

Chapter 221 - The Arts of the Boundless Ocean

Li Qingshan wondered if he should buy a pill cauldron and pill formulas instead. However, his alchemy was limited to the bare basics he had learned from Qian Rongzhi, so there was no need for him to be so hasty. At the very least, he knew how to use these treasures now.

The Book of All covered a large range of random topics. Just a single area was enough to keep Li Qingshan busy for half a day. He felt that his horizons were broadening.

However, he slowly discovered that the information regarding people, culture, and geography in the Book of All was mostly limited to the Clear River prefecture. Beyond this range, the information would be extremely simple and broad.

However, it was already quite a feat to have gathered all this information about the Clear River province that spanned fifteen hundred kilometers. It truly was not an exaggeration to name it a book of "All".

The nine provinces were so large that who knows how many kilometers it covered. Probably even the strongest cultivators could not visit every single place it had to offer, so how was it possible for a book to record everything?

It followed the same principle as mental maps. Even if a book like that really did exist, just how much would it be worth to a measly Qi Practitioner? Out of the thousands of cultivators, just how many could make it out of the Clear River prefecture? And, how many could make it out of the Ruyi commandery?

However, Li Qingshan believed that there would be a day when he used his eyes to take in everything the world had to offer.

Unknowingly, his mind returned to the brazen oath he had sworn in the tiny village.

"I want to travel through all corners of the world, across the entire universe! I want to taste all of the delicacies and drink all of the finest alcohol the world has to offer! I want to practise the fiercest abilities, fight the strongest foes, and sleep with the most beautiful women! Only then will this life not be a waste!

Looking at it now, it was just a person with nothing's desire for everything. Perhaps it was very coarse, but that was the most primitive desire hidden within the hearts of all men.

As a spark lit up within a restless heart, it would impel the frail body to conquer, to destroy, to create!

The most beautiful woman?

Li Qingshan grinned. Originally, he had just said that half-heartedly, but the Book of All really did seem to list the 'most beautiful'.

Out of the beauties on the beauties ranking, without any surprise, the one at the very top was the beautiful woman in clothes whiter than snow, the female hawk that gazed over the land.

Although the image on there failed to even capture a hundredth of her charm, it stirred Li Qingshan's past memories. He sighed from the bottom of his heart. "Heh, what a beauty!"

Xiao An pulled her mind out of the Canon Depository and raised her head. "What beauty?"

"Nothing." Li Qingshan stowed the jade slip away. Since he had seen the greatest and confirmed that there would not be any major changes to his objectives in the near future, there was no need for him to look at it ever again.

"Hmph!" Xiao An turned her head away from him.

"Hmm? You've even learned how to be angry." Li Qingshan smiled as he pinched her beautiful nose.

Xiao An shook her head and put up a tough struggle in his arms, but she smiled from ear to ear.

Li Qingshan held her firmly and pinched down on her nose. "My Xiao An will definitely be a great beauty in the future."

"Really?" Xiao An asked nasally.

"Didn't you hear what the damned granny said? You're some Aspect of Heavenly Fragrance and Beauty or something. It can't be wrong. I think even the one surnamed Gu won't be able to match you in the future."

"The one surnamed Gu? Gu Yanying!"

Li Qingshan was surprised. "You know her?"

Xiao An nodded gently.

Li Qingshan leaned against his arm. "Though honestly, Xuanyue would do as well. Forget it. A kid like you won't understand what I'm saying."

Xiao An pulled a face.

Li Qingshan spent a night bathing comfortably in the water. It felt even more pleasant than lying on a bed. Water had already become as close as a friend to him. He began practising the second layer of the Gui Water Method of Condensing Qi in there.

He used the Spirit Turtle's Method of Sea Suppression to settle down first before slowly absorbing the spiritual qi of the world and using the mental cultivation method of the Gui Water Method of Condensing Qi instead. The true qi in his body was converted into Gui Water true qi strand by strand.

By the time the sun had risen, Li Qingshan had already completed the second layer of the Gui Water Method of Condensing Qi. For the first few layers, all he needed to do was convert his true qi, to cover up the Innate Method of Practising Qi with the Gui Water Method of Condensing Qi, so it did not take him a particularly long time.

Li Qingshan grew restless once the sun had risen up. He leapt out of the bathing pool and put on his clothes. He wore the bamboo basket on his back and rushed straight to the bookstore with Xiao An.

The old man was still the same old man from the night before. He sat leisurely in the same rocking chair, reading the same book. When he saw Li Qingshan enter, he seemed to be surprised as he leapt to his feet, "Is there anything else you require, fellow cultivator?"

Li Qingshan got straight to the point. "Uncle, the book you gave me yesterday..."

"What book? How come I don't recall anything like that?" The old man's expression became unnatural.

Li Qingshan squinted his eyes and said slowly, "I used various different methods to study it for ages, but I found nothing, which was why I've come to seek guidance from you. Don't tell me you've been messing with me?" He no longer spoke as politely as before either.

The old man coughed gently. "I- I think I remember now. H- how did you find it?"

Li Qingshan said, "The images were alright, but the book was horrible!"

The old man smiled bitterly, "If that's the case, then forget that you had ever laid your eyes on it!" Junior brother, oh junior brother. You can't blame me for not helping out. Originally, I thought he was a vulgar man and might not be able to tell that the book was absolutely horrible!

"In other words, you really were messing with me!" Li Qingshan thought about all the time and effort he had spent on it, and he grew hostile.

The old man faked a laugh. "Fellow, there was something I wanted to give to you, but I forgot yesterday."

"Don't tell me it's trash like thi-" Li Qingshan suddenly halted. The old man had actually shoved the cultivation manual to the Arts of the Boundless Ocean into his hands. He hesitated, "Uncle, this is a little too precious. I didn't come here to blackmail you..."

The old man raised his head. He smiled and shook his head. "Just who would be bold enough to blackmail me in these streets, unafraid of the street patrols of the school of Miscellany? I did actually want to give you this book yesterday. I made quite the profit on the two books you bought from me. No matter how precious a book is, if there's no one to read it, it's all just trash."

He patted the "A Flower's Slumber" before continuing, "No one reads this book because of how horrible it's written, and that's fine. However, that book was clearly written brilliantly, yet because everyone else lacked the ability, it ended up in such a sorry shape. It's like the glamour of a pearl shrouded by dust, or the death of a beauty. Isn't that just a pity?"

Li Qingshan was slightly touched as well. "Uncle, you really are someone who loves books." The Arts of the Boundless Ocean definitely was not a mediocre cultivation method. However, it had far too high of a requirement on the reader, which was why its readerbase diminished.

The old man continued, "When I look at you, I have a feeling that perhaps you might end up finding the second half of this book someday, allowing this extraordinary cultivation method to be whole once more. By then, I'll be satisfied if you just show me the second half of the book."

Li Qingshan accepted the jade slip and clasped his hands proudly. "Uncle, if I happen to have the fortune in the future, I'll definitely return the complete copy of the Arts of the Boundless Ocean to you!"

The old man said happily, "I'll definitely live a little longer, waiting for you!"

Chapter 222 - Visiting the Arsenal of Arms Again

The old man was actually quite surprised. Normal people would treasure a precious cultivation method that they had obtained to great extremes, such that they would not even show it to their wives, children, or good friends.

Li Qingshan had only obtained an incomplete manual worth a little over a hundred spiritual stones, yet the value of the complete version was at least ten times that much. His generosity was truly surprising and admirable!

However, Li Qingshan's ambitions lay beyond the Nine Heavens. No matter how precious a cultivation method was, it was just a process to him. After taking this step, who knows how long the future journey awaiting him would still be.

The field of view determined the open-mindedness of a person.

Li Qingshan talked a little more in the bookstore with the old man. He learned the old man's name was Sun Fubai.

Sun Fubai was knowledgeable, and he had travelled the world before. Li Qingshan felt that he had benefited greatly from their conversation.

In the heat of the conversation, Sun Fubai gave Li Qingshan a few more books. They were all binned paperbacks. The pages had already yellowed slightly, while the edges had even roughened.

Li Qingshan hesitated. Sun Fubai smiled. "Don't worry, they're not like that. They're my favourite books and annals."

Li Qingshan stopped worrying. He casually flipped to a page and discovered many additional notes in red in the margins. Clearly, they were books that Sun Fubai had regularly read. A book lover was giving away the books he usually read. That was quite a gift.

He said politely, "Thank you for your gift, uncle!"

Sun Fubai said, "The only thing young people nowadays think about are divine arts and secret manuals that can make them powerful overnight. They don't know the true essence of books. I can see that you have a valiant and powerful character, with a bold and generous disposition, and you have quite the talent as a Qi Practitioner as well. You'll definitely make a name for yourself in the cultivation world in the future. However, if you don't know how to handle the affairs of human life, you'll still be a brainless person under the control of others no matter how powerful you are. You are welcome to read these books carefully. You'll definitely benefit tremendously."

Li Qingshan said, "I heard that histories make people intelligent, while cultivation methods and secret manuals can only make people stronger. However, real books can turn cowards into the courageous, fools into the wise. Not a single cultivation method can rival this effect. This is true strength."

Sun Fubai was delighted. "As long as you understand this."

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At the very centre of the town was a small, lonely building that stood three storeys tall. It did not neighbour any other stores.

Although it was rather tall in respect to the entire town, it was still very inconspicuous. The vermilion paint on the building was peeling, making it seem extremely old.

A set of bead curtains covered the entrance. Every single bead was a pearl worth thousands among regular people, so it was rather wasteful to turn it into a set of bead curtains. And, because no one cleaned them, they had already yellowed.

Only the two gilded words—Miscellaneous Goods— on the blackboard continued to sparkle.

There were thousands of miscellaneous goods stores in the world. There was nothing surprising if a few dozen of them could be found in a large city. However, there was only a single store in this market for cultivators, and it was impossible for a second one to appear in this town.

The moment Li Qingshan lifted the curtain and stepped through the entrance, he felt like he had entered a different world. Before him was an unbelievably spacious foyer. The floor seemed to be sculpted from a single piece of marble, and it was shiny enough to reflect his appearance. The raucous sounds of the streets were completely blocked by the curtains.

A few elegant women dressed in palace wear sat at the tea table in the lobby, conversing quietly.

However, whenever they raised their voices slightly, it would end up echoing through the lobby. This place had also used a formation to expand the space here, but it was much more sophisticated than the inn.

The women in palace wear saw Li Qingshan. They looked at one another and came up with excuses, as if they were all rather reluctant.

In the end, a pretty woman stood up helplessly and dragged her palace wear over to receive him. “Are you looking to buy anything, fellow cultivator?” She had a thin layer of makeup on. Although her smile was resplendent, Li Qingshan could tell with a single glance that it all came from training, and it was unable to disguise the reluctance on her face.

The woman in palace wear was actually a third layer Qi Practitioner. Even though the puppet waiters that the Hundred Flavours restaurant used were flexible and clever, using Qi Practitioners to receive customers clearly seemed more extravagant.

This really was the very centre of the town, the main base of the school of Miscellany, after all.

Li Qingshan had learned a lot about the town from Sun Fubai. This place was called the Town of Flowing Clouds. It was not fixed to one location. Instead, it would constantly migrate to places where Qi Practitioners gathered in larger numbers.

It was like a market among regular people, but it would last for much longer. It had chosen the Green Vine mountain this time because the Herb Gathering ceremony of the three mountains was drawing near, which had attracted many Qi Practitioners prepared to venture underground.

Before the ceremony, there would be a great demand for talismans and spiritual artifacts that could increase strength, while after the ceremony, Qi Practitioners would bring back various mineral deposits and spiritual herbs, beginning a whole new wave.

All of this was hosted by the school of Miscellany among the hundred schools. They were responsible for protecting all Qi Practitioners in town, as well as for maintaining regular trade. Otherwise, why would stronger Qi Practitioners bother to haggle over the price with weaker Qi Practitioners? It would be much faster if they just killed them and looted their items.

The Qi Practitioners in the teahouses and restaurants did not come from the school of Miscellany. They all needed to pay a yearly fee of spiritual stones to the school of Miscellany to set up business here.

When Li Qingshan asked where the best place for purchasing spiritual artifacts was, Sun Fubai immediately recommended the store of Miscellaneous Goods to him. Although it would be slightly more expensive than the streets, there was a guarantee for quality. Since Li Qingshan had plenty of spiritual stones, and he lacked the insight to discern quality, it would obviously be most appropriate for him to come here.

Li Qingshan said, "I want to buy a weapon."

The women by the tea table giggled quietly. "What weapon? Can't you call them spiritual artifacts? You can tell with a single glance that he's a bumpkin who has just emerged from the jianghu." "Don't tell me he wants to buy an inferior spiritual artifact!" "Ruping's commission will be impressive this time."

Although they had stifled their voices, Li Qingshan still heard every single word that they uttered. As it turned out, this woman was called Ruping, which sure sounded familiar. As it turned out, these female cultivators were not just responsible for receiving customers, but for sales too. No wonder they were so snobbish.

TL: May be a reference to a 2001 Chinese drama called Romance in the Rain.

"Please come with me!" Liu Ruping said indifferently. Although she could not hear what the others were saying, she knew that they were mocking her.

Liu Ruping moved her hips from side to side as she climbed up the stairs. Her moving buttocks made him think about the boss of the inn from last night. He wondered whether the female cultivators he would introduce to keep him company included her. He turned around and looked at the lobby, Perhaps they all might be included!

A daoist in blue robes walked in. Both his daoist robes and the ancient sword on his back flickered with light. In a world of Qi Practitioners, this was what the wealthy looked like.

The women in palace wear basically all wanted to rush over and receive him. A sweet-looking woman said loudly, "It's my turn." In the end, only she ventured forward, like a victorious hen, arriving before the customer. Her smile was much more sincere.

Although it was impossible for him to call anyone to keep him company at night as Xiao An was with him, he still could not help but feel relieved. Fortunately, he had not, or he would have been pitiful. He was still technically a virgin, so how could he lose it to a woman like that?

Arriving before a room on the second floor, his gaze was immediately drawn away by a board. Surprisingly, the board detailed three words—Arsenal of Arms. He had purchased the Tyrant's spear from the Arsenal of Arms back in Qingyang city. He had never thought there would be a branch in a town of cultivators as well.

However, most Qi Practitioners did not care for the silver and gold used among regular people. Why would a store that could sell spiritual artifacts sell weapons in a small, remote city? Their ability was obviously exemplary to be able to set up business in the store of Miscellaneous Goods run by the school of Miscellany.

Liu Ruping introduced with a professional smile. "The Arsenal of Arms is renowned throughout our Clear River province and even the entire Ruyi commandery. The weapons in here have all been tested by masters, so their quality is definitely the best of the best, unlike the stalls outside that offer goods of uncertain quality, who sell low grade spiritual artifacts that end up cracking after just a few battles."

"Then let's take a look!" As soon as Li Qingshan stepped into the store, he shivered. All of his hairs pricked up. He felt like an army that had been ambushed from all sides. Vicious, murderous intent poured over. He took a step instinctively, and all of his bones resonated. His aura suddenly rose up, like an army pouring their strength together, with a commander charging up ahead, about to kill their way out of the encirclement.

However, Li Qingshan immediately saw that there were no ambushes at all. There were just thousands of weapons placed neatly on weapon racks, spanning as far as the eye could see. A middle-aged man with an ugly, coarse appearance stood at the centre of the weapon racks, looking at him in a stunned manner.

"What's wrong, sir?" Liu Ruping was three steps away from Li Qingshan as she looked at him carefully. Just moments prior, this man who had a unique figure but seemed extremely simple and mild suddenly became a vicious beast, ready to pounce and kill. This was the first time she felt that this man might have been much more complicated than he seemed.

Li Qingshan realised where the sharp, murderous intent originated from. It was from these weapons. He restrained himself and said in surprise, "Didn't you feel it?"

Liu Ruping was stunned. "Feel what?"

The coarse man walked over. "The murderous intent on people is easy to sense, but the murderous intent on weapons is difficult. You can't develop such a sharp sense for it if you haven't been through a few life-or-death battles and claimed a few dozen lives with your own hands." He clasped his hands at Li Qingshan. "I can tell with a single glance that you're someone who knows his weapons. How may I refer to you?"

Li Qingshan said, "My surname is Niu. And how would I refer to you, sir?"

"That's a good surname, a good surname. You really are as sturdy as an ox! My surname is Zhang. There's no need to be polite with me, so you can just call me little Zhang."

Liu Ruping smiled. "Old man Zhang, you're trying to act young again. Don't you feel any shame?"

Little Zhang said, "Cultivators pursue longer lives. There's no hope for me this life, so can't you just let me have this? Right, elder sister Ping?"

Most of the shopkeepers responsible for the stores were older Qi Practitioners. In the end, they were still unable to cultivate faster than the rate at which they naturally aged. There was basically no

possibility for them to make anymore progress, so they chose to live a more peaceful and comfortable life.

Liu Ruping spat in contempt. "Who's your elder sister Ru? Cut the nonsense. I've brought you the customer, so hurry up and choose a weapon for him!"

Just when Li Qingshan wanted to say something, Little Zhang raised his head. "There's no hurry, sir. Let me guess what weapon you want, alright?"

Chapter 223 - The Whale's Ingestion of Water Blade

Li Qingshan smiled. "Alright, feel free to guess!"

"Looking at your stature, you're definitely not choosing some regular spiritual artifact that can be controlled. Instead, you're looking for a heavy weapon suited for close combat specially used by Body Practitioners. Am I correct?"

Li Qingshan's eyes lit up. He smiled. "Correct! That's quite impressive of you, little Zhang!" As his strength grew, his demand for a weapon increased as well. He was no longer satisfied with just the Wind-entwining blade, and he had not reached the sixth layer as a Qi Practitioner, so he could not control a mid grade spiritual artifact.

And, even if he did reach the sixth layer, he would not necessarily use a small blade or sword as his main weapon for combat, as his body would definitely reach a whole new level by then. Directly swinging a Wind-entwining blade at someone was much more satisfying than controlling a sword remotely.

As a result, he required a weapon different from the ordinary. Little Zhang managed to tell what he needed with a single glance; he knew that Li Qingshan needed a heavy weapon. That also meant they sold weapons like that, so why wouldn't he be happy?

Little Zhang also smiled from ear to ear when he heard how Li Qingshan was willing to call him that. He waved his hand gently, and a series of mechanical sounds rang out. The weapon racks actually slid away rapidly, changing directions before coming to a halt.

A weapon rack slid right in front of Li Qingshan. As expected, there were huge swords and axes on there.

Li Qingshan casually weighed a large spear in his hand and asked, "Don't you have any mid grade spiritual artifacts here?" All of the spiritual artifacts on the rack were low grade.

Little Zhang smiled. "Of course we do!" Regular Qi Practitioners could not afford mid grade spiritual artifacts, so he only brought people to see low grade spiritual artifacts most of the time. He clapped his hand and another weapon rack slid before Li Qingshan. The spiritual artifacts on there shone even brighter. "If you hadn't come to us, buying a mid grade spiritual artifact for close combat would have been quite difficult."

Liu Ruping's eyes immediately lit up. She would receive a commission for items purchased under her guide, so she obviously hoped that Li Qingshan would buy a lot and spend a lot.

This was why she was rather reluctant to receive Li Qingshan as soon as he had walked in, wanting to exchange with someone else. Even among the world of regular people, the way Li Qingshan dressed

made him look penniless. Among cultivators, he was the standard for broke. He did not have a single item on him that shone.

But now, she thought, You really can't judge a book by its cover. Her smile immediately became more sincere.

Li Qingshan looked at the mid grade spiritual artifacts and appeared satisfied as well.

"Look at this Broken Gold sword. It's forged entirely out of essence gold, and it weighs one hundred and five kilograms and a half. It can launch Metal Crescent Slashes. Originally, it was designed to be wielded with two hands, but I think just a single hand will be enough for you. It's both simple and flexible. Isn't it perfect?" Little Zhang slapped a huge, golden sword as he introduced it.

Li Qingshan asked, "How much is it?"

"We'll be taking only seventy-five spiritual stones for it."

Li Qingshan gained a rough idea of the price of a mid grade spiritual artifact. If he compared it to exchanging with contribution within the Hawkwolf Guard, it was around the same price. However, he shook his head. "I don't really know how to use swords."

Liu Ruping chimed in. "Look at how beautiful this sword is? If you carry it on your back, you'll definitely look extraordinary."

Little Zhang shot her a glare. "When it comes to men choosing weapons, it's even more important to them than choosing a wife. Women shouldn't butt in." He could tell that Li Qingshan was a person who actually used a weapon to kill; he was not some young master who came from a sect or clan. He could not be fooled by mere appearances.

Liu Ruping pouted, but as expected, she shut up for good. If you think that you're capable, try to sell it yourself. It's just a mid grade spiritual artifact. I don't even want to waste so many words trying to sell it!

Little Zhang introduced several weapons. None of them were less than a hundred kilograms in weight.

Li Qingshan was very interested. If he could use a heavy weapon like this in battle, he could probably even smash through protective true qi. However, after quite some thought, he suddenly asked, "Do you have any high grade spiritual artifacts?"

Little Zhang was slightly surprised. "Sir, we do have a few high grade spiritual artifacts here, but they're all treasures of the store. Even at a minimum, they'll cost several hundred spiritual stones, and they can go for over a thousand spiritual stones. They're not items that regular Qi Practitioners can see unless they really do plan on buying them."

Li Qingshan smiled. "If you won't show them, who'll buy them? Do you think I'm not actually interested in purchasing them?"

Liu Ruping's gaze towards Li Qingshan immediately softened. A high grade spiritual artifact was equivalent to ten mid grade spiritual artifacts. It was a rare transaction of quite the size.

Little Zhang studied Li Qingshan and smiled. "Fair enough. Come with me!"

The three of them arrived in a firmly-sealed room. Little Zhang took out something from his hundred treasures pouch. "Please take a look!"

The item was not made out of metal, wood, or rock. It was blue in colour, like ice, and it was sculpted into the shape of a whale. It shone brightly, a high grade spiritual artifact as expected. "There are even fewer high grade spiritual artifacts suited for close combat. We only have this one. It costs eight hundred and fifty-two spiritual stones,"

Li Qingshan had never seen such a strange weapon before. When he heard the price, his heart sank slightly. A high grade spiritual artifact was actually so expensive. He only had around three hundred spiritual stones left on him, which was only a third of the weapon's price. And, he had to save some spiritual stones for purchasing pill formulas and a pill cauldron. He did not have enough money on him, but he remained unfazed on the surface. "How do you use this?"

Seeing how Li Qingshan was actually interested in buying it, little Zhang could not help but become even more enthusiastic. He shot a glance at Liu Ruping. They had encountered a wealthy customer this time.

"The name of this weapon is the Whale's Ingestion of Water. You can use it however you like. Allow me to demonstrate." As he said that, he took out a huge tank from the hundred treasures pouch. It was filled with water.

Little Zhang placed the Whale's Ingestion of Water into the tank. The blue whale immediately opened its mouth, and in just a while, it sucked away all of the water in the tank. "Please watch carefully, sir!"

He raised his hand, and the whale's mouth spat out the water again, condensing it into the shape of a blade. It suddenly froze up, turning into an ice blade with the whale's body serving as a hilt. Coldness permeated the secret room.

Liu Ruping could not help but shiver. She said, "How wondrous!"

While Li Qingshan knew that she was just putting on an act, he could not help but nod in agreement. He had never seen a weapon like this before. As a matter of fact, he had not even thought of such a weapon before.

"It's the Whale's Ingestion of Water blade right now!" Little Zhang said. He waved his hand again, and the blade turned back into water, freezing into a sword this time. "This is the Whale's Ingestion of Water sword!"

"No matter what weapon you want, whether it be light or heavy, it's all within your control! What do you think?"

"It's fantastic!" Li Qingshan nodded. Regular weapons were all forged from metal. It was rare to see a weapon completely composed of water. If he wielded it with Gui Water true qi, it would definitely achieve quite an impressive effect. This was basically a weapon made for him.

If men really chose weapons like choosing wives, then he would have fallen in love at first sight with this Whale's Ingestion of Water. However, he was worried as well. "This blade of ice is so fragile. Won't it shatter when it clashes against metal?"

Little Zhang said, "You don't need to worry at all, sir. The weapons created by the Whale's Ingestion of Water are akin to profound ice. It's even tougher than essence steel. I'll be honest with you, sir. The ice blades condensed from the Whale's Ingestion of Water are slightly weaker than regular high grade spiritual artifacts, but they are definitely stronger than mid grade spiritual artifacts. As long as it doesn't shatter from a single attack, it can automatically repair itself no matter how many cracks or nicks there are. You won't need any maintenance from an artifact smith at all."

Liu Ruping said, "Then you sure can save a lot of spiritual stones and trouble. Just a small repair of a high grade spiritual artifact can set you back several dozen spiritual stones!"

Little Zhang added, "And if you use spiritual water instead, it'll be even stronger. Sir, since you're willing to buy this weapon, you might as well buy some spiritual water too."

Li Qingshan thought of something. Didn't he have an icy spring underground? He lifted the ice sword and flicked it forcefully.

With a clang, it seemed to reverberate like metal. The sound echoed through the secret room with great intensity. Liu Ruping could not help but cover her ears.

Little Zhang's hand shuddered. He saw how a white mark was left on the sword and praised, "What strength, sir!"

Li Qingshan knew that he was telling the truth. Not only had he poured all of his strength into the flick, but he had used true qi as well. Even treasured blades made from refined steel would shatter, but only a white mark appeared on the ice sword. If he used Ice Condensate water instead, he would not have to worry about its toughness at all. And, he could just hang it on his waist normally, which would be convenient and easily accessible at all times.

Moreover, he could create a blade that was even larger and longer so that he could unleash the advantage of his physical strength. Or, he could just condense a spiky club weighing more than five hundred kilograms. If he swung down with something like that, any protection from true qi or techniques would be no different from paper. For a moment, basically all the advantages of the Whale's Ingestion of Water filled Li Qingshan's head. He utterly admired the artifact smith who created this weapon.

"What other uses are there aside from this?" Although Li Qingshan's expression remained the same as before, little Zhang had dealt with countless customers before, so he could read his face. He could already tell that Li Qingshan actually wanted to purchase the item, which was why he had been so meticulous and gone to such detail. He was utterly delighted. He immediately opened the secret room and brought Li Qingshan to a field for demonstrating the usage of weapons. He pointed at the steel target in the distance.

All of the water was sucked into the whale again. The whale opened wide and countless, tiny icicles suddenly shot out. The steel target was peppered with countless holes instantly. It was fiercer than the Thousand Mechanism crossbow both in power and might, and it had more than just thirty rounds. It could be used in close combat and as a ranged weapon. Li Qingshan was tempted to snatch the Whale's Ingestion of Water over and try it for himself.

Looking at Li Qingshan's expression, little Zhang's smile grew wider. The Whale's Ingestion of Water suddenly lit up, gradually gathering near the whale's mouth. With a bang, a ball of water shot out and struck the peppered target, blasting it to pieces.

Li Qingshan cried out, "The Gui Water blast!" He had looked through the Gui Water Method of Condensing Qi last night, along with the techniques that it came with. Most of them were for healing, defence, and restricting the opponent. Gui Water true qi was not particularly suited for attacking, but among all of these techniques, the Gui Water blast was the most powerful and the most important technique.

Little Zhang asked confidently, "Fellow Niu, what do you think?"

Li Qingshan said, "It's a nice item, but could you help me out with the price?"

Before little Zhang could say anything, Liu Ruping said, "Sir, you are welcomed to ask around, but every single item in the store of Miscellaneous Goods is clearly marked with a price. You can check in the main catalogue. We're not permitted to accept even a single spiritual stone more or less from you. This is to avoid disputes. It's definitely fair."

Chapter 224 - The Value of a Daemon Core

Little Zhang said, "Actually, I can already tell that you're determined to purchase this item. If I were a merchant outside, I would definitely use this opportunity to increase the price, and with your character, sir, you would probably end up taking a loss."

Li Qingshan was certain that could be the case. Whether it be in his former life or in this current one, he had no talent with negotiating prices. He was not in search of a bargain. He just wanted to make sure he had not been ripped off. "Alright, I'll buy it then."

Little Zhang smiled happily, while Liu Ruping ravished in joy. Those little whores will probably be filled with regret now.

Li Qingshan said, "But, I might not have enough spiritual stones on me!"

Little Zhang's smile stiffened. "You must be joking, sir!" Liu Ruping's expression immediately coldened.

Li Qingshan said, "May I ask if you purchase items as well?"

Little Zhang was troubled. "The Arsenal of Arms does purchase weapons, but the price we pay will definitely be lower than the selling price." He no longer believed that Li Qingshan could afford the Whale's Ingestion of Water. Was he supposed to pull out another high grade spiritual artifact to exchange for it? Even for stronger Qi Practitioners, it was quite rare for them to be in possession of a high grade spiritual artifact. Li Qingshan clearly did not fall into that category. It had been quite a waste of his time and efforts.

Unbeknownst to him, Li Qingshan actually possessed a high grade spiritual artifact, and not just one at that. The comb and needle from the grannies of the Sect of Clouds and Rain combined with the Cursive Sword Calligraphy totalled to three. However, he could not afford to sell any of them right now.

Liu Ruping could no longer help herself. She mocked, “We might be a store of Miscellaneous Goods, but not all miscellaneous goods are accepted here. You better get out of here and try your luck with the stalls outside!”

Li Qingshan replied with a question, “May I ask how many spiritual stones I can pawn a daemon core for?”

Little Zhang was stunned at first, but he soon exclaimed, “A daemon core? You have a daemon core?”

Liu Ruping frowned. “Daemon cores aren’t obtained that easily. Don’t tell me you mistook some gem for it, trying to pass off something fake as the real thing?”

Then, Li Qingshan took out the daemon core he had obtained from great general Whitefang on Black Rat mountain. “Please take a look and see whether this is a daemon core or not!”

The earthen-yellow daemon core did not give off a particularly resplendent glow, but it contained a daemon’s several centuries worth of hard work.

Little Zhang and Liu Ruping spent most of their time selling items in the store of Miscellaneous Goods, so while their cultivation was not exactly great, their insight was the best of the best. They recognised with a single glance that this item was a daemon core of the legends.

Liu Ruping could not help but extend her hand to touch it. She wanted to hold it and take a closer look, but Li Qingshan had already stowed the daemon core away into his hundred treasures pouch. “Then I’ll see if I can get it pawned in the stalls outside.”

Liu Ruping grabbed Li Qingshan by his sleeve hurriedly and apologised with a bow, “I’ve blamed you wrongly, sir. I hope that you can be the bigger person and forgive me. Please wait, I’ll go fetch the head manager.” Perhaps intentionally or otherwise, but she revealed the snowy peaks hiding within her collar.

If the head manager learned that she had chased away a customer who wanted to sell a daemon core, she probably could not remain here anymore. And, just these two transactions alone could allow her to earn more than a month’s worth of commission. She raised her head and basically looked at Li Qingshan in a begging manner. His robust figure seemed to be filled with a masculine charm. Even if he demanded something extra, it would probably be within her area of consideration.

Li Qingshan glanced into the collar. He knew that while five pecks of rice could not make people bow and scrape, a daemon core was enough. Perhaps, it could make them do much more than just that!

TL: The idiom that describes a person who won’t bow and scrape over five pecks of rice (so around 50 litres of rice) means that they possess high moral integrity. The author basically spun the idiom into fitting this context.

Little Zhang said as well, “You most definitely should stay, sir. I can tell from a long way away that the Whale’s Ingestion of Water was basically made for you, sir! Actually, I wanted to give you a discount, but only the head manager can make the decision on this when she arrives.”

After a moment of thought, Li Qingshan realised that he had underestimated the value of the daemon core slightly. Originally, he thought that it was roughly equivalent to a high grade spiritual artifact, but a high grade spiritual artifact was clearly not enough to make the two of them behave like this.

Li Qingshan had only estimated the value of the daemon core based on the spiritual qi it contained, but he did not know that daemon cores were crucial to refining certain precious pills as well, which could be used to increase the amount of true qi and spiritual qi for a certain element.

The millenniums of peace between humans and daemons had directly resulted in a scarce supply of resources like this. When Qi Practitioners ventured underground, it was not just for collecting spiritual herbs. Otherwise, all they needed to do was demonstrate sufficient strength, and the daemons would basically all choose to flee.

However, most Qi Practitioners would cast down formations and trap daemons in their dens. Obviously, it was not because they had nothing better to do and wanted to purge evil in the name of justice. They did it for the daemon core.

Li Qingshan said after a moment of thought, "Fine then. I'll wait here."

Liu Ruping moved her hips and left in a hurry. Before long, she returned with a plump, old madam. Her true qi had actually reached the ninth layer already, and her face was creased with wrinkles from smiles. She lacked the strange arrogance of the grannies from the Sect of Clouds and Rain, and she did not possess the degrading lowliness of the procuress. Instead, she was noble, receiving all people with a smile.

"I'm Shi Peipei. Are you the fellow who wants to sell the daemon core?"

Li Qingshan said, "I am!"

Shi Peipei said, "Could you take it out and show me?"

Li Qingshan hesitated before handing the daemon core over to Shi Peipei. Since the school of Miscellany could set up such a large town with so many businesses, they would never stoop so low as to tarnish their reputation over a single daemon core.

Shi Peipei studied it carefully; Liu Ruping was nervous. A while later, Shi Peipei said, "Sir, the quality of your earth element daemon core is very impressive!"

Li Qingshan said, "May I ask how much it's worth?"

Shi Peipei said, "About that. I have a recommendation. I hope that you can hear me out. Before the Herb Gathering ceremony, my humble store will hold an auction. If the daemon core is sold through the auction, you'll definitely get many more spiritual stones than what we can offer. We'll only take five percent of the earnings."

Even Foundation Establishment cultivators could appear for the auction of the school of Miscellany, so if the school did not offer a few items of value, they would be looked down on. And, a person who could casually pull out a daemon core was definitely well-off. If they joined in on the auction, they would be able to raise the prices even higher, making the whole auction better. It was killing two birds with one stone.

Li Qingshan hesitated. "But I'm in urgent need of spiritual stones right now." And, he was not particularly willing to hand a precious daemon core to someone else.

Shi Peipei waved her hand dramatically and said to Liu Ruping, "As long as this fellow's expenditure today doesn't exceed two thousand spiritual stones, feel free to just hand him the item. If your daemon core doesn't fetch this price in the auction, it'll just be on us."

Liu Ruping bowed happily. "Yes, head manager!"

Li Qingshan hid his surprise. The value of the daemon core had truly surpassed his expectations. However, he seemed to think of something and his face sank slightly.

Shi Peipei frowned. "Is there anything that dissatisfies you, sir?"

Liu Ruping said, "Little Zhang promised him a discount for this high grade spiritual artifact!"

Little Zhang rubbed his nose as Shi Peipei probed into the matter a little. "Then knock off the extra fifty-two and make it a round eight hundred spiritual stones!"

Li Qingshan said, "If that's the case, I'll go with the auction then!" This was not what he had been thinking about. Instead, he had been thinking about how humans and daemons were probably unable to maintain their peace forever, and when that day arrived, he would also happen to possess a treasure worth two thousand spiritual stones on his body.

Wealth begets trouble!

Chapter 225 - Sword Qi Calligraphy

Shi Peipei's wrinkles seemed to ripple. "Then I'll write up an agreement for you right now, sir." They had obtained another valuable item for the auction this time. They could attract even more Qi Practitioners now.

"Sir, it's best if you hold onto some spiritual stones. I will prepare a private box for you. Quite a lot of wondrous treasures will appear in this auction. If something catches your eye but you miss out on it due to insufficient funds, that'll be quite the pity."

Li Qingshan's heart stirred. "May I ask what treasures will there be? Is there a catalogue?" Perhaps he could find the second half of the Arts of the Boundless Ocean. Although he knew the chances were very slim, it still piqued his interest.

Shi Peipei said, "It's inconvenient for us to reveal the exact lineup to you, but we will soon advertise a few items of great value, including the daemon core. You can ask Ruping about this."

"Feel free to ask me, sir." Liu Ruping smiled gently and gracefully. Her gaze towards Li Qingshan was very much affectionate.

If it were not for the fact that Li Qingshan had seen how quickly she could turn hostile, he would have almost been fooled by her.

Shi Peipei passed a jade token to Li Qingshan. "Please be careful, sir. You must not lose this. We only look at the token and not the person. If someone else comes to us with this token, we'll give the spiritual stones to them."

Li Qingshan focused on the token, and an agreement immediately appeared. "I'll take good care of it!" Afterwards, he extended his hand towards little Zhang.

Little Zhang placed the Whale's Ingestion of Water into Li Qingshan's palm in a hurry. Coldness pierced his body, but it was extremely comfortable as well. As true qi flowed into the spiritual artifact, he immediately experienced a sensation like his blood vessels were connected to it. However, it was slightly sluggish, as if something blocked his blood flow.

Little Zhang said, "If you want to achieve the most optimal effects with high grade spiritual artifacts, you'll need some time. Only when you refine it with true qi can you truly wield it freely as a part of your own body."

Li Qingshan nodded. He did not stow it away into his hundred treasures pouch. Instead, he held and played around with it, seeping it with strands of true qi. The transparent, crystal ice whale was as exquisite as a piece of art. No one would have believed it was a weapon.

Shi Peipei took her leave, while Liu Ruping said gently, "If there's anything else you require, sir, feel free to tell me."

Li Qingshan asked casually, "What if I said I required you?"

Liu Ruping blushed in embarrassment. "Oh my, how can you say that, sir? And, what's so good about me?"

Little Zhang chuckled to one side. He had clearly seen this plenty of times in the past. He was extremely happy after selling a high grade spiritual artifact as well, so he joked, "With how much you've spent today, how can our Ruping decline if you want her to do something for you?"

"Old man Zhang, if you keep babbling nonsense, I'll rip off your mouth!" Liu Ruping shot a glare at little Zhang, but she was not annoyed at all.

When Li Qingshan and Liu Ruping returned to the lobby, the other women downstairs had already heard everything that had happened. They all raised their heads at the same time.

Liu Ruping held her head and chest up high. She acted completely different from her usual aloofness. She purposefully remained very close to Li Qingshan, almost tempted to press against him as she walked. Her fragrance tickled Li Qingshan's nose.

Although Li Qingshan had heard plenty about gold diggers and sugar babies across his two lives, he could not help but be surprised when he realised he had become a 'sugar daddy', Women can actually stoop so low. Is there still a difference between women like this and prostitutes?

The other women in palace wear were all envious. Just why did Ruping end up so lucky? If they had gone up to receive him earlier instead...

Their gazes towards Li Qingshan were completely different compared to before. There was respect that could enchant the hearts of all men.

Li Qingshan suddenly understood. Now this is the treatment that the strong receive! No matter what age, no matter what world, the strong will flaunt their strength, and the weak will attach themselves to the strong. When the strong gains something, the weak will lose something.

Only failures would lament about the fickleness of human nature. Only the weak would grumble about the cruelty of society. Meanwhile, the strong only needed to grit their teeth and become even stronger.

Upon understanding this, the slight uneasiness completely vanished. He fiddled around with the ice whale as he smiled pointlessly. In Liu Ruping's eyes, he seemed to be utterly charming. Of course, this was charm only the strong possessed.

Li Qingshan brought Liu Ruping to the tea table and pulled out a chair for her. Liu Ruping was obviously flattered, and she smiled in an extremely reserved manner. After taking a sip of tea, Li Qingshan began to ask her about the auction.

Liu Ruping obviously told him everything that she knew. She told him everything about the items to be auctioned this time, which included various spiritual herbs, spiritual stones, rare treasures, and strange beasts. As expected, there was a huge assortment of items. Just the number of high grade spiritual artifacts amounted to seven or eight.

Liu Ruping even disclosed to him secretly that the ultimate treasure for the auction this time was a supreme grade spiritual artifact. The starting price would be five thousand spiritual stones, and it was estimated to fetch over ten thousand spiritual stones.

While Li Qingshan was interested, he knew that was not something he could afford. Even if he could afford it, he would not be bold enough to buy it. The people who were able to produce so many spiritual stones were Foundation Establishment cultivators like the sect masters of the three mountains at the very least. He would just be looking for death if he tried to snatch food from the tiger's mouth. He would probably be crushed to a pulp the moment he set foot out of the town.

"Aren't there any cultivation methods in the auction?"

Liu Ruping shook her head. Li Qingshan lowered his head and sipped the tea as he sank into his thoughts. It made sense. He would not run into something like that so easily, or Sun Fubai's efforts over all these years would have all just been a waste of time. However, he was not dejected. The world would never let down those who kept trying. He would definitely travel even further and even more extensively than Sun Fubai.

Liu Ruping saw Li Qingshan's disappointment, so she added in a hurry, "There are no cultivation methods, but there is a piece of calligraphy."

Li Qingshan asked absentmindedly, "What calligraphy?"

Liu Ruping said, "It's called Sword Qi Calligraphy or something. Apparently, it was left behind by some ancient sword immortal, but it only seemed like a mid grade spiritual artifact to me. It's just a great mess of calligraphy strokes. They must have come up with this description in an attempt to have it auctioned off. Only an idiot would fall for that and buy it. If you want a weapon, a high grade spiritual artifact is obviously better."

Li Qingshan looked at the yellow, rippling water in his cup and saw his expression change slightly in the reflection. He asked without looking up, "That's true. Only an idiot would buy something like that. However, since the Sword Qi Calligraphy is a mid grade spiritual artifact, what are its uses?"

Liu Ruping said with disdain, "Hmph, it's just like its name. It can launch a few strands of sword qi."

The tea rippled. Li Qingshan suppressed his inner joy and asked Liu Ruping a few more random questions. He learned that Liu Ruping came from a similar background to Qian Rongzhi. She had also originated from a small clan that was not even really a clan. Her talent was limited, so she did not receive a lot of resources. It led to quite a grumble from her.

Li Qingshan said, "I heard that the Hawkwolf Guard recruits anyone regardless of their background, as long as they're Qi Practitioners. Why don't you try joining?"

Liu Ruping said in surprise, "The Hawkwolf Guard? That's killing and murder everyday! And, I'd have to rush around through the rain and wind. Not to boast, but even a bad month in the store of Miscellaneous Goods lets me make much more than what a regular Hawkwolf Guard makes."

"Fair enough!" Li Qingshan understood that she was completely different from Qian Rongzhi. She was nowhere near as ambitious or vicious as that woman. However, if all the women in the world were like her, there was no point for men to exist anymore.

Liu Ruping could not help but ask, "Is there anything else you want to buy? Why don't you get a high quality garment tailored for you? I'm very good at choosing clothes. I can choose quite a few good ones for you."

Li Qingshan interrupted her with a smile, "No, I want to sell some more things!"

Liu Ruping was stunned.

In the end, Li Qingshan unloaded several hundred talismans, basically all of them on him apart from the high and supreme grade ones, onto the store of Miscellaneous Goods. He obtained another few hundred spiritual stones. The Herb Gathering ceremony of the three mountains was drawing close, so the value of talismans just happened to be high. It was a good deal.

Originally, Li Qingshan had wanted to buy a pill cauldron, but he gave up on that for now. It was not like he was in a hurry to refine pills at the moment.

If the Sword Qi Calligraphy was truly the item he was thinking about, really a part of the Cursive Sword Calligraphy, then he had to obtain it. He could not allow it to fall into the hands of others.

The Cursive Sword Calligraphy currently in his possession was basically between high grade and supreme grade. If he could find another piece of it and join them together, then it would truly be a supreme grade spiritual artifact worth over ten thousand spiritual stones.

As for the actual value of the Cursive Sword Calligraphy, it was probably much more than just that. It was enough to earn a few words of praise from the black ox. In the past, he might not have known what that signified, but he knew just how great the black ox's insight was now.

Normally, a mid grade spiritual artifact would never exceed a hundred spiritual stones in price, but he could not afford to treat everyone else as fools. He could not be certain that others would not realise

that something was amiss, so he had to ensure that nothing could go wrong. He had to gather as many spiritual stones as he could to guarantee that he would be able to win at the auction.

With that settled, Li Qingshan ignored Liu Ruping's disappointed gaze and left the store of Miscellaneous Goods. He was prepared to leave the town.

On the raucous street, he glanced back at the verdant Green Vine mountain again. He wondered if Yu Zijian would be able to wait until Hua Chenglu arrived.

Not everyone was worth waiting for, so he chose to wait for nobody. However, he hoped that she could wait until the person she wanted to wait for arrived.

With the bamboo basket on his back, he bid farewell to Sun Fubai in the bookstore before checking out of the inn. He left the inn and suddenly stopped.

Yu Zijian stood under the sun outside the inn, smiling even more resplendently than the sun. She held a girl who was slightly smaller than her by the hand, who also seemed rather reluctant. It was Hua Chenglu.

Li Qingshan smiled in relief. This was what made trust among humans treasurable, wasn't it?

If you could boldly trust in someone even if you had been fooled a hundred times, you would still end up with true friends one day. Although he walked a lonely path of determination and decisiveness, he also admired her bravery and resolve.

"Niu Juxia, this is Chenglu!" Yu Zijian basically dragged Hua Chenglu in front of Li Qingshan and introduced her to him happily.

Hua Chenglu was still the same cute little adult. She pretended to be natural and unrestrained as she clasped her hands towards Li Qingshan. She said with her child-like voice, "I never thought the people of the Green Vine mountain would be so audacious. Thank you for taking care of Zijian for all this time." She had to tilt her head backwards to take in Li Qingshan's huge frame. She wondered inside just how Zijian got to know such a strange person.

Chapter 226 - The Auction

Li Qingshan said, "It's no problem! Zi Jian, since your friend has come, I don't have to worry. I have some matters I need to attend to, so I'll be going first. I'll tell your father that you're safe and sound."

Before the two of them could reply, Li Qingshan strode off, vanishing into the crowd in the blink of an eye.

Hua Chenglu was young, but she was much more quick-witted than Yu Zijian. If he made too much contact with her, she might see through his disguise.

Hua Chenglu murmured, "Zijian, he's so rude. Does he really want to help you? Though, his back does seem a little familiar."

"That's because Niu Juxia is very kind! How can he have any ill intentions?" Yu Zijian defended Li Qingshan in a hurry.

Hua Chenglu shook her head. "You're still young and ignorant. You'd better be careful about being trafficked off somewhere. You'll even end up having to count the buyer's money."

"You're the one who's young and ignorant. Niu Juxia is a good person. How could he do anything bad to me?!" Yu Zijian widened her eyes.

"Whatever, I'm not going to try to convince you otherwise anymore." Hua Chenglu turned around and left.

Yu Zijian asked in a hurry, "Hey, where are you going?"

Hua Chenglu pointed at the mountain nearby with her chin. "The Green Vine mountain, obviously!"

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Li Qingshan returned to the Proud Sword manor. Yu Shukuang was not there, currently out collecting food and alcohol.

Thinking about how Yu Zijian would return very soon anyway, Li Qingshan stopped worrying and ventured deep underground again through the hole in his estate outside the city.

This region was already as familiar to him as his own backyard. He knew every single proper demon in this place. After transforming into his true form, he had no need to worry about being attacked by some ignorant daemon. Instead, it made it all much more interesting. They would all emerge and greet him, "Leader, you've returned!"

Li Qingshan would nod slightly in a stern manner, maintaining his dignity as the leader. However, what he thought inside was, Quite a lot of these guys are about to lose their lives because of the daemon cores in them. Who's fault is this supposed to be?

If he were still a human, there would probably be no need for him to consider this question at all. He would treat hunting down daemons for their daemon cores as something perfectly justifiable.

However, after becoming a daemon himself, receiving help from daemons and becoming friends and the leader of daemons, his thoughts gradually changed.

He walked through the deep, quiet caves, uncertain over just how far he had already walked.

A speck of blue light flickered in the endless darkness ahead of him. It was like the only star in the pitch-black night sky.

Li Qingshan was like a wanderer who had returned home. He became relieved as he sped up his steps. Before he had even entered the cavern, he heard the thunderous snore.

Li Qingshan shook his head. You sure are easy to read!

There was no need for him to hibernate at all, just like maintaining his vegetarian diet, but he continued with his primal instincts. Probably because he had failed to sense any dangerous auras, Milliped rolled over on the stone platform and did not rise.

Sleep as much as you can, while you still can!

Li Qingshan did not wake him up. He just leaned against the stone platform by himself, pressing his spine against the cold rock and sensing the pulsing spiritual qi inside. He slowly entered a meditative trance.

Xiao An, on the other hand, took out the Book of All and looked through it carefully. No matter how abundant the information in the book was, it was still more convenient when it was all stored in one's head.

The blue butterflies of light fluttered their wings millions of times in the darkness. A month passed by quietly.

A whistling gust of wind was suddenly kicked up in the quiet cavern. The butterflies drifted about as the sea of flowers waved in the wind.

At one end of the wind was Li Qingshan sucking in a deep breath. He stood up and checked himself inside. He smiled in satisfaction.

He had already converted all of his true qi into Gui Water true qi, and he had opened another meridian at the same time. He had reached the fourth layer as a Qi Practitioner.

His true qi had never been so powerful before. He took out the Cursive Sword Calligraphy and channeled true qi into it. Sword qi flew out and pierced the stone wall silently.

A blue butterfly of light fluttered happily through the air for a while before suddenly splitting into two. The attack was so powerful that it could instantly kill regular sixth or seventh layer Qi Practitioners. It would even be able to pose a significant danger to ninth layer Qi Practitioners.

If he really ended up returning the Cursive Sword Calligraphy to its original state, just how powerful would it be? He became more and more eager. Calculating the amount of time that had passed, it was about time for him to participate in the auction.

Xiao An had already climbed into the bamboo basket automatically and was now standing in it. Li Qingshan said, "You can just stay here this time. It's quite troublesome for me to carry a bamboo basket all the time, mostly because it just draws too much attention."

All Qi Practitioners had hundred treasures pouches, yet he just had to carry a bamboo basket on his back. Both Sun Fubai in the bookstore and Liu Ruping had indirectly asked him about it before. Although they were probably just curious, he could not be certain that someone observant would not end up realising something.

He guaranteed, "If there's anything good to eat or drink, I'll definitely bring it back for you."

"You find me troublesome?" Xiao An pouted.

"That's not what I meant."

"That is!"

"Listen to me!"

"No!"

Li Qingshan shot a glance at her before sighing inside, Stay calm, stay calm. Communicate, communicate.

He squatted down. "Then why don't you want to stay here?"

"I don't want to separate from you." Xiao An's eyes drooped down.

Li Qingshan said, "It'll just be for a short while."

"Not even a short while."

"Whatever then, I'm going to leave you behind!" Li Qingshan strode towards the cave, alarming a large flock of butterflies. He took a few steps before looking back. All he saw was that she continued to stand in the bamboo basket, without crying or throwing a tantrum, just staring straight at him, as if she was waiting for him to take her along with him.

He made up his mind. "I'm really going to leave you behind." When he arrived at the entrance of the tunnel, he could not help but look back. She remained just the same as before. If he really did leave like this, she would probably keep waiting until he returned.

He sighed helplessly. "Come with me!"

Together with the bamboo basket, she rose up into the air with a violent gust of wind, landing in Li Qingshan's hand. Xiao An smiled victoriously.

Li Qingshan pinched her tender cheeks viciously. "I knew I shouldn't have given in!"

Xiao An said, "If I'm not by your side, I can't protect you."

Li Qingshan suddenly fell silent.

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"Leader, please leave some for me! Croak croak!" A frog leapt around frantically as it spoke human tongue.

"Cut the nonsense, or I'll roast you whole and eat you!" Li Qingshan placed the Whale's Ingestion of Water into the spring of the Ice Condensate water, allowing it to suck up as much water as it wanted. It had already absorbed three tanks worth of water, but it still did not seem to be full.

The frog was utterly worried out of its mind, but it was powerless to do anything.

Only when the whale filled up completely did Li Qingshan take it out in satisfaction. He fished out a Pearl Dew pill and tossed it to the frog. "Here, for you." He would not actually take advantage of it. This frog was one of the strongest daemon soldiers under his command. If other Qi Practitioners were bold enough to come for the spring water, they would not be able to take even a drop of the spring water back even if they managed to survive the frog somehow.

The frog's tongue shot out, and it ate the Pearl Dew pill. "Croak! Thank you, leader!" Although the spring water was teeming with spiritual qi, it still could not be compared to the effects of high quality pills refined by humans at the end of the day.

“Keep guarding this place. Don’t forget about the gathering!” Li Qingshan handed over a few more matters before leaving the cavern again.

“Croak, croak! I won’t forget!” called out the frog. With a plonk, it dove into the Ice Condensate water.

Li Qingshan moved through the cave quickly. With a jolt of the crystal whale in his hand, there was a gurgle, and it spat out a huge blade. It even condensed a beautiful, crystal hand guard. It was perfect for Li Qingshan to unleash the full advantage of his strength, and it was an appropriate size and length for him. It was extremely heavy as well, over five hundred kilograms in weight. Even Li Qingshan could not wield it with just a single hand.

He had been constantly channeling his Gui Water true qi into the Whale’s Ingestion of Water. His aura had filled it completely now, without any sluggishness anymore. It was as if it was now an extension of his limb. When he created weapons, he did not have to let out the water then wait for it to slowly freeze either. It would condense in a single moment.

However, fourth layer Gui Water true qi was still slightly insufficient to unleash the power of this high grade spiritual artifact.

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Li Qingshan arrived in the Proud Sword manor. Yu Shukuang had already returned, passing a full hundred treasures pouch to Li Qingshan. He wanted to say something, but he hesitated.

Li Qingshan checked the hundred treasures pouch and smiled in satisfaction. Then he asked, “Why don’t I see your daughter?”

Yu Shukuang was surprised. “Didn’t she go to the Green Vine mountain? Why would she be able to return?”

Li Qingshan frowned. “In other words, she hasn’t returned yet?” Was the Green Vine Elder really going to disrespect the Hua family?

Yu Shukuang said, “She hasn’t returned at all. Did you see her?”

Li Qingshan told him about how he had met Yu Zijian in the market below the Green Vine mountain.

Yu Shukuang sighed. “Thank you for your troubles. As long as she hasn’t endured any harassment, I can be relieved as her father. As for whether she joins the Academy of the Hundred Schools or the Green Vine mountain, that’s probably beyond our control.”

Li Qingshan said, “I’ll be visiting the Green Vine mountain again very soon. I’ll take a look at just exactly what has happened. Just wait for the news from me!” He took out another empty hundred treasures pouch and handed it to Yu Shukuang. “I still need you to collect food, but it’s not that urgent this time. Just keep an eye out when you go about your usual business. Remember, don’t alert too many people.”

The underground daemons had an endless demand for surface food, and it would also be his main method for controlling his subordinates as the leader of the daemon soldiers. He obviously needed someone to handle this for him.

Yu Shukuang said, "That's easy. The Proud Sword manor has already purchased over a dozen large restaurants, and it's in charge of several large grain vendors too. It'll be much easier to handle this from here on out!"

Li Qingshan smiled. "That's some dedication!" Yu Shukuang had lived up to all the time and effort Li Qingshan had spent on him. He was in need of a clever subordinate who could read between the lines and plan ahead. He did not have the time or energy to construct his own network of people, but Yu Shukuang was capable of this. Otherwise, how was he supposed to have managed to create such a large Proud Sword manor?

He handed all of his silver notes to Yu Shukuang. "Don't hesitate about the money when it comes to handling this matter. In the future, you definitely won't just be leading some figures of the jianghu."

Yu Shukuang's heart skipped a beat. He smiled. "If it won't just be some figures of the jianghu, will there be Qi Practitioners as well? I don't have that ability with my talent. I've reached the innate realm at such a late age, so it's already quite impressive for me to be able to reach the second layer of Qi Practitioner."

Li Qingshan's face sank. "If you're satisfied with the second layer, then forget I said anything." Second layer Qi Practitioners were at the bottom of the food chain among Qi Practitioners. Not only would a subordinate like that fail to provide any great help to him, but he would probably even require him to resolve many issues for him. There would be no point in keeping a subordinate like that around.

Yu Shukuang looked into Li Qingshan's eyes. His pitch-black irises seemed to be burning. The ambition and confidence hidden within made Yu Shukuang's heart shiver slightly. Before this person, there was no need for him to act modest. It was the exact opposite. He needed to demonstrate sufficient ambition and confidence to gain his favour. This also happened to be his specialty.

"I heard that if you practise qi, practise qi, and then practise some more qi, you can overcome some sort of barrier and step into the world of immortals. I want to try."

Only then did Li Qingshan smile. He placed a Pill of Spring Breeze and Rain into Yu Shukuang's palm. "That realm is called Foundation Establishment. It means that everything is just the beginning."

.....

There was a hubbub of noise in the town as people gathered together, brushing past one another.

Qi Practitioners that regular people rarely ever saw were everywhere. Every single one of them were slightly eager and nervous. The once-a-decade Herb Gathering ceremony of the three mountains was about to begin in three day's time.

The great adventure in the subterranean world was about to unfold. It was filled with opportunities and danger. Some people could strike it rich overnight, while others could die as nobodies. Everyone hoped to be the former and wished for everyone else to be the latter. They had made sufficient preparations as well. Their gazes towards one another had already become extremely cold.

The quiet Tranquil teahouse was actually filled with customers. The brewer, Lu Ziyu, was basically completely tied up. Qi Practitioners at the sixth layer and higher were present everywhere now, and only they could afford to drink something so luxurious.

The other stores were basically facing the same predicament. Business was booming. However, only the store of Miscellaneous Goods had very few visitors. Once the flow of people reached here, they would be pushed away by an invisible barrier, preventing them from getting any closer. Unless they held an invitation, only powerful Qi Practitioners of the sixth layer or higher could directly step through the formations and enter the building under everyone's envious and admiring gazes.

Li Qingshan arrived extremely early. He was already seated in his private box, quietly waiting for the auction to begin. Looking outside, every single private box was enveloped by a layer of mist, blocking any curious gazes.

At this moment, Liu Ruping walked in with a smile. Li Qingshan said immediately, "You can go. I don't need your service!"

Liu Ruping's smile stiffened, but she saw how resolute Li Qingshan was, so she could only back out. She thought, Since you're so heartless, don't blame me for being disloyal!

The lid of the bamboo basket opened by a small crack, revealing Xiao An's crystal clear eyes. "You didn't want me to come because you wanted to be with her..."

Smack! Li Qingshan pressed the lid down. "What would a child know about?"

A gong rang through the entire hall, and Shi Peipei climbed onto the stage in a set of violet, silken clothes. She bowed with folded hands at first, thanking everyone for attending, before introducing herself and declaring that the auction had begun.

Items were auctioned off one after another. It began with a stack of low grade talismans, before progressing to mid grade talismans. The value of the items increased as the auction progressed, as did the bidding.

Li Qingshan waited calmly for the only thing that he wanted, the Sword Qi Calligraphy, to appear.

"The next item is the Sword Qi Calligraphy penned by an ancient sword immortal. It can unleash strokes of sword qi. Although it's just a mid grade spiritual artifact, it contains great understanding of the path of the sword, and this Sword Qi Calligraphy should only be an incomplete fragment of the actual thing. If someone assembles the other fragments, it'll be much more than just a mid grade spiritual artifact. The starting price is one hundred spiritual stones."

As the calligraphy scroll was unfurled, Li Qingshan's eyes narrowed. It can't be wrong. This is it. He did not understand calligraphy, but the sharp, twisted style hidden within was exactly the same as the Cursive Sword Calligraphy.

For a final confirmation, he glanced at Xiao An. Xiao An was proficient at both calligraphy and the sword, so she could not be wrong. With a gentle nod from her, Li Qingshan smiled. While it was a little expensive compared to regular mid grade spiritual artifacts, with a starting price of a hundred spiritual stones, it was still being auctioned off as a mid grade spiritual artifact. He had prepared over a thousand spiritual stones for it, so nothing should end up going wrong.

After Shi Peipei announced the starting price, everyone fell into a temporary silence.

A hundred spiritual stones for a mid grade spiritual artifact really was not a good deal. Apart from very few people like Li Qingshan, everyone present was a knowledgeable Qi Practitioner. Who knows how many auctions they had already attended in the past. They had already grown immune to something that was supposed to originate from some ancient sword immortal. There were plenty of ancient cultivators, so why wouldn't a few items end up being passed down?

Even if the Sword Qi Calligraphy had once shone resplendently, it was just a mid grade spiritual artifact now. No one dared to hope that they could find the other fragments. Even if they did find them, how were they supposed to assemble it?

This was similar to the Arts of the Boundless Ocean. It seemed to be hiding great value, but the value was just far too unrealistic. Most cultivators looked for practicality instead.

Li Qingshan smiled. Just when he was about to bid, a muffled voice suddenly rang out nearby from another private box, "Two hundred spiritual stones!" Right off the bat, he demonstrated his desire to obtain this item, which directly quelled the thoughts of many Qi Practitioners of casting a random bid.

Shi Peipei said, "Alright. This fellow bids two hundred spiritual stones. Is there anyone else willing to bid higher?" The Sword Qi Calligraphy had been appraised by her, and she had deemed it to be a special item. That was why she specially priced it a little high, higher than most mid grade spiritual artifacts. If a special item was unable to fetch a price befitting a special item, she would rather have it passed on. There were plenty of days to come for it to be sold.

Li Qingshan sighed slightly. As he had expected, he was not the only one who had recognised the value of this item. He also bid. "Three hundred spiritual stones!"

His voice passed through the blocking mist and immediately became twisted and vague. It was no longer even possible to tell whether it came from a man or a woman.

Shi Peipei glanced deeply at the private box. She knew that was Li Qingshan's box, and she smiled. As it seemed, the special item would be sold for a price it deserved today.

As expected, the other box bid again after a moment of silence. "Four hundred spiritual stones!" He had actually raised the price by another hundred spiritual stones.

The auction centre fell quiet, followed by a slight hubbub. Four hundred spiritual stones were already enough to buy an inferior high grade spiritual artifact. Why would someone pay that much for a mid grade spiritual artifact? Was the Sword Qi Calligraphy really hiding something? Or did the school of Miscellany hire someone to purposefully raise the price?

There were quite a few people who became tempted, but none of them were willing to risk the spiritual stones in their hundred treasures pouches. They just watched on quietly as the two of them competed against one another. They were rather surprised by the fact that the first intense bidding war had already begun before a high grade spiritual artifact had even appeared.

Li Qingshan frowned and said calmly, "Five hundred spiritual stones."

"Six hundred spiritual stones!" Before Li Qingshan had even finished speaking, the voice rang out again. It was twisted by the mist, but everyone could hear the fury within the voice.

Chapter 227 - Killing Intent

Li Qingshan also heard the anger contained in this voice, but he was unfazed. He continued, "Seven hundred spiritual stones!"

"Eight hundred spiritual stones."

Li Qingshan said directly, "One thousand spiritual stones."

Everyone became momentarily stunned. Even high grade spiritual artifacts rarely fetched a price beyond a thousand spiritual stones.

Was there really something extraordinary about the Sword Qi Calligraphy? That was what everyone thought, but no one was bold enough to bid right now. By the time they bid and actually spent over a thousand spiritual stones to purchase a mid grade spiritual artifact of some unknown use, they would not even be able to cry anymore.

"Is there anyone else who wants to bid higher? If there isn't, then the Sword Qi Calligraphy will be going to this fellow."

Shi Peipei's eyes swiveled about as she smiled from ear to ear with her wrinkly face.

No more voices rang out from the thick mist, perhaps because it was no longer worth it, or they were coming up with another plan.

Shi Peipei said to Li Qingshan, "Sir, the Sword Qi Calligraphy goes to you."

A while later, the Sword Qi Calligraphy was delivered to Li Qingshan. He unfurled it eagerly. The strokes on the scroll were intricate and sharp, brimming with sword qi. However, it was half the size of the Cursive Sword Calligraphy, which was why it was a mid grade spiritual artifact.

As it seemed, the calligraphy had not been evenly divided in the past. The issue now was how to assemble it.

Li Qingshan tried taking out the Cursive Sword Calligraphy and placing it on the Sword Qi Calligraphy before shaking it, but they showed no signs of merging together. He was slightly disappointed.

However, he immediately became riled up. His cultivation was still too low right now. It took him quite the effort even to wield a high grade spiritual artifact, so it was impossible for him to refine a supreme grade spiritual artifact. Otherwise, the Cursive Sword Calligraphy would be much more complicated than just being able to launch a few strands of sword qi.

Only when his cultivation had caught up and he had refined both spiritual artifacts could he try again.

Xiao An looked at it eagerly, so Li Qingshan handed it to her. Then, Li Qingshan glanced at the private box shrouded with mist and muttered to himself, "Why did that person want the Sword Qi Calligraphy?"

Xiao An immediately began to study the Sword Qi Calligraphy. She lay down on the thick, silken carpet, supporting her chin with her left hand while she used a finger on her right hand like a sword, moving about rapidly within a limited region. She produced blurs with her small hand, which seemed like a sword dance, yet also like calligraphy. There was a beautiful rhythm to it.

Her comprehension of the sword intent within the Cursive Sword Calligraphy had deepened once again. When she heard what Li Qingshan muttered, she tilted her head. "Maybe he's just like me!" Suddenly, she stabbed out a few dozen times with her finger, ripping through the air and kicking up a violent breeze. Wind immediately whistled through the private box, ruffling Li Qingshan's clothes.

Li Qingshan suddenly understood. Yep, that's probably the main reason. Unless they also possessed a fragment, no Qi Practitioner would be willing to gamble several hundred spiritual stones on something like this.

At this moment, there were a few gentle knocks on the door. Li Qingshan opened it, and Liu Ruping said, "The person who bid against you earlier wishes to see you."

Li Qingshan said, "Alright. I just happen to want to see him too." He became more and more certain about his guesses. Assembling the Sword Qi Calligraphy and the Cursive Sword Calligraphy would definitely result in a supreme grade spiritual artifact. If he could obtain another fragment, just what would it become? A legendary arcane artifact?

Liu Ruping backed out obediently. She actually did not try to pester him anymore. After leaving the private box, she smiled scornfully, but she was not in a hurry to pass on the message. Instead, she walked to another private box and knocked on the door.

A young man opened the door, and surprisingly, it was Mu Zhicong. He let her in and directly asked, "Why have you only come now?"

Liu Ruping threw a fake tantrum. "The customer who bid against him earlier wanted to see that Niu person, which is why I came a little late. Senior brother Mu, I hope that you can forgive me!"

Mu Zhicong was not too worried about this. He turned around and said, "Senior brother Song, I never thought that this bastard would be so wealthy. If he sells that daemon core too, he'll have two or three thousand spiritual stones on him at the very least. You can say that this is a blessing in disguise for you, senior brother."

Seated there was the senior brother Song from the Pheasant's Grace mountain, who Li Qingshan had tossed out in a single move, Song Ming.

Liu Ruping added, "That's not all. He just spent eight hundred spiritual stones earlier for a high grade spiritual artifact, and he exchanged some spiritual talismans for a few hundred spiritual stones as well." Originally, the transactions of customers with the school of Miscellany were an absolute secret; breaches would result in severe punishments.

However, as she had failed to curry any favour from Li Qingshan, she was resentful, and Mu Zhicong just happened to come at this time, asking for any information regarding Li Qingshan. He got her to report back to him immediately whenever she saw Li Qingshan. He offered her many benefits in exchange.

Liu Ruping saw Li Qingshan set foot in the store of Miscellaneous Goods and immediately reported this to Mu Zhicong, who was in another private box. However, Mu Zhicong had his own plans.

Song Ming sat there, unfazed, as he glanced at Mu Zhicong. "You've purposefully come to tell me this. What are you planning?"

Mu Zhicong walked over and patted Song Ming's shoulder. "The disciples of the three mountains stand together. Since you've been insulted, senior brother, how can I just stay by and watch? I just happened to run into this bastard a while back, and I wanted to kill him for you then and there. Unfortunately, thinking about how even senior brother was not his opponent, I would never be able to defeat him with my cultivation. Right now, the people from your sect are nearby, so this is the best opportunity for revenge you will ever have."

Although he smiled, killing intent was pent up inside. Niu Juxia, oh Niu Juxia. Our relationship wasn't so horrible before, but how dare you actually try to take Zijian away. As such, don't blame me for showing no mercy now. You're a mere independent cultivator, yet you still act so arrogantly. Even if you don't die to my hands, you'll die elsewhere. I'll just be sending you off a little earlier.

Song Ming clenched his fists. He was pale. Ever since that last battle, he had become famous about the three mountains, regularly mocked and made fun of by others. It was basically the greatest humiliation he had ever experienced in his life. He could never just accept it like this.

Now that he knew his enemy was nearby, he was overcome by anger. And, three thousand spiritual stones were enough to interest any Qi Practitioner. No matter what scheme Mu Zhicong had in mind, he would try anyway.

In the end, he asked carefully, "You're not telling me that your Green Vine mountain doesn't want in on a share of this, right?"

Mu Zhicong said, "Our Green Vine mountain serves as the host. If we work with others to kill independent cultivators before the Herb Picking ceremony, it'll probably make everyone fearful and affect the procession of the ceremony. Even if I had the courage, I wouldn't try to. However, if it's just personal grievances, then there's nothing wrong with it at all. And, how can senior brother Song not give me a share?"

Song Ming's expression wavered before he suddenly snorted coldly and left through the door. "Keep a close eye on him for me!"

Mu Zhicong said, "Ruping, keep monitoring him. Once this is all over, there'll be plenty of benefits for you!"

Liu Ruping pressed over, wanting to flatter up to him. She said gently, "I knew that a brute like him wouldn't be able to break free from your schemes!"

Mu Zhicong became impatient with her. He pushed her aside and made his way out.

Liu Ruping stamped her foot down viciously. Not a single man is decent.

.....

Li Qingshan was clueless about these schemes. The auction had broadened his horizons. He gained a rough estimate of the value of spiritual artifacts and herbs.

However, his item had yet to appear in the auction. He wanted to see just how much a daemon core would be worth.

A while later, an earthen-yellow daemon core was presented on the auction table.

“A class seven earth element daemon core. It can be used to make Earth Element pills... Starting price of one thousand spiritual stones.” Shi Peipei gave a lengthy introduction to the uses of the daemon core before finally stating the starting price. Just the starting price was higher than most high grade spiritual artifacts. Not only was it because it was rarer, but it was also because its usage was broader.

Shi Peipei cast her gaze to the few boxes with the best positions at the very top. Since the very beginning, they had been extremely quiet, as if nothing could interest them.

Li Qingshan pursed his lips together and wondered if he should throw in a few dummy bids to get the ball rolling. However, he soon discovered that there was no need for this at all.

The boxes at the very top that had been silent the entire time finally placed their first bid. “One thousand two hundred spiritual stones.”

“One thousand five hundred!”

“One thousand six hundred!”

The price of the daemon core increased rapidly as Li Qingshan’s smile grew wider and wider. He scooped up Xiao An and rubbed his face against her smooth cheek. “Haha, we’re rich!”

.....

The tumultuous centre quietened down once more. The auction had ended, and the lights on the stage dimmed.

However, Li Qingshan could still clearly “see” the lingering aura in the air. The lively atmosphere did not seem to settle down just yet.

Li Qingshan remained in his box. He did not leave as he thought back to the bidding war earlier.

Of course, this was not for the daemon core, but for a supreme grade spiritual artifact shaped like a small bottle.

The starting price was three thousand five hundred spiritual stones, and basically every bid increased it by five hundred. The Qi Practitioners below were on the edge of their seats with each bid, while the Foundation Establishment cultivators remained calm. They bid at ease. During the entire process, regardless of who won the item in the end, they remained calm.

Not a single Qi Practitioner was bold enough to participate in this mellow bidding war. In the end, the supreme grade spiritual artifact was sold for a price of nine thousand five hundred spiritual stones to a customer in the western box.

The final victor even said in a composed manner, “Thank you for letting me win!”

Li Qingshan personally believed that he was not capable of something like this. It had nothing to do with one’s breadth of mind; it was purely due to the difference in strength. It made him feel that whether it be humans or daemons, only when they survived a heavenly tribulation had they truly set foot on the path of cultivation, able to control themselves and go about matters free of any burden.

This was like a child learning how to walk and talk. They could stumble towards their objective and express their thoughts. Whether it be Qi Practitioners or daemons, they were all just babbling as they crawled along the ground.

Of course, the daemon core reached Li Qingshan's expectations in the end. Just as Shi Peipei had said, the earth element daemon core surpassed two thousand spiritual stones. It was sold for a price of two thousand six hundred spiritual stones in the end.

After taking out eight hundred spiritual stones for the Whale's Ingestion of Water and the store of Miscellaneous Goods' five percent fee, a total of one thousand, six hundred and seventy spiritual stones now laid quietly in his hundred treasures pouch.

Chapter 228 - Sensing Danger

Coupled with the earnings from the talismans he had sold, the spiritual stones on Li Qingshan amounted to over two thousand once again. He was even wealthier than before he had bought the Whale's Ingestion of Water.

The reason why he was still seated here was because he was waiting for the Qi Practitioner who wanted to buy the Sword Qi Calligraphy. If he really did possess another fragment of the Cursive Sword Calligraphy on him, Li Qingshan wanted to use these spiritual stones to purchase it from him.

There were the sounds of footsteps outside. Li Qingshan opened the door, but he found Liu Ruping standing there. "Congratulations, sir. Not only has the daemon core sold for a high price, but you've also managed to win what you wanted."

Li Qingshan saw how there was no one behind her. "Where's that person?"

Liu Ruping said, "He suddenly changed his mind. Apologies for making you wait for all this time. If there's nothing else you want to buy, please leave now!"

Li Qingshan was rather puzzled. Didn't that person want the Sword Qi Calligraphy? Or was he wrong instead and that person came from the school of Miscellany to place dummy bids? Liu Ruping's sudden change in her attitude raised some suspicion as well. "I'll see you around." He brushed past Liu Ruping.

Liu Ruping had her back towards him. Her lips were open, but she made no sounds. She mouthed, "I won't see you around!" She tied up her hair and thought, Though, I really must thank you! All she did was describe Li Qingshan's appearance and features to that Qi Practitioner, and she had earned twenty spiritual stones. There were not a lot of easy business transactions like this.

Ever since she had met this Niu person, she had been rolling in wealth. Both the commission from the school of Miscellany for his transactions and selling his information to others had net her a decent sum.

However, she failed to notice that Li Qingshan had looked back carelessly at her back. A cold light flashed through his eyes.

There were plenty of people in the world who were vicious, cruel, and willing to suddenly turn against someone. However, there were very few people who were resourceful and insightful at the same time. Qian Rongzhi was one, but there was not a lot of Qian Rongzhis in the world.

At the very least, she had failed to see through Li Qingshan's actual character.

Even the debt of a single meal must be returned, and the grievance of a hostile glare must be resolved.

.....

Sunlight shone weakly onto the streets, nowhere near enough to purge the coldness brought on by the bitter winds.

Most Qi Practitioners could ignore changes in temperature at such a level, let alone Li Qingshan with his body as a daemon.

However, he felt a deep coldness. This was not a matter of temperature, but a sensation of danger. It was a sharp instinct he had developed after becoming a daemon, but it became sharper as his cultivation increased.

It was so sharp that it was no longer just a so-called sixth sense. Instead, it directly originated from the Spirit Turtle's Method of Sea Suppression.

Shamans used turtle shells for divination, using them to forecast celestial phenomena and the future. Spirit turtles bore the nine halls and eight trigrams on their backs, and they possessed extraordinary intelligence. This kind of intelligence would gradually show itself as his cultivation increased. Although it could not forecast the future, he could sense ill omens.

Li Qingshan exhaled gently, raised his head, and closed his eyes. The ruckus in the surroundings vanished completely, but a sense of being watched appeared in his heart.

Not only did the person possess extraordinary cultivation, but their method of concealing their aura was extremely impressive as well. Even he would have failed to notice it if he did not pay attention.

Li Qingshan opened his eyes. He did not hide in the safe town, instead making his way out. The danger would not subside with time. All he could do was confront it bravely.

Stepping out of the town, the ground sank slightly, forming a round pit. As if he had stepped onto a springboard, Li Qingshan leapt a hundred paces away. His huge figure took off with unbelievable speed, rising towards the pure white mountains.

He turned into a mountain pass and vanished.

The forest rapidly approached him before rapidly receding around him. He dodged the obstacles dexterously, and if he could not dodge, he would directly run through it, but he would not stop. He did not try to use the Spirit Turtle's Method of Sea Suppression to hide his aura either.

A thousand steps behind him, a masked man in black clothing stopped hiding his tracks as he pursued.

Li Qingshan glanced backwards, and his eyes narrowed. It was an eighth layer Qi Practitioner, but that was no danger at all. He should not be experiencing such an intense sensation of danger. Was this really everything?

He did not stop. Instead, he ran even harder. He leaned forwards, sometimes pushing off the ground with both hands like a black tiger. He assumed the forms of the tiger demon when it came to running through the mountains and forests.

The masked man cursed inside. He was determined to obtain the Sword Qi Calligraphy, but he never thought someone would get in his way. Originally, he wanted to meet with Li Qingshan to obtain the Sword Qi Calligraphy, whether it was through coercion or promises, but with further thought, he realised that he would have to spend over a thousand spiritual stones at the very least if he wanted to purchase it. It would be painful, like paying with his own flesh.

As a result, he began to consider killing and robbing. In order to avoid alarming Li Qingshan, he even went as far as to spend twenty spiritual stones to purchase information about Li Qingshan from Liu Ruping.

However, never did he think that the kid would be so cautious, taking off as soon as he left the town with such startling speed.

However, he sneered inside. If you hid in the town, I wouldn't have been bold enough to touch you, but since you've come out, you're just begging to die. Do you really think you can shake me off? It won't be that easy. He used a movement technique and true qi wrapped around him. Like a black arrow, he directly shot towards Li Qingshan.

Within a valley covered by snow, fallen leaves were scattered everywhere. A black, spear-like object directly pierced towards the sky.

As if he had run out of strength, Li Qingshan stood in the knee-deep snow while his body radiated with true qi naturally. All Qi Practitioners would be able to tell that he was at the fourth layer, and he was very much exhausted.

“Why aren't you running anymore?”

After a moment of peace, a cold, complacent voice rang out from behind.

Li Qingshan suddenly looked back and saw a masked man walking over through the snow. He emerged from the forest and left behind footprints in places without snow, gazing at Li Qingshan coldly. Although he had pursued for several dozen kilometers, his true qi was basically untouched.

Li Qingshan turned around and asked in surprise, “Why are you chasing me?”

The masked man said, “Hand over the Sword Qi Calligraphy.”

Li Qingshan frowned. “I don't know what a Sword Qi Calligraphy is.” Information on his identity should have been an absolute secret. The first person he suspected was Liu Ruping.

Perhaps it was a rule of the school of Miscellany, but he had become a special customer of hers. She was responsible for serving him in all aspects within the store of Miscellaneous Goods. He was not completely certain, but so what if it was that woman? Hmph, he was not generous enough to forgive someone after being sold out and betrayed.

The masked man shouted, “Don't play games with me! If I said it's you, then it's you!” As he said that, a black vortex formed before him and whistled towards Li Qingshan's chest.

Li Qingshan dodged to one side in a desperate manner, lunging into the snow. He called out in a hurry. “Wait, it's me! I'll give it to you!”

The masked man smiled. "That's more like it!"

Li Qingshan took out the Sword Qi Calligraphy reluctantly and asked, "Tell me, who told you that I purchased the Sword Qi Calligraphy? Was it the woman who passed on messages for you?"

The masked man affirmed him casually as he looked at the Sword Qi Calligraphy rather excitedly. Who knows whether he thought of the same thing as when Li Qingshan had first obtained the Sword Qi Calligraphy.

Li Qingshan said viciously, "I won't spare her."

The masked man thought, And why would I spare you? He changed the topic. "And your hundred treasures pouch too! Hand it over!"

Li Qingshan called out, "Don't even think about it!"

The masked man said, "Then I'll come get it myself!" He patted his waist, and a small, shining sword shot out, directly towards Li Qingshan's head.

He did not even take this too seriously. The flying sword of an eighth layer Qi Practitioner could cut up a fourth layer Qi Practitioner like fruit. The reason why he had bothered to converse with him was just out of caution. He wanted to check whether Li Qingshan had a particularly powerful master that he could rely on. He wanted to avoid biting off more than he could chew. After checking and confirming that Li Qingshan was indeed an ordinary independent cultivator, he launched a killing blow without any more hesitation.

A ray of reflected sunlight dazzled the masked man's eyes. It formed a rainbow for a brief second.

There was the screeching of metal and sparks flew. The flying sword spun high into the air.

A shadow enveloped the masked man. He raised his head in surprise and saw a pair of eyes filled with killing intent, and then he saw a blade, a great big blade composed of ice!

In a trance, he seemed to see a huge, black tiger lunging towards him with a crystal blade.

Murderous aura flooded the surroundings.

All of this happened in just a split second. When Li Qingshan threw himself into the snow, he had secretly gripped the Whale's Ingestion of Water and created the ice blade. The moment the flying sword was about to strike him, he swung up with his blade and sent the sword flying.

Without any hesitation, he lunged forwards. He pushed off with his four limbs towards the masked man like a tiger lunging at its prey.

This kid hid his strength! The masked man lived up to his identity as an eighth layer Qi Practitioner. He immediately broke free from the restraints of the murderous aura as the thought flashed through his head. He crossed his hands several times before raising them up to block, and a black qi revolved and whistled out.

The blade and black qi collided violently, producing an ear-splitting sound, like an electric saw going through metal. Pieces of ice flew everywhere.

Li Qingshan roared out and poured all of his Gui Water true qi into the blade. He did not hold back at all, condensing all of his strength, all of his energy, into the strike as he swung down.

He was like a volcano that had fallen dormant for many millennia, now finally erupting. Happiness filled his heart. He felt extremely satisfied over the attack regardless of the results it achieved.

The ice blade was extremely sharp. It sliced through the black swirl of qi, and the masked man paled in fright. This was not the strength that a fourth layer Qi Practitioner should possess!

The blade swept through the protective true qi with a sharp whistle and blood splattered on the pure-white snow.

The gust of wind that followed the swing blew away several meters of snow, revealing the black, frozen soil below.

It left behind a deep gash in the frozen ground.

Li Qingshan stood with the blade as he wiped away the frozen traces of blood from the weapon. He raised his head and looked at the trees.

The masked man clutched the wound on his chest and looked down.

Their gazes met like invisible weapons, clashing again and again and producing sparks in the air.

The two of them seemed to want to say something, but neither of them spoke in the end. With a swish, the flying sword descended from above, now extremely swift and forceful.

Chapter 229 - A Startling Strike

The masked man formed a seal with his hand to control the sword. His eyes were filled with icy-cold fury. He was no longer careless now. Although the enemy had struck when he was careless, he could not afford to treat him like a fourth layer Qi Practitioner with how he managed to land a blow on him.

However, he was not worried either. A person would always be slaughtered if they used a close range weapon against a flying sword unless an absolute difference in strength existed.

Li Qingshan understood this too. He shook the Whale's Ingestion of Water and the crystal blade suddenly turned into an ice shield. With a series of clang, the flying sword darted about and struck the shield several dozen times. Not only did it fail to destroy the ice shield, but it even developed a layer of frost instead, making it more sluggish.

The flying sword shuddered, and its speed returned. It flew around like a bird, constantly searching for a weak point in Li Qingshan's defence.

However, the Whale's Ingestion of Water had been filled with Ice Condensate water, so the ice shield was half a foot thick, and it covered most of Li Qingshan. Although the flying sword was extremely nimble, it struggled to make any progress.

"A high grade spiritual artifact!" The masked man's eyes grew even colder and brighter. He had heard from the woman that even the daemon core had originated from him. This was a blessing in disguise. If he managed to kill this kid, it would be quite the harvest for him.

He took out a painting scroll from his hundred treasures pouch and unfurled it with a shake. The strokes on there were intricate and sharp, criss-crossed with sword qi. It was another fragment of the Cursive Sword Calligraphy!

All of Li Qingshan's hairs stood on end. A great sense of danger flooded his mind, like he faced a catastrophe.

Several dozen strands of sword qi cut through the raging wind and sliced through the drifting snow towards Li Qingshan.

The vertical stroke was the fastest. It arrived in the blink of an eye, immediately filling Li Qingshan's field of vision and stabbing deeply into the ice shield.

The horizontal stroke was the slowest, but it was the grandest and heaviest. The power it contained seemed to be able to sever all life. It left behind a deep gash in the ice shield, causing ice to fly everywhere.

The ascending and descending strokes followed a lethal trajectory. They actually looped around Li Qingshan, flying directly towards his unguarded back. They basically arrived at the same time as the horizontal and vertical strokes.

However, the most deadly one seemed to be the hook. It would suddenly flick towards the sky, and then towards the ground. It was impossible to gauge its trajectory. It suddenly plunged into the black, frozen ground, and Li Qingshan felt an icy-cold killing intent pierce his feet, wanting to hook onto his life and soul and drag it away from him.

The flying sword did not halt at all, constantly searching for a weak point.

Li Qingshan roared out, and the Whale's Ingestion of Ice completely spat out all of its Ice Condensate water, forming an ice ball that protected every inch of his body. It was similar to the Spirit Turtle's Profound Shell.

It was stabbed at, struck heavily, sliced at, and torn apart. The ice ball that was supposed to be as tough as steel became as fragile as a bubble under the barrage of sword qi. It produced a series of splitting sounds, riddling the entire ball with cracks.

Li Qingshan gasped. This was the first time he had witnessed the true strength of the Cursive Sword Calligraphy as someone on the receiving end. The true qi of an eighth layer Qi Practitioner bestowed the Cursive Sword Calligraphy with absolute destructive and lethal power.

If Li Qingshan had not used Ice Condensate water, but regular spring water or spiritual water, he would have never managed to block that attack.

At a closer glance, the Cursive Sword Calligraphy in the masked man's hands paled in comparison to his own in both size and glow. It should have only been equivalent to a high grade spiritual artifact.

The masked man was slightly surprised as well. Who knows how many Qi Practitioners much stronger than him had he already killed with this Sword Calligraphy, but he actually failed to breach the defences of a weaker Qi Practitioner today.

The flying sword hovered in the air quietly. The masked man said, "Where did you get your high quality spiritual artifact from? How is it able to block my sword qi?"

"No wonder you're so determined to get your hands on the Sword Qi Calligraphy. Turns out you really do have another fragment in your possession. Though, killing me won't be that easy." Li Qingshan shook the Whale's Ingestion of Water, and the ice ball turned back into an ice blade without any cracks at all. However, his true qi was significantly depleted. He took out a spiritual stone to recover.

The masked man suddenly laughed aloud.

Li Qingshan asked, "What're you laughing at?"

The masked man said, "The more good things you possess, the happier I am, as all of it will belong to me in the end."

Li Qingshan said, "Really? Then it seems like I should laugh too."

The masked man squinted his eyes. "You witnessed all of those moves earlier, so do you really think that you can get out of this alive? Misleading the enemy is a good tactic. You almost even managed to fool me. However, those tricks are completely useless before absolute strength." He rubbed his chest, and the terrifying wound had already begun to close up gradually under the effects of true qi. He was confident it would heal up perfectly before long.

The reason why he had stopped to talk to Li Qingshan was mostly so that he could use the chance to tend to his wounds and purge the freezing coldness from it. His wound had basically closed up, so he no longer bothered to waste any more time. He pointed at Li Qingshan. "Go!"

The flying sword shot off like a bolt of lightning. Li Qingshan also used this opportunity to recover his true qi. He did not transform into his daemon form. He could not afford to release the aura of a daemon here at all. It was very possible that the barren mountains in the surroundings were hiding many Qi Practitioners preparing for the Herb Gathering ceremony. There might have even been prying eyes spying on them right now from the distant mountain peaks.

They had come to kill daemons. Once they sensed daemon qi, maybe even Foundation Establishment cultivators would be alarmed. He could not take the risk.

Regular fourth layer Qi Practitioners obviously could not defeat eighth layer Qi Practitioners, but he was no regular fourth layer Qi practitioner. And, he had yet to use his true trump card!

With a thump, the flying sword stabbed into the shield.

Li Qingshan had pulled out the low grade spiritual artifact shield that he had not used in a very long time, turning it into the size of a table and lifting it before him.

In his other hand, the Whale's Ingestion of Water had already absorbed all the ice and water into its belly. He pointed it towards the masked man on the tree tops.

Swish, swish, swish, swish. Countless icicles shot out viciously.

The masked man completely ignored them. He raised his sleeve, and a wondrous stream of air formed several meters in front of him. Although it was not particularly powerful, it only needed a slight stir to redirect the icicles.

Cling! Clang! The icicles shot into the dense forest, causing the trees to shake and sway. Snow fell down.

There was a great boom, as if an invisible elephant had barged into the forest. The huge trees collapsed one after another. The icicles penetrated the bark and erupted with coldness, freezing the trees, and the force directly snapped many of the tree trunks.

This only demonstrated the power of the attack. If it were used against a sixth layer Qi Practitioner, it would be a terrifying lethal move, but it was nowhere near enough against eighth layer Qi Practitioners. With the opening of each meridian, their true qi would grow by several fold. And, the masked man did not just possess powerful true qi, but ingenious tricks too.

The masked man seemed to grow impatient, but he only used the flying sword to deal attacks. He refused to take even a step closer to Li Qingshan. Instead, he constantly remained vigilant of his surroundings. He understood the terrifying abilities of Body Practitioners the most. He would never give him an opportunity to suddenly rush over and injure him again.

He could only place all of his focus onto the flying sword. The flying sword moved faster and faster, such that it was no longer visible. All that remained were countless flashes of light. It formed a net around Li Qingshan.

It kicked up a string of rain-like barrages. Li Qingshan swung the shield left and right, but whenever a flash swept past him, it would always leave behind a deep gash in the shield. In the blink of an eye, the shield had become covered in marks. Its glow dim, already on the edge of falling apart now.

Li Qingshan remained right where he was without moving at all. He knew very well that if he moved, he would definitely reveal an opening, which would give the flying sword an opportunity. And, even if he could draw closer and become embroiled in close combat, he might not necessarily be able to gain the upper hand against an eighth layer Qi Practitioner.

But if he did not move, how was he supposed to win?

He was like a wild beast laying in the grass, silently waiting for an opportunity to present itself. He would not move, but if he did, it would be for a fatal blow.

However, the net pressed closer and closer, and his opportunity instead became less and less likely to appear the longer he waited. He made up his mind. If there was no opportunity, then he would make one. Suddenly, he tossed the shield into the air, knocking the flying sword away. However, his chest was now wide open with that.

A sneer flashed through the masked man's eyes. The flying sword moved even faster, striking like lightning.

With a ruffle, Li Qingshan unfurled the Cursive Sword Calligraphy and blocked his chest with it, launching several dozen strands of sharp sword qi.

The flying sword collided with a vertical stroke before being sent flying by a horizontal stroke. It was unable to stop the great wave of sword qi.

The masked man shivered inside. As he looked at the Sword Calligraphy that was even slightly stronger than his own, he was stunned, but he really wanted to laugh out crazily afterwards. Never did I think that the reason why this kid spent so much money to buy the Sword Qi Calligraphy was because he possessed another fragment of it.

If regular eighth layer Qi Practitioners faced this sudden wave of sword qi, they would probably have to worry for their own lives. However, this was nothing to him. He shook the Sword Calligraphy in his hand again. Who knows how many times denser his true qi was compared to Li Qingshan's, so he could use the Sword Calligraphy much more liberally. He did not have to worry about depleting all of his true qi from a single use.

The two waves of sword qi collided in the air, but there was no intense clash, nor did they nullify each other. Instead, they directly merged together, forming a cluster of ink-like black water that varied in shape.

Li Qingshan and the masked man both ravished with joy. This only proved that the two pieces of calligraphy shared the same origin, and that a possibility to merge them existed.

However, this only lasted for a split second. The ball of ink elongated to a certain limit before seemingly losing control over its internal pressure and blowing up again. It formed a ring of sword qi that expanded into the surroundings.

Both of them changed in expression. They did not dare to waste any time at all. Before the sword qi had even arrived, the power had already flooded the surroundings like an avalanche or a tsunami. It had definitely surpassed a supreme grade spiritual artifact in terms of power.

The masked man shot into the sky like a black arrow. It was already too late for Li Qingshan to dodge, so he knelt down on one knee, wielding a shield in his left hand and the Whale's Ingestion of Water in his right, which condensed an extremely narrow but seven-foot-thick lump of ice even further in front of him.

The wave of sword qi arrived in a flash, expanding to several hundred meters across and destroying all of the surrounding snow and ice. The masked man looked down from above. A black, round figure stood out amidst the white ground. He could not help but gulp as he felt excited for some reason. If he could grasp this power, would there still be any Qi Practitioners that could oppose him?

With a bang, only half of the round shield in Li Qingshan's hand remained. All of the spiritual qi had dispersed. It was completely destroyed now. As for the lump of ice even further ahead, it had been cut through the centre as easily as a piece of paper.

Li Qingshan was shocked as well. If the sword qi had not shot off in all directions and was under the slight control of the enemy, he would have been a dead man already. Even if he had daemonified, he would still be heavily injured.

Even with that being the case, he had basically destroyed a high grade and low grade spiritual artifact to barely block the sword qi. Fortunately, the weapons of the Whale's Ingestion of Water were condensed from water and they could self-repair, or it really would have been quite the loss this time.

He raised his head and looked at the masked man in the air. Li Qingshan's eyes were frigid. The bamboo basket on his back had already vanished.

The masked man watched the bamboo basket whistle over as he felt stunned. He had no idea what trick this was, but he did not dare to lower his guard. Separating his hands, a black strand of qi rushed out and ripped the bamboo basket to shreds.

A speck of cold light flickered like a falling star, ripping through the qi. Before the sword had even arrived, the sword intent seemed to pierce his body. The masked man was astounded as he stiffened up slightly.

Not only had he been stunned by the sword intent, but he was surprised and frightened by it too. The sword intent was clearly the same as the Sword Calligraphy's. Was there really someone talented enough to comprehend the sword intent within the calligraphy? And, to his disbelief, the wielder was actually a child less than ten years of age.

Li Qingshan was amazed. Since when did this girl's sword technique reach a level like this? Despite the great distance, he could sense how terrifying the sword intent was. He could not help but wonder just how he would handle it if the sword was directed towards him instead. However, he was unable to come up with a suitable answer.

Of course, he was suited for actual combat and not theory. Only in an actual life-or-death struggle would he be able to unleash all of his potential.

The great threat immediately made the masked man jerk to his senses. He wanted to dodge, but he felt like that was impossible. This was not because he had nothing to push off of. A casual spurt of true qi from an eighth layer Qi Practitioner could blast them ten meters away.

Xiao An wielded the sword with her white, tender hand as she directed the tip at the masked man. The tip was no longer straight. Instead, the edge constantly trembled.

Li Qingshan found this to be extremely familiar. He suddenly remembered how Xiao An laid on the ground in the private box and her hand constantly trembled as she drew in the air.

As it turned out, Xiao An had already patched up a portion of the sword intent from the Cursive Sword Calligraphy after obtaining the Sword Qi Calligraphy. And, when he clashed against the masked man, she had been hiding in the bamboo basket, but she could still see the outside world clearly.

With a single glance, she had managed to take in the strokes on the masked man's copy of the Cursive Sword Calligraphy clearly. And, she even felt the sword qi that it had released up close.

To regular people, all of that had just happened in a split second. They would not have noticed anything. However, to her, a mere glance was already enough.

All geniuses needed was instantaneous comprehension. The three fragments of the Cursive Sword Calligraphy joined together in her mind, condensing into this one strike. It already possessed a sliver of the ancient sword immortal's sword intent.

In that flash, in the face of a devastating attack, it was already too late for the flying sword to save him, and it was too late for him to pull out a talisman. The masked man extended his hand in a crazed panic, releasing all of his true qi and black qi that swirled and rushed out like a tornado.

Just like in the private box, the tip of the sword suddenly stopped trembling. All of the strokes gathered into a powerful stab.

Xiao An brushed past the masked man and both of them fell out of the sky.

Li Qingshan rushed over in a hurry and caught Xiao An. She was pouring with sweat, and her fragrance of sandalwood grew heavier and heavier. Her eyes were dim, but still clear. She was just exhausted.

The masked man did a flip and landed firmly on the ground. He pointed at Li Qingshan, and then at Xiao An. "You-" The moment he uttered a single word, blood spurted from his throat, almost reaching Li Qingshan.

He trembled a few times before collapsing.

With a great rumble, several hundred trees gradually tilted and collapsed. The thunderous sound reverberated through the valley.

At the same time, Xiao An's hidden blade turned to dust, dispersing in the wind. The might of the strike earlier was not something a low grade spiritual artifact could withstand. It had sapped all of her energy as well.

However, the result was instantly killing an eighth layer Qi Practitioner.

Xiao An stared at Li Qingshan and raised her chin. "I meant it!"

Li Qingshan stroked her nose with his index finger. "Alright, whatever you say!"

TL: I can't really translate it properly, but Li Qingshan stroked her nose in this context as a form of punishment. He basically used the second joint of his index finger to do it, which can hurt if you do it hard. It's often used as a punishment for games among friends.

The flying sword fell out of the sky like a dead snake. With a gust of true qi, it fell into Li Qingshan's hand. At the same time, he picked up the hundred treasures pouch and fragment of the Cursive Sword Calligraphy from the ground. A stream of fire flew out from the tip of Xiao An's finger, entering the corpse and destroying all traces of it. She immediately recovered with that.

Li Qingshan said, "People are going to come very soon. We can't stay here. Let's go!"

He had managed to kill a powerful enemy without transforming, obtaining a spiritual artifact he could only dream of. However, for some reason, the sense of danger did not disperse. Instead, it continued to loom over him like a dark cloud, which was why he chose to leave immediately.

The two of them disappeared into the messy valley. A while later, a group of Qi Practitioners arrived and stared at the scenery in shock. They all looked at one another. Were there Foundation Establishment cultivators fighting here earlier?

Only the leading Qi Practitioner frowned slightly. He was young and his face was chiseled like jade. Surprisingly, he had already reached the ninth layer. Even though practising qi could delay ageing, it was possible to tell that he could not be too old. With his age, he could be labelled as a genius wherever he went.

He asked indifferently, "Song Ming, are you certain it was this direction?"

He wore the same uniform from the Pheasant's Grace mountain as Song Ming. However, he had three tail feathers embroidered on his chest, one more than Song Ming. The other Qi Practitioners all gathered around him, and all of them were disciples of the Pheasant's Grace mountain.

Song Ming stepped forward politely. "Yes, first senior brother. Quite a few people saw it with their own eyes. It can't be wrong."

The first senior brother asked, "Then where is he right now?" His voice was very nonchalant, but that originated from his absolute confidence in his own strength.

Song Ming hesitated. "He... must be nearby."

Before the first senior brother could even say anything, another Qi Practitioner had already spoken, "Junior brother Song, the Herb Gathering ceremony is about to begin. Who has the time to search for someone with you? We're avenging you right now, so use your head a little."

Fury surfaced on Song Ming's face, but he was afraid of losing his temper, as the person who said that to him was also a core disciple of the Pheasant's Grace mountain, and he was at the seventh layer.

The first senior brother raised his hand, silencing everyone. "Harassing Song Ming is no different from harassing all the disciples of our Pheasant's Grace mountain. As the first senior brother, I must stand up for you. I must settle this grievance!"

Chapter 230 - The Truth-seeking Society

"Benevolent be the first senior brother!" "No wonder senior brother is already destined to become the future sect master!" "Our Pheasant's Grace mountain will definitely end up leading the three mountains!" "What leading the three mountains? With first senior brother's talent, it'll be a piece of cake for him to condense a golden core and turn the Pheasant's Grace mountain into a mid level sect."

Among all the flattery, Song Ming also said in a hurry, "Thank you, first senior brother." However, he knew very well that if it were not for the sake of a hundred treasures pouch worth several thousand spiritual stones, his arrogant first senior brother would have never stood up for him. If the first senior brother even had a minute of spare time, he would spend it all on cultivation.

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The snow began to fall again.

The spring water gurgled, flowing beneath the frozen snow, which was why it was called the Quiet Spring.

Under the embrace of the snowy mountains, several delicate houses sat within a small valley. It seemed like a settlement in wonderland. A few Qi Practitioners with loose robes and tight sashes walked around elegantly and gracefully, talking and drinking with one another. They were as cheerful as they could get.

Suddenly, everyone turned around. A huge figure emerged from the forest. His steps were heavy, completely lacking the elegance and grace of Qi Practitioners. Just like a vicious beast had emerged from the forest, the Qi Practitioners all raised their guard.

“Who are you? This is the base of the Truth-seeking society.”

Li Qingshan said loudly, “I’ve come to see Han Xiong.” His voice boomed through the entire valley.

Han Xiong emerged from a hut and beamed with joy as soon as he saw Li Qingshan. “Fellow Niu, you’ve finally come!”

Li Qingshan nodded. “I’ve come to take a look.”

Han Xiong introduced him to the Qi Practitioners in a hurry. When they heard he was the infamous Niu Juxia, all of them were amazed. They looked at one another and smiled before gathering in the largest hut with Li Qingshan.

The hut had a timber floor. Everyone sat on the ground. There was a charcoal fire at the centre, which currently heated some alcohol and cooked some food. Warmth and a delicious fragrance filled the entire room.

To be able to find such a place in this snowy weather, even Li Qingshan relaxed slightly.

Han Xiong said, “Please wait, sir. I’ll go fetch the leader of our association.”

A while later, even more Qi Practitioners entered, approximately twenty of them. A group of Qi Practitioners all chattered away at Li Qingshan at the same time, filled with great enthusiasm. Two female cultivators even delivered a bowl of warm alcohol and a serving of soup filled with meat.

Li Qingshan sniffed it and praised, “Nice alcohol!” He drank all of it and ate all the meat, but he said nothing more.

The Qi Practitioners saw how he was reluctant to speak, so they did not force him to. They all began to chatter among themselves. Most of them spoke about the Herb Gathering ceremony. As it turned out, they planned on forming a small group to venture underground together, but their gazes constantly hovered around Li Qingshan.

However, Li Qingshan seemed to ignore all of it. He sat by the fire like a statue, allowing the swaying firelight to project his shadow onto the wall.

Before long, Han Xiong brought an old man over. The old man was as skinny as a monkey, but he wore a set of large, spacious robes for a daoist priest. He really did seem like he had stolen them from somewhere. Han Xiong had to bend over in order to whisper into his ear.

However, the independent cultivators all seemed to respect him very much. When they saw him enter, they all called out, "Leader!"

Li Qingshan looked over as well. A seventh layer Qi Practitioner was quite a rare master among these independent cultivators. Apart from the old man, there were two sixth layer Qi Practitioners too. The three of them seemed to be the leaders of these people.

Han Xiong said in a hurry, "Fellow Niu, this is the leader of our Truth-seeking society, priest Qiu." Seeing how Li Qingshan had no intention to greet him, he became slightly awkward.

Slurp, slurp. Li Qingshan had his head lowered to drink the alcohol. Who knew what he was thinking.

Priest Qiu conveniently closed the door, and the whistling wind and snow from outside immediately subsided. This room seemed to have become a sealed world of its own.

Afterwards, he chuckled. "You must be fellow Niu, right? Most esteemed greetings from this lowly priest!" He was completely unfazed by Li Qingshan's rudeness.

Li Qingshan nodded slightly. "Hi."

Priest Qiu said, "Your presence truly is an honour to our humble Truth-seeking society. We've gathered many people of virtue today as well, so we definitely won't disappoint you."

Li Qingshan said, "I'm just taking a look."

Priest Qiu also sat down by the fire. "Hehe, it's fine if you just want to take a look. Let me tell you about our Truth-seeking society's purpose. By truth-seeking, we mean..."

He went on a long ramble, giving an impassioned speech. He said something like everyone was brothers and sisters, as well as how evil sects were, harassing and abusing our brothers and sisters. As such, everyone needed to band together.

The shifty-looking old man seemed to become surrounded by a halo as he spoke, filled with absolute charm. As he spoke, he seemed to incite everyone on. The independent cultivators all raised their heads and were moved by his speech.

Li Qingshan had a heart of steel, so he could not be moved so easily. However, he found this to be somewhat familiar.

Priest Qiu suddenly stopped and asked Li Qingshan, "Fellow Niu, don't you think so too?"

Immediately, over twenty pairs of eyes locked onto Li Qingshan.

Li Qingshan replied, "It is?"

Everyone was delighted. Priest Qiu continued, "I've cultivated for a century, and from my observations of the cultivation world, the greatest issue is everyone's selfishness. They treat cultivation methods like their personal treasures, only passing it onto their disciples. In the end, a lot of talented people live their whole lives in obscurity at the very bottom of the world. They are also directly responsible for a lot of cultivation methods becoming lost!"

The independent cultivators all nodded. They were the people with talent; it was only because none of them had inherited anything that they were reduced to independent cultivators.

“If we tear down the prejudices of clans and sects and share our cultivation methods and understandings with the entire cultivation world, such that all seniors serve as the teachers of juniors, wouldn't the cultivation world prosper and develop? There would not be a lot of fighting and killing in the cultivation world either. In under a century, cultivators will definitely increase by a hundred fold in quantity and quality. By then, slaughtering all the daemons and demons in the world would pose no difficulty.”

His magnificent ideology made the independent cultivators extremely excited.

Li Qingshan was slightly surprised as well. Originally, he believed that this was just an alliance between independent cultivators, but never did he think that they possessed such a grand dream, and this dream was highly unrealistic. If it really did come true, it would not be far from eternal unity and peace.

Priest Qiu said sternly, “Of course, it'll be very difficult, but as long as we work hard, there will always be hope. Our Truth-seeking society is the hope of the cultivation world!”

Afterwards was time for the independent cultivators to share their thoughts. A man stood up. “Originally, I was only a second layer Qi Practitioner. Ever since I joined the Truth-seeking society, I managed to benefit tremendously from the conversations with everyone else. I broke through recently to the third layer!”

There was a series of cheers and applause. The other Qi Practitioners all stood up and spoke as well. There would be cheering and applause after every single person. The room was immersed in the enthusiastic atmosphere.

In the end, it was Li Qingshan's turn. He shook his head, expressing that he had nothing to say.

The independent cultivators refused to accept that. They all pressed him together. “Speak, speak, speak, speak, speak...”

Li Qingshan frowned slightly. Priest Qiu raised his hand, and the voices immediately stopped.

“Since fellow Niu is reluctant to speak, allow me to say something instead. No matter how the cultivation world wants to develop, or how each individual wants to improve themselves, the most, most crucial part of it all is forgoing your selfishness.” Priest Qiu extended a fist towards Li Qingshan before loosening it.

“Only by opening your fist can you hold even more. If you show others kindness, they will return it to you. In simpler words, only with sacrifice can you obtain more!”

Priest Qiu clapped his hands. “It's time for everyone to share now. Let's all take out our things! Fellow Niu, as long as you need anything, just mention it.”

The independent cultivators followed the same order as before, taking items out from their hundred treasures pouches to share. It could be spiritual herbs, or it could be pills. When it reached a female cultivator's turn, she suddenly unbuttoned her clothes, revealing her full chest. She wanted to share her body. As long as someone needed to, they could visit her in her room. It utterly stunned Li Qingshan.

The female cultivator saw Li Qingshan's expression and said proudly, "We're all brothers and sisters. In this lonely world, we must seek comfort from one another. My body can bring satisfaction to you all, while I myself can find happiness too, so why not?"

It led to a series of praises. She raised her chest even higher, as if a much nobler spirit had replaced the unsophisticated beliefs of society. She seemed to rise up to the level of a holy maiden.

Li Qingshan grimaced. He said nothing. He just felt that he had sure seen a lot of strange things today.

The entire process unfolded in an extremely harmonious atmosphere. There were no disputes or arguments, holding goodwill to everyone else. When two or three Qi Practitioners wanted the same item, they would immediately take a step back and let each other have it. Probably even brothers connected by blood were not so friendly to one another.

Even across his two lives, Li Qingshan had never seen so many amicable, modest and polite people before.

Every single person smiled happily. In this lonely cultivation world, it was just fantastic to be able to treat each other warmly and lovingly.

In the end, it was Li Qingshan's turn again.

Having remained silent throughout the entire process, Li Qingshan said again, "I have nothing to share!"

As if a bucket of cold water had been poured over the warmth and happiness, everyone's faces changed. Over twenty pairs of eyes stared at him coldly.

Priest Qiu said, "Don't forget what I said. Only with sacrifice can you obtain more. All you need to do is hand your heart to someone else, and they'll hand their heart back to you."

Han Xiong said, "Fellow Niu, didn't you buy the version of the Gui Water Method of Condensing Qi complete with comprehensions, and the Book of All? What's wrong with taking those out and sharing with us?"

The eyes of all the independent cultivators lit up. The Gui Water Method of Condensing Qi complete with comprehensions was the holy grail among independent cultivators who practised Gui Water true qi, while the Book of All could be described as something that all independent cultivators required. However, these two books were just too expensive, so regular independent cultivators could not afford them.

Li Qingshan shook his head firmly. "I don't want to share!" He had spent almost two hundred spiritual stones to purchase these two books, so there was no reason for him to share it with someone else for free. If all the books in the world really were just shared like this, Sun Fubai would have been put out of business a long time ago.

Though, he did not mind exchanging them with someone, but none of the items that the independent cultivators took out were worth much. Not a single one caught his attention. They were worth a few spiritual stones at most. These people probably did not try to keep anything good to themselves either. They were just poor.