

Chapter 231 - Is that All?

There was nothing wrong with the weak wanting to band together, but the strong would never want to share fairly with the weak. At least, Li Qingshan did not. His proud, lonely heart did not need the 'warmth' of so many strangers. Just Xiao An alone was enough for his family.

The expressions of the independent cultivators all changed. The female cultivator who wanted to share her body earlier cursed under her breath in anger, "Selfish!"

All of the independent cultivators chanted with her. "Selfish!" "Selfish!" "Selfish!"

The waves of sounds rolled out, wrapping around Li Qingshan. As the flames rose up, the shadows projected on the walls twisted and distorted, as if they were demons that wanted to lunge at him.

Li Qingshan lifted the fire iron and picked at the fire. He asked, "What did you add to the fire?"

Priest Qiu was slightly surprised. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Li Qingshan said, "Your voice is very special as well. It made me remember some matters of the past." The singing, the dance, and the incense from the Parlour of Clouds and Rain in Jiaping city were what he remembered. Having experienced it once already, he would be a fool if he fell for it a second time.

Priest Qiu lowered his head. "If you join our Truth-seeking society, I can make you the vice leader." The two sixth layer Qi Practitioners wanted to say something, but they both seized up when priest Qiu glanced at them.

"Oh?" Li Qingshan smiled. "I can join, but let me ask you one thing. Will you be venturing underground as well for the Herb Gathering ceremony of the three mountains?"

Priest Qiu smiled. "I'm already too old."

Han Xiong said, "The leader is our father, the hope of the cultivation world. How can he enter such a dangerous place? We will find the spiritual herbs ourselves and bring them back to share."

He was originally a clever, capable man, but his eyes were filled with devotion right now. And, what he said led to an echo of agreement.

Li Qingshan's heart was like a clear mirror. The strongest did not venture underground, only waiting for the weak to risk their lives. The weak would gather the herbs to bring them back to the strong. This relationship was nothing like a father and son's. It was clearly a master-slave relationship.

Priest Qiu had used this Truth-seeking society to enslave all of the independent cultivators here. Even more terrifyingly, these independent cultivators completely embraced it, like crazed zealots. They had been completely brainwashed. This was not something that could be achieved in a short amount of time.

Under the threatening glares of the Qi Practitioners, Li Qingshan shook his head. "You and I don't share the same path."

Priest Qiu said sinisterly, "The selfish have no right to live in this world!"

The killing intent was so heavily condensed that it was almost tangible. The specks of firelight dimmed, finally extinguished.

There were over twenty Qi Practitioners, varying in strength, but just like what they had said earlier, they were brothers and sisters. Their true qi merged together, all gathering onto the body of their father, priest Qiu.

Priest Qiu's true qi rapidly increased. It easily broke through the level of the eighth layer, reaching the ninth layer and then the tenth layer. The powerful, terrifying true qi surpassed Li Qingshan's understanding of Qi Practitioners. It rushed towards him like a raging wave.

This seemed to be some wondrous combined attack. No wonder he was still so oppressive towards Li Qingshan even though he knew Li Qingshan had defeated a sixth layer Qi Practitioner in a single strike.

Li Qingshan felt like a straw hut by the ocean, almost about to be smashed to pieces by the incoming tidal wave. He rubbed his forehead gently. Was this the feeling?

Priest Qiu said, "Look how powerful I am. If you continue to cling to your ignorance, refusing to let go of your selfishness, only death awaits you. Open your mind and join us. Merge with us. You will be protected by the family!"

As he said that, the independent cultivators actually all said the same thing. The thunderous sound wave shook up the tiny hut, almost as if it wanted to crush all dissent.

The walls of the tiny hut flickered with light and glyphs. It had been inscribed with some sort of formation, such that it was impregnable. Li Qingshan seemed to be trapped in a cage with a monster.

Li Qingshan straightened himself up and knelt on the ground on one knee. He held the Whale's Ingestion of Water and shook his head. "Is that all?"

"Kill him!" Priest Qiu bellowed out.

The Qi Practitioners all rushed over like they were crazy. There were techniques, talismans, and spiritual artifacts, a great assortment of items shining with various colours and lights. They all rushed towards Li Qingshan to kill him.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Sparks and fire flew everywhere!

The wild gusts of wind sucked the extinguished ashes high into the air.

By the time the dust in the air had dispersed, an ice ball had appeared where Li Qingshan previously stood. He had curled up and hid himself in the ball, so he was unscathed.

Priest Qiu raised his head, and the surging true qi condensed into a great hand, gripping the ice ball.

Crack! Crack! The ice ball became riddled with cracks. Even the ice from the Ice Condensate water was unable to withstand the terrifying force of over twenty Qi Practitioners.

The crystal ball shattered to pieces, and the hand of true qi grabbed Li Qingshan, pressing him firmly against the ground.

Blood spurted from Li Qingshan's mouth. He questioned, "You never planned on sparing me right from the beginning, did you?!"

"Originally, I wanted to control you so that I could use your power and obtain your items, but I didn't expect you'd be so pigheaded. Is there anything you want to say now?" Priest Qiu walked over and looked at the immobilised Li Qingshan. His face was filled with a victor's complacency.

Li Qingshan said indifferently, "Is that all?"

Priest Qiu said furiously, "Die!"

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Xiao An crouched down unhappily in the snowy forest beside the valley. She used a branch to draw on the snowy ground. Due to the destroyed bamboo basket, Li Qingshan made her wait here.

However, ever since Li Qingshan entered the hut, his aura had completely vanished. It made her somewhat uneasy.

Suddenly, this feeling of uneasiness intensified for seemingly no reason at all. Xiao An suddenly stood up and stared at the hut in the distance. After a moment of hesitation, she made her way towards the hut.

However, she suddenly seemed to sense something. She crouched down again as she carefully observed the surroundings. Two prayer beads rolled out of her sleeves and they turned into two extremely small skulls. One flew into the air, while the other pressed along the ground.

Flames flickered in her eyes. Her field of vision immediately became extremely broad, covering the entire valley, but it was extremely detailed as well. She could even see every blade of grass on the ground.

White bone and great beauty could see through all illusions!

Immediately, she saw over a dozen Qi Practitioners secretly lurking in the surroundings. They had all used powerful concealing techniques, such that they were almost transparent. In this white world of snow, even people with extremely good vision would struggle to discover their traces.

However, Xiao An was able to see them extremely clearly thanks to her ability. She could not help but worry. She had no idea how to contact Li Qingshan.

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Priest Qiu's complacent expression stiffened. He gazed at the terrifying wound on his chest in disbelief. Li Qingshan continued to lie there, staring at him coldly.

By Li Qingshan's hand was an unfurled Cursive Sword Calligraphy.

In the moment that priest Qiu had struck out, the criss-crossing strokes of sword qi had sliced through his protective true qi like a hot knife through butter.

Priest Qiu said in disbelief, "Is that a supreme grade spiritual artifact?" Why did a weaker Qi Practitioner possess such a rare treasure?

Li Qingshan stood up and pushed priest Qiu gently. "I've said already, is that all?"

Chapter 232 - Remnants of the White Lotus

Priest Qiu collapsed on the ground as blood flowed from his body. His eyes were wide open, dying with many regrets.

All of the independent cultivators in the surroundings were stunned. Li Qingshan shook his head. This was indeed a very terrifying move, but locking him in this tiny hut was their biggest mistake.

If priest Qiu had used the true qi to launch techniques from afar, Li Qingshan would find it very troublesome, but at such a close range, it was impossible for him to dodge the terrifying sword qi from the Cursive Sword Calligraphy. He did not even have the chance to use any techniques.

At the end of the day, priest Qiu was still a seventh layer Qi Practitioner, not a tenth layer Qi Practitioner. His reaction was even worse than the masked man from before. How could the protective true qi that had not been refined in any fashion at all block the sword qi?

"Leader!" Han Xiong roared out and lunged at Li Qingshan.

Spurt! The ice blade ran through Han Xiong's body, and the tip protruded from his back. With bloodshot eyes, Han Xiong continued to advance forwards, wanting to grab Li Qingshan's shoulders.

However, his body rapidly froze under Li Qingshan's icy gaze, turning into a statue of ice. His face was blue and pale, vicious like a ghost's.

Li Qingshan twisted the hilt of the blade, and the statue of ice shattered, scattering on the ground. Pieces of Han Xiong covered the timber floor of the hut.

The ice blade rapidly vanished, appearing behind Li Qingshan and beheading a Qi Practitioner who swung his sword at Li Qingshan. A series of sharp howls, like ripping air, rang out at this moment.

With priest Qiu's death, all of the independent cultivators became enraged. Death was no longer a concept to them. Li Qingshan was the murderer of their father.

Several dozen hands extended out with the furious glares of several dozen eyes. The room seemed to spin. Li Qingshan felt slightly dizzy as he stood in the centre.

Was this the feeling?

According to his mind, the ice blade turned into a blueish-white blur.

Seven hands flew into the air. Four legs were severed. A young man was cut into two pieces, while the independent cultivator who wanted to share her body earlier was directly bisected along the waist. Fortunately, none of them could feel any pain, as the coldness infiltrated their bodies, freezing their corpses and shattering them as they hit the ground.

It sounded like someone had thrown a pile of glassware onto the ground.

From life to death, it only took an instant. The moment they struck the ground, they were reduced to pieces of ice.

A flying sword pierced the blur, shooting directly towards Li Qingshan's temples. Without even looking back, Li Qingshan raised his hand and caught the flying sword. The flying sword trembled like a small snake, but it was unable to break free.

Li Qingshan tilted his head and made eye contact with the sixth layer Qi Practitioner who had released the flying sword. He tossed it conveniently, and the flying sword shot over uncontrollably, penetrating deep into the wooden door. The end of the sword vibrated.

The other sixth layer Qi Practitioner had thrown himself on the ground in a panic. He wanted to open the formation to flee earlier. If it were not for his swift reaction, he would have lost his head.

The two of them were central figures to the Truth-seeking society. Perhaps due to their greater strength, the control on them was weaker. They were not as crazed as the regular cultivators who charged over recklessly with priest Qiu's death. One of them wanted to launch a sneak attack, while the other wanted to flee.

Li Qingshan gripped the hilt with his left hand as well, wielding it with two hands now. The tip of the blade slanted behind him as he crouched down slightly.

Li Qingshan vanished, and a cold gust of wind kicked up the icy power. Like a roaring ice dragon, it rushed towards the sixth layer Qi Practitioner who tried to launch a sneak attack on him.

All of the independent cultivators in the path of the ice dragon were ripped to shreds, becoming a part of the icy powder.

The sixth layer Qi Practitioner was shocked. His reaction was quite fast though. He took out a Scarlet Flame talisman and activated it as he roared out, "Die!"

The sixth layer Qi Practitioner at the entrance cried out, "Don't!"

The Scarlet Flame talisman had already sprayed out flames that resembled a fire dragon.

The ice dragon and the fire dragon collided.

Boom!

The entire valley rumbled.

The quiet, little hut that sat in the valley had its ceiling blown several meters into the air by the blast wave, ripped to pieces. White smoke rose from the hut. Due to the formation, most of the structure of the hut remained intact, but it was charred everywhere.

The dozen or so figures that silently approached the place fell to the ground in a hurry, looking at the hut nearby in shock. They had no idea what had happened.

Xiao An eased up slightly. She could already sense Li Qingshan's aura.

The Whale's Ingestion of Water in Li Qingshan's hand had turned into a strange shape. The back of the blade expanded in all directions, forming a great ball of ice that enveloped Li Qingshan. It was very thin, but it was enough to block the explosion of the Scarlet Flame talisman. As for the long edge of the blade, it had already nailed the sixth layer Qi Practitioner against the charred wall.

The Whale's Ingestion of Water blade was just too useful to him. With his ability to react in battle, he managed to make complete use of the blade's ability to transform.

However, because he was only at the fourth layer, he was unable to control the high grade spiritual artifact completely. If he did not cultivate Gui Water true qi and his true qi was not extremely pure, it would be impossible for him to unleash such power.

Li Qingshan drew out the blade, and the Qi Practitioner slid down from the wall, hitting the ground with a thump.

Li Qingshan looked back. The only person left alive in the room was the sixth layer Qi Practitioner at the entrance, but he was also heavily injured. The wooden door he wanted to open had been blasted open. The formation had completely fallen apart. He crawled outwards with difficulty.

The other independent cultivators had all been reduced to charred fragments in the explosion.

Just like how a Lightning Summoning talisman would achieve extraordinary results in stormy weather, the tiny room sealed by the formation concentrated and restrained the power of the Scarlet Flame talisman in here, squeezing and condensing it. Even sixth layer Qi Practitioners would become heavily injured if they did not possess a defensive spiritual artifact.

Li Qingshan held his blade as he walked over slowly. The Qi Practitioner looked back in fear as he did everything that he could to mobilise the remaining amount of true qi in him.

"D- don't kill me. I was forced into this."

However, Li Qingshan did not stop. There was no expression on his face either, but there was a sliver of confusion in his eyes, as if he was contemplating a question he just could not understand. He arrived near the Qi Practitioner and lifted his blade.

"Stop! The Hawkwolf Guard is here!" The dozen or so people leapt out from the snowy landscape, drawing their blades with a series of swishes. Reflecting the sunlight, the Wind-entwining blades all pointed at Li Qingshan. Nine Wolf Fang flying blades hovered in the air, ready to strike at any time.

The concealing technique faded away, revealing their Black Hawk and Wolf uniforms. All of them were commanders, while the leading man wore a scarlet uniform. He was a scarlet wolf. He did not have a blade in his hand. Instead, a thin chain wrapped around it, shining with light.

"Argh!" There was a momentary shriek. Li Qingshan let his blade fall, and the Qi Practitioner's head rolled down the steps of the hut.

"How dare you!" The man in the scarlet uniform was furious. The chain in his hand immediately grew thicker and longer and straightened with a rattle. The end of the chain turned into a snake's head that bit towards Li Qingshan.

Li Qingshan tilted his head slightly, dodging the snake head, but the chain suddenly changed directions mid-air. It wrapped around him before suddenly tightening, trapping Li Qingshan firmly. The snake's head bit into Li Qingshan's shoulder.

Li Qingshan's Gui Water true qi immediately seemed to freeze up. He was unable to mobilise it anymore.

The man in the scarlet uniform rejoiced as his lips curled into a sneer. The Python Constrictor chains were a high grade spiritual artifact he had exchanged for after completing so many missions. He could wield it as he wished, so it was much more useful than a regular flying sword. Once it wrapped around the opponent, it could seal up their true qi. A Qi Practitioner without any true qi obviously could not fight back. With this spiritual artifact, he had caught many vicious criminals in the past.

The other Black Iron Hawk and Wolf commanders all eased up. Only a pretty woman frowned slightly. She wore the uniform of a Black Wolf commander, and her cultivation was only at the fifth layer. Among these people, she was basically the weakest of the bunch.

However, when she looked at the extraordinarily large man and then the ruins behind him, she felt doubt.

According to the lead, a remnant of the White Lotus cult, Qiu Ruiliu, should have been here, with several dozen independent cultivators he had recruited to his side. Qiu Ruiliu was only a seventh layer Qi Practitioner, so the Hawkwolf Guard of the prefectural city had sent a single scarlet wolf and mobilised the commanders from the surrounding Hawkwolf Guards to provide assistance.

While the White Lotus cult was the sworn enemy of all of the Hawkwolf Guards of the Ruyi commandery, the higher-ups had mobilised such a great force for a single Qiu Ruiliu, which only demonstrated how difficult of a target he was to deal with. Now, all of these people seemed to have died, slain by this man. However, she clearly noticed that even though this man had been wrapped up in the chains, he did not panic at all.

“Get over here!” The man in the scarlet uniform tugged the Python Constrictor chains. The chains became taut, but he immediately became stunned. Li Qingshan did not move at all.

“You get over here!” Li Qingshan grabbed the metal chains and tugged hard.

The man in the scarlet uniform felt a tremendous force, so great that he was unable to oppose it at all, reach him through the chains. Caught off-guard, he was pulled into the air. He felt disbelief. All the strength a Qi Practitioner possessed originated from their true qi. How was it possible that he still possessed such terrifying power after his true qi was sealed up?

Li Qingshan thought, I won't lose to anyone else when it comes to physical strength, but why has the Hawkwolf guard appeared here? Have they discovered my identity, wanting to capture me?

He glanced past all the Hawkwolf guards and suddenly stopped on the pretty woman. Qian Rongzhi! He never thought she would come as well, but she seemed to have failed to recognise him. That also meant they had not come for him, so he eased up slightly.

Apart from Qian Rongzhi, the other commanders were all stunned. Although Wu Gen was just a Scarlet Wolf guard and not a commander, he was still half a rank higher than black iron commanders like them, and he was much stronger too, having reached the eighth layer. They were extremely envious of the high grade spiritual artifact in his hand, the Python Constrictor chains, too. But never did they think that he would actually fail to take down an unknown independent cultivator.

They came to Wu Gen's rescue in a hurry. The flying blades shot forward, while those who could not control flying blades charged forward with their Wind-entwining blades.

Qian Rongzhi said, "Be careful! This person is endowed with physical strength! He might be a Body Practitioner!"

Wu Gen was unscathed as he flew through the air, but he was utterly humiliated before so many subordinates, which made him turn red. Furious from the humiliation he had suffered, he controlled the Python Constrictor chains to shrink around him, wanting to constrict Li Qingshan to death. He completely ignored Qian Rongzhi's words. He refused to believe that someone with some physical strength could break free from his Python Constrictor chains.

Chapter 233 - Utter Confusion

Li Qingshan immediately felt his body tighten. He tried to wriggle, but the chains refused to budge. He knew that he could not break free from a high quality spiritual artifact with his current strength. He would only have a chance if he daemonified.

In the blink of an eye, nine flying swords attacked him from different directions.

Time seemed to slow down. The flying blades spun slowly. Their ear-piercing screeches were stretched into a long, deep note. The sharp blade reflected in his clear eyes, only half an inch away.

Li Qingshan threw himself onto the ground, and the flying blades brushed past his face.

Swish! Swish! Swish! Swish! With great splendor, the flying blades produced a series of flashes above his head.

If they were just hidden weapons, Li Qingshan would have dodged the attack successfully. Unfortunately, they were spiritual artifacts controlled by sixth layer Qi Practitioners.

The flying blades stopped above Li Qingshan's head at the same time. The blades swiveled and fell downwards.

Li Qingshan rolled along the ground. Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump! Flying swords stabbed into the ground where he had just rolled past one after another, throwing him into even greater danger.

He remained extremely calm, while the confusion in his eyes seemed to deepen. Was this the danger that he sensed? Why was she here? And why was he encircled by these people?

He had been sold out, hunted down, coerced, and encircled. All of this should have been very clear, but it seemed to become complicated, like a real mess!

He thought hard, but he never stopped moving. He had already aimed the Whale's Ingestion of Water at the chains behind him, spurting out Ice Condensate water. With the final bit of Gui Water true qi within the spiritual artifact, he covered the chains in a thick layer of ice.

Li Qingshan drew in his body. By the time the chains had ripped through the ice, he had already broken free. His true qi immediately returned to normal. He forcefully twisted his body and dodged the flying blades by a hair's breadth again, backing into the hut in a flash.

The hut was not made of regular wood. Although the formation had been destroyed, it was still as tough as steel, offering him temporary shelter.

The Whale's Ingestion of Water produced a crystal blade. Li Qingshan frowned and yelled out, "Just because you're Hawkwolf guards, doesn't mean you can treat other people's life like they're worth nothing!"

The man in the scarlet uniform, Wu Gen, was surprised. He never thought there would be a person who could escape from his Python Constrictor chains. He saw the spiritual artifact in Li Qingshan's hand, and a thought flashed through his head. He raised his hand. "Stop the attacks! Surround him!"

The Hawkwolf guards immediately obeyed the order. They rose up into the air and surrounded the hut.

Only then did Wu Gen say, "We've come to capture a surviving member of the White Lotus cult, Qiu Ruiliu. I think you're one of the surviving members of the White Lotus cult, so how dare you resist capture? You're just looking to die!"

Li Qingshan had never imagined that priest Qiu would possess a background like that. Now that he thought about it, his speech really did seem like an evil cult luring their followers around.

"Qiu Ruiliu? Are you talking about a skinny daoist priest? He has already been killed by me. Do you have any evidence to say that I'm a follower of the White Lotus cult?"

The Hawkwolf guards all shuddered. Their target was already dead. Was this true?

"You managed to kill the follower of the White Lotus cult just by yourself? I don't believe it. As for the evidence, we'll know once we go back and investigate you. Surrender yourself right now, and we'll keep you alive. Our Hawkwolf Guard will never convict an innocent man. After we investigate you properly, we will obviously let you go!"

Wu Gen claimed he was not convinced, but he was already slightly convinced inside. He managed to break free from their encirclement. Just that alone was not something a regular Qi Practitioner could do. If he could take down an enemy like that with wit, then it would be for the best. He wanted to use the authority of the Hawkwolf Guard to frighten him, and once he was captured, he would be at their whim. Wu Gen had already done this plenty of times in the past.

Li Qingshan said, "What a joke. We're all Qi Practitioners. Why would we ever place our lives in the hands of others?"

Wu Gen smiled viciously. "Then there's nothing more to say. Get him!" He refused to believe he could not capture a single person with so many people on his side.

"Wait!"

Wu Gen frowned, and only when he saw it was Qian Rongzhi did he ease up slightly. "Rongzhi, what do you want to say?"

"Sir, don't we have a Nighthawk nearby? We can just get him to take a look and check. It won't be good if we get the wrong person," Qian Rongzhi said with some worry.

Wu Gen frowned heavily. Women would always be women. They were just too soft-hearted. This person was clearly well-off. If he could capture him first and ask about his origins, then he could die as a casualty of the Truth-seeking society if he did not have a particularly powerful background. Wouldn't

that be better? However, he obviously could not say that in front of so many commanders, so he sank into his thoughts.

“Senior brother, Rongzhi is right. We should get to the bottom of this. We have to be sure we don’t capture someone innocent!” said a square-faced young man from beside Qian Rongzhi.

Only then did Wu Gen finally nod. “Alright. Send the signal and summon him here!”

The square-faced young man was the new Black Hawk commander of Jiaping city. He also originated from the Academy of the Hundred Schools, just like Wu Gen, which was why he called him “senior brother”. Compared to the other Black Hawk commanders, he was much younger, so he possessed quite the talent. It would not be too difficult for his cultivation to increase by a few more layers. He would be naturally recalled to the Clear River city after a few years of toughening up outside, promoted to scarlet bronze.

Because of their many years of friendship, Wu Gen obviously respected his opinion much more. Normally, he would not scold him unless there was good reason to.

Before long, a Black Wolf guard emerged from the forest and bowed constantly. “I’m Zhou Pei. Greetings, sirs.”

The square-faced young man asked, “Zhou Pei, do you know this person? Hey big man, come out and see if he knows you!”

Li Qingshan found the voice to be somewhat familiar, but he was unable to recall where he had heard it from. He arrived at the entrance in a flash and looked at the Black Wolf guard. Both of them called out at the same time,

“Zhou Wei!” “Niu Juxia!”

This Zhou Pei happened to be the Qi Practitioner who did not really like talking beside Han Xiong when he saw him the other day, Zhou Wei. He never thought he was actually a Nighthawk.

A Nighthawk was a hawk that never saw the light of day. It was a special position within the Hawkwolf Guard. They used various different identities to infiltrate various organisations so that they could collect information and undergo investigations.

It was possible to construct an information network by bribing people of the jianghu among the world of regular people, but only cultivators could achieve something like constructing a similar network in the cultivation world.

Because this line of work was very tiresome, not only forced to remain undercover but also under constant threat to their lives, everyone was known as “hawks” regardless of their cultivation.

Li Qingshan had only heard a rough introduction regarding it when he joined the Hawkwolf Guard. This was the first time he had seen someone like this.

Zhou Wei, or Zhou Pei, immediately reported everything that had happened in the bookstore and restaurant the other day, proving that Li Qingshan had indeed been fooled here and was not a part of the Truth-seeking society. After saying that, he stood to one side with his head lowered. All he did was

glance at Li Qingshan in surprise. He had never thought he would actually be able to destroy the entire Truth-seeking society alone. Priest Qiu had basically fallen to his own sword.

Only then did everyone understand the entire story. They looked at one another, waiting for Wu Gen to make a decision.

The square-faced young man sighed. "Fortunately, Rongzhi warned us, or we would've killed the wrong person."

Qian Rongzhi replied politely and cautiously, "You're far too kind, commander."

Chapter 234 - Internal Conflict

However, what Qian Rongzhi thought was, This commander has just come from the Academy of the Hundred Schools, so he sure is naive. He actually treats the laws of the empire seriously. All laws are for people to use. Since when would anyone spare a plump lamb they come across?

The reason why she decided to be a good person for once was just because she was afraid the plump lamb would turn out to be a vicious tiger.

From the moment she laid eyes on him, she found Li Qingshan to be familiar. If she were Yu Zijian or Hua Chenglu, that was all he would be. They would not think too much about it.

It was exactly because Li Qingshan's huge size was just too impressionable that they felt it was all just a false sense of familiarity. They felt like they would never forget about someone like him if they had met him before.

However, Qian Rongzhi's thoughts went much deeper and finer. Although Li Qingshan was larger than before, the impression he had left on her was just too deep. This impression did not reside with his appearance alone.

The changes in his expression, the way he spoke, and the attitude he used to confront enemies all matched that man. Coupled with his glance that had paused on her momentarily, she drew a conclusion very soon that there was a good chance this was Li Qingshan.

After reaching this conclusion, how could she let the Hawkwolf guards continue opposing Li Qingshan? Li Qingshan possessed the strength to kill two ninth layer Qi Practitioners. Now that several months had passed since then, who knew how much stronger he had become. The reason why he had been putting up with all of this was just because he wanted to keep his trump card hidden.

If he was really forced to reveal his trump card, probably everyone present would have to be silenced. She did not believe she occupied any special spot in his heart.

Wu Gen was slightly displeased. This way, he would lose out on some potential gains, and he would not be able to redeem himself for the humiliation from earlier. As a Scarlet Wolf guard, he was not bold enough to twist justice before so many people. Otherwise, he probably would not be able to escape the punishment of law once someone reported him.

He said to Zhou Pei rather reluctantly, "You've done very well. You'll definitely have a share of the contribution once you return!"

Zhou Pei said, "I don't want the contribution. I just hope that you can relieve me of the duty as a Nighthawk so that I can return to being a regular Black Wolf guard."

Wu Gen waved his hand impatiently. "Alright, I understand. I'll report this to the higher-ups." Then he said to Li Qingshan, "You can go."

With a sweep of true qi, all of the hundred treasures pouches landed in Li Qingshan's hand.

Wu Gen shot a glare at him. "Leave everything behind!" He extended a finger, and the metal chains extended like a huge python, wrapping around the entire hut and shaking it about. The hut creaked and clattered; he wanted to tear down the entire place.

The other commanders were hostile too. They carried out missions not just to uphold the law of the empire. The spoils of battle that the enemy possessed was an extremely important component of their income. How could they just watch someone else take it away?

Li Qingshan persevered. "These are my spoils of battle!"

Wu Gen said, "We have to confiscate these items of the White Lotus cult. It's possible that they contain information on the other remnants of the White Lotus cult. I'd advise you to hand it over, or I'll arrest you for withholding evidence!"

Li Qingshan smiled angrily. "I helped you complete your mission. Not only won't you thank me, but you even plan on framing me as well?"

Wu Gen said, "Do you really think you're worthy of being framed? Use your brain a little and get out of here, or the law will show no mercy!" The other commanders cooperated by unleashing their flying blades again.

Something seemed to surge in Li Qingshan's chest. It was something he had repressed to the bottom of his heart the entire time. It growled and roared, wanting to break out.

Even if you want to act recklessly, there's a limit to it. You idiots might want to die, but don't drag me down with you! Qian Rongzhi lowered her head and frowned as she cursed inside, but she said nothing. Her words would have little effect in her current, lowly position, so it would be useless even if she tried. Instead, she would end up offending a great group of colleagues for nothing. If it really did reach that point, she had her ways of pulling out anyway.

The square-faced young man said, "Senior brother, this doesn't seem particularly appropriate." Then he said to Li Qingshan, "Hey. Just leave behind Qiu Ruiliu's hundred treasures pouch. There's information regarding the White Lotus cult within it, and it's extremely important to us. It won't bring you any benefits even if you possess it."

"Enshan, you- sigh!" Wu Gen sighed helplessly. If some other commander was bold enough to act on his own like this, he would have lost his temper a long time ago. However, he had been very familiar with Fang Enshang back at the Academy of the Hundred Schools. They had been fellow students for several years. At the same time, what he said was completely correct, so there was no reason for him to lose his temper.

In the past when he first left the Academy of the Hundred Thoughts, he too had been influenced by the many years he spent in the school of Legalism, wanting to uphold justice and protect the dignity of the empire's law. However, only after he went through a few things did he realise that this spirit, these laws, would never supersede the pills and spiritual artifacts within a hundred treasures pouch.

Whatever. These weak, independent cultivators probably did not possess anything good anyway.

Li Qingshan hesitated slightly as he weighed his options. The items of actual value had probably all been plundered by priest Qiu already. If he fell out with these people, he would have to transform and slaughter all the people here, without sparing anyone!

This included the Nighthawk, Zhou Pei, and the square-faced young man, as well as Qian Rongzhi.

A voice inside him asked hesitantly, Do you really have to kill them all? Immediately, another vicious voice roared out, Kill them! Kill them!

His expression constantly changed. He actually began to tremble gently. He understood what internal conflict meant now.

Wu Gen said impatiently, "Don't push your luck!"

Li Qingshan suddenly raised his head, "Qiu Ruiliu's hundred treasures pouch isn't with me!"

Wu Gen said furiously, "You want to trick me?" The Python Constrictor chains tightened, and the wooden hut was completely crushed to pieces as shrapnel flew everywhere.

Li Qingshan said indifferently, "I'm telling the truth!" When he checked the hundred treasures pouches earlier, he suddenly discovered that one was missing. He had just fought earlier, so he had an idea just how many enemies there were. The only one missing happened to belong to priest Qiu.

Priest Qiu's corpse had already vanished. Originally, he thought it had been destroyed in the explosion, but thinking about it now, even if it had been blasted to pieces in the explosion, it should not have vanished without a trace. However, there was nothing on the ground.

Li Qingshan frowned. He arrived where priest Qiu had collapsed before and stamped around. With a swing of his blade, he cut through the flooring, revealing a hole underground. Who knew where the murky hole led off to.

The formation of the wooden hut made the walls seem indestructible to others, but the formation had been cast down by priest Qiu in the first place, so he obviously knew a way out.

As it turned out, he had already prepared a path of retreat. Although he was in the direct range of the sword qi from the Cursive Sword Calligraphy, he was protected by the true qi of around two dozen people. He was injured, but he did not die on the spot.

He knew he was not Li Qingshan's opponent, so he just collapsed on the ground and sealed off his breathing and heartbeat, playing dead.

This gamble truly came with great risk. If Li Qingshan sensed it and casually slashed him, he would not even be able to fight back.

However, the wooden hut was in chaos back then. Under the encirclement of so many Qi Practitioners, Li Qingshan was affected to a certain degree even though it was not enough to strike fear into him. And, with the explosion at the end, Li Qingshan's sense of hearing, smell, and sight were all affected, which priest Qiu used to open the secret tunnel and flee.

Li Qingshan could not help but be surprised about the craftiness and prudence of this follower of the White Lotus cult. It was no wonder that the cult was an organisation powerful enough to clash against Gu Yanying and the Hawkwolf Guard of the entire Ruyi commandery.

Li Qingshan turned around with his ice blade, ignoring the chains in the surroundings. "If you don't believe me, come over!"

Qian Rongzhi quickly made her way over to Li Qingshan.

Fang Enshang extended his hand. "Don't go!" He wanted to stop Qian Rongzhi, but he was also afraid of alarming Li Qingshan by moving rashly.

The Hawkwolf guards were all nervous for Qian Rongzhi. This vicious, huge man was extraordinarily powerful. If he really decided to hurt her, Qian Rongzhi would probably be killed on the spot.

Under everyone's gazes, Qian Rongzhi brushed past Li Qingshan and studied the hole in the hut.

Li Qingshan frowned. This woman would never take such a great risk for some official business. Had he been discovered?

Qian Rongzhi did not even glance at him. After studying it carefully, she raised her head. "He's right. There are very fresh footprints below. Qiu Ruiliu has already fled. He should be injured. Sir, we'd better pursue him right now, or he'll end up getting away."

The Hawkwolf guards all sighed in relief. This conclusion matched their expectations as well. Qiu Ruiliu was extremely crafty. They had failed to capture him even after several attempts, so how could he be slain so easily by an independent cultivator?

They also felt some admiration towards Qian Rongzhi. This woman did not have a particularly strong cultivation, but she was extraordinarily brave. At the very least, none of them were bold enough to venture over.

Even Wu Gen nodded in praise. With this person supporting him, Enshang will have it much easier as a Black Hawk commander, and he will not remain so naive forever. However, little did he know that Fang Enshang's naivety had just saved him from death, while Qian Rongzhi's so-called bravery originated from her meticulous planning.

Even Wu Gen knew what was more urgent. He pulled back the Python Constrictor chains and flew into the hole first. He brushed past Li Qingshan and snorted coldly. "Let's just say you were lucky!"

The Hawkwolf guards all entered the hold one by one, with Qian Rongzhi last. She glanced at Li Qingshan and smiled before disappearing into the hole as well.

A while later, the Quiet Spring valley fell quiet once again. Li Qingshan made his way down the stairs and sat down on them. He leaned on his arm as he sank into his thoughts.

This time, the internal conflict ended without being settled.

However, a larger internal conflict occurred in the depths of his mind. This was the boundary between humanity, immortals, buddhas, and demons. True conflict did not arise from the outside world, but from the inside, those unanswerable questions and those choiceless answers.

However, they had to be answered at the end of the day. He could not run away from all of his problems. He could not run away, nor did he want to run away. Even though none of the answers were the answer he wanted, he still had to make a decision. Life was not about being able to do whatever that you wanted, and it would not unfold to your tastes.

It was exactly these tough or even painful choices that allowed people to grow, to go from an ignorant child to the person they wanted to be.

Ready?

“Hehe, I’ve finally found you!”

Li Qingshan raised his head in a rather tired manner and saw a young face. The face was filled with resentment and grievances. It had emerged from the forest, and beside him were many other people in the same uniform, who also emerged from the forest.

Chapter 235 - Another Year of Heavy Snow

Li Qingshan sighed gently. He pushed off his knees and stood up, like a boxer who had been forced into another match before he had even recovered from the previous one.

However, there was no fear in his eyes!

This should be it!

At a certain time, great flakes of snow began to fall from the sky once again. Numerous figures flickered through the snow as their magnificent, silken robes fluttered gently. They did not leave behind a single mark on the snowy ground as if they were ghosts in the snow.

The ghosts looked at Li Qingshan like hunters who had found their prey. They were relaxed and satisfied with themselves. If there was still a reason for them to be slightly cautious, that was because they were worried that their prey might escape.

The “first senior brother” pointed at Li Qingshan and asked, “Junior brother Song, is this the person you were searching for?”

Song Ming said with hatred, “That’s him, first senior brother!”

“A fourth layer Qi Practitioner?” The first senior brother curled his lip in great disdain.

“Song Ming, you’re far too useless. You’re a sixth layer Qi Practitioner, yet you were defeated by someone weaker than you. And I had thought you had met someone powerful.”

The disciples of the Pheasant’s Grace mountain all mocked him. They became even more relaxed and cheerful. They did not take Li Qingshan seriously at all.

Song Ming's face reddened. "First senior brother, his cultivation as a Qi Practitioner isn't particularly great, but he's a Body Practitioner too. He was completely unscathed when I hit him with a palm strike. We can't be careless."

Li Qingshan closed his eyes and sensed his surroundings. A ninth layer Qi Practitioner, two eighth layer Qi Practitioners, five seventh layer Qi Practitioners, and ten sixth layer Qi Practitioners. Was this the strength of a sect?

He could only match them in battle if he transformed, but fighting here would probably attract the attention of their seniors.

"Look, he has closed his eyes. Has he accepted his fate?" A disciple of the Pheasant's Grace mountain laughed.

A dense mist rose up after that, surging everywhere like the tide. Li Qingshan vanished in the mist.

"Oh no, it's a Great Mist talisman. He's trying to escape!" Song Ming cried out.

As if someone had plucked a cloud from the sky and thrown it onto the ground, the mist pervaded the entire valley very soon. The pure-white mist was extremely thick, reducing visibility to basically zero. It contained water spiritual qi, so even the vision of Qi Practitioners would be heavily affected.

The first senior brother snorted coldly. "Mere trickery!"

With a wave of his hand, he used a technique quickly, and a great gust of wind arrived, dispersing the mist.

Wild winds whistled through the valley, causing everyone's clothes to ruffle violently. Li Qingshan immediately appeared again. He had already made it to the slope in the distance and was fleeing with great speed.

Since he could not fight, he could only run!

"First senior brother's Wild Wind technique sure is powerful!"

"Did he really think he can escape using tricks like that? How naive."

The disciples of the Pheasant's Grace mountains all sang praises, but they all moved quickly. With their sleeves fluttering in the wind, they chased after Li Qingshan.

Back when Song Ming rushed into the Proud Sword manor, he seemed extremely graceful, but here, there were at least a dozen people more graceful than him. They would cover several hundred meters with each glide.

The first senior brother was arrogant. Only after his junior brothers had taken off did he take off with a jolt of his sleeve. Despite moving later, he caught up and overtook them all, charging ahead and rapidly closing the distance from Li Qingshan.

Li Qingshan used the Tiger Demon Climbs the Mountain, and with a leap, he climbed up to the top of the mountain. Hearing the whistling sounds from behind, he suddenly looked back.

The first senior brother reached a height even greater than the mountain peak and bellowed out, "Peck of the Golden Pheasant!" His right hand curled into the shape of a pheasant's head as he lashed out at Li Qingshan from afar. He was like a golden pheasant pecking the bugs on the ground with indescribable ease.

However, Li Qingshan felt like he faced an imminent catastrophe, as he was playing the role of that bug on the ground.

A huge, golden beak pierced through the sky. He had used one of the greatest techniques of the Pheasant's Grace mountain. All the disciples of the Pheasant's Grace mountain were amazed. Although all inner disciples learned this technique, none of them could use it as skillfully as their first senior brother. They never thought that their first senior brother would use an ultimate move like this right from the beginning. The kid was dead for sure.

Li Qingshan felt like he was unable to dodge the simple beak no matter how he dodged. He raised his right hand, and the Whale's Ingestion of Water gathered light, suddenly emitting a fist-sized ball of water.

Boom!

The Gui Water blast collided with the pheasant's beak in the air.

Rings of light radiated outwards as the violent wind made the forest ripple like wheat.

The first senior brother exclaimed, "The Gui Water blast!" With a jolt of true qi, he scattered the incoming wave of air, but he paused slightly as well. How could a mere fourth layer Qi Practitioner use the Gui Water blast? Suddenly, he noticed the spiritual artifact in Li Qingshan's hand and came to an understanding. A high grade spiritual artifact. Song Ming was right. This kid was extremely wealthy. He was a good prey worth the hunt.

The other disciples on the ground were not as relaxed as he was. Many of them had been blown backwards by the violent wind due to their insufficient cultivation. They could only swallow the praises they were about to sing. They were in complete surprise. How did a fourth layer Qi Practitioner manage to block their first senior brother's Peck of the Golden Pheasant?

Only Song Ming called out, "I said this before, this guy is tough to deal with!" He actually felt elated inside, while he hoped that Li Qingshan could unleash some stronger moves and last a little longer against their first senior brother, which would demonstrate it was not because he was useless, but because the enemy was just too powerful back then.

Li Qingshan used this time to leap off the mountain. He hurtled through the air; the world spun around him, and the chilly winds rushed into his face. He took out the underground mental map and unfurled it with both hands, studying it mid-air.

The cave leading underground closest to here was only fifteen kilometers away, below a mountain. If it were flat land, he could cover fifteen kilometers in just a moment, but he was in a mountain range, which meant he had to traverse a great mountain every few kilometers.

Although this was still the outskirts of the Boundless mountains and not actually the depths, the mountains still towered in an extraordinary manner. They were beyond logic. Any one of them could be regarded as a famous mountain if they appeared in Li Qingshan's former life.

Even with the form of the Tiger Demon Climbs the Mountain, Li Qingshan's speed was heavily affected. He conveniently stuck a mid grade Swift Breeze talisman on himself so that he could move slightly faster. The bare trees seemed to assault him as he ran through the forest, but even with that, Li Qingshan was unable to widen the distance between them. Every time he looked back, the ninth layer Qi Practitioner would be slightly closer.

However, he was not worried. He was not only thinking about how to escape.

The first senior brother felt extremely shocked. A fourth layer Qi Practitioner could actually erupt with such speed. He used the Golden Pheasant Flaps its Wings and spent most of his time gliding through the air, unaffected by the terrain, but he still struggled to catch up. This independent cultivator was truly a tough nut to crack.

The two of them crossed through the mountains, gradually pulling away from the disciples behind. The killing intent in Li Qingshan's eyes grew heavier and heavier. He casually tossed aside a depleted spiritual stone before taking out another, rapidly replenished his true qi.

He had already taken out the Cursive Sword Calligraphy and placed it in his bosom. He could pull it out at any time and kill the enemy.

Li Qingshan glanced backwards at the first senior brother, who was only several hundred meters away from him. However, he looked past the first senior brother and at the sky even higher up. The sky had dimmed, filled with snow. Aside from him, no one else noticed a red star that rapidly flickered through the sky.

Xiao An stood on a large skull. She left behind a tail of scarlet flames as she sailed through the snow and wind. Her clothes and hair ruffled in the wind as a red light shone in her eyes. Her gaze pierced through the wind and snow as she gazed at the mountains below.

A snowy night like this, mountain terrain like this, and a sight like this. All of it seemed like *deja vu*.

Before they had even realised it, a year had already passed, but this time, she was no longer as weak and fragile like before. There was no need for her to watch on helplessly in despair as he traveled further and further away.

This time, she would definitely help him!

She was just waiting for a signal to attack!

Li Qingshan thought inside, A little further, just a little further!

The first senior brother had no idea that he had already fallen into a trap from above and below. The identities of the hunter and the hunted silently reversed. He had never even imagined that a mere fourth layer Qi Practitioner could pose any harm to him.

Li Qingshan climbed up another mountain peak. The first senior brother used this opportunity to pull within a hundred meters of him. He rejoiced as he raised his right hand, and a golden streak of light shot out, streaking through the raging wind and snow and leaving behind a golden stream.

Li Qingshan sensed danger. He could not look back in time, so he lifted the ice blade behind him.

Ding! The golden light stabbed deeply into the icy blade, and Li Qingshan's hand trembled. Only then did he clearly see that the golden light was the golden plume of a pheasant. Even though the ice from the Ice Condensate water was as tough as a high grade spiritual artifact, the tiny plume actually managed to pierce into it. It was even more powerful than the West Gate Granny's needle.

His protective true qi and any protective techniques were all as fragile as paper. Even defensive spiritual artifacts would probably be pierced all the way through by the attack if they were not high grade.

The first senior brother became even more surprised. He saw how the Peck of the Golden Pheasant could not kill Li Qingshan, so he did not use it again. Instead, he switched to this lifebound spiritual artifact, the Golden Pheasant's plume, but he never thought it would be blocked by the ice blade.

The Golden Pheasant's plume was no regular high grade spiritual artifact. All disciples of the Pheasant's Grace mountain would nurture a spiritual artifact like this when they began practising qi. They would constantly channel it with true qi. Whenever their cultivation increased, they would forge it with essence gold, and in the end, it would result in this Golden Pheasant's plume. The time and effort that went into it was immeasurable. However, it was terrifyingly powerful as well, and it could only be controlled by its owner using a specific method of the sect.

Li Qingshan did not leap down into the pitch-black valley. Instead, he stopped and turned around. The ice blade in his hand rapidly transformed, enveloping the Golden Pheasant's plume in a great lump of ice.

The first senior brother stood on the tip of a lonely pine that swayed in the wind. He sneered. "You're not running anymore?" He looked around. "This will be your tomb. It's not bad at all!" He was completely unfazed by Li Qingshan's actions.

Li Qingshan said, "Right back at you." The Whale's Ingestion of Water had released all the Ice Condensate water already, forming a sphere around the Golden Pheasant's plume that he stood on.

The first senior brother sneered. "Now that's pretty pigheaded of you! You want to try these mere tricks again? I'll show you the power of our Pheasant's Grace mountain. The Solar Radiance of the Golden Pheasant!"

The Golden Pheasant's plume exploded with blinding light, completely piercing the ice sphere and dyeing it golden. It was magnificent.

However, Li Qingshan sensed the ice rapidly melt away, as if it was suppressed by the power within the Golden Pheasant's plume and was unable to keep it trapped.

The first senior brother glided down. "Be a little more clever in your next life. Don't offend the disciples of the Pheasant's Grace mountain!"

Li Qingshan sighed emotionally. "Another year of heavy snow!"

Chapter 236 - Slaughtering the First Senior Brother

The Cursive Sword Calligraphy unfurled with a swish. The first senior brother saw the profound, intricate, and sharp handwriting. It was clearly just strokes of ink on paper, yet it was so sharp that it seemed like it had been carved into a cliff using a sword.

A tremendous sense of danger filled his heart. The sound of the blizzard seemed to stop. Compared to the speed of the sword qi, the violent wind and drifting snow seemed to be frozen.

The first senior brother's eyes narrowed. He extended his hand and waved it. The Golden Pheasant's plume expanded in size by a hundred times and protected him like a steel wall.

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang! The screeching of metal rang out. The furious wave of sword qi rushed towards the first senior brother in the air. As he drifted through the air on the Golden Pheasant's plume, he was like a rowboat in the raging seas, in danger of capsizing at any time. However, it also went with the flow, actually striking a special form of balance. It swayed and drifted, enduring and redirecting the force.

Not only could the Golden Pheasant's plume attack and defend, but it also defended in a manner that Li Qingshan had never seen before. It was as graceful and natural as possible. The unique styles that sects had developed themselves really could not be underestimated.

The Gui Water true qi in Li Qingshan's body flowed into the Cursive Sword Calligraphy furiously, launching stroke after stroke of sword qi. He held a spiritual stone in his hand at the same time to constantly replenish his true qi. In the blink of an eye, Li Qingshan had already tossed aside three spiritual stones.

"A supreme grade spiritual artifact! You actually have a supreme grade spiritual artifact!" The first senior brother stood on the Golden Pheasant's plume and called out in the snow and wind.

He suddenly burst out laughing. "Haha, I never thought I'd have such good luck. Kid, with your current strength, you can't unleash the full power of that supreme grade spiritual artifact. It's no different from wasting it when you wield it, so hand it over! I am the one who has been chosen by the heavens. I will step over your corpse to a higher realm of cultivation!"

If a high grade spiritual artifact could make all Qi Practitioners envious and make their hearts thump, then a supreme grade spiritual artifact could drive all Qi Practitioners crazy. That was a treasure that even Foundation Establishment cultivators would use all their strength to obtain.

Li Qingshan's mouth opened and closed slightly. His voice was swallowed by the snow and wind, but the first senior brother still managed to read his lips. "Go die!"

Two, huge skeletons descended from the sky as they revolved around one another. They ripped through the wind and produced sharp screams, like the cries of ghosts at night, enough to strike fear into the very hearts of people.

"What are those?!" The first senior brother's expression changed drastically. He controlled the Golden Pheasant's plume and flew through the snow and wind. He actually borrowed the force of the sword qi to make a few unexpected turns in the air, leaving behind a twisted golden trajectory as he dodged the attacks of the skulls.

Bang! Bang! Bang! They disturbed the cushion of air underneath the plume, causing him to rapidly fall down the pitch-black cliff. He thought, Oh no, I've fallen for his trap!

The screams gathered like shadows. The first senior brother looked behind him, and the two skulls caught up from left and right. Blood-red flames flickered in their eye sockets as their teeth chattered, eager to rip out his flesh and blood.

From afar, it seemed like a golden streak and two thin red streaks were falling straight down a bottomless abyss.

The trajectory of the golden streak was extremely swift and unstable, while the two red streaks constantly revolved around each other, sealing off any direction of escape for the golden streak.

At this moment, the two red streaks suddenly intercepted the golden streak.

The two skulls lunged towards the first senior brother. He snorted coldly. "Foolish tricks!" He pinched both hands and extended them. Two golden pheasant beaks pecked the foreheads of the skulls viciously.

With two thumps, the two skulls were sent flying, but in the final moment, they opened their mouths. From the roaring flames, two figures emerged.

One was large and one was small. They were Li Qingshan and Xiao An. They had leapt out of the skulls at the same time. Li Qingshan wielded the Cursive Sword Calligraphy, while Xiao An held a shiny, white rib as a sword.

The unstoppable sword qi and Xiao An's startling attack were unleashed at the same time. The two sword moves fused together wondrously, without any imperfections at all. They formed a net of slashes that shot towards the first senior brother.

The first senior brother felt like the entire world had been cut into pieces by the criss-crossing sword qi. Fear and panic finally appeared in his eyes for the first time as he reached towards the hundred treasures pouch on his waist.

He moved extremely quickly, but compared to the sword qi, he seemed sluggish. He had never imagined he would have to waste talismans and spiritual stones in order to deal with a fourth layer Qi Practitioner, so he had not been prepared beforehand.

I'm a genius, the future sect master of the Pheasant's Grace mountain. My future is limitless! I can't die here! This thought flashed through the first senior brother's head.

The sword qi vanished with a flash. The first senior brother lowered his head to check himself. He laughed aloud. "I didn't die! I won't!"

His voice halted, and his chin fell off. Many criss-crossing, bloody marks appeared on him, which began to shift.

With a poof, he exploded into a mist of blood in the air. Pieces of his body rained down, devoured by flames before they hit the ground.

No longer under anyone's control, the Golden Pheasant's plume turned back to its original size and drifted off with the wind.

Li Qingshan and Xiao An landed on the ground simultaneously. Xiao An held the Golden Pheasant's plume. Li Qingshan opened his palm, and a hundred treasures pouch sat there quietly.

The two of them smiled at one another. An indescribable feeling of teamwork and cooperation rose up in their hearts.

Li Qingshan placed the talisman between his fingers back into the pouch on his waist. That was the supreme grade talisman he had obtained from the West Gate Granny. He had no idea what its effects were. He checked the Book of All according to the inscriptions and glyphs on there, but he failed to find any information on it. Though, there was plenty of information available on low and mid grade talismans.

Clearly, the supreme grade talisman was so precious that it would not be recorded in the Book of All. However, the book was not all useless either. Xiao An looked at the styles of the other talismans as a reference to forecast that the talisman should be an offensive fire element talisman.

Fire had the greatest power to kill out of the five elements, while the power of a supreme grade talisman went without saying.

Li Qingshan's plan was that if he and Xiao An failed to kill the first senior brother even when working together, he would immediately activate the supreme grade talisman and kill him for good. If that failed too, he would transform at the risk of leaving behind traces of daemon qi and still kill the first senior brother.

Before the battle had even begun, he was already certain that he would win.

"The people behind are coming," Xiao An licked her lips. The flesh and blood of ninth layer Qi Practitioners was far more delicious than that of regular people.

"Let's send them all to the afterlife!" Red light flickered in Li Qingshan's eyes. After three tough consecutive battles, his bloodthirstiness and killing intent had been completely activated. His exhaustion had vanished, while even his confused thoughts and internal conflict had ceased to exist. All he needed was even more slaughter.

Faced with the crossroad of life or death, there was no need to think too much about his choice. He wanted to live, so he had to kill all his enemies. It was as simple as that.

Li Qingshan and Xiao An did not even look at each other. They just quickly hid themselves in the dark, ready to launch a two-pronged attack. They quietly waited for the prey to take the bait.

Li Qingshan buried himself in a snow hole, holding his breath and resting.

The second wave should consist of two eighth layer Qi Practitioners. They would not be easy targets either if he did not daemonify. If the two eighth layer Qi Practitioners worked together, they might even be more difficult to kill than the ninth layer Qi Practitioner from earlier.

They needed to kill one of them the moment they launched the sneak attack. Then the other one would be easy. After this wave, everything else would be much easier to handle.

The Cursive Sword Calligraphy could instantly kill sixth and seventh layer Qi Practitioners. Combined with Xiao An's two Skull Prayer Beads and her sword style from the Cursive Sword Calligraphy, they could be finished off from the get go.

Once the disparity in strength reached a certain level, numbers no longer meant anything.

He also had absolute confidence in this battle, but for some reason, the uneasiness in his heart did not settle. Instead, it grew more and more intense. His heart thumped uneasily, faster and faster.

"Oh no! Let's go!" Li Qingshan leapt out of the snow hole and signalled to Xiao An.

Afterwards, he immediately rushed towards the underground cave he had decided on already.

Xiao An flew to Li Qingshan's side and asked in confusion, "What's wrong?"

Li Qingshan said, "I don't know, but it's very dangerous!"

Xiao An pondered for a moment before suddenly raising her head. "I know. It's the sect master of the Pheasant's Grace mountain, a Foundation Establishment cultivator!"

Li Qingshan furrowed his brows. A Foundation Establishment cultivator? Fair enough. Probably only Foundation Establishment cultivators can make me feel so much danger and pressure. If it were a Qi Practitioner, even if they were at the tenth layer, he was confident that he could kill his way out at the risk of exposing himself and transforming. There was even a chance for him to turn the situation around.

However, Foundation Establishment cultivators were masters on a whole different level. The techniques they used had the power of supreme grade talismans, while the power of their spiritual artifacts was as clear as day too.

Even if Li Qingshan transformed, there was no way he could hold his ground against him. However, all he had done was kill a Qi Practitioner of the Pheasant's Grace mountain in these snowy mountains. That fellow had no chance to seek reinforcements, so how did he alarm a Foundation Establishment cultivator?

Xiao An saw Li Qingshan's confusion, so she explained, "The Book of All details that core disciples within sects will often have life lanterns. The life lanterns will be in the possession of the sect masters. If the disciple dies, their life lantern will be extinguished, and the location of their death will be made known."

It went without saying that a ninth layer Qi Practitioner would definitely be a core figure among core figures within a sect.

Li Qingshan had no idea that the first senior brother had already been designated as the future sect master.

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A while earlier, over fifty kilometers away, three old men sat together at the top of the Green Vine mountain as they discussed matters regarding the Herb Gathering ceremony.

They held paramount power among the three mountains. They were the sect masters of the Green Vine mountain, Pheasant's Grace mountain, and Burial Mound mountain. Together, they were known as the three elders.

The Green Vine elder served as the host, so he sat on the highest seat. He wore a set of green robes, and his face was covered in curly, entwined hair. Basically all that was visible was a pair of clear eyes.

To the left of the Green Vine Elder was a grey-robed old man. His eyes were milky, and he was expressionless. Even his face seemed grey. He gave off the faint aura of corpses. His eyes would swivel only once in a while, but he did not possess any aura befitting of the living.

Regular people would probably treat him as a corpse. Even if they saw his eyes swivel, they would treat him as a living corpse. He was the sect master of the Burial Mound mountain, the Lone Grave Elder.

To the right of the Green Vine elder was an old man in luxurious, golden clothes. He was obviously the sect master of the Pheasant's Grace mountain, the Golden Pheasant Elder. Embroidered on his clothing was no longer a pheasant's tail feather. Instead, it was the impressive golden pheasant's head. The cockscomb was as red as fire, while the beak was sharp like a blade.

Compared to the other two old men, he gave off a spirited, youthful vigor, like a rooster heralding the break of dawn. He would always hold his chest up high like it was full of air, but it did make him seem a little haughty.

Chapter 237 - The Golden Pheasant Elder

A map was unfurled on the table before the three of them. It shone with light as it projected a three dimensional image above. It was an underground mental map, even larger than Li Qingshan's.

This underground mental map had been created over many years after the disciples of the three mountains ventured underground again and again. At the cost of countless lives, they had managed to come up with a relatively safer region, which was Milliped's territory!

The Golden Pheasant Elder pointed at a corner of the map with his shriveled, claw-like hand. "The disciples of my Pheasant's Grace mountain will be entering through here." This was the safest route. It crossed a few spiritual grounds that had spiritual herbs growing, which also happened to be worth a lot.

The Green Vine Elder stared at it for quite some time before slowly shaking his head. "Won't do."

"Yep." The Lone Grave Elder nodded quickly before returning to his half-dead state.

The Golden Pheasant Elder stood up impatiently. "This is exactly what annoys me about the two of you. Can't you be faster? I don't care if you agree or disagree. Just hurry up and come up with the rules. You waste so much time everytime!"

The Green Vine Elder said, "Fellow Golden Pheasant, you've already grown so old, yet you're still so impatient!"

"Yep," the Lone Grave Elder spat out another word.

The Golden Pheasant Elder glared at the two of them. Just when he was about to say something, his heart skipped a beat. His expression changed drastically, and he abandoned the other two elders, rushing out the window.

Everyone raised their heads together in the town below the Green Vine mountain. They saw a golden speck of light appear at the very top of the mountain, like the brightest star in the night sky. Qi Practitioners with exceptional eyesight managed to see the true form of the golden speck of light. It was a golden pheasant that shot through the air with unbelievable speed while its long, golden tail feathers dragged behind like a golden comet.

All of the Qi Practitioners could not help but sigh. So this is the strength of a Foundation Establishment cultivator!

The town momentarily fell silently before recovering its clamor. It seemed to be even noisier than before, as if the fighting spirit and ambition of all the Qi Practitioners had been riled up.

They had no idea why a Foundation Establishment cultivator, someone who always remained discreet, would suddenly rush off the Green Vine mountain. They wondered whether something had happened between the alliance of the three mountains.

.....

Li Qingshan suddenly looked back at the sky. Through the snow and wind, he saw a golden star appear on the distant horizon, shooting directly towards his direction.

As it was simply too far away, it did not seem to be very fast, but Li Qingshan felt an unprecedented sense of danger, like an imminent catastrophe was about to take his life.

The golden star definitely was not something he could oppose right now.

He concealed all of his aura and changed directions, venturing into the mountains. However, the golden star immediately changed its course as well. As a result, he knew that his ability to hide his aura could not fool the senses of a Foundation Establishment cultivator.

As a result, he simply gave up on hiding his tracks. He used an accelerating talisman and rushed towards the cave as quickly as he could.

This sight seemed to overlap with the snowy night from a year ago. They were surprisingly similar. Unknowingly, he seemed to have gone through an entire cycle, returning to where he had started again.

But this time, brother ox would not be there to help. He needed to rely on his own strength, as well as Xiao An.

Xiao An listened to Li Qingshan and hid herself within the dark clouds high in the sky. She was ready to rush down and provide assistance as soon as Li Qingshan gave the signal. If Li Qingshan could suppress and hide his aura, then she had no aura at all. She existed between life and death, a special existence that was neither alive nor dead, neither dead nor alive. No matter how sensitive the Golden Pheasant Elder was, it was impossible for him to discover a hidden set of bones.

The view in front of Li Qingshan rapidly changed. He rapidly conquered the rising and falling landscape, but the golden star in the sky drew closer and closer. Li Qingshan now experienced an indescribable pressure, no longer just an obscure sense of danger.

The golden star grew larger and larger in his eyes. Even from five kilometers away, Li Qingshan found the glorious aura to be chilling.

The golden pheasant also discovered the fleeing Li Qingshan. It raised its head, unfurled its wings, and let out a cry, blazing with golden light.

It was like it was welcoming dawn, allowing the sun that had sunken into the west to rise once more.

The golden light clearly depicted the shape of the golden pheasant, complete with a cockscomb, a beak, and feathers. It was life-like. However, it was like a fighting cock, filled with rage.

The Golden Pheasant Elder inside glared; his eyes were like a fighting cock's too. His hair and beard stuck up from anger. His beloved disciple had been killed, so sorrow and rage filled his heart. He swore revenge!

From the moment he saw Li Qingshan, he knew that Li Qingshan was the person he was searching for. This was not because Li Qingshan was running away. As the sect master, he obviously knew about the humiliation that his inner disciple Song Ming had suffered in Salt Mountain city. However, as the Green Vine mountain then took over the Proud Sword manor, he could only leave the matter unsettled.

Before the first senior brother had ventured out to avenge Song Ming, he had definitely reported it to his master, which was why he was bold enough to bring the disciples of the Pheasant's Grace mountain with him. However, he had never thought he would actually die.

The resonant crow of the golden pheasant shook up the mountains, reverberating through them. For a moment, only the pheasant's cry was audible in the snowy mountains.

Li Qingshan experienced piercing pain in his ears as his mind shook. His true qi surged controllably. He could not help but be shocked. This was the power of a Foundation Establishment cultivator!

The spirit turtle's daemon core revolved in his body, suppressing all of the discomfort. The cave was near now. Once he made it over this mountain, the valley ahead was it!

He could not allow the golden pheasant to draw near, or just a single attack would put him in life-threatening danger.

But at such a close distance, Li Qingshan could finally get a feel for the golden pheasant's startling speed. The first senior brother glided quite quickly already, but he seemed as slow as someone crawling along the ground in comparison to the golden pheasant.

And, the golden pheasant did not glide. It truly flew through the air.

When Li Qingshan had just made it halfway up the mountain, the golden pheasant had arrived one and a half kilometers from him. He twisted his foot and forcefully changed directions, lunging towards the other side of the mountain.

The golden pheasant flapped its wings and unleashed several dozen golden feathers that shot over with lightning speed. It was like a sun shedding its light. Every single feather was even swifter and more vicious than the spiritual artifact controlled by the first senior brother.

Li Qingshan had been expecting this move. He would move left at times, right at times, pause at times, or even slow down at times. His movements became completely unreadable.

The Whale's Ingestion of Water was no longer a weapon, but a huge, ice shield that covered his surroundings. Even with that, he was still worried, so he stuck a high grade Golden Shield talisman on himself.

However, as soon as he had completed all of this, golden light filled his eyes. He was not even able to respond in time.

The ice shield shattered, and the golden shield broke. As if he had been struck by lightning, Li Qingshan halted completely.

A tiny hole appeared in his chest. A golden streak of light had penetrated him. His tough skin that could even stop the swing of a spiritual artifact seemed to be completely useless. The golden feather pierced through his three layers of defence and penetrated deep into the rock below.

The Golden Pheasant Elder instead furrowed his brows. With his cultivation at Foundation Establishment, he had actually failed to kill this weak Qi Practitioner in a single move. Perhaps no one would believe him, but the golden feather should have directly pierced Li Qingshan's heart.

Li Qingshan's defences had not been useless. They provided him with a moment to react. In the final moment, he had forcefully twisted his body, which was why the attack missed his heart. However, a sharp, scorching aura suddenly erupted in his body, as if it was trying to rip him to pieces and reduce him to ashes.

The golden pheasant paused in the air. The Golden Pheasant Elder was in no hurry to continue his attacks. Even if he had failed to penetrate Li Qingshan's heart, the spiritual energy within the attack should have still been enough to kill him. Instead, the Golden Pheasant Elder felt rather regretful over the fact that he had not held back under his rage. He should have captured him, found out about his origins, and then tortured him to death!

Xiao An's expression stiffened. Li Qingshan had not given her the signal this entire time. The Golden Pheasant Elder had struck out like lightning, so Li Qingshan had no time to do so. Moreover, he would not want her to risk her life.

The flames in her eyes roared. She was about to fly down without any regard anymore.

Li Qingshan suddenly sprang up from the ground. He basically dragged his body around to the other side of the mountain, even if it meant rolling and crawling, escaping from the Golden Pheasant Elder's field of vision.

The Golden Pheasant Elder was slightly surprised as he smiled viciously. He roared out, "You will regret not dying earlier!"

Li Qingshan ignored it. Who knew how many times he had heard rubbish like that already. The spirit turtle's daemon core managed to make an impact again in this critical moment, forcefully suppressing the foreign, explosive spiritual energy.

Suddenly, his face lit up. The cave detailed on the mental map was right in front of him. Just when he was about to charge in, a golden light enveloped his head.

The golden pheasant flapped its wings and made its way over the mountain, rediscovering Li Qingshan's tracks. All it needed was a single lunge and grab, and it would be able to capture Li Qingshan.

Xiao An's fists creaked from how hard she clenched them. It took her tremendous willpower to remain in the air. If she could not endure it any longer and showed herself, not only would she fail to provide any assistance to Li Qingshan, but it was even very likely for her to destroy his only chance of survival. If she ended up being captured, Li Qingshan would never flee by himself. Before absolute strength, the combined efforts of the weak were meaningless. Instead, they would just drag each other down.

Li Qingshan unleashed all the strength left in his body and leapt forwards, lunging towards the cave that was covered in half-snow and half-vines. Due to using too much strength, his muscles and bones twisted and creaked.

He turned around mid-air, facing the sky and looking at the golden pheasant claw that reached over swiftly. Before the shining claws had even reached him, his skin already stung. Since they were so close, he was able to see through the golden pheasant and see the Golden Pheasant Elder's old, arrogant face and the contempt and hatred on there.

The corner of Li Qingshan's lips curled up. The talisman in his hand flashed and broke, turning into a scarlet fireball. It rose into the air and struck the sharp claws.

The Golden Pheasant Elder's expression turned into one of shock. He exclaimed, "Supreme grade talisman!"

Boom!

Red light filled the entire sky.

The mountains swayed as the earth quaked!

The boulders in the distance were launched high into the air. Meanwhile, everything at the centre of the explosion, whether it be rocks or vegetation, directly melted, turning into flowing lava. Subsequently, it all solidified rapidly in the ice and snow, forming a black circle.

The Golden Pheasant Elder was unscathed, but the golden pheasant's right leg had completely vanished. His face reddened and twisted.

This was because Li Qingshan had vanished with the explosion. Even the cave had been swallowed up by the fireball, completely collapsing in the explosion before being covered up by several hundred tonnes of rock.

Chapter 238 - Second Layer of the Tiger Demon

The Golden Pheasant Elder produced a great roar. The golden pheasant flapped its wings furiously, kicking up violent gusts of wind and uprooting many towering trees.

At this moment, the disciples of the Pheasant's Grace mountain all arrived too. They cried out, "Master! Where is first senior brother?"

"You bunch of trash!" The Golden Pheasant Elder raised his hand, and a violent gust of wind blew them away. They slammed against the trees viciously and slid down, but they dared not complain.

"Please forgive us, master!" "Please spare us!"

The Golden Pheasant Elder's heaving chest gradually settled down. He barked, "Where's Song Ming?"

Song Ming walked over obsequiously and knelt on the ground, "Master!" He suddenly felt a tremendous pressure push him to the ground.

The Golden Pheasant Elder said, "All of this happened because of you. If it weren't for a piece of trash like you, your senior brother wouldn't have- he wouldn't have-"

"Fellow Golden Pheasant, no one could have imagined this, so why must you direct your anger at a junior?"

A relaxed, carefree voice rang out in the sky. The Green Vine Elder and the Lone Grave Elder had already arrived at a certain time, hovering in the air. The speaker was obviously the Green Vine Elder. The Green Vine Elder and the Lone Grave Elder looked at one another; they seemed to be smiling inside.

The three mountains were both in an alliance and each other's competitors. If one was stronger, then the others were weaker. The Pheasant's Grace mountain's loss of a genius disciple was fantastic news to them. It made them even happier than obtaining a daemon core.

The Golden Pheasant Elder's anger returned. His chest heaved again. "This is my Golden Pheasant mountain's business. It has nothing to do with you two old coots!"

"Fellow Golden Pheasant, you can't say that. Our three mountains stand together in an alliance, so your enemies are obviously our enemies. Once we return, we'll immediately put out an order for capture among the three mountains and bring the murderer to justice," said the Green Vine Elder. Who knew whether his mouth hidden under his beard was smiling or not.

"Yep!" The Lone Grave Elder nodded.

The Golden Pheasant Elder did not decline either. Avenging his dear disciple superseded his desire to protect his dignity, but it had been quite a long time since he had suffered such humiliation. He gritted his teeth. "If you find that kid, don't kill him in a hurry. Just let me know. I want him alive. I want to skin him alive and carve up his bones out of pure hatred."

Song Ming was still on the ground. His face was ashen. Although he had managed to get out of this alive, his future on the Pheasant's Grace mountain would be gloomy now that his master hated him.

Damn it! How did it end up like this!?

He would have never imagined that his ninth layer Qi Practitioner first senior brother would end up dying at the hands of someone minor. He had heard how his master had given him two supreme grade talismans. Even if he ran into a Foundation Establishment cultivator, he should still be able to stay alive, so how did he end up dying to someone so insignificant?

While the other disciples of the Pheasant's Grace mountain all had their heads layered in sorrow, what they thought inside was the exact opposite. Many of them rejoiced or even celebrated the death of their first senior brother.

This applied to the two eighth layer Qi Practitioners in particular. The first senior brother had always kept them firmly suppressed, such that it was suffocating. Now that the first senior brother was gone, they could obtain even more resources. There was even a chance for them to inherit the position of sect master. Wasn't this fantastic, unexpected news? When they thought of that, they looked at one another before immediately shifting their gazes.

As for that Niu Juxia or whatever he was called, the three mountains were out to get him. He was already a dead man. How would it be possible for a Qi Practitioner to live when they were hated by a Foundation Establishment cultivator?

None of them knew that Li Qingshan was quietly listening to all of this.

In the mountain, deep below the soil, Li Qingshan concealed all of his aura. Like a toad in hibernation, he was buried in the soil.

Actually, he did not even need to try to conceal his aura. His aura was already extremely weak, difficult for other people to sense.

His back had basically been reduced to ash, unable to sense anything anymore, while the tiny hole on his chest gradually expanded. The violent spiritual energy rampaged through his body. His daemon core struggled to keep it suppressed.

In just a single clash with a Foundation Establishment cultivator, who knew how many times he had visited the brink of death. He had only barely managed to escape using the talisman and the environment. He was still heavily injured, such that he was a mess internally and externally. His entire body was immobilised by the pressure of the soil. If he were a regular Qi Practitioner, he would have died already.

However, he ignored the precarious situation and the wounds on his body, gathering all of his focus on his ears. He used his extraordinary hearing to eavesdrop on the conversation above ground. He concentrated on it carefully with a stern expression.

When the voices vanished, he suddenly smiled. His smile gradually grew, revealing his pearly teeth. Although he remained there silently, without producing any sounds, the viciousness and insolence within him only intensified.

Sharp claws extended from his hands and feet, while his hair turned scarlet, expanding to other parts of his body simultaneously. His black, iron-like skin became covered with a pattern akin to the stripes of a tiger. Even his irises turned into slits, just like a brutal beast's.

He actually broke through to the second layer of the Tiger Demon's Fist of Bone Forging at a time like this.

The path of the tiger demon had to be comprehended through battle. Today, Li Qingshan had basically gone through five battles without rest. Against the masked man first, against the Truth-seeking society second, against the Hawkwolf guards third, against the first senior brother fourth, and against the Golden Pheasant Elder fifth.

Each battle was more intense than the last, more dangerous than the last. He had only managed to forge a chance of survival after being heavily injured and utterly exhausting himself. He had been forced to his limits. If he had survived, then he would erupt!

Li Qingshan began to struggle. He let out soundless roars as his long canines resembled sharp daggers. His body grew larger bit by bit, forcing apart the earth around him as he turned into his daemon form.

The surging daemon qi crushed and tore apart the foreign spiritual energy in his body, while the hole in his chest closed up. The wounds on his back rapidly healed, returning his back to its state a very short while ago; no, it had become even tougher and more tenacious than before.

After suffering tremendous damage, the Ox Demon Forges its Hide had actually strengthened, like black iron that had gone through another round of smelting. His defences had doubled at the very least. Even if he were directly struck by a mid grade spiritual artifact now, he would be unscathed.

Li Qingshan smiled in a self-deprecating manner. It seemed like he needed to be injured more often in the future.

With the powerful vitality and recovery of his daemon body, he made a complete recovery very quickly.

Exhaling gently, Li Qingshan used the Spirit Turtle's Method of Sea Suppression to return to human form, or more accurately, half-beast and half-human.

He had returned to his original size, but he retained his fiery hair, slit pupils, and sharp teeth. Even the striped pattern remained on his face. He did not seem human at all.

Li Qingshan could not be bothered by this. After confirming the direction, he swung his sharp claws and dug downwards furiously.

An indescribable flame filled his heart and supported his movements. The pitch-black soil seemed to morph into the faces of his enemies. He would grab at them and rip them apart as hard as he could, and only then would the restlessness in his heart ease.

The tiger demon focused on killing, which had a tremendous influence over his mind.

However, he no longer tried to control this influence, this killing intent, anymore. Instead, he allowed them to roar like a scorching fire in his heart.

The space before him suddenly opened up. He had finally reached a section of the cave that had not collapsed. Leaping down, he easily adjusted his position mid-air before rushing into the depths of the cave.

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Within the mountains in a huge, open pit, a child waited quietly. This was the entrance to another cave, as well as where she had agreed to rendezvous with him if they separated.

She showed no expression, nor did she move. If it were not for her clothes that moved in the wind, she would seem like a marble statue that had been standing in the snowfield since forever.

However, her heart had already become something akin to the lava under the snow, filled with burning anxiety.

A black bear three or four times the size of a regular bear took heavy steps, foraging for food in the forest. Suddenly, its nose twitched. The heavy smell of sandalwood arrived with the cold wind.

It passed through the dense forest and arrived by the edge of the pit. Looking down, it saw the still child, and it began to drool naturally, but it hesitated. The child seemed to give off an invisible splendor, making her seem noble and sacred like an inviolable existence.

When buddha spoke the dharma, all demons bowed their heads in submission. When eminent monks carried out their virtuous deeds, vicious beasts would keep their distance.

But in the end, its appetite and viciousness overpowered its intelligence and perception. It lunged towards the child. Despite its huge size, it actually moved extremely gracefully.

Xiao An turned around expressionlessly. Her pupils that were like glaze made contact with its vicious gaze. It shuddered.

The perfect purity was like deep coldness, just like how the purest water was uninhabitable to aquatic life. She was not like a child. She was not even like a human.

However, she suddenly turned around again, ignoring the black bear that was only inches away. Joy from the bottom of her heart ripped through her eyes. At that moment, she suddenly gained an aura befitting of the living, like a delicate puppet that had turned into a human child.

However, the black bear's eyes were filled with terror. It could not be bothered with the prey that was only inches away anymore as it turned around and fled. A terrifying aura rapidly drew closer.

Before the black bear could get very far, a black shadow burst out from the snow. The shining, scarlet pupils produced two streaks of light in the dark night. It appeared above the black bear and swung its claws casually. The black bear's brains immediately splattered out, and with a whimper, it collapsed on the ground.

As if the shadow was still not satisfied, it extended its arms, wrenching out a warm heart.

If regular people saw this, they would have peed their pants in their fright towards this vicious beast. Even Qi Practitioners would shiver inside.

However, the child was filled with joy. She exclaimed, "Qingshan!"

The shadow suddenly turned around, staring straight at the child. The red light in its pupils gradually vanished, while its heavy, murderous aura seemed to fade slightly. It revealed a rather fierce smile. "That's the first time you've called me by my name."

Faced with Xiao An's worried gaze, Li Qingshan smiled. "I've broken through to the second layer. What do you think? It's pretty good, isn't it?" He casually swung his hand and left behind four deep claw marks on the rock wall ten meters away.

Xiao An nodded seriously, expressing great appreciation towards his current form.

"Looks like my Xiao An has good tastes!" Li Qingshan laughed aloud and scooped her up, placing her on his neck and making his way into the cave.

"Where are we doing?" Xiao An asked.

"To hold the underground gathering, of course."

"Aren't there still quite a few days until that?"

"We need to prepare beforehand to welcome the friends from above ground. We need to fulfill our role as the host."

"Can I kill them all?"

"Of course!"

Life was like a battlefield. We fight tooth and nail for our entire lives, and only when we die can we rest.

Chapter 239 - Before the Ceremony (One)

"It's all your fault! If it weren't for you, would I have ended up like this?" Song Ming grabbed Mu Zhicong's collar firmly with bloodshot eyes.

He was completely done for. Although the Golden Pheasant Elder did not punish him in the end, his seniors and juniors all avoided him like the plague. Even the outer disciples that usually hung out with him ignored him now. He was completely alone on the Pheasant's Grace mountain.

Mu Zhicong shook off his hand impatiently. "Senior brother Song, didn't you want revenge? Or did I force you into revenge?"

"Y- you- I might suffer, but don't you think you'll have it easy either!" Song Ming completely lacked his former grace as spittle sprayed out from his mouth like he had gone mad. He launched a palm strike at Mu Zhicong.

"You're crazy!" Mu Zhicong shivered inside and retreated in a hurry. Although he managed to avoid the palm strike, his chest still ached from the true qi.

Song Ming even tried to pursue him. Green vines erupted from the ground, wrapping around him firmly. He fished out a golden pheasant's feather with a flip of his hand.

Mu Zhicong bellowed, "Don't forget, this is the Green Vine mountain!"

Greenery lingered and flowers bloomed outside the window, like it was late spring, but there was mist and snowy mountains just a little further away. They were currently on the Green Vine mountain. More specifically, they were in the residence for inner disciples, in Mu Zhicong's room.

Song Ming's mind shuddered. He gradually calmed down and stowed away the Golden Pheasant's plume.

Mu Zhicong released the vines and patted Song Ming's shoulder. He advised, "The three mountains have already sent out an order for his capture, so you'll be avenged at the very least. There are no permanent obstructions in the world. As long as you do well in the Herb Gathering ceremony, senior brother, you'll definitely fall back into favour with your master. Who knows, you might find and ingest some spiritual herb and advance rapidly in cultivation, becoming the new first senior brother."

Mu Zhicong was just afraid that Song Ming would try to throw his life at him if he completely offended Song Ming, so he pleaded with tactful words.

Song Ming left the residence with a broken expression. Below a great camphor tree, Ma Chaoqun bowed to him, "Senior brother!"

Smack! There was a clear slap, and Ma Chaoqun slammed against the tree heavily, causing leaves to rain down.

Song Ming said viciously, "Have you come to make fun of me?"

Ma Chaoqun said, "Never. All of this happened because of me. It's me who's let you down, senior brother! You can hit and berate me all you want."

Song Ming was rather surprised. He sneered. "With your tiny bit of cultivation, you think you can let me down? Seeing how you're still bold enough to talk to me, you have some balls. You really do live up to your background of the jianghu. You have some personal loyalty."

With that, he walked off. After taking a few steps, he suddenly turned around. "You can stick with me in the future. If anyone is bold enough to harass you outside, let me know."

"Senior brother?" Ma Chaoqun was dazed.

"You could hold onto your grudge for two entire decades just for the sake of revenge, so am I supposed to pale in comparison to you? I'll show them that I'm not a piece of trash that anyone can mess with!"

Mu Zhicong watched the two of them vanish down the shaded path. He muttered to himself, "Never thought Song Ming would have some backbone!" Then he murmured, "Niu Juxia!"

He never thought that man could actually escape while being rounded up by the Pheasant's Grace mountain, even killing the first senior brother in the process. He basically wondered whether he had fallen for some scheme or not. He found this to be unbelievable. Was that guy really this powerful? If he came looking for him for revenge, what was he supposed to do!?

In a daze, the tall figure seemed to appear before him, and the shadow he cast enveloped him.

However, Mu Zhicong immediately shook his head. Even if this Niu person thought to his wit's end, he would not be able to tell if he played a role in this at all. And, his life was in danger under the three mountains' order for capture, so he was in no position to think about revenge.

Thinking up to this point, Mu Zhicong stood up and made his way out towards where the outer disciples stayed.

.....

“Chenglu, are you really telling the truth? Are the three mountains really looking to hunt down Niu Juxia? Why hasn’t anyone else told me?” Yu Zijian paced around anxiously in her room.

Hua Chenglu laid back leisurely on a rattan chair. “You’re currently under house arrest, so of course no one would tell you. I heard he killed the first senior brother of the Pheasant’s Grace mountain, and he was being hunted down by the Golden Pheasant Elder... Stop pacing around. You’re making me dizzy.”

“T- then how is he right now?” Yu Zijian suddenly stopped and widened her eyes in horror. Her eyes had already grown misty. She was ready to shed tears at any moment now.

If it weren’t for me, Niu Juxia wouldn’t have fallen with the Pheasant’s Grace Mountain, and he wouldn’t have come to Green Vine mountain. He wouldn’t have...

“You idiot, he obviously escaped, or they wouldn’t have ordered his arrest! You better worry about yourself a bit more instead of others!”

Only then did Yu Zijian ease up. She silently prayed, Niu Juxia, please be fine.

“Miss Hua is right.” A voice rang out from outside. Mu Zhicong stepped into the courtyard with his hands behind his back. He seemed extraordinarily graceful under the mottled shade of the tree.

Yu Zijian said, “Senior brother Mu!”

Mu Zhicong said, “Zijian, it’s almost time for the Herb Gathering ceremony. I will be taking care of you when that happens, but you need to make some preparations yourself too.”

“Zijian is not a disciple of the Green Vine mountain. She won’t be participating in your sh*tty Herb Gathering ceremony. Hurry up and get out of here. I feel vexed whenever I see the people of the Green Vine mountain now!” Hua Chenglu suddenly sat up on the seat and cursed.

When Hua Chenglu arrived on the Green Vine mountain wanting to take away Yu Zijian, the Green Vine elder had met with her reluctantly and directly turned down her request. However, while she liked to behave in a very mature manner, she was still a young girl at the end of the day.

If the patriarch of the Hua family, or Hua Chengzan, had come in person, there would be no issue in resolving this matter. However, if the Green Vine mountain released a person obediently from a single word that a little girl had said after scampering over, they would seem like they were afraid of the Hua family. The Green Vine Elder could not afford to stoop so low just yet.

Hua Chenglu obviously would not give up, so she insisted on staying on the mountain with Yu Zijian. After all this time, she had grown restless. She no longer cared about acting mature anymore. She released all of her unruly and capricious nature as the young miss of a large clan now.

“Miss Hua, do you really think you can talk nonsense just because you’re from the Hua family? Don’t assume that I’m afraid to teach you a lesson.” Mu Zhicong’s face reddened and he raised his hand.

Hua Chenlu offered her face to him. “Come! If you think you’re so capable, then teach me a lesson. You’re a coward if you’re afraid to!”

Mu Zhicong was utterly enraged, but his hand just hovered in the air. He was actually afraid to lay his hands on her. If he touched her, it would lead to a dispute between the Green Vine mountain and the Hua family. That was not a burden he could bear.

Yu Zijian made her way between them in a hurry and tried to persuade them. “Stop arguing!”

Mu Zhicong made use of this to get out of the predicament that he faced. He lowered his hand furiously. “If it weren’t for Zijian shielding you, I’d definitely teach a lesson to an ignorant little girl like you!”

“Who do you want to teach a lesson to?” A voice rang out at the entrance.

“Brother!” Hua Chenglu sprang up from the chair.

Mu Zhicong turned around in a hurry. He saw an extremely handsome man sitting on a verdant, slender branch that swayed in the wind. His ebony hair hung loose as his lips that were like peach blossoms formed a smile. If it were not for the prominent adam’s apple on his throat, he might have been mistaken for a great beauty.

Hearing how Hua Chenglu referred to him, a name leapt out in Mu Zhicong’s heart—Hua Chengzan.

Across the fifteen hundred kilometers of the Clear River prefecture, there were countless geniuses. However, this person was the best of the best among these geniuses, a true prodigy. Not only did he come from a renowned clan and possess a handsome appearance, but he was also the only non-Foundation Establishment Scarlet Wolf commander throughout all of the Ruyi commandery.

This was not due to his background from the Hua family, or the special enlistment of the White Hawk commander. Instead, it was because he had reached the tenth layer of Qi Practitioner before the age of twenty. Everyone believed he would soon become the youngest Foundation Establishment cultivator of the Clear River prefecture.

Although he had been stuck at the tenth layer for many years, which caused the halo of a genius over his head to dim slightly, he was still a dazzlingly bright presence in the eyes of regular Qi Practitioners. He was known in the Clear River prefecture as the greatest below Foundation Establishment.

Mu Zhicong bowed in a hurry. “I was not aware of commander Hua’s arrival. I’ve failed to welcome you from afar.” Even with the Hua family set aside, just Hua Chengzan’s identity as a Scarlet Wolf commander was enough to make any Qi Practitioner revere him.

In the eyes of these cultivators from sects, the Hawkwolf Guard was not some fair emissary of justice that upheld the laws. Instead, they were the hawks and hounds of the government that framed people with their draconian laws.

Hua Chenglu arrived underneath the tree and leapt up and down. “Why have you only just come? Zijian and I have been harassed to death by the people here.”

Mu Zhicong laughed dryly. “I was only joking around with your dear sister.”

“Then let me joke around too!” Hua Chengzan’s face sank as he raised his hand. He possessed authority over the laws of the Clear River prefecture, and who knew how many Qi Practitioners he had killed and interrogated in the past. Although he rarely ever displayed his power, once he grew hostile, the bleakness seemed to summon late autumn in this prosperous springtime garden all of a sudden.

Mu Zhicong staggered a few steps back and tripped over the chair, falling on his bottom. He raised his hand to shield his face like a woman as he cried out, "Don't!"

But nothing happened. Mu Zhicong lowered his hand, and all he saw was Hua Chengzan seated there, still smiling, as if his bearing earlier was all just an illusion.

Hua Chenglu mocked, "What a coward. My brother had already said that he's joking around!"

Mu Zhicong turned bright red. He felt both ashamed and fearful. He had completely collapsed before Hua Chengzan's aura earlier. Not only was he unable to fight back, but he even lost the courage to run away. He could only kneel on the ground and beg for his life, leaving everything completely up to Hua Chengzan's whim. If Hua Chengzan had lashed out at that moment, killing him would be no different from killing an ordinary person. Before he had even struck, Mu Zhicong had already suffered an absolute defeat.

"Senior brother Mu!" Yu Zijian wanted to help him up, but Mu Zhicong had already leapt to his feet. "I'll report this to my master." before scampering off.

Hua Chenglu called out, "Why don't you get down here!?"

Hua Chengzan seemed powerless to that request. He gently drifted down from the branch and smiled at Yu Zijian. "Miss Yu, long time no see!"

Yu Zijian lowered her head in a hurry. "Brother Hua, what brings you here?"

Hua Chenglu said complacently, "I got him to come, obviously."

Hua Chengzan said instead, "I have some formal business to attend to here."

The two of them looked at each other. Hua Chenglu stroked her brother's nose furiously. "So you didn't come for me!"

Hua Chengzan sighed. "I obviously came for you. I told you a long time ago that there was no need for you to hurry here, and that you just needed to wait for me to handle it. Now, it's much more troublesome instead." The minds of people were extremely tricky to handle. Now that he had come here, he had to worry that the Green Vine Elder felt like the Hua family was trying to pressure him.

"If it weren't for me, Zijian would have been forced to join the Green Vine mountain already!"

"Fair enough!"

"Since commander Hua has arrived, why don't you come up the mountain for a chat with me so that I can fulfill my role as the host?"

Suddenly, a great voice boomed out from the top of the mountain.

Chapter 240 - Before the Ceremony (Two)

"Come with me!" Hua Chengzan lifted up Hua Chenglu with one hand and flew through the treetops like a bird, heading towards the top of the mountain.

“Wait for me, Zijian!” Hua Chenglu turned around and called out, but all she saw was a green mass. She was already very far away from the courtyard.

The voice curled upwards, and the branches swayed. Yu Zijian sighed gently inside. If she had not received the help of all these kind-hearted people, who knew what circumstances she would be facing. Regardless of the end result, she thanked them from the bottom of her heart.

If it were not for these warm feelings, what would be the point of living in this world? However, if someone ended up hurt because of her, she really had no idea what to do.

Niu Juxia, please be fine!

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Advancing through the wild gales as the wind whistled past her ears, Hua Chenglu asked, “Brother, what mission brought you here?”

“It’s a secret.” Hua Chengzan smiled, but his expression was rather heavy.

Obviously, this would not escape the eyes of his younger sister, Hua Chenglu. She pouted unhappily, but she did not ask any further. She wondered, Apart from that woman, just what can give my almighty brother a headache?

“Has it got to do with the Herb Gathering ceremony of the three mountains?”

Hua Chengzan said nothing. He suddenly soared into the sky, flying above the entire Green Vine mountain.

Hua Chengzan spotted the diagram of the nine halls and eight trigrams on the square in front of the hall as well as the nine three-legged cauldrons giving off wisps of smoke. Looking down from above, the mountains all lingered in the mist, giving off an aloof and otherworldly feeling. The Green Vine mountain was quite a rare paradise.

From afar, they spotted the Green Vine Elder standing with his arms behind his back, waiting in front of the hall.

Quite a few disciples of the three mountains gathered on the square. Hearing the disturbance, they had all climbed out the mountain to see what was going on. Raising their heads, they saw a handsome man and a girl flying up to the top of the mountain with the breeze, like a white crane soaring over the mountains, untouched by human society.

The weaker Qi Practitioners failed to sense anything, but the stronger Qi Practitioners were all stern.

They had only witnessed this feeling of being one with nature from Foundation Establishment cultivators. He truly deserved his title of being the greatest below Foundation Establishment.

Hua Chengzan and Hua Chenglu landed before the steps gently.

Hua Chengzan clasped his hands first. “Greetings to senior Green Vine from junior Hua Chengzan.” Regardless of the impressiveness of his background, no matter how much talent he had, this was the basic amount of respect that a Qi Practitioner owed to a Foundation Establishment cultivator.

In the path of cultivation, the strong were revered.

The Green Vine Elder stroked his beard with a smile and returned half the gesture. "You should have let me know that you would be visiting earlier so that I could welcome you at the base of the mountain. Now, it just makes me seem like I'm taking advantage of my seniority to slight an esteemed guest like you."

He indirectly blamed Hua Chengzan for not notifying him first, directly passing through the formation and setting foot on the mountain. However, he was also astounded by his ability to pass through the formation silently.

Hua Chengzan said, "It's because I was worried about my younger sister, so I ignored the common courtesy. Please forgive me, senior. My younger sister has enjoyed your hospitality for all the days she spent on the mountain. I'm just afraid she has been rude the entire time. It's all thanks to senior's leniency to not fuss about her. Chenglu, why don't you thank the senior?"

"Thank you, senior Green Vine." Hua Chenglu bowed rather reluctantly.

Hua Chengzan rubbed Hua Chenglu's head gently and said powerlessly, "My sister is young and ignorant, and she's spoilt too. There's nothing I can do about her either, so I hope senior doesn't take any offence."

"Your dear sister is naive and innocent, so how could I take any offence?" The Green Vine Elder laughed. Even if he was slightly unhappy inside, he would not stoop to the level of a little girl, or he would just seem narrow-minded.

Hua Chengzan resolved the dispute from before in a few simple words. He smiled and clasped his hands. "I have some formal affairs that I'd like to discuss with the sect masters of the three mountains. Here's not an appropriate place to talk. Let's go in!"

At that moment, he was no longer an elder brother apologising for his sister, nor was he a junior who respected his seniors. Instead, he was a commander of the Hawkwolf Guard, a representative of the law. His attitude naturally changed such that he treated him as an equal. As a matter of fact, he even gained the upper hand, now in control of the flow of the conversation.

The Green Vine Elder could not help but grow stern. He raised his hands. "Please!" He could not help but sigh inside. This kid was graceful, and he handled affairs with composure. He was greater than all the disciples he had under him. He could shoulder great responsibilities. If he could have a disciple like this inherit and continue the sect, would the prosperity of the Green Vine mountain still be an issue?

Hua Chengzan made Hua Chenglu wait outside as he entered the hall with the Green Vine Elder. Right as he was about to step through the door, he suddenly turned around and glanced past every single face on the square. However, he was left slightly disappointed. He thought in a self-deprecating manner, If that person would appear here so easily, then there would be no need for so much trouble.

As expected, the Golden Pheasant Elder and the Lone Grave Elder were already seated in the hall. Seeing Hua Chengzan walk in, they both stood up before sitting back down again. Their eyes were filled with caution. They had to maintain their dignity as sect masters while trying to avoid offending the Hawkwolf Guard.

As if Hua Chengzan was accustomed to treatment like that, he only clasped his hands. He did not bow like he should have as a junior.

“So what brings the commander here in person?” The Green Vine Elder dismissed all of his disciples. Only the four of them remained in the large hall, such that his voice echoed through the place. The vermilion pillars of the hall seemed to extend into the darkness. They seemed extremely lonely.

Hua Chengzan paced around in thought, like he was organising how he would say it, but it was also like he was contemplating something. Suddenly, he stopped and said, “I’ve come to warn the three of you that someone will be coming for the foundations of your three mountains. The three of you should prepare yourselves.”

“What?” The Green Vine Elder was surprised.

“Bullsh-” The Golden Pheasant Elder directly sprang to his feet. He had been in an extremely horrible mood for the past few days. He blurted out foul language, only managing to stop himself half way through.

“Oh?” The Lone Grave Elder blinked his eyes a few times. Many more emotions immediately sprang forth from his corpse-like face.

The Green Vine Elder looked down. “Please don’t exaggerate to frighten us, commander. The alliance of our three mountains has lasted for several generations. How can our foundations of a thousand years be seized so easily?”

The Golden Pheasant Elder waved his hands around in an intense manner. “Who are we supposed to be afraid of when the three of us work together? Don’t tell me the White Hawk commander has taken a fancy to our sects?”

“Yeah!” said the Lone Grave Elder.

Their confidence was not unreasonable. Great Xia had stood for several millennia, and all nine provinces had experienced peace the entire time. Even battles between sects were very infrequent. Although there were some secret machinations going on behind the scenes, they could basically fend off anything if three Foundation Establishment cultivators worked together.

Obviously, they could not fend off Golden Core cultivators, but all Golden Core cultivators were well-established, possessing their own clans and sects. Why would the three mountains interest them? And, the Hawkwolf Guard never interfered with battles among sects. They would much rather stir up these battles instead, so since when were they nice enough to come and warn them?

Hua Chengzan acted like he was in thought for a while, giving the three of them sufficient time to react to the news. Only then did he say, “This person comes from the Sword Collection palace!”

The three agitated old men acted like an invisible hand had grabbed them by the throat. They all fell quiet, unable to say another word.

The Sword Collection palace was a great sect renowned throughout the Green province. It was said that only Foundation Establishment cultivators had the right to become inner disciples. In the eyes of all

small to medium-sized sects of the Green province, that was the name of an existence they could not oppose.

After quite a while, the Golden Pheasant Elder managed to return to his senses first. He bellowed, "You lie! The Sword Collection palace is an orthodox sect, so why would they just attack other sects? And, what would we have that would attract their attention?"

The Green Vine Elder smiled bitterly. "If you aren't joking, commander, then we can just go and get prepared to change sides. Just how are we supposed to oppose the Sword Collection palace?"

The Lone Grave Elder's face darkened; his entire body had already stiffened. He seemed even more like a corpse now.

Hua Chengzan said, "It's not an attack, but control and recruitment. Actually, you don't have to worry too much. I've obtained reliable information that the person is just an inner disciple of the Sword Collection palace. He only underwent his tribulation recently, so this is his first time leaving the mountain for training. If you can defeat him, then there's obviously nothing to worry about."

The three elders looked at one another. The training mission of a disciple from the Sword Collection palace was actually to deal with them. That was utterly insulting, but they just could not get angry over this, as it was the Sword Collection palace. As a matter of fact, they eased up slightly. If it was just an early Foundation Establishment cultivator, were they supposed to be afraid that they could not fend him off with their cultivation?

Hua Chengzan shook his head. The understanding of people from sects still originated from rumors and stories that were passed from mouth-to-mouth. It was impossible for them to analyse and draw conclusions from detailed information like the Hawkwolf Guard.

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Hua Chenglu hugged her knees as she sat before the hall. No matter who tried to talk to her, she would reply viciously, "Go away!"

Just as she was getting bored, Hua Chengzan emerged from the hall. The three sect masters had personally come out to see him off.

All of the disciples on the square were surprised by the treatment he received.

The eyes of the female cultivators shone even brighter. If they were to choose a partner, they needed to find a man like him.

If it were some other time, perhaps Hua Chengzan would have smiled at them and spread his romantic reputation as a handsome young master. However, he was in no mood to do so right now.

Still worried, he whispered sternly, "I'll just be in the town below the mountain. If he appears, send someone to contact me. The three seniors must receive him together when the time comes, or the three mountains will be in danger."

He was blatantly saying that they would not even be able to defeat a single disciple of the Sword Collection palace if they fought with just the three of them. The Golden Pheasant Elder definitely would have burst out swearing if he had heard this some other time, but he seemed very cautious now. He

only nodded. After hearing Hua Chengzan's analysis, none of them dared to make light of the situation anymore.

Compared to their pride, the three mountains were much more important. The Sword Collection palace was impressive, but they all understood the principle that it was better to be the head of a dog than the tail of a lion.

"Just... what... does... the... Sword Collection palace... want?" The Lone Grave Elder stammered as if it had been many years since he last spoke.

This also happened to be the question that the Green Vine Elder and Golden Pheasant Elder wanted to ask the most. What did they possess that would interest a great sect from over five thousand kilometers away?

Hua Chengzan hesitated. "As for what he wants, I'm not completely sure, but you must turn down any requests that he has, or the world will be in danger!"

The elders of the three mountains looked at one another. Although they each ruled over a region, they still knew what they were capable and incapable of. Even when combined, the three mountains could not influence the world at all, so it all seemed a little exaggerated. They wanted to ask some more questions.

Hua Chengzan clasped his hands and made his way down the stairs, flying off with Hua Chenglu. They soared over the sea of trees, including the residence for outer disciples.

Hua Chenglu asked urgently, "What about Zijian? What about her?"

Hua Chengzan said, "Don't worry. Once I finish with this, I will obviously take the two of you back to the Clear River prefecture." He was in no hurry to demand for Yu Zijian from the Green Vine Elder. He would only speak when he felt confident, and when he did speak, the Green Vine Elder would not be able to turn him down.

Of course, it would be for the best if he did not have to speak at all. If he handled this matter properly, the Green Vine Elder would probably be grateful for his warning, and he would let Yu Zijian leave the mountain without needing him to say anything at all. There was no need to hurry.

Hua Chenglu said, "But it's almost the Herb Gathering ceremony. Zijian is going underground with them. Who knows how dangerous it'll be."

Hua Chengzan said, "Didn't you see how someone was willing to take care of her? There won't be any danger. It'll be good for her instead."

"But!"

"No buts. If there was danger, they wouldn't send so many Qi Practitioners underground. It'll be fine as long as they don't venture too deep. How can she leave without any benefits after staying on the Green Vine mountain for all this time?"

Hua Chengzan seemed to think of something as he muttered to himself, "If you really talk about danger, I'd be worrying for the daemons instead."

“What?” Hua Chenglu asked in confusion.

“Nothing.”

The greenery receded, and the snowy winds buffeted their faces.

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Below the Green Vine mountain, the town happened to be experiencing its busiest time. The Herb Gathering ceremony was about to begin, so almost a thousand Qi Practitioners gathered there. All of them wanted to make some last minute preparations. It was the liveliest right now.

But at this moment, the ruckus near the north gate vanished. A wide path opened up on the cramped street, allowing a group of Qi Practitioners to pass by.

The leader of the group happened to be Wu Gen. His scarlet uniform stood out clearly, while the black uniform of the commanders behind him fluttered in the wind, giving off a stern and stately presence.

“Why are the Hawkwolf Guard here?”

“Have they come to participate in the Herb Gathering ceremony too?”

“Can’t be. It has never happened in the past!”

Wu Gen’s face was utterly sunken. He quietly made his way into an inn, while the commanders behind him entered too. All of them seemed to be in a bad mood.

The boss of the inn bowed to receive them. “Master Wu, you’ve finally returned! Please come in! I’ve saved the best rooms for you!”

Wu Gen said, “Shut the door!”

The boss said, “But I’m still open for business!”

“Shut the door!” Wu Gen’s voice sank.

The boss closed the door in a hurry. Wu Gen erupted with foul language, “You bunch of trash! You couldn’t even catch an injured person. Every single one of you is all talk and no action! How am I supposed to report back like this?”

A crack slowly opened up in the door upstairs. Seeing the group of Hawkwolf guards below, the door was immediately shut again.

Fang Enshang said, “Senior brother, the terrain underground is complicated. The caves criss-cross with one another, so it was difficult for us to find him. There’s nothing that we could do.”

The other commanders all nodded in agreement. Qiu Ruiliu’s hole was not just a short secret tunnel. Instead, it directly connected to the caves below. They followed his tracks in pursuit, which ended at an underground river. When they found his tracks again, they were led to the den of a daemon. It took them a tremendous amount of effort to get out and reduced them to a sorry state.

Although they administered different regions, there would be many criminals on the blacklist that would flee underground, preventing them from capturing them.

Wu Gen just happened to have nowhere to vent his anger. He roared at Fang Enshang, "Haven't you learnt Tracing techniques from the Academy of the Hundred Schools? Haven't you? Huh?!"

Fang Enshang lowered his head. "I have."

"Then why couldn't you find him? Huh?!"

Fang Enshang said softly, "Didn't you learn it too, senior brother?"

The commanders all tried their best to stop smiling, but no one dared to laugh aloud.

Wu Gen immediately seemed like he was about to explode. Qian Rongzhi pulled Fang Enshang away in a hurry and tried to persuade him. "Sir, please calm down. We still managed to destroy a branch of the evil White Lotus cult, the Truth-seeking society. After suffering this loss, Qiu Ruiliu will probably be too afraid to show himself again for a very long time. After all, even commander Gu failed to find the White Lotus Mother."

Wu Gen's anger subsided slightly under the persuasions of a beauty and the fact that he was being compared to Gu Yanying. He glared viciously at Fang Enshang, and just when he was about to say something, a lazy voice rang out from upstairs.

"Oi, it's not a good idea to talk about your superiors behind their backs."

Wu Gen suddenly turned his head. "Who is it? To eavesdrop on us, you really are out of your... Commander Hua!"

Hua Chengzan leaned against the railing on the second floor and smiled. "Sir Wu, I see your temper has improved! So who's out of their minds?"

Wu Gen was pained. "I'm out of my mind, okay? What brings you here?"

Hua Chengzan said, "You just let a criminal escape, that's all. There's no need to be like this. With the breadth of the net of justice, it's loose, but it never lets anyone slip through and get away. Won't you have an opportunity in the future? It's just like what Rongzhi said. Even boss Gu failed to kill the White Lotus Mother." He shifted his gaze and looked at Qian Rongzhi.

"I was just speaking carelessly. I hope you can forgive me, commander. Though, I never thought the commander would actually remember my name." Qian Rongzhi bowed courteously. She did not try to tease or flatter him at all. Although she had only seen him once before, this commander Hua gave her a very deep impression. The conclusion she reached about him was that he was difficult to make use of.

She personally believed her beauty and arts of charm were nowhere near as great as the master of the Sect of Clouds and Rain. And, even the sect master seemed to struggle to gain complete control over this person. And, if she tried throwing herself at him now, it would only make him look down on her.

Hua Chengzan smiled. "I always remember the names of beauties. Oh right, did you find that person who joined the Hawkwolf Guard with you, Li Qingshan?"

Qian Rongzhi said, "Commander, although I joined the Hawkwolf Guard at the same time as Li Qingshan, we're not close with one another. I haven't heard from him in such a long time, so he may have died underground already."

“Really? I have a feeling that I’ll still be able to see him.” Hua Chengzan waved his hand and casually tossed down a painting scroll, which unfurled in the air. It depicted a man in simple clothes.

The painter had exceptional skill. The man seemed to be very young, only around twenty years of age, but he gave off a bleak presence. His skinny figure held up the large, wide clothing, which made him seem a little like he was just skin and bones.

“This is your new mission. Remember this person. Once he appears near the Green Vine mountain, contact me immediately! Remember, don’t touch him!”

With Wu Gen at the lead, the Hawkwolf guards answered loudly, “Yes, sir!”

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Clang~

Yu Zijian paced around by herself in her courtyard. Suddenly, the sword on her waist thrummed gently. She stopped in surprise and drew the sword. The blade of the sword was clear like water in autumn, clearly reflecting her confused face.

She checked the sword several times, but she was still confused by what was going on. In the end, she could only sheath the sword.

Clang~

She leapt in fright and took a step back, drawing out the sword again and checking it several times.

The scattered sunlight landed on the sword, reflecting brilliant streaks of light. However, the sword was as still as water, without producing any noise or disturbance at all.