

Chapter 321 - Trial Mission

“D- Did you really write this?”

Liu Chuanfeng’s eyes were slightly red. Originally, he had read the draft with a mindset of giving Li Qingshan some advice and revitalising his dignity as his teacher.

Yep, martial arts practitioners. Seems to be a world without cultivators. It’s quite the setting, but isn’t it a little too literarily unsophisticated? There isn’t even an opening poem. Oh right, Qingshan comes from the mountains. Getting him to write poems would be asking too much of him. It’ll be up to his I, his teacher, to fix this.

Liu Chuanfeng read it slowly with an opinionated mindset. Afterwards, he gradually forgot about his original objective. The cohesive plot of the novel had sucked him in, turning page after page. By the time he had returned to his senses, he had already reached the end. The sun was already setting.

The writing style of the entire novel was vastly different from the ones he had read before, but it had a grand setting and portrayed everything to great detail. Even right now, he could recall the scenes vividly. This novel was not bad at all. Instead, it was unimaginably good, which destroyed his original plans.

Li Qingshan said, “Of course.”

“Impossible. That’s impossible,” Liu Chuanfeng muttered. He had been writing for so many years now, so he understood the difficulty that was involved.

“Hah, that’s because I’m a genius.” Li Qingshan patted Liu Chuanfeng’s shoulder. Sure enough, the story from a great master was powerful. Of course, he would have never been able to do this without Xiao An’s localising edits.

“Hmm? What’s this?” Li Qingshan peered into his body and discovered that a speck of light had appeared in the dim Divine Talisman of Great Creation. Suddenly, he raised his head and looked at Liu Chuanfeng. He appeared several times more pleasant to the eye now.

Originally, he had still been worrying about whether he could collect the power of belief with something he had plagiarised. Didn’t he already have his first reader?

Liu Chuanfeng was unable to come up with any appropriate responses to that. All he could do was accept Li Qingshan’s explanation for now. It was probably because he originated from the jianghu, which was why he could write matters of the jianghu so easily and with such vivid detail.

“Qingshan, you definitely won’t regret joining the school of Novels. I’ll send this off to the Cloudwisp association right now. Have you thought of a pen name?”

Li Qingshan immediately became stumped. He furrowed his brows in thought before thinking of something. He extended his index finger. “How about Jin Long, or Golden Dragon?” He had considered the two authors he was most likely to plagiarise from and fused their names flawlessly.

Liu Chuanfeng reeled back, cringing. It really was quite difficult to come up with a name cruder than that. He bellowed, "Do you think you're giving names to children in the village? We're novelists. Our pen names are basically our second names."

This was the first time Li Qingshan had felt so meek before Liu Chuanfeng. He muttered, "Golden Dragon sounds so awesome and auspicious." He racked his brains hard again. As a great author who had "written" a million words already, it truly was quite awkward for him to be stumped over coming up with a pen name that was only a few words long.

"Wuji. Wuji is pretty good, right?"

"As a novelist, how can I have the same name as a character in my books? What will my readers think of me?"

"Qingshan!"

"All you did was drop your surname. My dear disciple, please be a little more serious."

Li Qingshan said, "I understand now. I'll just be Li Qingshan!"

"What? Isn't that your real name..."

"Yeah, it is my real name!" Li Qingshan smiled as he radiated with confidence. Recently, he had been caught up in far too many regular matters. He had almost forgotten this old dream of his.

There would be a day when he would spread the name "Li Qingshan" across the nine provinces, with millions muttering his name.

This was more like a fantasy that a child had while staring at the sky. If he mentioned it, people would only laugh. Even he himself found it quite amusing when he thought of it himself. However, it was called a dream exactly because of that.

Refining True Spirit pills was not a dream. Becoming a Daemon General was not a dream either, as they were too serious. If he did it, he would do it solemnly, while those who heard about it would be solemn too.

Bedding Gu Yanying could be regarded as half a dream. Although he was so serious about it, he had almost made a certain person collapse from laughter. Hmph, when lower people hear of the Dao, they'll laugh aloud. If they don't laugh aloud, it's not the Dao.

Who the fuck cares about what others think? I, Li Qingshan, will become the strongest, most famous man, or should I say daemon, across the nine provinces.

All of his down-to-earth hard work was for reaching this fantasy. Novels were just the first step to his grand plan, so why did he have to think so much about coming up with a fake name?

"The great novelist, Li Qingshan. Now I like this name! Get Fubai to broadcast it properly for me. I'll personally shell out ten million taels of silver for this. Get everyone in the Clear River province to know my great name!"

"What great name?"

Just as Li Qingshan's thoughts flowed in high spirits, Hua Chengzan rode the wind and arrived on the island.

Li Qingshan went to receive him. "What brought you here?"

Hua Chengzan heard about how Li Qingshan had actually written a novel. After hesitating, he hesitated some more before asking, "Don't tell me it's those, right? Old Wang hasn't been in a good mood recently!"

Li Qingshan said, "Am I that kind of person?" It turned Liu Chuanfeng bright red, fuming.

"I wouldn't think so. I heard you spent all afternoon on Benevolence island?" Hua Chengzan hinted with a smile. He had befriended the greatest female primary disciple in the entire academy in such a neat and quick fashion, and he had even managed to capture the tomboy Han Qiongzhi's heart. His charm was so impressive that it was truly beyond anything Liu Chuanfeng possessed.

"Don't misunderstand. I was just learning alchemy from her," Li Qingshan explained in a hurry. Ru Xin could be a very good partner, but clearly, she was not interested in him. He did not want to damage his reputation either, nor could he be bothered to use this opportunity to pursue her.

"Pursuit" always came with an element of "begging". He just happened to utterly hate begging others. He was not born into this world to serve a woman. Even if it were Gu Yanying, this aspect would remain unchanged.

"Whatever. Let's not talk about that. Do you have any spare time lately?" However, Hua Chengzan did not believe him. He too had a lot of first hand experience with that woman's personality. She definitely was not someone who would spend time teaching Li Qingshan alchemy for no reason.

"Why?"

"A trial mission."

This was a tradition that had always existed within the Hawkwolf Guard. Whether it were new Hawkwolf guards or promoted Hawkwolf guards, they all had to complete a trial mission to demonstrate that they had the ability to hold their post. Although it was more symbolic than practical now, it was still necessary. Having been promoted to Scarlet Wolf guard, Li Qingshan could not avoid this either.

"What's the mission?" Li Qingshan only felt that receiving private lessons from Ru Xin was even more correct of a decision. Otherwise, who knew when he would be able to learn alchemy in its entirety and refine True Spirit pills with all these interruptions.

"One of our Nighthawks has been killed. It might be connected to the White Lotus cult. Don't worry, it's just an investigation mission. If you can find the murderer, then feel free to avenge our people, but if you can't, just report back."

Li Qingshan said, "My previous trial mission was also an investigation mission." And, in the end, the entire Qian family was annihilated.

Hua Chengzan said, "As long as Altar Lord level figures don't appear, regular Qi Practitioners probably won't even be able to touch a hair on you. Through her various encirclements, commander Gu has just about killed off most of the Altar Lords from various regions. The remaining that managed to slip away

are too afraid to show themselves too. And, there'll be an additional reward for completing this mission."

"What reward?"

Hua Chengzan smiled. "It's what you've been looking forward to all this time, which is going to the Ruyi commandery and meeting commander Gu!" This was also an ancient tradition of the Hawkwolf Guard. Newcomers had the right to see their commanding officer's commander. If they were lucky and became chosen, there would be a lot of benefits.

"That's not bad at all." Li Qingshan smiled too. He also wanted to verify some thoughts of his and approach that half-a-dream of his.

Chapter 322 - Fate and the Fate of Love

"When do I set off?" Li Qingshan asked.

"The sooner the better. It's best if you set off tomorrow!"

"Alright, then tomorrow it is!"

"Report to the prefectural city tomorrow. Oh right, when your book gets printed, give me a copy." Hua Chengzan left behind the uniform and accompanying blade of Scarlet Wolf guards before bidding farewell and leaving.

The next day, Li Qingshan changed into the impressive Scarlet Wolf uniform and arrived at the office of the Hawkwolf guard in the Clear River prefectural city.

He made his way to the highest floor and knocked on Hua Chengzan's room.

However, the person who opened the door was Han Qiongzhi. As soon as she saw Li Qingshan, she gave him a fierce glare and moved aside in a sulking manner. She ignored him.

Li Qingshan was perplexed. However, this first young miss Han had always been subject to changing moods, so he did not take it seriously either.

Hua Chengzan sat behind the desk with his hands crossed and a smile on his face. No matter when, he always seemed like he was in control of the situation.

He gave a simple explanation of the mission. The murdered Hawkwolf guard was called Zhou Pei. He had once been a Nighthawk and because of his merit from the mission of encircling and suppressing the Truth-seeking society founded by remnants of the White Lotus cult, he had recovered his identity as a regular Hawkwolf guard.

He had been killed in the process of carrying out a mission two days ago. His corpse was delivered back with the word "traitor" engraved on his body. They suspected it to be the handiwork of the remnants of the White Lotus cult.

When Li Qingshan heard "Truth-seeking society", he suddenly remembered it all. He had seen Zhou Pei before, and he had been personally responsible for the demise of the Truth-seeking society. The

suspected murderer happened to be the leader of the society who had slipped away through his fingers, Qiu Ruiliu.

Never did he think that he would end up with this mission again. The coincidences and arrangements of fate in the world were truly unpredictable.

However, it actually was not much of a coincidence at all. There were hundreds of cities within the governance of the Clear River prefecture, and Hua Chengzan was responsible for numerous missions too. However, Li Qingshan originated from the Hawkwolf Guard in Jiaping city, while Zhou Pei's post had been in Jiaping too. That was why he had specially allocated this mission to Li Qingshan. It was a little like returning home after achieving great success.

The information and documents were placed on the table. Two hands extended towards them simultaneously. Li Qingshan and Han Qiongzhi's eyes met before they looked at Hua Chengzan together.

"Isn't this my mission?"

Hua Chengzan said seriously, "Although it's an investigation mission, it has to do with the White Lotus cult, so we can't afford to be careless. According to the rules, the mission has to be jointly carried out by at least two people."

Li Qingshan pulled his hand back. He no longer said anything. Han Qiongzhi was strong enough, even though she was a little ill-tempered. They could reach Jiaping by noon if they flew, and a slight investigation would take a day or two at most. It was nothing he could not put up with. And, she was still a beauty at the end of the day. At least he would not be lonely on the journey.

Han Qiongzhi slammed the desk. "No, I disagree!"

Hua Chengzan said sternly, "This is the order of your commander!" No matter how lax he was usually, the hierarchy was still clearly divided within the Hawkwolf Guard, strictly abiding to the laws. Unless Han Qiongzhi resigned from her post, she was forced to obey.

Han Qiongzhi stared at Hua Chengzan before glancing towards Li Qingshan on the side. Suddenly, she seemed to understand something and blushed.

Watching the two leave, Hua Chengzan leaned back comfortably on the high back of the chair. "Junior sister, this is all your senior brother can do for you."

Since young, rarely were there any men that Han Qiongzhi appreciated. If this was not rare enough, then it was even more rare for Han Anjun to appreciate the man in question too. As her childhood friend, he obviously had to assist her. Spending time alone with each other was the best way to develop their feelings. If she went back home with Li Qingshan as well, that would only be for the better.

He was helping out a friend too. If Li Qingshan could establish ties with the influential clan that was the Han family, he would benefit endlessly too. At the very least, he could receive help from Han Anjun, and there was even a chance for him to enter the care of Han Anguo. There would be no need for him to worry about running out of cultivation resources anymore. This was basically a match made in heaven. He had never thought his joke from before might actually come true. He could not help but admit that Li Qingshan had been developing rather impressively.

As for Gu Yanying, it would be best if he woke up from that great daydream of his as soon as possible!

Outside, Han Qiongzhi asked, "Was it your idea?"

"Of course not." Li Qingshan curled his lip. "Even if you can get whatever you want, you first young miss, I, Li Qingshan, would never bother to use tricks like this."

Han Qiongzhi raised an eyebrow. "What? Am I not worth using tricks for?"

"You are, you are. You most definitely are. Can you wait a moment for me? There's a place I need to visit first." Li Qingshan played along casually and looked around.

"That's more like it. Where are you going? How mysterious. Something bad?"

Li Qingshan said, "Then let's go together!"

It was inconvenient to use techniques in the city, so they travelled on foot. They arrived outside a small building on one side of the city. The plaque that hung high above the entrance spelled out two words, "Cloudwisp Association".

Han Qiongzhi was surprised. "Did your school of Novels do this?"

Li Qingshan grinned. He gave no explanation. This was the first time he had come here too. He had obviously come here to take a look at the development of his new book.

Last night, Liu Chuanfeng had personally delivered the draft here.

Sun Fubai and Liu Chuanfeng knew that Li Qingshan would be coming, so they came out to receive him together. However, when they saw Han Qiongzhi, they were slightly surprised.

There were many young masters and young misses from influential clans in Clear River city, but rarely did anyone surpass the one right in front of them. They could not help but wonder when they saw how she accompanied Li Qingshan.

For Li Qingshan's sake, Han Qiongzhi bowed towards Liu Chuanfeng in an unconcerned manner. "What are you doing here?"

Liu Chuanfeng admired the impressive ability of this dear primary disciple of his even more. In the past when she saw him, she would not even look at him properly.

"You'll know as soon as you see it." Sun Fubai invited them in with a chuckle, taking them around the Cloudwisp association on a tour.

The various storytellers were currently reciting Li Qingshan's novel in the hall upstairs, preparing for their future performances. All of them agreed that Li Qingshan's novel was extremely fascinating, and it happened to be extremely suited for storytelling too. However, due to the lack of sophisticated poems, it could not be used to target scholars and nobles. It brought the bards to their wits' end as they tried to write lyrics for it.

Li Qingshan swung his hand in an exaggerated manner. "If you can't sing it, then you can act it out, right?" He behaved like he was acting it out, which enlightened these people.

In another room, a group of painters and artists created accompanying illustrations for the characters in the novel. This idea originated from Liu Chuanfeng. Ever since he discovered accompanying illustrations, his books of smut sold much better, and it was easier for him to gather the power of belief too.

In the printing press to the back of the association, over a dozen printing machines purchased from the school of Mohism ran at full capacity, humming aloud. They pressed the characters against the white paper one by one. Once the accompanying illustrations were completed, they could repeat the process then bind it all together, and it would become a book.

Li Qingshan looked around and expressed complete satisfaction. "I really can't spare any extra time, unfortunately, so I must trouble you with the matters here, Fubai."

Sun Fubai said, "We're all one family. Saying something like that would be alienating me."

"When are we going?" Han Qiongzhi asked impatiently. These people from the school of Novels sure were strange. They were cultivators, yet they spent all their time mingling with these regular people. What was so interesting about that?

She had flipped through a stack of printed copies too, but she found it boring from just a single glance. Apart from cultivation methods, she had no interest in anything that contained words at all. All she felt was that compared to fighting the disciples of the school of the Military, he really was not that admirable when he wrote novels instead.

"We'll go right now." Li Qingshan could imagine how his name would spread throughout the entire Clear River prefecture before long, so he was in a good mood.

"Let's go together. It's faster if you take this."

Arriving outside, Han Qiongzhi was just about to pull out the flying shuttle, and Li Qingshan agreed with her. Her expression eased up before immediately stiffening again. No matter when, she could never afford to embarrass herself as the first young lady of the Han family. Even if she had a good impression of him, she could not try to coddle or suck up to him. Not to mention that this guy even had the audacity to brush her off back on Benevolence island.

A cloud shot into the air, flying directly towards Jiaping city.

As he travelled back along the same path as before, Li Qingshan felt rather sentimental.

Han Qiongzhi had always been a bold and easygoing person, but when she faced him, she would think about Hua Chengzan's intentions behind these arrangements. She wanted to get closer with him, but she was also afraid of embarrassing herself. If she acted up whenever she felt like it like before, wouldn't she just be like those little girls in love? That was even less of her style.

In Li Qingshan's eyes, her usual behaviour was no different from a little girl's, yet she just had to act mature right now, which was very awkward for her. For a moment, she was actually unable to say anything to him at all.

Fortunately, Li Qingshan's sentiment left just as quickly as it had arrived. A while later, he began conversing with Han Qiongzhi, and only then did she ease up slightly, but she remained tense. She did her best to maintain a grasp over her actions. This just happened to be one of her weak points.

As they spoke, all Li Qingshan felt was that this first young miss Han's personality seemed to have changed suddenly and drastically. She became reserved. Although she lost some of her sharpness, she became slightly less easy going too, which perplexed him. However, they were not exactly close, so it was not like he could get to the bottom of this.

Never did he think that his chaotic battle to vent his gloominess in the school of the Military had touched on her tender feelings.

After travelling for four hours, they saw a lone mountain in the distance, standing beside a great river. A hawk perched on there, watching over the city that stretched into the distance.

The cloud vanished below him, and Li Qingshan landed firmly on the top of the mountain. He looked around. It has been a while, Jiaping.

The Black Hawk commander, Fang Enshang, brought all the Black Wolf guards to receive them. There were quite a few old acquaintances among them. They all saw how a great Scarlet Wolf guard beauty stood beside Li Qingshan, who wore his Scarlet Wolf uniform. Just her composed bearing had surpassed all regular women. They were unable to describe their admiration for her, and they felt a tinge of sour jealousy.

They had all personally witnessed Li Qingshan joining the Hawkwolf guard back then. He was just a kid from the mountains, but little did they think that in just a short year or two, he would have risen to such a level.

Fang Enshang bowed politely. "Greetings from Fang Enshang."

Li Qingshan returned the gesture to Fang Enshang, while Han Qiongzhi went up and patted his shoulder. "Little Fang, long time no see. Why're you still at the sixth layer?"

Fang Enshang said, "Your language sure is unforgiving, second senior sister. How can my talent match yours, senior sister, or this fellow Qingshan right here? When I first met him, he was only at the fifth layer." Because Han Qiongzhi was the secondary disciple of the school of Legalism, she was known as the second senior sister.

"You flatter me. I think it's commander Fang's bearing that's changed the most. You've become much more mature." Li Qingshan felt much of Fang Enshang's naivety was now replaced with the bearing of a commander.

"You're two men, yet you sing praises for one another. Don't you find it embarrassing? So tell me just what is going on."

Having escaped the awkward situation of being alone with Li Qingshan, Han Qiongzhi turned back to normal and immediately took control of the situation. As she asked for the full story regarding this matter, she requested Fang Enshang to take them to Zhou Pei's corpse.

Clearly, Han Qiongzhi had a lot of experience with dealing with matters like this. Li Qingshan was willing to follow along with her too, remaining silent and contrasting against her.

In the chilly morgue, Fang Enshang lifted a white cloth and exposed a naked corpse that had turned blue. Sure enough, the word "traitor" was carved into the body.

Li Qingshan had seen plenty of corpses before, so he was mostly unfazed. All he did was furrow his brows in thought. He did not feel like daoist priest Qiu was someone who would do something like this. This was more like a method of revenge used by third-rate figures of the jianghu.

To a very large extent, the Truth-seeking society had not been destroyed by the Hawkwolf guard, but by Niu Juxia, who had killed his way out. Even if they knew Zhou Pei was a spy, their grievances did not run so deep. Just slitting his throat would have been more than enough.

Han Qiongzhi was unafraid too. She studied the naked corpse without any bashfulness that a normal woman would possess. Instead, she became angered. "They're out of their minds to provoke the Hawkwolf Guard like this. Little Fang, do you have any leads?"

Fang Enshang said, "I was just about to say. We had an informant report yesterday that daoist priest Qiu had appeared in the north-west. He seemed to be travelling in the direction of Ancient Wind city."

Li Qingshan's doubts became even heavier. He had experienced daoist priest Qiu's craftiness first hand. Why would someone like him leave behind traces that regular informants could spot? And, wasn't Ancient Wind city where the Qian family once stood?

His second trial mission actually pointed there once again. Was this a coincidence, or was there another reason for this?

Han Qiongzhi covered the corpse with the white cloth quickly and said to Li Qingshan, "We'll go right now!"

Li Qingshan hesitated. "I don't think this is as simple as it seems." He stated his doubts.

If this were in the past, Han Qiongzhi would have definitely mocked Li Qingshan as a worrywart. However, after everything he had been through, she knew he was not a coward. However, it would not be in line with her character if she did not charge over to Ancient Wind city immediately, sniff out Qiu Ruiliu, and cut him to pieces.

"Then what do you think we should do?"

Fang Enshang was slightly taken aback. How rare. To think that even his second senior sister would have a moment when she would ask for the opinion of someone else. In the school of Legalism, she never listened to anyone apart from the two commanders.

Li Qingshan considered it for a moment. "Let's just go with what you said!"

Although he had his doubts about this, he trusted Hua Chengzan's judgement. They should not encounter any danger in this mission, or Hua Chengzan definitely would have warned them.

Why would an Altar Lord of the White Lotus cult set up such a large trap, even going as far as exposing themselves, just to ambush two Qi Practitioners? If they really did not care about their own safety, they might as well just come to the Hawkwolf Guard and massacre to their hearts' content. Wouldn't that be better? Why did they have to lure them to such a remote place like Ancient Wind city?

The most likely possibility would be that Qiu Ruiliu had gathered another group of independent cultivators and had set up a shoddy trap. With his abilities, he could kill whoever came at him as long as they were below Foundation Establishment.

Han Qiongzhi said, "Then why'd you say that?"

Li Qingshan shrugged. "There's nothing wrong with being more careful."

"Qingshan's doubts are very reasonable. Daoist priest Qiu is very crafty. I'll come with you. An additional person brings additional help." Fang Enshang could still remember how Wu Gen had failed even with all the Hawkwolf guards accompanying him.

Han Qiongzhi said, "There's no need. Give this brother a proper burial. If he had family, take good care of them. He won't die in vain. We will avenge him."

She saw how Fang Enshang wanted to say something else, so Han Qiongzhi cut him off. "If the two of us work together, there won't be any problems at all!"

Chapter 323 - Altar Lord of White Lotus

With great confidence as well as trust in Li Qingshan, Han Qiongzhi waved her hand, and the two of them set off.

Han Qiongzhi urged him, "Hurry up and summon the cloud!"

It was early in the afternoon when Ancient Wind city, which sat on the side of the mountain and faced fertile land, appeared before them. It was dyed a faint yellow by the dim sun of winter.

Under the ancient city gates, Li Qingshan and Han Qiongzhi gazed ahead.

Although it was winter, quite a lot of people moved around on the streets. There were both adults and children, giving off a worldly hubbub. It was the same as the past, and it would remain like this in the future too. There did not seem to be any danger or hidden killing intent.

As they walked through the streets, the two of them had instead raised quite a lot of attention, treated as outsiders.

Li Qingshan said, "Let's look around for him!"

Han Qiongzhi called out, "Qiu Ruiliu, we can already see you, so come out!"

They attracted even more gazes over. Li Qingshan shook his head with a smile. Was a move used to trick children supposed to work?

A creak followed her voice. At the end of the main road, the doors to the Qian estate swung open loudly.

No different from the past, Qiu Ruiliu wore the robes of a daoist priest as he stood at the entrance. He clasped his hands. "I was unaware that esteemed guests would be coming, so please forgive me for failing to welcome you!"

It actually worked!

Before he had even finished talking, Li Qingshan felt a scorching gust of wind kick up beside him. Han Qiongzhi shot over, leaping towards the entrance of the Qian estate.

With a swish, she drew her blade from her sheathe. It lit up with flames that were ten meters long as she swung it towards Qiu Ruiliu's head.

"Die!"

This attack was the school of Legalism's Blade Aura of the Death Sentence. It possessed the dignity of law, the right to execute people, as well as the decisiveness of the school of the Military. Before the attack had even arrived, it could already overwhelm the opponent with awe.

However, Qiu Ruiliu simply stood right there, smiling as he watched the blade arrive before him.

With a clang, the blade landed on a black barrier of light. A formation enveloped the entire Qian estate. It would be extremely difficult for her to contend against the formation alone.

Knocked back, Han Qiongzhi made a flip in the air and landed gracefully.

Qiu Ruiliu said, "Originally, I wanted to lure some powerful people here, but I never thought I'd only lure over some shrimp."

"Murder!" Only now did the passersby on the streets react. They all called out as they fled towards their homes. They were merely some poor people, so why would they want to become involved in a battle like this?

"Why aren't you helping me?" Han Qiongzhi turned around and asked Li Qingshan. However, all she saw was Li Qingshan staring at the black barrier around the Qian estate with a frown.

"Let's go!" Li Qingshan suddenly grabbed Han Qiongzhi, and they took off into the sky.

"What are you doing?" Han Qiongzhi said as she put up a struggle. Even if Qiu Ruiliu was protected by a formation, the power of the formation would not be endless. Moreover, she possessed a few supreme grade talismans too. Even if this was an ambush, there was nothing for her to worry about.

However, Li Qingshan said nothing at all. His face was sunken as he wrapped his arm around her waist like a hoop of metal. An unprecedented feeling of alarm loomed over his heart.

"You want to leave? It's too late!" Qiu Ruiliu laughed aloud. Even in this moment, he seemed to be brimming with righteousness, more upright than insidious.

A black streak of light shot into the sky from within the Qian estate, pushing the black barrier outwards. It caught up with Li Qingshan instantly, enveloping the entire city.

As if night had suddenly descended, even the winter sun in the sky dimmed. Some of the people who had yet to flee back home suddenly halted. They became riddled with cracks before collapsing like sand statues, reduced to a dark red smear on the ground silently.

Without any preparations or prior signs, the entire city, whether they were male or female, whether they were old, frail, women, or children, had died in that instant.

There were no heroes that appeared, engaging in a battle between good and evil to save the common people. There were no laments or pain. All it was was an instant, and everything became deathly silent. The hubbub of the streets seemed to have never existed in the first place.

The moment Li Qingshan and Han Qiongzhi were enveloped by the black barrier of light, they stiffened. They felt like they were being crushed and ripped apart by a terrifying force, as if it wanted to crush them to a pulp, yet also rip them to pieces.

Under the balance of the two powers, it was almost like nothing, but destruction was omnipresent. They could feel it in their bodies.

The cloud condensed from spiritual energy collapsed quietly. The two of them fell out of the air.

Han Qiongzhi's confidence was completely replaced with fear. It was impossible for just a person like Qiu Ruiliu to cast down a formation like this. At the very least, they needed an Altar Lord of the White Lotus cult to achieve this.

Li Qingshan, on the other hand, immediately thought of the story Gu Yanying had once told him, about how the White Lotus Mother had sacrificed hundreds of thousands of lives.

This time, they had unfortunately won the grand prize. There was an Altar Lord hiding within the Qian estate at the very least.

Han Qiongzhi mobilised her true qi desperately, but her true qi refused to obey her. She wanted to say something to Li Qingshan, but she saw how stunned he was as he stared at her. She subconsciously touched her cheek.

Her fair, smooth cheek had become like an age-old oil painting. A tiny crack had appeared, oozing with blood.

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Ancient Wind city has probably been reduced to a ghost city now!

In the Academy of the Hundred Schools, Qian Rongzhi gazed at the blue sky and thought about that.

Everything that had once been would be reduced to nothing in the White Lotus cult's Lotus Bloom formation.

She chanted softly, "All sins annihilated, the lotus blooms."

The first time she had met Qiu Ruiliu was during the encirclement mission last time. In order to hunt him down in the caves that were as complicated as a cobweb, they had split up, communicating with one another with their tablets.

In the end, she had found the injured Qiu Ruiliu.

This time, it was a complete coincidence, or perhaps it was inevitable. She did her best to search for traces before entering a cave that was least likely for Qiu Ruiliu to choose to escape in.

In the darkness, two pairs of eyes met one another. There was no conversation, nor was there any fighting. She acted like she had seen nothing before backing out again.

Back then, Qiu Ruiliu was injured, but she was just a fifth layer Qi Practitioner. If she fought and kept Qiu Ruiliu busy, he would die for sure, but it was very likely for her to fall in battle too. It was not a worthwhile exchange.

A few months later, in a very ordinary mission, she met Qiu Ruiliu again, or should you say he had come looking for her. He invited her to join the cult. He did not try to threaten or tempt her. All he did was show extreme sincerity. "I knew from the moment that I saw you that you're a person of the White Lotus cult! If you refuse, then cut off my head right now and turn it in at the Hawkwolf Guard. I won't resist."

Whether it was the truth or a lie no longer mattered.

Qian Rongzhi considered for a moment before agreeing. She became a believer of the White Lotus, and she offered all of her possessions to the White Lotus cult, along with the Qian estate, so the White Lotus cult could use it as a secret base. Under her urgings, it obviously turned into a land of sacrifice for the White Lotus cult.

Even she was uncertain whether she was expecting Li Qingshan to go there or not, whether it was a coincidence or just inevitable. If he died, she would sigh for him. Hehe.

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Han Qiongzhi looked at the blood on her hand. Fear filled her eyes. For the first time in her life, she was so close to death.

At this moment, the black streak of light that had lifted up the black barrier retracted and twisted. The top instead swelled, like the bud of a flower. The mottled, dark-red smears on the ground began to disappear bit by bit as the final trace that proved their existence gradually vanished. Their flesh, blood, and souls had all become nutrients to the flower bud so that it could bloom.

Li Qingshan tried to mobilise his true qi, but his sea of qi had scattered, as if it had collapsed on a much more rudimentary level. It was even more impossible for him to use any techniques.

As the flower bud bloomed, the power of the formation grew stronger, and the damage to their bodies increased. If this continued, they would die even if the hidden Altar Lord just stood by.

This was the terrors of the White Lotus cult that had battled Gu Yanying and the entire Hawkwolf Guard of the Ruyi commandery for all these years. Despite also being Foundation Establishment cultivators, the elders of the three mountains basically seemed friendly and courteous in comparison.

Qiu Ruiliu let out a sigh. "The heavens hold benevolence. I can tell the two of you are anything but ordinary people, so why not forsake darkness for light? Join our White Lotus cult and let's bring salvation to the world together. It'll save you from quite a lot of suffering too."

"Shut up!" Han Qiongzhi gritted her teeth, and the taste of blood filled her mouth. As a stronger Qi Practitioner, she possessed a body that had completely surpassed regular people, which was why she had not collapsed immediately under the formation. However, her injuries were spreading bit by bit, like millions of ants gnawing away at her body, suffering a slow death.

"You were not born to be a coward!" Han Anjun had once scolded her like this. Although she found that old man utterly irritating, he was completely right about this. No matter the predicament, she, Han Qiongzhi, would never embarrass herself, especially when Li Qingshan was watching.

Qiu Ruiliu said, "You refuse to come to your senses! However, being able to become a part of the black lotus and cleanse your sins in the process is your good fortune."

Li Qingshan raised an eyebrow. He was about to strike. No matter who it was, if they wanted to take his life, they would have to ask his fists first. Even if this formation could suppress his true qi, it could not suppress his daemon core. Having reached the second layer of the spirit turtle, he would no longer be so helpless even if he faced a Foundation Establishment cultivator.

He had indeed hesitated for a moment earlier. His body was much tougher than Han Qiongzhi's. Although he was suppressed by the formation, it did not cause him any actual harm. With how powerful the formation was, he would have no choice but to transform if he wanted an opportunity to break out, but he would have to expose his greatest secret too. However, he could no longer care so much at a time like this. He could not just watch Han Qiongzhi die.

Han Qiongzhi said sternly, "Go!"

"What?" Li Qingshan frowned. If they could enter and leave this formation as they pleased, what were they feeling fear for?

"The black lotus is the crucial point to the formation. I'll break it, and you use this opportunity to escape! There might only be an instant, so you have to grasp it properly. Go back and seek reinforcements. Avenge me!"

If there aren't any chances, then let's die together! She did not manage to say that before leaping up, charging towards Qiu Ruiliu. She held a supreme grade talisman in her hand.

Blood seeped out from between her fingers, wetting the talisman in the blink of an eye. The talisman flashed. She had used the residual true qi in her blood to ignite the talisman in the most primitive way possible.

The talisman began to burn, turning into a scorching fire ball. It rapidly swelled in size and rose up like a dark-red sun. It illuminated Han Qiongzhi's smiling face that was covered in cracks. "Die!"

"Altar Lord!" Qiu Ruiliu's expression changed drastically. There were no Qi Practitioners who could endure the might of a supreme grade talisman.

However, before the fire ball had even reached the peak of its power, it began to dim, swallowed by the darkness. It rapidly subsided, such that only a wave of heat was left when it arrived before Qiu Ruiliu.

Han Qiongzhi's smile vanished. Despite her despair, she continued to move, clutching a second supreme grade talisman in her hand.

Qiu Ruiliu drew a sword with a wood-grain-like pattern. He lamented, "I can't bear for you to suffer so much, so I'll send you off!"

A shadow flashed past Han Qiongzhi, arriving before Qiu Ruiliu. It was Li Qingshan.

Alarmed, Qiu Ruiliu swung his sword.

Li Qingshan raised his hand, and several dozen strands of sword qi shot out. Even the terrifying formation was unable to dull their edge.

Qiu Ruiliu was stunned. Criss-crossing marks covered his body before shifting slightly. Before he could even fall apart as pieces, he collapsed due to the formation, reduced to a dark-red smear.

Chapter 324 - Arrival of the Hundred Schools

“You! Didn’t I tell you to leave?” Han Qiongzhi stopped.

Li Qingshan’s tall figure stood before the entrance of the Qian estate as he looked back and said, “Apologies. I don’t have a habit of having women die for me!” He was apologising for his momentary hesitation earlier.

“Even if we’re trying to interrupt the formation, I have a better chance at it than you. You go instead!”

“I’m in charge here!” Han Qiongzhi caught up with him in a hurry. Li Qingshan pointed at her forehead, and a supreme grade talisman lit up, enveloping her.

Although the power of all talismans had greatly weakened within the formation, it would still be of some use. The thin cracks on her face immediately stopped spreading.

She wanted to speak, but a recovery pill was tossed into her mouth, and her injuries began to heal.

“Only women who listen are adorable. Don’t let my efforts go to waste.” Li Qingshan said nothing more. He turned into a gale and made a beeline for the inner courtyard of the Qian estate.

Han Qiongzhi gritted her teeth and rushed towards the exit of the city.

“Sometimes, there needs to be a sacrifice, but no matter who the sacrifice is, it shouldn’t go to waste.” This was also something Han Anjun had once told her. Even in chess, the concept of bait and sacrificial pieces existed, let alone in a battle between two armies. This was the path of the school of the Military.

The familiar scenery rushed past him as Li Qingshan charged in.

His true qi was useless now. Not only was he unable to fly, but he had even lost the ability to make turns in the air. Right now, his feet could not afford to leave the ground without good reason.

Who knew how many walls he had run through. Finally, he arrived at the inner courtyard, the origin of the black lotus stalk.

There was a pond of lotus flowers to one side. The lily pads were verdant as the lotus flowers bloomed, emanating with fragrance like it was late spring. He could vaguely see a carp swimming around in there. It was brimming with life. However, it seemed like such a strange contrast to the deathly silent Ancient Wind city.

A man in black ceremonial robes with a black lotus crown sat on a lotus leaf with his legs crossed. He extended his hand to stir the water of the pond, teasing the carp. He was like a cultivated scholar. He did not even give off a hint of treachery.

However, the thick stalk of the black lotus that was about to bloom was planted right before him. It had claimed the lives of tens of thousands of people.

“You’ve come. Looks like Ruiliu has already departed. No, I can say he’s come too.” The man in black looked at the black lotus and smiled.

Li Qingshan was very tempted to just swing his blade at him without uttering a single word, just like what Han Qiongzhi had done, but the warnings in his heart were basically screaming out. This black-robed man was not just a Foundation Establishment cultivator. He had reached the peak of Foundation Establishment. The feeling he gave Li Qingshan approached what the slovenly daoist priest exuded.

Under such a state, perhaps he only needed a single move to kill him. However, the more dangerous it was, the calmer he became. He searched for the slightest opening, the slightest hope of survival.

“Who are you supposed to be?”

“Names are just a form of reference for convenience, so you can call me Black Lotus!”

“Your companion has died. Don’t you feel sorrow or fury for him?”

“I feel happy for him. He’s tainted with quite a lot of sins, so it’s about time they catch up to him.” Altar Lord Black Lotus chanted slowly, “All sins annihilated, the lotus blooms. Away from the sludge, to purity and clarity!” His gentle voice had quite the charm. His eyes were clear and at ease, like an eminent monk. Anyone who saw him would want to get closer to him.

“You feel happy for yourself, as he’s made your lotus a little stronger. Though I wonder when you’ll pay for your own sins?”

“Perhaps today.” Black Lotus smiled.

Li Qingshan was speechless. The Altar Lord had not just overcome death. He truly viewed death as relief. The thoughts of cultists truly could not be analysed with logic.

At this moment, there was a splash in the pond, and a red shadow passed through the lily pads, squirming around and swimming over. It nodded towards Li Qingshan in acknowledgement. It was the same fish that Li Qingshan had originally released. It opened its mouth, as if it was asking for pills.

“You know each other?” Altar Lord Black Lotus waved his hand. “Go, go. I don’t have any pills for you right now.”

Even against a carp, something that was only regarded as a daemon in the eyes of regular people, his expression was so gentle that he seemed like he was coaxing a child throwing a tantrum for candy. Perhaps this metaphor was wrong, as he had personally killed hundreds, if not thousands, of children just then.

The Altar Lord was helpless. He took out a pill from his hundred treasures pouch and placed it in the carp’s mouth, rubbing the carp’s head. Only then did the carp swim away in satisfaction. The pill was not as great as Virtue Accumulation pills, but it was not far off either.

No, I can’t keep dragging it out any longer. Li Qingshan took a step forward.

“You want to cut the black lotus and save your friend?”

Li Qingshan’s steps halted. Had this Altar Lord been spying on them the entire time? If that was the case, it would be difficult for him to carry out his plan.

"I saw nothing. I was just guessing you were planning that. Hawkwolf guards rarely move alone, especially when they face the likes of us. You were staring at the black lotus the entire time before. Is it a man or a woman?"

"Are you planning to use the power of belief within your divine talisman to activate a talisman and launch a sneak attack against me?"

Li Qingshan's heart that had just settled down slightly suddenly tightened again. When he activated the talisman and opened his hundred treasures pouch, he had not used his own blood, but the Divine Talisman of Great Creation. Ever since he left the prefectural city, the power of belief within the divine talisman had gradually increased. Clearly, it came from the members of the Cloudwisp association.

The power of belief had always been an extremely special power. It was not affected by the formation at all. Right now, it played a critical role for achieving victory, but he never thought the opponent would see through and disclose everything before he could even strike.

The Altar Lord said, "The power that the divine talisman in your body radiates with is still very weak, but it's still not something that I can just ignore. Whatever, go ahead!"

"What?"

"I won't stop you. If you can shake the stalk, the formation will shake for an instant too, and your friend will have the opportunity to escape from here. I want to see how you'll achieve this."

Li Qingshan frowned. Never had he met such a strange opponent.

Black Lotus said, "Don't worry. If I wanted to kill you, I would have done it long ago. You can treat what I said as sincere words coming from the heart of a dead man!"

"A dead man?" Li Qingshan strode towards the black stalk, but he was filled with doubts. If the Altar Lord had done everything he could in an attempt to kill him right from the beginning, he would instead be at greater ease. However, this situation was just too unexpected, which only pressured him more. He had to guard against an attack from the Altar Lord at all times, and he had to worry about whether this was a trap or not.

However, he did not purposefully maintain his distance from him either. At such a distance, they were just a few meters away, which was absolutely nothing in the eyes of a Foundation Establishment cultivator.

Li Qingshan halted. He wielded his fingers like a sword and leapt up. The remaining dozen or so strands of sword qi in his body fused with his finger and stabbed towards the black stalk.

The unstoppable sword qi stabbed deeply into the stalk, cutting off its access to nutrients. The huge bud on top tottered slightly too. The sky suddenly brightened slightly before recovering its darkness once more.

Li Qingshan returned to the side of the pond and looked at the Altar Lord in bewilderment.

Sure enough, the Altar Lord had done nothing. Instead, he praised, "The sword qi is quite extraordinary. No wonder Ruiliu crumpled from just a single strike."

“Now, it’s time for the matter between us,” Li Qingshan said. Han Qiongzhi must have used this opportunity to escape. Now, only the two of them remained in Ancient Wind city. He could transform and fight to his heart’s content. With the formation serving as an obstruction, he would not be spotted by outsiders either.

“Oh?” The Altar Lord was slightly surprised. Even if this seventh layer Qi Practitioner had some special powers, standing up against a Foundation Establishment cultivator when he could not even use his true qi would be overestimating himself a little.

“Even in the face of great danger, people like me will confront it calmly, without losing their composure. Why must you copy the mediocre and put up a pointless battle of desperation?” He instead lectured Li Qingshan.

“Cut the bullsh*t!” Just when Li Qingshan wanted to unleash his daemon qi, he heard footsteps from behind and looked back. “Why did you come back?”

“I don’t have a habit of having men die for me either. And, I’ve never been an adorable woman in the first place. There’s no need for me to please you!” Han Qiongzhi’s expression changed as she rebutted.

Even she herself did not know why she had returned. From the education she had received since young, retreat was the most optimal decision in a situation like this, and she would not be at any fault either. Whether it was the Hawkwolf Guard or the school of the Military, neither of them encouraged pointless sacrifices.

Wavering about at a time like this would instead waste the sacrifice of her companion. Originally, she hated these gestures that were no different from a little girl’s, but this time, she was unable to abandon him. In her heart, he was not just a colleague, a friend, or a companion.

“I just feel like I can’t escape the pursuit of a Foundation Establishment cultivator. Instead of being defeated one after another, we might as well put on one last struggle together. Perhaps we might have a small chance.”

“So it really was a woman, and a beautiful one too. It truly is rare to find a pair that both pleases one another and are willing to sacrifice for one another. You should treasure this fate that has brought you together.”

At this moment, Altar Lord Black Lotus continued to study them in interest. As he spoke, he seemed more like a matchmaker.

Li Qingshan had no idea on how to react either. If someone was willing to die with you, then it would be nothing even if they found out about your secret!

He said to Han Qiongzhi, “Be careful.” He took out all of his supreme grade talismans and was about to unleash them in a desperate battle.

“Hold on!” The Altar Lord suddenly raised his hand.

Li Qingshan would never wait if he faced other opponents, but this Altar Lord Black Lotus was just far too strange. From the beginning till the end, let alone killing intent, he even lacked hostility.

“Both of you go. The people I was waiting for have come!” The Altar Lord raised his head towards the sky.

A streak of scorching white light cut through the darkness, descending from above and landing on the black lotus that was about to bloom.

Boom! Thunder soon followed.

A few familiar figures descended from above.

Han Qiongzhi cried out, “Father!”

Han Anjun was among them. Beside him was also Liu Zhangqing, Wang Pushi, the One Thought master, and the others. Basically all the school leaders were present. As for the lightning bolt, it had originated from the peak Foundation Establishment slovenly daoist priest, Zhou Tong. That was why it had managed to rip through the formation in a single stroke.

Wang Pushi said, “Altar Lord Black Lotus, today is the day you die!”

Chapter 325 - Blowing Hot and Cold

The Altar Lord heard that and smiled towards Li Qingshan as if he was saying, “Like I said!” He seemed to be completely unaware that he was already in dire straits. The black lotus beside him had only tottered slightly after being struck by the lightning.

Li Qingshan could not help but look at Han Qiongzhi. Had she sent out a distress signal when the formation had weakened? Han Qiongzhi was just as confused as he was.

No, that was impossible. The Academy of the Hundred Schools was over five hundred kilometers away from their present location. Even if she did send a signal, it was impossible for them to arrive so quickly. There was only one explanation—this was a trap, a trap for the White Lotus cult. Their identities as the hunter and the hunted immediately reversed.

Even if Altar Lord Black Lotus had the support of the strange black lotus formation, he still stood no chance against the attacks of so many school leaders. The gates of death loomed before him.

However, another question appeared in Li Qingshan’s mind. If that were the case, why hadn’t they struck earlier, letting this city full of people die and even risking Li Qingshan and Han Qiongzhi’s lives?

Wang Pushi said, “You planted the black lotus, so I’d like to see how you escape this time.”

“Life and death is set by fate. I did not flee in the past out of my own volition, but because the time was not right. I have always felt apologetic over that. You will definitely be satisfied today, commander.”

As it turned out, the black lotus was not just a regular arcane artifact. Instead, it was one bound to the Altar Lord’s life. He could unleash this formation when he planted the black lotus, such that even Foundation Establishment cultivators would be at his whim if they entered it. He was truly in his strongest state right now.

However, once it was planted, he could not move it so easily, so he was also in his weakest state.

All Foundation Establishment cultivators knew escape techniques, and Altar Lord Black Lotus was among the best of the best at such techniques. As long as he was not trapped by a formation, he could escape easily even when surrounded by all these Foundation Establishment cultivators. He had been surrounded multiple times in the past by Hawkwolf guards because he had been exposed, but they had failed to capture him every single time.

At the cost of several tens of thousands of lives, they had finally managed to trap him here for good. They were about to complete a service of great merit, such that even Wang Pushi could not help but feel delighted.

Liu Zhangqing said, "It's just a pity for these tens of thousand lives."

"Namo Amitābha!" The One Thought master chanted. His face was filled with pity. He could have prevented all of this.

"There's no need to blame yourself, sir prefect. You take responsibility for the millions that occupy the Clear River prefecture. You have an obligation to make trade-offs." Black Lotus said, "There's no need to be sad, master. All of their sins have already been washed away. They've comprehended the wondrous essence of the lotus, sent off to the blissful paradise. Instead, we are the ones who dwell in filth, tainted with sins, unable to be liberated. Now that's worth lamenting over."

The Altar Lord did not expose their hypocrisy. Instead, he comforted them gently, without the slightest extremism. He was filled with tolerance and understanding.

"Vile spawn, shut up!" A thunderous lion's roar erupted from the One Thought master's mouth. With a furious glare, he said, "If I don't enter hell, who'll enter hell? Even if I must be tainted with sins, I'll still kill you all and purge you scourges for the world!"

The Altar Lord said, "Master, you're wrong there. Legalism uses strict laws to warn and deter people, which is why killing me is commander Wang's priority mission. Confucianism governs the people and must weigh the trade-offs presented before them, which is why the entire city of people has been sacrificed, with no other choice available. However, the buddha is benevolent. Although there are great beings who purge demons, you cannot let your fury overtake your benevolence."

Li Qingshan could see exactly what was going on. The various school leaders had initially tried to get under his skin verbally, but the Altar Lord remained as calm as still water. He was unaffected.

The slovenly daoist priest said impatiently, "What's the point of spouting all this nonsense? Let's just work together and kill this bastard!"

Han Anjun said to Li Qingshan, "Well done. Take her away from here."

That seemed to signal the beginning of the battle. The various school leaders all surged with light, drawing their spiritual or arcane artifacts.

Li Qingshan glanced at the Altar Lord deeply before pulling Han Qiongzhi away with him. The Altar Lord even said with a smile, "We won't be meeting again."

Li Qingshan did not feel positive at all. The Altar Lord was just too composed, and from what he had said earlier, he seemed to have been expecting all of this. Even his own life or death no longer seemed

important to him. From the beginning till the end, let alone fury or killing intent, he had not even spoken or behaved harshly, which instead gave Li Qingshan a deep sense of dread.

Arriving near the formation, he left without encountering any obstructions at all.

Without the life-threatening pressure, Han Qiongzhi was unable to contain her injuries anymore. She immediately spurted with blood and fainted.

Li Qingshan was afraid of wasting any time too. He summoned a cloud first, taking them to a safe location that was high enough and distant enough before shoving another recovery pill into Han Qiongzhi's mouth. He used a technique to heal her injuries.

A while later, Han Qiongzhi woke up slowly, and Li Qingshan stopped worrying. He glanced down and began to frown again.

The battle did not erupt immediately like he had been expecting. Altar Lord Black Lotus said something, and the school leaders all became stunned.

What was going on?

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The bamboo forest covered the ground with swaying and mottled shadows. The winter near Clear River city was very cold too, but it was not bone-chilling like Ancient Wind city. Qian Rongzhi was currently lamenting as she tread through the snow alone.

A delicate courtyard appeared before her. It was just as empty and quiet as before.

There was only Liu Chuanfeng writing away diligently in there. Novels had already become his only source of pride, so he could not allow his own disciple to steal the show from him.

However, he was focusing so hard that he failed to even sense Qian Rongzhi's arrival.

Qian Rongzhi smiled. This person had not been informed and taken along to kill the Altar Lord. However, this was expected.

That day, after accepting Qiu Ruiliu's invitation, she immediately reported it to Wang Pushi.

Sure enough, Wang Pushi told her to play along first and serve the role of a Nighthawk on the surface so that she could investigate the internal ongoings of the White Lotus cult and find the whereabouts of even larger targets. Then he reported it to the Ruyi commandery so that they could organise another attempt to kill them all.

Instead, he purposefully fed her some information so that she could earn the trust of the upper echelon of the cult. With greater risk came greater reward, so she obviously received quite a lot of rewards from both sides. However, due to her mediocre talent, she was unable to break through so easily.

Thump, thump. Qian Rongzhi knocked against the bamboo strut on the veranda. "Is Li Qingshan here?"

"You're?" Only now did Liu Chuanfeng raise his head. He felt injustice. His dear disciple was no better than him, so why was he so lucky with women?

Qian Rongzhi stated her school and spoke a few words of courtesy before fishing out a jar of alcohol from her hundred treasures pouch. "Seems like I've forgotten. He hasn't completed his trial mission yet, so I guess fate just doesn't want him to drink this. I'll give this jar of alcohol to you instead, sir!"

Liu Chuanfeng was immediately overjoyed. About time I got lucky with women. He faked a cough. "That doesn't seem like a good idea. Why don't you wait here for Qingshan to return?" He did not even wait for Qian Rongzhi to make any insinuations when he added, "If that's the case, I might as well oblige."

A while later, there was a clank, and Liu Chuanfeng knocked over the jug of alcohol, falling onto the ground.

"Just like the rumors. He's useless." Qian Rongzhi had coated the alcohol in true qi, so she spat it all out again. Afterwards, she picked up his waist tablet and made her way towards the central formation of Cloudwisp island.

Being a spy was a dangerous profession no matter what day or age it was. They would be surrounded by the enemy at all times, with only death awaiting them once they were discovered, let alone a double-crossing spy who constantly blew hot and cold.

However, she had it somewhat safe. For the entire time, she had not attracted any suspicion from the White Lotus cult.

Because she had subsequently reported everything back to the White Lotus cult.

Chapter 326 - The Affairs of Life are no Different from Chess

Just as the school leaders were about to strike, Altar Lord Black Lotus said, "School leaders, do you only look right in front of you and never behind you?"

"What do you mean?" Liu Zhangqing asked.

"This is both my designated end, as well as the Academy of the Hundred Schools' designated end."

"You can't talk yourself out of this. Are you just trying to make time? The academy is protected by a great formation. Even if the White Lotus Mother comes in person, she won't be able to break through it so easily." As Liu Zhangqing said that, his expression suddenly changed.

He took out a formation disc coiled with dragons and snakes. The glow it had originally shone with had actually vanished. The various school leaders all knew what this meant. The Formation of Dragons and Snakes that guarded the academy had fallen!

Qian Rongzhi watched as a white lotus grew in the formation. It swayed about, pure and beautiful.

The stream of spiritual qi that constantly gushed into the air was immediately severed. The formation was powerful, but it required great precision too. It was like a machine. As long as a single component became defective, the entirety would be affected.

The sky twisted. It remained just as blue as before, but the mist that surrounded the various islands of the academy gradually dispersed under the winter sun.

A few fishermen who happened to be on the lake gazed at the islands before them in surprise. They had already heard about how immortals occupied this place, but this was the first time they had seen it in person.

“What’s going on!?” Disciples of the various schools all emerged from the buildings and gazed at the sky, discussing among themselves. They had even thought that the formation had encountered some sort of difficulty in its operation.

Hua Chengzan was the first to sense that something was off. He said in surprise and fury, “Qian Rongzhi, what are you doing!?” Then he spotted the resplendent white lotus. His surprise and fury turned into disbelief, as well as a sliver of fear.

He already knew that Qian Rongzhi was a spy in the White Lotus cult, but he never expected her to actually become carried away with it. The White Lotus cult had become an existence hated and loathed by all a long time ago, only growing worse as time went on. Their members were always in precarious situations. With how clever she was, why would she become so devoted to their cause?

Qian Rongzhi said, “Commander Hua, I’m just an insignificant soldier carrying out orders, so why must you make things difficult for a mere woman like me?”

Why would Hua Chengzan listen to her? He lunged over straight away. Before anything else, he had to destroy the white lotus so that the formation could begin operating again. Otherwise, the consequences would be unimaginable.

Qian Rongzhi did not try to stop him either. She took several steps back in retreat, which surprised Hua Chengzan slightly. However, he seemed to see a white figure flash through the depths of the bamboo forest from the corner of his eyes, appearing before him.

It was an old woman with grey hair. Although her face was covered in wrinkles, she seemed extremely benevolent. Her deep creases from smiling made her seem like she was constantly smiling. She held a white lotus in her hand, but it was close to withering away. Her gaze towards Hua Chengzan was so gentle too, like she was looking at her own son or grandson.

However, Hua Chengzan experienced an almost suffocating pressure. He turned mid-air and leapt backwards. A few people appeared beside him before he knew it. There were men and women, old and young, but they all smiled.

They were not sneering or smiling sinisterly, nor were they faking their smiles. Instead, it possessed joy from the bottom of their heart, as if everything in the world, no matter how insignificant, brought them delight.

A cold sensation filled his head, running all the way to the soles of his feet. He was familiar with all of these people apart from the old woman, having heard about them many times. The bounties on their heads were astronomical. The remaining Altar Lords of the White Lotus cult had all gathered here.

Qian Rongzhi bowed politely, “Disciple Qian Rongzhi welcomes the holy mother’s esteemed presence, the various Altar Lord’s presence.”

Hua Chengzan was shocked. Sure enough, the old woman was the White Lotus Mother, but wasn’t she rumored to be a middle-aged woman?

“Get up. There’s no need to dwell on these empty gestures. I still need to thank you for opening the door for me. I’ve made you take on quite the risk.”

“To share the holy mother’s burden is my responsibility.”

“Who’s this?”

“His name is Hua Chengzan. He’s a Scarlet Wolf commander, and he’s a trusted subordinate of Gu Yanying.”

Only when she heard Gu Yanying’s name did the White Lotus Mother look at Hua Chengzan carefully. “You really are quite a rare handsome man. If I were a little younger, even I’d probably be interested. It truly is a waste for you to serve below that Gu Yanying who doesn’t know the wondrous essence of life.”

Hua Chengzan knew that he was probably done for this time. He smiled. “It’s just a pity that I don’t like old women.”

“Oh? Then what do you think about this?” The White Lotus Mother was not bothered by that. She underwent an alarming transformation. The wrinkles on her face smoothed out bit by bit as her withered lips gradually reddened. Even her grey hair had turned black, and her skin had become snow-white. In the blink of an eye, she had become a beautiful young woman. The white lotus in her hand seemed to rejuvenate too, returning to a state before it had bloomed.

The White Lotus Mother said with a clear voice that sounded like an oriole’s song, “Although I seem a little old sometimes, I’m still a person after all. Is he on the list too?”

Qian Rongzhi said, “Yes!”

“Then take him back. Enlighten him to the righteous cause and turn him into a member of the White Lotus cult!”

Before he could even see what the White Lotus Mother had done, Hua Chengzan collapsed on the ground helplessly. Although he was still conscious, he could not even move a single finger or mobilise a single shred of true qi.

A thought filled his head for no reason. Is this the difference that exists between me and her?

The White Lotus Mother left behind an Altar Lord to watch over the formation and directly made her way over to Contention island. The other Altar Lords ventured to the other schools and islands with their various cultists to gather resources and find people on the “list”.

This list had originated from Qian Rongzhi. It recorded all the talented disciples of the various schools.

The White Lotus cult had clashed numerous times with the Hawkwolf Guard. They had sustained heavy losses, and they had been labeled as a heretic cult too, so they were oppressed from all directions, almost to a point where they had run out of successors. The plan this time was for resolving this issue.

This “list” would replenish the White Lotus cult with new blood. In particular, tenth layer Qi Practitioners like Hua Chengzan just needed to be “enlightened to the righteous cause” and producing a few more Altar Lords would not be an issue.

As for the people who failed to make it onto the “list”, they would be cleansed of their sins and sent off to paradise.

Among the academy, the most battleworthy school leaders had all set out to kill Altar Lord Black Lotus. How could the remaining school leaders match the White Lotus Mother? Right from the beginning of the battle, victory was already guaranteed.

After hearing Altar Lord Black Lotus’s words, the various school masters were all stupefied as they hovered above Ancient Wind city. These outstanding disciples they had carefully chosen and nurtured slowly over time were exactly the most important aspect of the academy.

If anything happened to them, the entire Clear River prefecture would be drastically weakened. More terrifyingly, it was very likely for these people to become their future enemies. It was rumored that the White Lotus Mother could forcefully pour the doctrine of the cult into the minds of cultivators, turning them into comrades.

Wang Pushi finally understood the greatest miscalculation in his plan. If Qian Rongzhi had actually met the White Lotus Mother, then she would have been filled up with the cult’s doctrine too. Any of her free thought, such as her ability to weigh advantages against disadvantages, would no longer exist. Even if she were to die for the White Lotus Mother, she would be willing. The Altar Lord right before them was a living example.

The Altar Lord said, “Will you be rushing back to provide reinforcement, or will you be staying here to kill me? I hope you can decide soon. Being indecisive is not a good idea.”

“I’ll kill you wretch first!” The One Thought master let out a lion’s roar. His pewter staff exploded with light and struck towards Black Lotus.

In the courtyard within the bamboo forest, Hua Chengzan moved his lips with difficulty. He looked at Qian Rongzhi in confusion. “Why did you do this? Has the White Lotus cult really brainwashed you?”

“I’ve already said, I have no other choice.” Qian Rongzhi sighed. If it were possible, she would much rather remain on the lookout for opportunities and slowly strengthen herself instead of becoming involved in a dangerous struggle like this. Achieving success was not so easy. No matter how much a measly Qi Practitioner racked their brains, they still needed some luck to survive. However, she only ever took gambles where she was guaranteed to win. The thing she hated the most was luck.

Now, she had completed everything that she could do. All she was waiting for was the judgement of fate, as this time, she was not the chess player, but the chess piece, and a chess piece that could be controlled by both sides. The dangers and feeling of helplessness involved was so great that there was no point for her to tell anyone about it.

Now, all she could do was wait for the appearance of the other player.

A white shoe landed on the lotus heavily, even grinding it forcefully. The white lotus that even lightning could not shake had been immediately ground to dust.

The shoe was embroidered with beautiful, detailed silver lines, which twisted into a profound glyph. On the ground, Hua Chengzan recognised it with a single glance; it was an arcane artifact. He tried his best to look up.

There was a set of graceful, free-flowing white clothes embroidered with wings. Under the beams of sunlight, the person's face was slightly blurred, but the smile formed by the corner of her lips would always remain so clear and give him such a lasting impression.

Qian Rongzhi immediately stood up. She bowed towards the owner of the shoes in a rather exhausted manner. "Subordinate Qian Rongzhi has been awaiting great commander's arrival for quite some time now."

Suddenly, Hua Chengzan understood everything. I see! After completing her trial mission, he followed the rules and brought her to the Ruyi commandery to see her. They had a private conversation. Everything must have originated from there!

The expression of the Altar Lord who had stayed behind changed drastically. Every single cultist of the White Lotus was far too familiar with this figure. She was basically on par with the White Lotus Mother herself. He immediately fled using a technique. In the blink of an eye, he had already arrived over three hundred meters away, pulling far away from the formation.

The jade folding fan suddenly unfurled, and she swung it casually.

The Altar Lord felt a slight breeze brush past him. He called out, "Holy mother, escape!" His body suddenly split into two.

The bamboo forest remained silent for quite a while before falling apart with a rustle. Looking from above, the neat shape of a fan had suddenly appeared in the forests of the island.

"White Lotus, it's checkmate!"

"Gu Yanying!"

The White Lotus Mother suddenly looked back. Light rushed towards the sky once again from the Cloudwisp island, and the Formation of Dragons and Snakes began to operate once more. She had entered this place after disabling the formation, but she was now trapped within the formation.

What was going on? Just which part went wrong? It was impossible for Qian Rongzhi to betray her after being filled up with the cult's doctrine.

Gu Yanying patted Qian Rongzhi's shoulder, showing her approval. Being able to remain true to themselves in the face of the White Lotus Mother's Heart Cleansing Technique of Clear Ripple despite only being a Qi Practitioner was truly rare. She obviously had to make use of such a rare opportunity.

No one knew when, but a group of cultivators in white clothes appeared in the bamboo forest. They stood behind her, awaiting her command.

Like she was wielding a blade, she gently swung her finger.

"Yes, ma'am!"

The refreshing breeze stirred the lotus.

Ancient Wind city had been reduced to ruins, and the Qian estate had already been reduced to dust.

Only the pond which the black lotus had been planted in remained the same. The carp swam around leisurely in there as the pond reflected Li Qingshan's expression of contemplation.

Li Qingshan stood beside the pond as thousands of thoughts filled his head.

The affairs of life were no different from chess, all within the control of those familiar with it.

Chapter 327 - Extra

The battle only lasted for a very short amount of time, and it was completely one-sided. With a group of school leaders present, if they failed to overwhelm a single Altar Lord, then they would be utter laughing stocks.

When the battle reached its most intense moment, Altar Lord Black Lotus was already prepared to launch an attack with his life on the line so that he could pull a school leader or two down with him. However, he seemed to sense something. He personally cut down the black lotus and grabbed a single lotus seed within the seed pod. He said, "My end has not arrived yet." before fleeing into the distance.

The various school leaders were all afraid of being injured by his final strike, so they had all pulled away from him, which instead gave him the opportunity to escape.

The slovenly daoist priest and Ma Buyi pursued him together. The Altar Lord had fled, but he had personally cut down his lifebound arcane artifact, so he was not lightly injured either. As long as they could catch up to him, they could sever his final hope of survival.

The slovenly daoist priest and Ma Buyi were the most appropriate choices for pursuit too. The other school leaders all returned to the academy to provide reinforcements.

In the beginning, Li Qingshan had no idea what had happened. All he felt was confusion. The battle had arisen because of him, but even he had no idea what it entailed.

In the end, it was only because Han Qiongzhi had asked Han Anjun in great displeasure that Li Qingshan finally gained a rough idea about what had happened.

If this were a game of chess between the Hawkwolf Guard and the White Lotus cult, or perhaps Gu Yanying's chessboard, then the role he played probably even paled in comparison to a chess piece.

This was because both sides understood that this mission was just a symbolic fuse to set off a chain of events; it was not the focus. As a matter of fact, it was even purely a coincidence that Han Qiongzhi and he were the ones carrying out the mission. If Hua Chengzan changed his mind, perhaps there would be two other Hawkwolf Guards instead, or maybe there was no need for anyone at all.

They were not sacrifices, nor were there any risks either. They had not been used as bait or sacrificial pieces. It was impossible for Wang Pushi to use Han Anjun's daughter, the secondary disciple of the school of Legalism, as a sacrifice.

The various school leaders had appeared when the black barrier unfolded. The primary reason why they had not struck immediately, apart from wanting to wait for the black lotus to be planted properly, was because Han Anjun wanted to give his own daughter a test. He wanted to see how she would perform. He believed that an experience like this would be akin to a precious treasure to Han Qiongzhi, who had never suffered any particularly large setbacks before.

The school leaders would have never just stood aside and watched as they were being slaughtered. If the Altar Lord actually tried to touch them, the school leaders had their ways to protect them.

After Han Anjun's departure, Han Qiongzhi erupted with curses over this arrangement, but Li Qingshan fell silent. As it turned out, the greatest risk he faced was transforming before all the school leaders.

Apart from being still shaken up, he felt gloomy too, which he wanted to get out of his chest. Compared to this, he would much rather transform and battle the Altar Lord to death.

Han Qiongzhi did not think too much of it, probably because this was not the first time she had experienced a "test" like this. After cursing to her heart's content, she no longer thought about it anymore. Instead, she felt rather perplexed when she saw Li Qingshan standing by the pond alone.

She went up and said, "What's wrong with you? Are you worrying about Xiao An? She's fine." Han Anjun had only told her everything through a spiritual artifact after he had returned to the academy.

Li Qingshan smiled in a self-deprecating manner. "I've stolen quite a lot of the show recently in the academy, to a point where I actually thought I was a big deal!"

If he had been abused, then he could bide his time and wait for an opportunity for revenge. If he had been used, then he could find the person who had used him and ask for an explanation. But right now, he was just unhappy with all of this, and there was no one he could vent it on.

The Altar Lord had been very polite to him, perhaps because he was a highly cultivated person, or perhaps there was something wrong with him mentally. However, the primary reason was because Li Qingshan was nothing in his eyes. You said I'll die today. Okay, maybe I might actually die. After a casual conversation, he sensed that the school leaders could no longer hold themselves back, so he just brushed him aside. "You can go. The people I'm waiting for have come."

Wang Pushi's thoughts were probably even simpler than that. I sent you on a mission with no danger at all, so what can you be displeased about? You think I should tell you beforehand? Why should I?

Going even further, Gu Yanying had no idea he was carrying out this mission at all. Wang Pushi was just a chess piece too.

It was as if just when Li Qingshan felt like he was the main character, someone had run over and stated to him clearly, "You're just a supporting character, no, you're not even a supporting character. You're just an extra for the Hawkwolf Guard."

The other supporting Hawkwolf Guard character, wait no, Han Qiongzhi asked, "What's wrong?"

Li Qingshan said, "It's something that's very difficult for women to understand." This was a man's battle between his grand ambition and cruel reality. Perhaps the more wonderful the dream was, the more painful it was when it was time to wake up!

Han Qiongzhi shot a glare at him. She hated it when people used the fact that she was a woman as an argument, but when she remembered how Li Qingshan had even risked his life for her survival, her gaze softened again.

“You think you’re so great just because you’re a man? When you’re complacent, you think you can do anything, but once you become dejected, you can’t even match a woman, acting like how you don’t care on the surface when you’ve already given up and admitted defeat inside.”

“Are you talking about Hua Chengzan?”

“How did you know?” Han Qiongzhi was taken aback.

Li Qingshan laughed aloud. “I can’t tell normally, but you really are quite adorable!”

Han Qiongzhi’s face reddened, and she clenched her fists. “I think you only have a bit of bearing about you when you’re fighting or drinking.” Looking at Li Qingshan’s wretched smile, she was tempted to punch him.

Smiling at one another, both of them felt much closer.

“Let’s go back!” Li Qingshan said. After locating his anguish, his mind had instead settled down. He became even more determined. Regardless of whether he could accept it or not, he had to accept it all. This was life. No one was born to be a main character, nor was there anyone destined to play the role of an extra for the rest of their life. He had to continue further down his path.

“Alright.”

It was at this exact moment that the surface of the pond rippled, and a huge carp poked its head out.

“Daemon!” Han Qiongzhi clenched her fists.

“I’m the one who raised it.” Li Qingshan stopped Han Qiongzhi. “You go first. I want to bid farewell to it.”

After chasing Han Qiongzhi away, Li Qingshan crouched down and rubbed the carp’s head. “You sure are pretty lucky. I think the pond is too small for you, such that you’ll outgrow it very soon. Do you want me to release you into the Clear river?”

The huge carp nodded before suddenly diving to the bottom of the pond. Just as Li Qingshan felt puzzled, the carp swam back with something in its mouth, placing it in Li Qingshan’s hand.

Li Qingshan looked at it carefully and saw that it was a tiny black seed pod. There were around a dozen or two lotus seeds in there, with only one missing. It was the seed pod of the black lotus from earlier. Even Li Qingshan was uncertain about whether the black lotus was conjured from spiritual energy or if it was an actual plant. However, he did know that the seed pod was anything but ordinary.

“For me?”

The carp nodded before opening its mouth.

Li Qingshan stowed the seed pod away. He reached into his hundred treasures pouch, but he had already eaten all of his pills. After a moment of consideration, he found a spiritual fruit and fed it to the carp. Only then was it satisfied.

Li Qingshan used a technique and swept the carp onto the cloud. He picked up Han Qiongzhi and headed back to the academy.

Along the way, he released the carp into the Clear river. It dove into the water happily, without the slightest reluctance to part with him.

Afterwards, he was met with a casual question from Han Qiongzhi. "Do you like commander Gu?"

Li Qingshan replied without much thought, "I do."

In the end, Han Qiongzhi immediately turned hostile and refused to pay anymore attention to him.

Li Qingshan was slightly surprised at first, but no matter how dense he was, he could still tell what Han Qiongzhi felt about him. He could not help but become content with himself. I, Li Qingshan, possess charm too! He could not help but think about the joking words he had said a few months ago.

He could not help but begin to closely study Han Qiongzhi beside him. Her pretty, short hair must have come from Han Anjun's influence. There were many bald disciples in the school of the Military. Her tall nose bridge was very sculptural, while her pursed lips flowed with determination, or should he say, stubbornness.

She resembled her cool brother, Han Tieyi, slightly. Perhaps a pair of straight eyebrows and twinkling eyes were too valiant for a woman, but she was without a doubt a beauty.

Han Qiongzhi's face reddened even more. She was filled with indescribable joy. She felt that even though she had been "tested" once again by her damned old man, it was not entirely bad.

However, she finally lost her patience with Li Qingshan's gaze too, as this wretch was not satisfied with just her face. He had already begun to size up her body, and he had just reached a conclusion of "fantastic".

"What're you looking at!?" When she said that, even Han Qiongzhi herself felt feeble.

"Do you like me?" When he said that, even Li Qingshan felt like he probably had better things to do.

How could Han Qiongzhi admit that? As a result, the two of them returned to the Lake of Dragons and Snakes under a strange tension once again.

The sun had just begun to set, dyeing the ripples of the lake red.

Just as he had wanted, he had used less than a day to complete the trial mission, but everything that had occurred completely exceeded his imagination.

Thinking about it now, all he had done was watch a great show and play the role of an extra. Thankfully, he had not left the stage just yet.

However, only when he approached the academy did he realise that the true show had actually unfolded here.

The Formation of Dragons and Snakes no longer existed, and every single island had sustained horrifying damage. Large swathes of structures had been knocked over, with many disciples cleaning them up.

However, the island with the most exaggerated damage was Contention island. The jagged mountains there seemed to have been cut apart and ground down, turning into large swathes of cracked rock. There was not a single complete structure there.

Li Qingshan rushed over to Anāsravā? island, and sure enough, he found Xiao An safe and sound. Only then did he stop worrying. However, the island was filled with despair. Many monks had died, refined by the Altar Lords of the White Lotus cult. Not even their corpses remained.

Li Qingshan embraced her tightly and felt a different kind of danger. This was a battlefield where two Golden Core cultivators had once fought. There was not a single Qi Practitioner that could protect themselves, no matter how talented they were.

In the past, the Soaring Dragon Elder had cut down mountains like tofu. He could still recall it vividly.

“Qingshan.”

Someone called out his name. Li Qingshan looked back and saw Hua Chengzan. Their eyes met, and both of them felt like they had just survived a disaster.

Hua Chengzan said, “Sorry, I didn’t know either... Are you fine?”

Li Qingshan wrapped his arm around Hua Chengzan’s neck and smiled. “Do I look like I’m in trouble? You’d better stop asking stupid questions like that in the future.”

Hua Chengzan smiled too, but it was rather forced. Compared to Li Qingshan, he had actually just returned from the gates of death. All it would have taken was a single thought from the White Lotus Mother, and he would have been dead already.

“Commander Gu wishes to see you.”

Chapter 328 - A Second Word of Advice

Li Qingshan had never thought that the place where Gu Yanying wanted to see him would be Cloudwisp island.

Within the flickering bamboo forest were clothes even whiter than snow. It was another winter.

Her illusionary figure was already right before him. Li Qingshan focused his mind and walked over.

“Greetings, commander Gu!”

Gu Yanying looked back. Her gaze was like a hawk’s, as if she wanted to see through him completely.

Li Qingshan raised his head and met her gaze. His memories from two years ago were suddenly verified. None of it was fake or a dream. He was just wet behind the ears in the past, but after going through so much and witnessing so much, did he still possess the same courage?

Gu Yanying suddenly smiled, like the breeze of early spring. It seemed warm, but it was still cold, passing by freely.

“You...” The white clothes drifted past before him. Li Qingshan was slightly surprised. She had specially called him here, yet she said nothing to him at all. What was the meaning of this?

Gu Yanying stopped and looked back. “I was originally prepared to tell you something, but it looks like there’s no need for that now.”

There was no fury or dissatisfaction, nor was there abjection or self-deprecation. There was only firm determination. To a man like that, there was no need for her to say anything at all. All she had to do was watch and see which step he could make it to.

Li Qingshan said, "You might as well say it."

"Then I'll give you a word of advice. A piece of trash like you won't have the right to drink tea with me even in a hundred years' time. How's that?" Gu Yanying could not help but laugh.

Li Qingshan remained silent for a while. He replied, "That's quite old-fashioned."

Gu Yanying tapped her chin with her fan. "Really? I can't think of a worse way to say it. As long as you get what I mean!"

Those who were truly powerful would not go around everyday calling others ants. All they would do was step over the ant nest unwittingly. Why would anyone purposefully crouch down on the ground and point at a group of ants, saying "You stupid, weak insects." unless there was something wrong with their head?

Li Qingshan said, "Is that the second word of advice you've gifted me?"

"The Green province spans fifteen thousand kilometers. The jianghu is only but a corner." This was the first word of advice she had given him, and he had already achieved it. He had emerged from the conflict of the jianghu and arrived in the Academy of the Hundred Schools, the stage where cultivators clashed.

Gu Yanying raised her folding fan. Atmospheric winds swept around it and carved a sentence into a verdant bamboo stalk to the side. "A piece of trash like you won't have the right to drink tea with me even in a hundred years' time."

She waved her fan again, and the piece of bamboo was carved out, arriving before Li Qingshan.

"Keep it. You're welcome to throw it before me in the future with your head held high. Good bye, little bro Qingshan!"

Her voice still lingered in the bamboo forest, but she had already taken to the skies, without leaving a single trace behind.

During the battle this time, the White Lotus cult almost faced complete destruction. Only the White Lotus Mother managed to escape. However, it was at a tremendous cost to her cultivation, and she even sustained heavy wounds. She could no longer pose any harm anymore. Perhaps she would recover her strength in the future and come out to stir up a storm again.

However, she no longer possessed the right to be her opponent. To her, this game of chess was already over. When the White Lotus Mother fled, she did not even pursue her. All she did was watch this old rival of hers leave one last time. Hopefully, she would be clever enough to not show up again, or bide her time until she had left the Ruyi commandery at the very least!

Li Qingshan returned to the bamboo courtyard. Hua Chengzan was waiting in there. He asked, "What did she say to you?"

"Here!" Li Qingshan passed the bamboo piece to Hua Chengzan.

Hua Chengzan's expression became quite strange.

"Do you want me to pass this to you instead? I think it suits you better than me."

"Piss off. Keep it for yourself!" Hua Chengzan tossed it back to him.

Liu Chuanfeng emerged from inside. He rubbed his bleary eyes. "Qingshan, you're back. Ah, it's already so late. The alcohol's got quite the kick."

Li Qingshan and Hua Chengzan smiled bitterly at one another. As others were shaking in fear, fighting for their lives, he was having the snooze of his life.

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Hua Chengzan said, "It's just a joke, but it's also the truth. Do you understand what I feel now?"

Li Qingshan said, "That's the truth for you. Don't pull me down to the same level as you. If it weren't for the fact that you're a little handsome, I would have cut a piece of trash like you off a long time ago."

"You're saying I'm a piece of trash?"

"Piece of trash. If you think you're so capable, why don't you go establish a foundation?"

"Alright, just you wait!"

The next day, Hua Chengzan entered secluded cultivation.

He might not have shown it, but the mental shock he had experienced was probably even greater than Li Qingshan's. No one had told him any details from the beginning till the end. He had almost lost his life in the attack, and in the end, that person did not even bother to talk to him anymore than she needed to. He even paled in comparison to Li Qingshan in this aspect.

If you're thinking that my special treatment in the past is a reason for you to abandon yourself, then I'll just treat you like a Qi Practitioner! Since we're already destined to be worlds apart, why should I waste this time on you?

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Li Qingshan carefully studied the black seed pod under the lantern light. He also tried to remove a lotus seed. It seemed like a black pearl, shining like a gem. It seemed to contain a strange power.

However, it was not a pill or medicine he could directly convert into daemon qi or true qi. Since the black lotus had only grown with the sacrifice of the entire Ancient Wind city, several tens of thousand lives, did that mean it was the essence of flesh and blood? He had to show it to Xiao An.

As he thought of that, a petite figure appeared at the door silently. She leapt into Li Qingshan's arms again. It was Xiao An.

"What's wrong?"

"I was scared I won't be able to see you again."

A clash between two Golden Core cultivators was like a natural disaster. No matter how powerful a Qi Practitioner was, they would still be in a precarious situation, constantly in fear. She had no choice over how she reacted either. She found death meaningless, but she was unable to find separation meaningless.

“Don’t worry. You’ll always be able to see me again. Let’s venture beyond the Nine Heavens together!” Li Qingshan pecked her hair and showed the lotus pod to her. “Is this of any use to you?”

As soon as Xiao An held the seed pod, she felt the surging life force inside. This was the only power that she could convert into her own cultivation through her flames.

Li Qingshan smiled. “Looks like I didn’t return with nothing this time. I don’t know why, but Altar Lord Black Lotus didn’t take the entire seed pod with him, making it easy pickings for us.”

Back then, the Altar Lord had unleashed all the power of the black lotus. He was ready to perish together with them. If he had plucked the entire seed pod, then the black lotus would immediately lose its core, and it would not be able to unleash any more power. The school leaders were not ignorant children. They could not be scared off by a mere demonstration of power.

It was exactly that violent explosion that had reduced Ancient Wind city to ruins, and in the centre of the explosion was absolute darkness. Even with the school leaders’ eyes, they were unable to see what was going on in there. The seed pod had fallen into the pond at this exact moment.

The carp had leapt up and swallowed it, but it was unable to digest it, which was why it spat it back out. The lotus pod did not give off any light or spiritual qi either, such that Li Qingshan had failed to notice it even when he stood beside the pond. The various school leaders were in a hurry to hunt down the Altar Lord or provide assistance to the academy, which made it even more impossible for them to look around carefully. This was how it had fallen into the great carp’s possession.

Chapter 329 - A New School

Under Li Qingshan’s suggestion, Xiao An tried ingesting a black lotus seed. Immediately, the flames released some extremely pure essence of flesh and blood, enough to rival the flesh and blood of over a thousand people.

Xiao An immediately began cultivating, refining the lotus seed completely.

Li Qingshan stopped worrying too. Originally, he planned on taking Xiao An on another trip outside. However, not only would it be time-consuming, but he could easily attract suspicion too.

A bloodthirsty personality could explain why he killed, but the disappearance of the corpses would be difficult to explain. If he caught the attention of someone observant, then he would be in trouble. These lotus seeds should be enough to provide for Xiao An’s cultivation for a very long time. At the very least, she would not be held back by the lack of flesh and blood.

Leaving Xiao An there to cultivate, Li Qingshan opened the door. The moon shone brightly with a few stars in the night sky, and white snow covered the entire courtyard. He also had to make some preparations for his own path.

That night, Li Qingshan visited Benevolence island and Wuwei island first and found Juechenzi and Ru Xin. The schools of Daoism and Medicine were the most skilled in alchemy. As the primary disciples of the two schools, they were both in charge of some pills. He chose some higher quality pills and bought them, also reminding them to not tell anyone else.

The two of them were neck deep in work after the disaster that the academy had faced. Ru Xin was in a hurry to heal the injured, while Juechenzi had been handling the various matters of the school of Daoism in the slovenly daoist priest's place, as he was still missing. They had a short conversation with him and handed the pills to him in a hurry before getting back to work. Even Ru Xin was not in the mood to joke around.

In the end, he went to the school of Miscellany's Treasure island. He exchanged all the remaining spiritual stones on him for pills in the main store of Miscellaneous Goods. He also kept an eye out for the prices of other items. He discovered that the prices of spiritual artifacts and talismans had begun to increase.

He could imagine the shock that the cultivators had experienced from this battle. Li Qingshan gave it some consideration, but he still decided against selling the talismans and spiritual artifacts on him.

Returning to Cloudwisp island, Xiao An was still meditating. As it seemed, refining the black lotus seed would take quite a lot of time.

Li Qingshan did not disturb her. He thought over everything he had gained today. Because he had focused on choosing relatively better pills, he did not have a lot of them, but it should still be enough for him to reach the third layer with the Ox Demon's Fist of Great Strength.

He did not plan on entering seclusion to cultivate. As long as he ingested pills and practised daily, he should achieve success before long. By then, his body would become stronger once again, and he would be much more confident when facing the heavenly tribulation.

The sky gradually lit up, and Hao Pingyang came to visit him. He told Li Qingshan a piece of news—Zhang Lanqing had died.

He had died at the hands of an Altar Lord. All he was hit by was a single attack, and he was reduced to nothing. He could not fight back at all. If it were not for the fact that the Altar Lord wanted to capture Hao Pingyang alive, he would have been dead already too.

When he mentioned that, Hao Pingyang's voice became hoarse, and his eyes reddened.

Li Qingshan asked after quite a while of silence, "Is there anything I can do?"

"I've just come to tell you this. He has already been avenged. I plan on paying a visit to his home." Hao Pingyang said a few other things absentmindedly before leaving.

This was the last bit of existence that this dark-skinned, honest-to-the-core man had left behind.

Li Qingshan stood in silence for a little longer before beginning to practise his forms. In the empty bamboo forest, he practised the Ox Demon's Fist of Great Strength again and again. He did not stop until he used up the final shred of his strength. Only then did he fall down on the ground, huffing and puffing.

The sky gradually grew brighter. Today, they held a collective funeral on Contention island. It was called a funeral, but most of the cultivators who had died had not even left behind any remains. Even if they did leave behind remains, they had been delivered back home to be buried too.

The various disciples lit lanterns over the lake, remembering their fellow disciples that they might or might not have known.

Li Qingshan gazed off into the distance. The lantern light drifted apart in the darkness, gradually growing further and further away. He returned to Cloudwisp island and continued cultivating.

Pills after pills were converted into energy in his body before turning into power that surged and churned within him, awaiting for a time of release.

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On Contention island, a building rose straight from the ground. Due to the engineering of the school of Mohism, they built structures at a startling rate. There were many mechanical structures too.

At the top of the building, the twelve school leaders gathered in a single room.

The slovenly daoist priest was utterly displeased with this result. His pursuit of Altar Lord Black Lotus had failed in the end. He had almost leapt to his feet and erupted with curses when the One Thought master glanced at him, but he held himself back in consideration for the atmosphere.

Earth elder Huang took great puffs of his pipe. The school of Agriculture had suffered heavy losses, but not in terms of disciples. Instead, his precious fields and orchards had sustained quite a lot of damage. When the cultists of the White Lotus saw so many spiritual fruits, they forcefully plucked them regardless of whether they were ripe or not. He ended up getting it all back, but it was still quite the loss.

Standing behind them to their sides were their primary disciples. They all sat on their heels quietly too.

Only Wang Pushi lacked a person behind him. Hua Chengzan had entered secluded cultivation. For him to neglect the bigger picture despite his personality, it only demonstrated how determined he was.

Xiao An wore black, silken robes. A wooden pin barely managed to hold it together in a bun, but quite a lot of her long hair still flowed behind her. After digesting a black lotus seed, she had advanced with her cultivation of the Path of White Bone and Great Beauty yet again, and she had conveniently pushed her cultivation as a Qi Practitioner to the eighth layer too, which was a better match to her identity as a primary disciple and provided an explanation for the pills the One Thought master had given her.

Li Qingshan's gaze brushed past Ru Xin. She nodded slightly in acknowledgement as her lips curled slightly. This disastrous event that had shaken up the entire academy did not seem to affect her much. He believed that if it were not for the fact that she had to consider the feelings of others, she would still be joking around fearlessly.

This was not just lacking a sense of parental selflessness as a doctor. She was basically heartless. It made Li Qingshan feign a glare at her.

As the main person in charge, Liu Zhangqing sat in the main seat just like before. He cleared his throat and attracted everyone's attention, saying, "Through this disaster of the academy..."

After a sorrowful grieving over the deaths, he suddenly changed the topic. "... but it has also exposed many holes in our system. A certain school leader was so weak and powerless that he couldn't even keep an eye over his own waist tablet, so is he really shameless enough to continue holding a position he does not deserve?"

He did not mention a name, but everyone's gazes landed on Liu Chuanfeng, who sat at the very end. Despite his drunken dream, it still had not managed to save him completely.

Liu Chuanfeng felt awkward, but he was accustomed to this. It was not like Liu Zhangqing had the right to dismiss him as a school leader anyway. The only reason why he had to lose his waist tablet was because it was a component in the plan too, so just how was he supposed to stop all of it?

Liu Zhangqing said, "Our academy is in urgent need of a capable and responsible school leader to watch over the formation on Cloudwisp island."

Li Qingshan was perplexed. Surely a school could not claim two islands at once? The school leaders would be overwhelmed if that were the case!

Liu Zhangqing said, "In order to make up for our academy's lost strength as quickly as possible, I recommend establishing a new school in our Academy of the Hundred Schools of the Clear River prefecture, one that can protect the formation on Cloudwisp island. Fellow Chu, please come in!"

Chapter 330 - The Battle for Cloudwisp Island

Tap, tap, tap. A cane struck the ground again and again. An old man of advanced age walked in with a hunched back with the support of a young man. His face had already waned to a rather horrifying extent. Only his eyes still seemed to shine.

Li Qingshan had never seen a person so frail from old age. He believed that if it were not for his peak Foundation Establishment cultivation, he would have been reduced to a pile of buried bones a long time ago.

"I'm Chu Shidao. Greetings to you all." Chu Shidao pushed aside the young man and released his cane, bowing to everyone.

Everyone stood up and bowed back. Even earth elder Huang was no longer able to take advantage of his seniority. He placed down his pipe and said to Liu Zhangqing, "You've actually invited great master Chu here. Are you planning on having great master Chu take over as a school leader?"

Chu Shidao was not an individual obscure to the public. He possessed great renown throughout the entire Ruyi commandery. There was not a single person who would not gasp in admiration over his painting ability. It was an extremely great honour to be in possession of one of his paintings. However, it was rumored that he was close to the end of his life now, and he had stopped painting already, retiring from public view as a hermit. They never expected him to actually appear here.

"I'll be honest with you all. My life is already close to its end, so I'm afraid I can't occupy the position of school leader for very long. By then, my little disciple will take over. Danqing, why don't you bow to the various seniors?"

Only then did the school leaders find out that Chu Shidao had come here to guide the delicate young man beside him. He only seemed to be seventeen or eighteen years old, but his cultivation had already reached the tenth layer. He was definitely worthy of being evaluated as a “genius”.

They had heard quite a long time ago that Chu Shidao had accepted his final disciple. He had vanished for an entire decade in order to teach this disciple of his. Now that they saw him today, it turned out to be true.

There were no objections. If a person like him was willing to join the Academy of the Hundred Schools of the Clear River prefecture and establish a school of Painting, it would be the academy’s honour. And, they had heard that he had many indirect disciples, who could make up for the academy’s loss of strength.

They added a seat below Liu Chuanfeng. This was probably the one and only time Liu Chuanfeng would have the upper hand.

However, the ownership of Cloudwisp island would not be decided so easily.

When Liu Chuanfeng heard how they wanted to take his foundations away from him, he began to panic too. “Cloudwisp island, for the past millennium, has always been my school of Novels’ island. We’ve tended to it and protected it for all those years. We’re losing it just because I made a slight mistake? That’s completely unreasonable.”

The various school leaders began to differ slightly in opinion too, but obviously not because of the useless Liu Chuanfeng. Instead, it was because of Li Qingshan who stood behind him.

Li Qingshan had mocked himself over what he had gone through this time, but in the eyes of the school leaders, he was a true genius with a brilliant future ahead of him. There was nothing they could complain about over both his cultivation speed and strength in battle. He had even been personally summoned by her yesterday. They could not oppress or neglect someone like him without proper thought.

Liu Zhangqing began to show signs of anger. “This is not all. You know exactly what those dirty works of yours you wrote in the past entail.”

The One Thought master said, “I’m afraid that would be an inappropriate reason. Although we have always disagreed with school leader Liu’s actions, not only has he stopped writing those obscene books in the past half a year, but he has recalled them all and destroyed them too, which only demonstrates his change. Regular people aren’t sages. Everyone makes mistakes. There is nothing better than changing for the better after a mistake. Please reconsider, school leader Liu!”

Liu Chuanfeng was strangely touched. “Thank you for speaking for me, master.” Right now, no one cherished his pen name of the Master of Wind and Moon more than him. After understanding the true path of the school of Novels, he had recalled all those books with complete willingness.

The One Thought master glanced at Xiao An. “This was all your own work.”

“This lowly daoist also feels that master Chu shouldn’t be in such a hurry to usurp another’s island!” The slovenly daoist priest spoke too, agreeing with the One Thought master for once. You already have a foot in the grave, yet you still want to flaunt about in our academy? How despicable.

To Liu Zhangqing's surprise, even Wang Pushi and Han Anjun objected. Out of the five major schools, actually four of them disagreed with him.

No matter how much renown Chu Shidao had, no matter how high his cultivation was, he was still an "outsider". If he wanted to usurp someone the moment he arrived in the academy, then it was extremely easy for others to repulse him.

Li Qingshan's relationship with them played an extremely subtle role too. Ever since he joined the school of Novels, combined with Liu Chuanfeng's own hard work, the opinion on the school of Novels had indeed been changing bit by bit unknowingly. Although it was still a pile of mud, at least it was worth supporting. Otherwise, who in their right state of mind would speak for a person who wrote smut?

Chu Shidao said, "Forgive my ignorance, but since when could a Qi Practitioner hold the position of school leader? And since when could a school possess a single disciple?"

Liu Chuanfeng was speechless. Cultivation would always be the most important standard for measuring a cultivator. This also happened to be his greatest flaw.

"I'll be able to undergo the heavenly tribulation before long."

Chu Shidao said, "And before long, I'll depart from this world too. I've heard about the wonders of the school of Novels for a very long time now, about how you can turn make-believe into reality. That just happens to be what my school of Painting is capable of too. Why don't we compete against one another and use that to decide the ownership of Cloudwisp island?"

Why would Liu Chuanfeng be bold enough to compete against a Foundation Establishment cultivator? He wanted to shirk away from the request.

"I won't harass you just because you're weaker. It's not a good idea for school leaders to clash too." Chu Shidao's gaze suddenly turned towards Li Qingshan. "This must be your disciple!"

"I'm Li Qingshan. Greetings, great master Chu."

"I've long heard about how you're good with battles, and your abilities as a Body Practitioner are startling. Are you bold enough to compete against my disciple?"

"May I ask how we would compete?" Li Qingshan glanced at Chu Danqing.

"Paintings and novels are both matters for the refined. If painters and authors were to fight with their hands and feet, it would be far too tasteless, so why don't we just take a step back and turn make-believe into reality? My disciple will produce a painting, while you will produce a novel. We'll let the characters in the painting and novel decide it all. What do you think? Cloudwisp island will go to whoever wins."

Even the various school leaders present had never heard of a battle like this, but they also felt like Chu Shidao was completely brushing aside their opinions.

Liu Chuanfeng shot a glance at Li Qingshan, wanting him to turn down the challenge. There were so many school leaders on their side right now, so why would they accept the challenge?

Li Qingshan never planned on agreeing anyway. If it were just a battle of martial prowess, he was confident in himself even though Chu Danqing was at the tenth layer. However, he had absolutely no confidence in a battle like this. This old man had some understanding of him, so he wanted to use his weakness against him. How was it possible for him to fall for this?

“If you still won’t agree to this, then all I can do is write to the Academy of the Hundred Schools in the Ruyi commandery to request for the dismissal of the Clear River prefecture’s school of Novels, no matter how embarrassing or awkward it will be!” Chu Shidao tapped his cane against the ground heavily, displaying his unswerving determination. “This is just too tasteless, which is why I’m reluctant to do so.”

All the school leaders understood why Chu Shidao’s attitude was so firm. These were definitely not empty threats. He came from the commandery city of Ruyi. If he wanted to use his connections to dismiss the school of Novels that had a Qi Practitioner as a school leader and a single disciple, it would be a piece of cake. Most importantly, the school leaders present had once submitted a request to dismiss the school of Novels in writing together. Perhaps Chu Shidao only needed a slight push, and he could get what he wanted.

By then, surely they could not submit another request together to protect the school of Novels instead!

Liu Chuanfeng paled silently. He had some understanding of Chu Shidao’s influence too. The school of Novels had just set its foot on the right path and was developing, so if they really were dismissed, all their hard work would go to waste. And, he would never give up on the ancestral property that was Cloudwisp island. He looked towards Li Qingshan in a pleading manner.

Li Qingshan said, “Alright, I’ll agree to it. However, the school of Novels is unlike the school of Painting that can complete a work in a stroke of a brush. We require time to propagate so that we can collect the power of belief. Only then can we turn make-believe into reality. I can produce a novel, but I need a year at the very least to propagate it.”

“A year is too long.”

“Anyways, I need time. If great master Chu refuses to agree to this, then there’s no need for all of this. Please write to the Ruyi commandery for our school of Novels’ dismissal.”

In the end, under Liu Zhangqing’s mediation, they agreed on six months.

Chu Shidao had his reasons for this too. He had already displeased the school masters for wanting to usurp Liu Chuanfeng. If he pushed even harder, he would probably infuriate them all. He had already gained a deep understanding of the school of Novel’s ins and outs beforehand too.

Li Qingshan had already published a book, but the book was about a fictitious story of the jianghu. It could not rival Danqing’s painting. As a result, he would be forced to publish a new book, which would take a few months at the very least. Even if he managed to publish it in time, there would not be enough time to propagate it, preventing him from gathering sufficient power of belief. By then, it would be absolutely nothing of importance.

They dispersed. Chu Shidao and Chu Danqing went with Liu Zhangqing to take residence in the school of Confucianism.

Li Qingshan and Liu Chuanfeng returned to Cloudwisp island, discussing how they were supposed to fight back.

Liu Chuanfeng was frantic. "Oh no, it's just six moths. How is that enough? You've agreed too hastily."

Li Qingshan said, "If I didn't agree, are you supposed to come up with some other idea?"

Liu Chuanfeng said, "Quickly. I'll grind the ink for you, so go write quickly. Forget it, why don't I just edit that novel of yours, considering it hasn't reached the shelves yet? Wielding the Dragon-slaying sabre, Zhang Wuji split open the Bright peak in a single stroke, stunning the cultivators of the six great sects. Cheng Kun planted twelve World-destroying Hunyuan Thunderbolt bombs under Shaolin temple, wanting to destroy all the cultivators. How's that?"

Li Qingshan was taken aback. He could not help but admire Liu Chuanfeng's quick wit. He really had not thought of this idea in the beginning, turning a wuxia novel of low fantasy into one of high fantasy and increasing the power level by at least ten times over.

"Then how are you supposed to change the part when they're adrift at sea? You can't trap cultivators on an island!"

"Don't be stupid. Beyond the nine provinces is the Boundless ocean. If you went there right now, you definitely won't be able to return! How it's written still depends on us novelists, right?"

Li Qingshan thought about it, "Then you edit it!"

With his permission, Liu Chuanfeng was overjoyed. He rushed off.

Li Qingshan shook his head. He was thinking of another idea. Liu Chuanfeng's idea was obviously a good one, but he might not be able to gather so much power of belief.

In his past life, novels had initially been serialised in newspapers before being propagated through various television adaptations, which was why it could achieve so much popularity. Rome was not built in six months.

Even if he changed it into destroying the nine provinces in a single stroke, so what? If he could not gather enough power of belief, all it would be was more bark than bite even if he could conjure it. After all, he had to consider the natural limitations of the Divine Talisman of Great Creation.

Li Qingshan returned to his room and unfurled a piece of white paper. He got to work, continuing with the plan he had thought of. He was preparing himself for both possibilities.

These stories should be able to gather extremely pure power of belief rapidly.