

Three Realms 1571

Sovereign of the Three Realms (WN)

Chapter 1571: Specifications Rise

Security was heavy around the city lord's manor.

City Lord Xie Wushang was having a leisurely afternoon nap. Unfortunately for him, the pageboy at the door knocked with urgent news. "City Lord, the chief warden's messenger wants an audience."

The wardens held the most power on the island as they represented the Rejuvenation Isles. They grasped everyone's fate in their hands and maintained basic order. Of course, all they needed to do was to make sure that nobody escaped. They didn't care about the darkness, horror, and bloodshed that normally existed on the island.

In fact, they seemed to prefer it. It was the very essence of Winterdraw Island's existence.

Among the wardens, the one with the greatest power was their chief. He was the central figure of the island with countless martial dao experts serving him. He held everyone's fate was in his palms.

He could kill anyone with just a word if he pleased. Someone like the city lord could maybe put up some struggle, but death would still be imminent. So how would Xie Wushang have the gall to neglect the messenger?

He surged to his feet, fixed his apparel, and sped off to meet the guest.

"Esteemed messenger, please forgive me for not going out to meet you." Xie Wushang was extremely meek and docile. However, the latter didn't seem to take note of it.

The messenger's brow arched. "Lord Xie, the chief warden has received an order to return to the Isles. A guest with status never seen before will be visiting Winterdraw. The chief places great importance on this, and it'd be best that you complete your given task as soon as possible. Don't disappoint him, or you know the consequences..."

A dangerous warning tone had crept into the messenger's words at the end.

Instead of bursting into rage, Xie Wushang reassured the messenger submissively. "Rest assured I will do everything in my power and use every single available resource to fulfill the chief's orders. Everything will be handled appropriately with no mistakes."

He was extremely afraid of the chief warden and didn't dare be discourteous in the slightest. Even a mere messenger was treated with full respect.

"Good. Time is of the essence. This time, you won't just be welcoming royalty and nobles from the Rejuvenation Isles, but also exalted disciples from the Ten Divine Nations. Conduct yourself well. If you finish your tasks properly and appease the chief, he might even grant you freedom. If you don't, he'll be faulted, and you know best what'll happen to you then."

A chill ran down Xie Wushang's spine. He well and truly understood that it was different this time. Even the chief warden was following orders from others.

The chief was merely a subordinate to the senior executives in the Rejuvenation Isles. If the task wasn't handled appropriately, he'd also suffer at the hands of his supervisors. The city lord would definitely be dead then.

"I'll spare no effort and do everything I can." Xie Wushang declared yet again.

The messenger gestured dismissively. "The chief wants results, not empty platitudes. The progress in Sin City is extremely slow, which makes the chief impatient. He's begun to wonder if you've been lazy."

"Never! The city lord manor will pass down the word and treat this assignment as top priority!"

"Alright, I've said all I've come here to say. Conduct yourself well." The messenger didn't waste any more time talking to Xie Wushang. He stroked his chin and left with a turn. He didn't need to show Xie Wushang much respect since he was the chief warden's confidante.

Though the city lord was a little put out by the messenger's attitude, he didn't dare think about complaining as the chief warden genuinely did value his confidante highly.

It'd be best if the city lord greatly sped up progress on his given task.

After musing about it briefly, he assembled his closest subordinates.. "Pass on my orders. The bar of the upcoming selection will be raised once more to an unprecedented level, with rewards and titles to match!"

His confidantes were taken aback. This time's selection had already been created out of thin air with very high standards. And yet, the city lord was still unappeased and wanted to raise the bar once more?

"City Lord, are you being a bit too hasty? Finding talent is important, yes. But you'll be crossing the line if you raise the level any further. After all, the city lord manor is built upon layers of layers of hardworking and talented individuals. And yet, their rewards and titles are only on par with the upcoming selection. If you raise the bar once more, they'll be resentful."

"Agreed. The selection is meant for finding new talents. If they're given preferential treatment and better rewards, won't the hearts of your long-serving subordinates grow cold?"

"We understand that the city lord thirsts for talent, but if you proceed with your plan, your long-serving subordinates will feel it unfair."

His subordinates gave sincere advice, and their arguments made sense. If the bar for the selection was set too high, it'll be unfair for the veterans.

Xie Wushang knew that his confidantes were right, but he sighed. "Everyone, this is no longer within our control. The chief warden's messenger just arrived with a veiled threat. He feels that we aren't prioritizing this matter enough and that progress is too slow. Apparently, the chief warden has grown very impatient."

"The chief warden?!"

"Is this selection being held by his command?"

The crowd was rendered speechless after learning about the chief's involvement. They could advise if the matter was contained to only within Sin City. But since the chief was involved, they no longer had the right to speak, nor would they dare to.

Who could possibly bear the crime of going against the chief's orders? They weren't suicidal.

Xie Wushang muttered, "I've no clue what the chief is planning, but since he's given us this task, we must take it seriously. If he thinks that we're not prioritizing this matter enough, we'll all be in serious trouble. We have to all put our opinions behind us and treat this matter with utmost importance. There can't be any slip-ups.

"Pass on the message and tell everyone to put everything they have into this event. The recruitment of geniuses is Sin City's greatest endeavour. Any opinions or dissent can wait until it's over. I'll give everyone a proper explanation then!"

Nobody could possibly argue after seeing the city lord's resolve. They wouldn't be going just against the city lord, but also the chief warden.

"Rest assured. We will carry out your orders immediately and urge everyone to focus their efforts and energy on this event."

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The new announcement caused another large commotion in Sin City.

"No way! A new announcement? The bar for the selection is raised once again?"

"Is our city that hungry for talent? The stakes this time are unprecedented!"

"I know right? All qualified candidates will be granted gold residency seals, which means they have permanent residency in the city, two million sky spirit stones every year, and a special title!"

"Tsk ts. I've never seen rewards on this level before."

"The competition will certainly be extremely tough as well. Those who make the cut will be swimming in fame and money! Clearly the deal of the century!"

"With rewards like that, the difficulty and passing cutoff must be extremely high!"

"Just look at the sign-up requirements! There's limits on age, cultivation, and a lot of other things!"

"Seriously! The upcoming selection is definitely meant to discover future talents. All empyrean cultivators are barred from entering. Half-step empyrean realm is the maximum limit, and all participants must be less than a hundred years old."

"Tsk ts. In the cultivation world, we're barely adults at a hundred years old. How many can possibly reach empyrean at that age?"

"All who qualify are serious geniuses, right?"

"Hehe. The city lord thirsts for capable talents like water. What a pity that I'm already over a hundred years old, or I'd soar to the skies with this chance!"

Posting of the new announcement led to sighs of astonishment and regret. The bountiful rewards were too eye-popping, but it was such a shame that they didn't meet the basic requirements.

Apart from the abovementioned, all candidates had to be great emperor or above. The requirements so harsh that they were almost unattainable. Only real geniuses could qualify.

At one hundred years old, true geniuses would've hit their stride and began to soar dramatically, while lesser geniuses would've started to encounter their bottlenecks. One's potential would've mostly surfaced by this age.

Inside the inn that Jiang Chen was staying at, heated discussions flared everywhere about the newly raised standards. The atmosphere in the city had grown noticeably fervent after the announcement.

He didn't like it one bit. A level-headed person like him could sense the danger that often lurked behind the scenes in a rowdy scene like this. He didn't know for sure how dangerous the selection was going to be, but there was definitely a reason why the city lord had placed so much importance on it.

Is Sin City really in such need for talent? To the point where they need to raise such a huge and insane commotion?

Jiang Chen was slightly puzzled. However, he couldn't be bothered with mindless guessing around. He was going to go all out since he'd already made his mind to join the event.

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Chapter 1572: The Selection Begins

Riotous, feverish sentiment continued to grow. Unperturbed by the crowd around him, Jiang Chen became more cool-headed despite the heated atmosphere. He'd always followed his own heart and done things at his own tempo.

Rank and wealth weren't why he'd decided to participate. A two million sky spirit stones stipend and a fancy title? None of that was of any consequence. His only goal was to get closer to the city lord manor so that he might grasp more vital information in order to escape Winterdraw. He had no desire to be involved in anything else.

After a long wait, the day of the selection finally arrived. It took place in a wide, spacious area.

The place was jam-packed with candidates, yet their numbers were dwarfed by the ocean of spectators.

The intense promotional campaign launched through various channels had raised the event to new heights and galvanized the entire city. It had been a great success and attracted many geniuses.

Standing in the candidate area, Jiang Chen stayed immersed in his own world, turning a deaf ear to the outside noise.

City Lord Xie Wushang appeared in a presiding tribune, accompanied by his advisors. Forbidding guards maintained the order, clad in their distinctive armor.

Cheers rose as soon as the crowd spotted him. He was rather popular in Sin City, and the spectators were delighted to witness his glory in person.

“City Lord Xie, City Lord Xie!” Wave after wave of jubilation crashed atop one another. With a slight smile, the city lord waved back.

A piercing glint shone in Jiang Chen’s eyes as he gazed at the city lord. The man wasn’t very tall, yet his average stature brimmed with the bearing unique to those with great authority. His aura immediately dominated the scene.

He can’t be much weaker than the Savages’ Forefather Bamboo.

Worthy of Myriad Abyss fame, the leader of a simple island of exile was as strong as the forefather of an entire tribe on Divine Abyss Continent. It was a sign of the enormous gap between the two areas in this respect.

Jiang Chen closed his eyes after stealing a quick glance.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please be quiet so I can say a few simple words.” The city lord gestured for silence with both his hands. As if petrified, the crowd turned deathly still. Not even loud breathing was audible. It was as if the myriad of people had become air.

Jiang Chen’s eyes narrowed. Xie Wushang had silenced the spectators with a simple hand gesture and one sentence, a sure sign of his considerable authority.

“Our city ranks as one of the three great powers on Winterdraw. Why is that so? Is it thanks to my individual strength?”

“Of course not! I’m only doing my duty. You are our greatest boon and support. Nothing can stop us when we work as one! Today, as is our city’s wont, I’ve set high standards so the greatest talents may shine brightest! Isn’t that what we’re all here for?”

“To all the young talents here today, I hope you can set aside all burden and display your gifts to the fullest! Remember that those qualified will become the city lord manor’s future pillars and will receive a treatment to match!”

Skilled as he was at agitating the masses, he’d inflamed the atmosphere with a short yet rousing speech. Many of participants were champing at the bit, eager to prove themselves.

Winterdraw boasted of a high population. Case in point, when Jiang Chen had first arrived on the island, the area had been extremely remote, yet still inhabited. And on top of the high population density, almost every local was a cultivator. That made for a high average cultivation level, leading to many prodigies being overlooked.

Today’s selection was a chance for these forgotten geniuses to shine and stand out.

There were many factions on the island, but none as celebrated as the three major ones. For any young prospects, joining the city lord manor would be a dream.

On Winterdraw, a faction’s backing was always desirable. Almost every lone soul who went it alone truly ended up becoming a departed soul, hence why today’s occasion had garnered such attention. For many, it was an occasion to turn their fortunes for the better.

“Alright, I don’t like to be long winded. You’re the stars today, so show me what you’ve got.” True to his word, he cut the speech short and left the rest to the supervisor.

Said supervisor proclaimed loudly, “Ladies and gentlemen, in the name of the city lord, I’ll be presiding over today’s selection. It will be split into qualifiers and an elite round. You can join the city lord’s banner as long as you pass the qualifiers, while those who pass the elite round will be granted a dignitary title and an annual salary of two million sky spirit stones.”

A qualifying round and an elite round? Were many going to be chosen then?

Sensing the crowd’s bafflement, the supervisor smiled. “Don’t think it’ll be easy simply because there are only two rounds. In fact, the first one alone will be a challenge. At a guess, less than five hundred will pass, and no more than ten will remain after the elite round.”

The crowd gasped. The elimination rate was too high! More than ten thousand had registered, yet no more than five hundred would qualify?

And no more than ten would successfully pass the elite examination?

Even Jiang Chen was surprised. But he immediately composed himself. Since the standards had been set so high this time, harsh trials were to be expected. On the contrary, a casual examination wouldn’t be worthy of a grand occasion.

“Alright, everyone please prepare yourselves. Remember, the elimination phase will start as soon as we begin. So I hope you’ve prepared yourselves properly. You only have yourselves to blame if you’re out,” the supervisor warned sternly.

“The first round is comprised of three different tests. The first is a martial trial of fighting. Failure means disqualification! As for the specifics, you’ll find out very soon.

“All of you have a registration number. You’ll form groups of one hundred based on your number. Remember to keep to the order. First group, number one to number one hundred. The others wait here!”

Jiang Chen’s number was three thousand something, so he had a while to wait. But he wasn’t anxious. He closed his eyes, patiently saving his energy. There was little pressure on him, especially after he’d seen the preconditions of participation. Emphyrean realm cultivators and above were excluded.

He was confident no one under emphyrean realm was his match. In fact, even first or second level emphyrean didn’t scare him.

So the proceedings were a mere formality for him. If not, he should forget about going to the Eternal Divine Nation and just return to Veluriyam.

Xing Tong and her father were in the crowd. They’d arrived early in the morning, worried as they were for Jiang Chen. They were two spectators drowning in an ocean of people.

“Daddy, do you think Big Brother Jiang will succeed?” The anxiety in Xing Tong’s pure eyes betrayed her worries and innocent hope.

Xing Hui chuckled. “Of course he will.”

He was strangely confident in the young man. With his experience, he could see Jiang Chen was an uncommon man who would shock the crowd if he were to let loose his enormous power. The gentleman was certain to pass with flying colors despite the harsh requirements.

“That’s right, he will definitely succeed.” Her father’s reassurance renewed Xing Tong’s faith.

The first trial seemed to proceed very quickly. A group was called away every quarter hour. Jiang Chen’s turn came merely four hours later.

Along with his group, Jiang Chen followed the stewards to a restricted area. They soon arrived at a training field.

“Everyone, the first test will take place here. You’ll face numerous great emperor mechanical constructs with destructive power and sturdy defenses. You have to stay on your feet for a quarter hour. If you’re defeated, you’ve failed and will be sent away on the spot!

“Those who pass this test will be escorted to the second!”

It was a most primitive way to fight. The rules were simple enough. Of course, martial prowess wasn’t the only factor, but also personal judgment. The field would turn into a chaotic battlefield when everyone waded in, putting many aspects of a candidate to the test!

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Chapter 1573: The Second Round

Exactly how many construct puppets there were in these combat grounds was an unknown. They wouldn’t have gotten an answer, in any case. A lot of things were left unanswered.

“Alright, it’s time for all of you to go in!”

The required stay wasn’t long at just seven and a half minutes. It didn’t seem too difficult for anyone to last that long.

But Jiang Chen could sense that this was a lie immediately upon entering. The construct puppets weren’t just for show. They lacked human intelligence, but they were carefully laid out in such a way so as to launch an ambush from almost anywhere.

After entering, the first thing he did was put some distance between the other cultivators and himself.

He wasn’t afraid of the puppets, per se, as his consciousness was strong enough to judge wherever they could potentially come from. Though the appearance of this trial was rather sudden, he felt up to the task. Rather, it was important to be wary about his fellow man.

Perhaps his fellow competitors were a more dangerous element than the mechanical puppets. Amid the chaos, it was quite possible for some to take advantage by attacking the other candidates, thus reducing the competition.

Though it may not be the smartest thing to do so, human hearts were the hardest to guard against. Jiang Chen wasn’t holding out hope that anyone would want to cooperate with him, but he didn’t want to be caught unawares or blithely become someone else’s stepping stone.

He became much more composed after coming to this decision and utilized an especially clever method of avoidance. Deploying his consciousness, he looked for any danger that could possibly arise.

The puppets didn't attack with particular intensity at first. As time went on, more and more puppets charged ferociously forward. It didn't take long for the puppets to outnumber the hundred in his batch, making it easy to differentiate the strong from the weak in the ensuing fray.

The weaker cultivators were quickly hit and fell to the ground. Those who were slightly stronger could just barely dodge or parry their blows.

After a moment, some cleverer cultivators began to work in unison. They fended for themselves using basic cooperation and territorial designation. But bonds born here didn't withstand the test of anything strenuous. A puppet's point of origin was random and unnoticeable. A line of defense so hastily set up was easily broken by another few unpredictable puppets.

Cooperation that was born on largely shaky terms wasn't reliable from the outset. The smallest of cracks would bring it back to the ground. All of this was due to their lack of mutual trust, since no man would leave their back open to another fellow candidate they didn't know.

Ghastly screams sounded all over.

The fighting became limited to autonomous pockets. The puppets tore through every group fighting together.

Jiang Chen hadn't thought of working with another from the start since a few minutes wasn't nearly enough time to form a bond of trust. Perhaps a fairweather alliance was feasible in favorable circumstances, but any difficulty or change could quickly sour the situation.

Time passed moment by moment. The puppets present began to strengthen and rampage about.

This resulted in a rapid reduction in the contestants' numbers. More and more were incapacitated and transported out. Finally, there were only forty left out of the initial a hundred, a number that was still diminishing.

Thankfully, the first round was only seven and a half minutes long. Just as the situation was about to become the most dangerous yet, the excruciating waiting period was up.

A shrill whistle brought all the puppets to a halt. They disappeared on the spot, as if a puppet master had engaged in sleight of hand.

"Time's up!" The tester responsible for this segment came in smiling. "Not bad. Almost thirty remain in your group – a very good score. Congratulations. I hope you find success in the next round as well."

A group with a survival rate of less than thirty percent in the first round was considered a good showing? Jiang Chen didn't know what to say.

The qualifiers seemed significantly crazier than he'd thought. With this elimination rate, it was entirely possible that there would only be five hundred left after three successful rounds.

At least, that would be the case if this first round's rate was anything to judge by.

Thankfully, he'd simply been warming up for the first round. In fact, he'd barely fought any of the puppets other than symbolically doing so. He'd mostly avoided them ahead of time using his speed and consciousness.

He hadn't intentionally evaded all contact, occasionally exchanging a few blows with them. All of this had been done in a way as to not leave any room for criticism.

All in all, Jiang Chen's performance had been middle of the pack. The most astute of observers might be thinking he was concealing his strength, and not much more than that. This was all he could hope for right now, really.

The remaining group was quickly brought to the site of the second test.

"Everyone, arriving at the second test means you're already both lucky and proficient. However, the second round is hardly easier than the first. You should prepare yourselves. The second round tests your consciousness.

"You will be placed into a labyrinth. More accurately, it's a normal palace with a formation inside of it. You must navigate out of the labyrinth within an hour. All who cannot will fail the second round."

A test of the consciousness?

Jiang Chen snickered to himself. There was no other test he would have guaranteed success with, but his consciousness? Navigating out of a maze? This was nothing short of trivial.

He was a master of formations quite capable in labyrinths. Moreover, his consciousness had been vastly empowered by the lightly active chain seal within it.

In actuality, his consciousness was already equivalent to an empyrean one. Some cultivators of that level even wouldn't win against him on purely consciousness alone.

Many empyrean experts had tried their head at attacking him using that avenue already, but none had succeeded. The biggest example had been Elder Xi from Huang'er's family, an old man who'd attempted to undetectably destroy his mind. The attack had been invisibly neutralized without a change in expression.

The chain seal had been responsible for that. But now, the chain seal was clearly much more active. His consciousness saw a very real benefit in the form of an increase to his consciousness.

A labyrinthine maze?

Anticipation crept in. Jiang Chen hadn't seen every kind of labyrinthine formation or maze there was, but he had plenty of ideas and experience about them.

Many things of that nature shared common, underlying theories. His Nine Labyrinth Formation was the perfect example of a powerful maze. His Minor and Major Artifice Formations were similarly designed to confound and perplex.

Furthermore, there had been an illusion-generating formation in Guo Ran's residence – as well as secret spatial methods. Jiang Chen had the requisite knowledge base from his previous life, which was paired with the Ancient Crimson Heavens Sect's heritage.

“Alright. The maze is open, go inside!” A voice sounded. Everyone ventured in without hesitation.

In the next moment, they found themselves in an entirely new world.

Entering into the formation, Jiang Chen’s heart was as still as water. If this round tested one’s consciousness, he couldn’t buzz around aimlessly like a headless fly.

Within the palace, he took in all the empty space, passages, and gateways around him. There were exits everywhere. But scattering forth his consciousness revealed that they had a common destination, being connected to each other in the end. There was no actual way out.

Jiang Chen took his time. This was the unique characteristic of labyrinth formations. Exits and related clues appeared to be everywhere, but taking one of them wouldn’t yield a real egress.

There’s only one way out of a labyrinth like this, and it’s always very well hidden. Normally, anything visible to the eye cannot be the true way out.

Those who set up these mazes had different intentions based on their personalities. Some preferred a sharp and deviant style, others enjoyed effecting confusion through all sorts of illusions, and still others hid all actual passages within falsehoods.

Jiang Chen had run into the third example. There were many passages, but none of them was the real one.

The one who set up the formation doesn’t seem weak at all. It must be someone who has spatial abilities. Only someone like that could hide the real exit within an unknown patch of space. Finding that may be the way out.

Mentally speaking, Jiang Chen was quite relaxed. Though he thought the labyrinth pretty remarkable, he didn’t find it remotely difficult enough. He’d already sorted out his thoughts. What he needed to do next was to find the door in unknown space. He firmly believed that it did exist. However, discovering it required great experience and greater strength of consciousness.

There definitely will be many who won’t find the exit. Of this he was sure of. The labyrinth had been constructed in a clever enough sort of way to ensure that. An exit couldn’t be found without a clear line of thought.

His consciousness pushed forward in space, finely sensing its fabric and all minute changes. There was sure to be a subtle disturbance in the air near the actual hidden exit.

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Chapter 1574: Checkpoints of Life and Death

Because Jiang Chen had sorted out his line of thought, everything followed naturally from there. His consciousness suddenly rippled with a finding. He shot towards the distortion he detected with a burst of joy. “This is the place. Open up!”

He leapt confidently into the patch of space. A brilliant flash of lightning-like radiance blasted forth. His body disappeared from the labyrinth with a white flicker.

In the next moment, peace returned to where he had been. Jiang Chen’s figure had disappeared.

Whoosh!

The young man landed back on solid ground. The palace was clearly behind him, the one they'd just entered. He was now at its back entrance, having entered from the front.

"And just like that, I'm done." The hint of a smile escaped from his lips. Footsteps came from behind him, followed by applause.

"Not bad, not bad. Not even fifteen minutes for you to get out. It seems you are quite skilled in spatial formations." The exclamation came from the tester responsible for this round. A middle-aged man in scarlet robes appeared. Approval and admiration was plain on his face.

Jiang Chen smiled slightly, offering a cupped fist salute. "I got a bit lucky."

The man raised an eyebrow. "Martial dao permits one or two instances of good luck, but you have the best time so far for this round. I doubt anyone can do better. In this field alone, you are the most brilliant among your peers!"

Jiang Chen laughed. "I was lucky enough to have a master teach me about the mysteries involved in space and formations. Or at least the fundamentals, at any rate."

There was no self-satisfaction in his voice. His composure caused the red-robed man to admire him all the more. "It's rare that a young man like you can stay so calm and collected in the face of compliments."

Each group had been allotted an hour's time to pass the second round. Bit by bit, more people emerged from the palace.

Among the thirty who'd passed the first round, nine remained at the end of the hour. The elimination rate was astonishing indeed. A group of a hundred had been reduced to only nine, and a final round yet remained. Judging by the last two rounds, the third round wasn't going to be easy, either.

About nineteen thousand had signed up for the competition. If one batch was comprised of a hundred, then nearly two hundred batches existed.

If only nine remained at the end of the second round for every group, roughly two thousand would be left. But the staff member prior had said that less than five hundred would pass the qualifiers.

This meant that the third round would have the most shocking elimination rate of all. Only two or three would remain out of nine.

The nine that were left were already generally quite elite – or so they thought themselves. There was increased mutual suspicion because of this.

At this point, no further cooperation could be possible. They were direct competitors to each other. Every person wanted the others to be eliminated, and themselves to stay. After all, passing the third round meant that they qualified to enter the city lord's residence and have a good shot at becoming one of his dignitaries.

The remaining nine were led to the entrance to the third round.

The man responsible for this round was old and bald, and had two middle-aged assistants. They were slightly surprised to see that nine remained in this group.

"Not bad. Nine in this group, eh? It's much better quality than overall." The bald old man was taken aback.

A middle-aged man laughed from the side. "Elder Lu, how many do you think will pass round three?"

The old man chuckled in response. "I won't try guessing, but I don't think they'll do poorly. Maybe they'll even be the group that excels the most."

The conversation had barely finished before the nine-person group was before them.

"I would like to congratulate you ahead of time," the bald old man smiled. "You are one-in-a-hundred geniuses to have made it this far. However, you must prove that you are one-in-a-thousand instead. Only after passing round three will you be considered to have passed the qualifiers. There's no point to your previous successes if you stumble here." The old man's words sobered up all nine candidates.

They knew that to be true, but hearing it straight from the mouth of the examiner was a different feeling.

"The third test is one that tests a mixture of skills. Your strength, speed, willpower, and courage!

"Remember, this round carries with it considerable risk to your lives. You still have time to give up and drop out. There will be no room for regret once your test begins. Your decision here may mean the difference between life and death," the old man warned.

Give up?

There was no hint of interest from any of the nine. Such a thing didn't exist in the world of martial dao. How could any would-be candidate be someone who feared death?

Wealth was also often found in great peril. None of them were going to so easily give up at a chance to affiliate themselves with the city lord.

"If that's the case, come with me."

The third test was one of life and death.

"Do you see? From here on, there's a passage that leads to the other side. Many checkpoints are present, each taxing limits to the point of mortality. You only have one chance to get through all of them smoothly. If you reach the end, you pass. If you're held up anywhere along here... there will be a fair chance of death."

A fair chance of death.

This was a rather tactful way of putting it. Whether it would occur or not was hard to determine.

"Arrange yourselves according to your registration number."

The candidates checked amongst themselves. Jiang Chen's number was exactly in the middle of the pack. He glanced into the distance. It wasn't obvious how many checkpoints there were, but he had the feeling that many traps were hidden in its recesses. The entire affair looked rather horrific.

A cultivator with monolids was the first. "Everyone, watch me obtain a clean victory!"

He pumped himself up incessantly even as he entered the passage.

There was a haze over everyone else's visions as he did so. Nothing inside was visible from the outside, to ensure fairness for the earlier candidates. Thus, the passageway was sealed off whenever someone entered.

Time passed by very quickly. After a few breaths, everything was as it had been before. There was no information about the first entrant passing or failing. The non-reporting of results was so no psychological pressure would fall on those who came after.

"Next," the bald, old man commanded.

The second candidate disappeared just like the first. Then the third, then the fourth. More people went forward and disappeared in silence.

The crushing atmosphere actually caused those who further down the line to tense up. Not knowing how many had passed, were there any who had?

Everything was unknown.

"Next." It was Jiang Chen's turn now. The young man was completely calm. Every bit of his consciousness, martial strength, and pore in his body was prepared.

"Go on," the bald, old man commanded.

Without further ado, Jiang Chen disappeared in a blur of light.

A sharp guillotine sliced down from above as soon as he entered; its swiftness was reinforced by advantage in terrain.

Jiang Chen had sufficient awareness to seem almost prescient. Rather than slowing down, he sped up.

In that critical moment, his body already left behind afterimages as he swept past. The remnants of light and shadow left by the Kunpeng Meteoric Escape were the only things destroyed by the blade.

After evading the guillotine, Jiang Chen swept forward with the aerodynamic ability of a swallow. Suddenly, a strange wind with unknown origin roared beneath his feet. Uninterested in being delayed at such an unfortunate time, he accelerated once more.

Boom!

There was crashing wind behind him, a consuming demon that roiled in his direction. It seemed to want to swallow up all that came into the passage.

Jiang Chen's speed and swiftness of judgment were the best measures of self-preservation he could've asked for.

Wait, this isn't good. There's something wrong with the wind speed. There are arrows around here!

With faster reflexes than ordinary people, he stiffened and dropped his body backwards like a plank, feet firmly planted to avoid a hail of arrows. They soared harmlessly over his body.

He didn't know whether a trap had triggered the arrows, or if someone was specifically here to get some revenge.

He wasn't exactly going to wait around for the next attack, though. Recovering himself instantly, he propelled himself up from the ground and hurtled forward once more. The only way to pass was to go forward.

Awoo!

A ravenous maw cut in from the side of the passage as he did so, bringing with it a rancid smell and bloody gore. It pounced at Jiang Chen, intent on swallowing him up.

The passage was filled with fatal checkpoints alright.

Jiang Chen's speed advantage was being used to its maximum here. Before the maw could approach, his feet were already upon it, using it as a vantage point to leap forward once more.

[Sovereign of the Three Realms \(WN\)](#)

Chapter 1575: Challenging The Elite Round

Sure enough, checkpoints fraught with dangers abounded and difficulties awaited at every turn in the passage. Jiang Chen hopped over the bloody jaws, but before he could reach top speed, dragons of fire baring their fangs appeared in the cloudy sky above.

Spiraling pillars of fire belched a sea of rising flames, as if he'd suddenly returned to the Ancient Slaughter Formation of Seven. There were some differences, but just like the formation, various changes littered his path without warning.

Thankfully, he was familiar with the formation's secrets. The seemingly great dangers closing in on him weren't as threatening as they appeared to be.

"Jiang Chen, don't worry. The fire is an illusion. I don't feel any lethal energies coming from them," the Vermillion Bird secretly sent.

He'd dare face even the most terrifying of fires with the ancient beast by his side, but its explanation still set his heart at ease. His figure accelerated and shot straight for the flames, puncturing through them landing on the other side. The third trial was behind him.

"Congratulations, young man. You've passed the qualifiers," a voice told him.

Collecting himself, Jiang Chen didn't display any semblance of happiness as he followed the officials. As for the other candidates, it was none of his business how many would pass, as long as he himself did.

He was brought to a large, quiet great hall to rest. Quite a few candidates had finished ahead of him and were waiting inside. He glanced their way and counted a dozen sitting figures.

Sure enough, there are many talents on Winterdraw. He hadn't tried his hardest, but he was still surprised to see so many had qualified.

Most great emperors from the human domain probably would've failed, even without the age limitation. To think this place is only an island of exile among the Rejuvenation Isles! The foundations of Myriad Abyss Island really aren't something to underestimate.

Jiang Chen became even warier with this recognition.

Compared to the human domain, he'd been struck by the much richer spirit energy the first time he'd landed on the island, only to learn later Winterdraw was merely a second or third rate power. This led him to reconsider Myriad Abyss Island in a new light, that such a place would possess rich energy.

My journey this time won't be easy. If I grow careless, I may even leave regrets on this marginal island. What a fearsome place. I truly can't lower my guard for a second here. He sat down cross-legged to regain his breath.

The trials went on. Close to twenty thousand youngsters had registered, so it took roughly four days for the qualifiers to finally come to a close.

"Alright, young geniuses, you've waited for a long time." The supervisor's voice rang inside the peaceful hall. "In total, three hundred ninety eight of you have qualified. Let me first congratulate all of you again for making it this far. You've already gained the city lord manor's acknowledgment and become one of us.

"You'll be facing an even harsher elite round next. Only eight will be chosen at most. These elites will be conferred a dignitary title and obtain a yearly salary of two million sky spirit stones. Remember, that's merely a baseline salary. Ample additional rewards await after great contribution or merit. The city lord manor has simple and straightforward rules. Your abilities will dictate your treatment.

"More importantly, you need to show the city lord your talent is superior than anyone else. That's the only way to gain his respect. Make him think you're indispensable, that you're worth nurturing in the long run!"

Jiang Chen remained indifferent despite the supervisor's stirring speech, his heart calm as water.

"Of course, those of you who don't become elites shouldn't lose heart. You might not obtain the same rank or pay, but the city lord manor still welcomes you with open doors. You'll merely have a slightly lower starting point. Our lord isn't inflexible. No matter how humble your origins, your future will be just as bright as long as you exhibit peerless talent!"

After all, those in the great hall were the cream of the crop who'd emerged from more than ten thousand candidates.

"There are also three parts to the elite round. The first part will test pill dao. The second will challenge martial prowess. We will select the best sixty four out of those remaining. Then, you'll be eliminated one by one until the best eight remain.

“Perhaps some of you question the rationale of a pill dao test. But keep in mind that the city lord wants comprehensive talents. True peak-level powerhouses need coverage in many departments. It’s difficult walking far through brute force alone.”

The city lord manor naturally had its own requirements, so the youngsters weren’t too surprised. Those who’d made it this far naturally had their own achievements in pill dao.

“Competition is cruel, but the sky’s the limit if you’re chosen. Youngsters, show us what you’re made of!” After stoking the crowd’s emotions, the supervisor continued, “You will now be given new numbers.”

Jiang Chen was attributed number eighty one. “Nine times nine is eighty one, a return to the origin of all. This is auspicious.” He was as serene as ever.

Pill dao was child’s play for him. Of course, it was only one of the assessment factors as the city lord manor had its own priorities. The final ranking would include many subjective factors.

Since he was number eighty one, he had some time to kill. He remained sitting and waited calmly. He had little worries at this stage of the selection.

In a secret private room somewhere inside the great hall, City Lord Xie Wushang and his subordinates observed the process in high spirits.

An advisor flushed with excitement. “My lord, this crop is a quality bunch. All those who’ve reached the second round are good seeds. The chief warden will certainly be pleased this time.”

Xie Wushang smiled, obviously rather satisfied as well. “Money talks. Why else would so many geniuses have come?”

Raising the bar was a brilliant move. The city lord was quite pleased with the quality of the candidates this time.

“Everyone, is there anyone you favor among the three hundred something? Someone who’s sure to make it to the final eight?”

Many had passed the qualifiers, but in the end, they were mere foils for the true centerpieces, a backdrop for the top eight to shine brighter.

“I have my eyes on number one hundred sixty three. The kid’s so calm and steady that you can’t help but trust in him. His performance in the previous rounds has also been rather eye-catching.”

“I’ve been keeping an eye on several of them, but we’ll have to wait for the final results to deliver their verdict. Many might have hidden their real strength in the qualifiers.”

“That’s right. Some might have been more brilliant, but who knows if others don’t have some aces up their sleeves? In the martial world, no one knows who will have the last laugh.”

“Heh, I’ve been observing number eighty one. This kid’s performance has been very persuasive. He hasn’t let the feverish mood affect him. One who can stay so impervious to outside influences is sure to become an expert!”

Number eighty one happened to be Jiang Chen.

Xie Wushang looked at the great hall and scanned the assigned numbers, his eyes sweeping across Jiang Chen.

“Eh? There’s truly more to this young man than meets the eye.” At first glance, he sensed a strange aura exuding from the kid. That was purely a powerhouse’s instinct. He couldn’t help taking another look, nodding slightly afterwards. “Number eighty one is worth keeping an eye on.”

Eyes closed, Jiang Chen could faintly sense vague strands of consciousness in the air observing himself. But he remained motionless, as if unaware.

All the officials were observing him because of the city lord’s judgment, but the latter said, “Don’t overdo it, or you might alarm the youngsters and hinder their performance.”

The advisors ceased their scrutiny at his order.

Just then, someone called Jiang Chen’s number. It was finally his turn.

[Sovereign of the Three Realms \(WN\)](#)

Chapter 1576: The Elimination Matches

Pill dao was the elite round’s first topic, but it was run differently from the many pill dao evaluations and competitions Jiang Chen had previously participated in. Those had emphasized theory, while practical applications were the sole focus this time.

Everything was to be considered from a practical aspect this time. For example, when one received such and such wounds, which pills or herbs made for the best recovery?

How should one react when poisoned by such and such toxins? What were the antidotes or the most appropriate preventative measures?

There were ten questions in total.

“Eight correct answers or more is excellent score and will result in priority consideration. Seven is average, while six is the bare minimum. Five or less means immediate disqualification from the list of the last sixty four.”

There was no precise grading rubric, but the evaluation had its own criterion.

The design of these questions was much more reasonable than pure theory. At the very least, it was much more useful, which was the number one priority for cultivators in a dangerous world. Gaudy concoction skills or rich theoretical knowledge were of no significance without tangible benefits.

Jiang Chen agreed with the examiners’ angle of attack. No matter what, he applauded the absence of idle rhetoric or abstract principles in favor of subjects grounded in reality. Tangible results ought to be the truest measure of skill.

He began answering the questions in earnest. Questions of this level couldn’t stump him, but he wasn’t arrogant enough to get carried away simply because of his superior knowledge. On the contrary, he bent his mind to the task and answered each question conscientiously.

Standing out would only attract unwanted attention, or so his past experience had taught him.

He knew the answers full well, but instead of penning them immediately, he mused deeply for a long time, putting his thoughts in order, only answering after seemingly careful deliberations to avoid suspicion.

And even then, he took pains not to provide a full ten correct answers. Eight would be already an admirable feat for the other candidates. He didn't want his performance to seem too abnormally good.

So, instead of mindlessly pursuing perfection, he kept his score to eight out of ten. As for the other two, he deliberately made subtle yet credible mistakes in order to fool the judges.

After handing over his answers, he walked out as if still preoccupied in the test before. Someone else guided him to another confined area. Those who'd completed the first test were forbidden to return to the scene of the crime, or they might divulge questions and answers.

Jiang Chen found himself in an unfamiliar place. According to the rules, he was to wait there until the next part.

Just like in the qualifiers, the second martial evaluation was a nearly identical obstacle race. The content was simply more challenging. It seemed they'd run out of fresh ideas and had to settle for raising the difficulty.

Just as before, Jiang Chen stayed composed and did things at his own rhythm, handily passing the trial despite the apparent dangers he had to face. Once again, his results barely met the bar for an excellent score.

This way, he achieved an excellent grade in both of the first two examinations, making him fully confident for his participation in the third. I might as well pack up and go home if I'm not chosen after scoring excellent twice.

Sure enough, his number was included in the last sixty four, giving him the right to participate in the elimination stage.

This third and last examination was to be the grand finale.

A candidate had to defeat three opponents in succession, one to reach the last thirty two, a second one to reach the last sixteen, and finally a third to be selected as one of the top eight. They would attain the ultimate glory of the selection and the best treatment after it.

The chosen geniuses gathered together. Many of them looked forward to doing battle. Why couldn't the fighting begin immediately?

Jiang Chen remained calm and collected. He blended into the crowd with just the right attitude, not too flamboyant but not too subdued either.

"Congratulations, everyone. Making it this far proves you're so much more exemplary than the rest. Even so, competition is cruel. Only the eight most outstanding among you will be chosen and bestowed wealth and status. Who will be the brightest stars among you?"

"I don't know and neither does the city lord. But we're all waiting for you to show the fullest extent of your talents. And now, you'll be reassigned a number one last time."

Jiang Chen's number was a rather ordinary twelve this time.

"Before we begin, we need to first explain a few details.

"One, heaven-defying artifacts or contracted spirit creatures are forbidden. The matches must be a martial exchange between the candidates.

"Two, no cheating in any shape or form. The city lord manor holds final veto power.

"Third, to encourage fighting to the fullest, everyone must sign a contract of life and death. You won't be held accountable if you kill your opponent. Of course, you can choose to fight to first touch or choose to forfeit. But remember that you're responsible for your own lives."

No matter how cruel, the rules had been laid on the table in black and white.

"Any objections? You still have time to raise any."

Heads shook. The conditions were within their margins of tolerance. Only the third one was a little cruel, but the cultivation world itself was fraught with risk. The selection wasn't the right place for safe and smooth sailing. To register implied some ability to withstand danger.

"We'll now randomize all the numbers. The pairs drawn will fight each other, for a total of thirty two duels in the first round. The winners will proceed to the second round,"

Jiang Chen was calm as ever. The identity of his opponent was of no consequence. Everyone present deserved their spot in the top sixty four, but no one was his match.

His number came up in the eighteenth draw. His opponent was number thirty three, a tall and sturdy fellow. The man was in the top three when it came to size. His iron tower-like frame seemed to radiate power and menace. He threw Jiang Chen a wide grin after seeing his opponent.

"Kid, remember that I'm called Wang Kui, the same Kui character as in 'strong' or 'first.' It's not that shameful to lose to me!" Despite his nonchalant tone, his words brimmed with arrogance.

Jiang Chen smiled at the man's self-confidence and nodded back. "See you on the stage."

The young lord didn't know where the man's confidence came from, nor did he care.

Soon after, all thirty two head-to-heads were decided.

"The first round has been drawn. You all know who your opponent is. We'll proceed in groups of four. Four fights will take place at the same time on four different stages, so the first round will finish after eight turns. Remember the order of the duels and don't delay the others!"

Organizing the too many fights one by one would take too long, not the result the city lord desired.

The city lord seemed in a hurry. He wanted the selection wrapped up and the final results published as soon as possible.

No one else knew the reason for his urgency, but they had to follow his orders, hence why duels were to proceed four at a time.

Since Jiang Chen's fight was the eighteenth, he was in the later half.

Wang Kui walked beside the young lord seemingly on purpose, or not; his tall frame sending repeated provocation in an intimidation attempt. He made no attempt to cover his threatening gaze, as if trying to scare his opponent into submission with his eyes alone.

Sovereign of the Three Realms (WN)

Chapter 1577: Domination with One Move

Wang Kui's antics amused Jiang Chen to no end. The more the man puffed himself up, the more Jiang Chen suspected the man was a weakling. An expert who was truly strong inside and out didn't need to employ such methods of intimidating his opponent. His aura and poise upon the arena alone would display his strength for the world to see.

Bullying in the stands was pathetic behavior and the furthest thing from frightening. How could someone who'd made it to the final sixty-four be scared by a look?

Jiang Chen certainly wouldn't, and he doubted anyone would.

Wang Kui treated the young man's scorn as a kind of fear. He was rather pleased with himself; this opponent of his didn't have the courage even to lock eyes with him!

In actuality, Jiang Chen calmly observing the battles in the ring. This was a fight between great emperors, but the spectacle was remarkably impressive. The great emperors of Winterdraw were unquestionably a cut above the human domain's, whether it came to cultivation, combat ability, or martial dao understanding.

Since Winterdraw is a place for exiles, those who survive here are likely to make even more thorough use of their potential, no? It's a harsh environment.

Though the island induced despair with concerning regularity, to a certain extent, it also energized cultivators with a burning need to grow to their fullest potential.

No one dared succumb to laziness given the tough conditions here. They didn't have the luxury to.

Of course, great emperors were limited by their cultivation in the end. Especially under such limited conditions, Jiang Chen didn't consider it much of a challenge to handle opponents of this caliber.

After all, he had fought great emperors when he was still emperor realm – and peak great emperors, at that. Now that he was himself a great emperor, he had the confidence to beat every other person on his level in the human domain.

Though the great emperors here showed power and finesse that were a shocking cut above, Jiang Chen felt confident that he was at a different height. His real opponents now were empyrean experts.

Even if he didn't make use of contracted spirit creatures or potent treasures, he was unthreatened by any mere great emperor.

Each battle played out in its own fierce way. There were rarely one-sided fights; every bout became a struggle between neck-and-neck contestants. Evidently, the sixty-four finalists were all approximately as strong as each other.

The parties that won overwhelmingly decisive victories were considered the hottest candidates for the top eight. Finally, it was Jiang Chen's turn to take the arena.

Wang Kui was champing at the bit. He charged into the ring with huge strides, glaring at Jiang Chen below with self-sure majesty.

"Are you going to forfeit yourself? Or are you going to come up, only to be smacked back down?" His tone put him solidly in the position of the victor already.

Jiang Chen snickered quietly before slowly stepping onstage. He looked across with coolness at Wang Kui's overconfident demeanor. "I don't know where you're getting your arrogance from, but your rudeness means that you'll be sent off in the quickest way possible!"

As he spoke, a ray of aureate light shot out from his pupils. The Evil Golden Eye struck like a bolt of malevolent lightning.

Jiang Chen's gradual refinement of the technique meant that it was now extremely potent. Almost no one in the same realm could defend against it.

Wang Kui was presumptuous enough not to have paid any attention to Jiang Chen at all. He was only focused on landing a critical blow. The light made him tremble. In the next moment, his fierce eyes glazed over. His soul was bound by some invisible force, falling into a stupor.

"Off with you!"

Though killing was permitted in the arena, Jiang Chen didn't want to leave a murderous impression on his audience. Thus, he used his Kunpeng Meteoric Escape to dash across on insubstantial wings. Within seconds, he was right up to Wang Kui.

A hand seal created a bigger copy of itself, palm slamming into Wang Kui's face.

Smack!

Wang Kui seemed to have been paralyzed in place. He couldn't move at all. A single push from the giant palm was enough to send him flying off the stage like a broken kite.

Thump!

A cloud of dust kicked up from where he lay. Wang Kui's broad body had made close contact with the earth and he wasn't in a pretty state.

Jiang Chen retracted his arts, freeing his opponent's mind from its bindings. Wang Kui braced himself, but found that he had already fallen and couldn't get up. His entire appearance was worse than sorry.

"I... lost?" The big man blinked, trying to recover his wits and a bit perplexed by what had just occurred. How come he had lost in the span of a single breath? He didn't even know how things had played out. This was far too pathetic!

Anger flared up in his heart. Shame hitherto unexperienced caused him to roar, “No, you used a some kind of devilish spell on me!”

He had no better explanation. What else could it have been?

“Honorable judge, he used some kind of devilish spell!” Wang Kui raised a report of dissatisfaction. He found his experience odder and odder. How could he have lost control of his consciousness otherwise? His defeat had been far too easy. It made no sense.

“Enough with the rambling. You lost.” The judge ignored Wang Kui’s plea, coldly stating the conclusion of the fight.

Wang Kui was furious. “How could I lose?” he howled. “Couldn’t you see how he used a devilish spell? Are you taking his side?”

Though the man was quite sizable, his cranial capacity was less than stellar. He was outright questioning the judge’s fairness.

As expected, the judge’s face darkened. “Your ignorance is no fault of yours, but talking in ignorance is. You don’t even know how you lost. Even if there were another hundred bouts more, you wouldn’t be able to win against him.”

The words were a bucket of icy water, extinguishing Wang Kui’s defiance altogether.

“How can this be? How can this be?” Lost and listless, he couldn’t accept his defeat.

“What wonderful ocular skill!” The city lord’s advisors uttered uniform praise from within a secret observation room.

“The city lord’s eyes are keen indeed. This youth is nothing short of extraordinary. He must have concealed his strength earlier. He smashed his competitor to smithereens.”

“His ocular skill is impressive, but so is his luck. His opponent was such an ignorant fool!”

“Indeed, that big guy couldn’t wrap his head around it. Winning against someone like that isn’t very telling at all. We’ll see how the next two rounds pan out.”

“It’s hard to say. He hasn’t shown the full extent of his abilities at any point thus far. This bout is the same as an instant knockout. I have no doubt he will be one of the quarterfinalists, at least. I’m sure everyone else agrees?”

The advisors were all tremendously interested in Jiang Chen’s performance. Some considered a factor of randomness to be at play, but more realized that this young man had a lot of potential – just as the city lord had said. There were some amazing fights after Jiang Chen’s as well.

Finally, all thirty-two bouts were completed. The winners advanced to round two. Only two steps remained until the top eight could be decided.

All the geniuses fortunate enough to win in the first round were serious, their fighting spirits high. They knew that they were about to become the city lord’s important retainers, thus entering the executive layer of society. This was an opportunity that they’d never had before!

“After the end of the first round, the winners may rest for four hours. The second round will be held after the intermission.”

The shortness of the break illustrated how time was clearly of the essence. Those who’d triumphed after a difficult round were especially bitter. After all, it would take a lot of time for them to recover their strength and stamina. Four hours were far from enough.

Thankfully, all of these were top tier geniuses. This meant they possessed pills that could rapidly restore vitality. It was necessary for them to consume the pills at this crucial time, given the hard requirement to recoup their strength as quickly as possible.

The second battle would only get harder, not easier. In light of that, pills were downed generously.

In the first round, Jiang Chen was among the minority who’d had an easy fight. It could be said that he hadn’t even warmed up. One look had been enough to end the fight, costing him no energy whatsoever.

He didn’t waste away the four hours given. He closed his eyes, meditating on the sight of every battle he’d witnessed. His mind processed them many times over.

Though Jiang Chen was very confident, he knew that knowing one’s enemy was the most sure way to victory. After watching fight after fight, he was able to find the winners’ various advantages. Doing so gave him a preliminary overview of his potential opponents’ strengths.

Four hours passed in no time at all.

“Alright, time’s up. Next is the drawing for the second elimination round. Just like last time, you’ll get new numbers.”

Jiang Chen was number nine this time, another auspicious number. His opponent was number seventeen.

“Number seventeen?” He immediately called up the images of this candidate.

Wasn’t that person a little fatty? He had won in the first round, but not through overwhelming means. He seemed a flexible and capricious combatant.

His memory hadn’t betrayed him. A pale-skinned fatty was sneaking furtive looks at him from not far off.

This fatty was unquestionably different from Wang Kui. His heart was much clearer about the truth. In fact, he was a bit disappointed after seeing that Jiang Chen was to be his opponent. This wasn’t an attractive candidate by any stretch of the imagination!

[Sovereign of the Three Realms \(WN\)](#)

Chapter 1578: Absolutely Stunning

Compared to previous opponents, the little fatty displayed no impudence after entering the arena. Instead, he feigned weakness.

Pretending weakness, eh?

Jiang Chen was unmoved. Whether his opponent was a braggart or a wimp, his own performance wouldn’t be affected.

"I'm Lin Hui. My martial cultivation is rather shallow. After seeing your incredible skill, friend, I don't think I can defeat you. My presence here is just for show. Please go easy on me." The fatty spoke in a defeated tone.

Jiang Chen was completely impassive and didn't bat an eyelid.

And yet, the little fatty suddenly launched into motion. His body sprang up like a bouncy leather ball, propelling with rapidity that was the opposite of what his figure would suggest. Once airborne, he scattered a rain of snowflake-like throwing weapons at Jiang Chen's head.

A remarkable sneak attack!

In response, Jiang Chen's body flared with aureate light. In the next moment, the hail of weapons were stopped in place in a one-yard radius around him. It was as if they'd encountered resistance from the very air itself.

A layer of gold light floated above Jiang Chen's skin, blocking the concealed weapons from proceeding. The magnetic force he projected was impossibly effective against metallic weapons. He hadn't let down his guard from the start.

Despite the fatty's front, Jiang Chen had been prepared for a fight all this time beneath his calm exterior. He'd long detected his opponent's killing intent. Thus, he hadn't been surprised by the fatty's leap at all. Everything had been within expectations.

The fatty was surprised that his ambush hadn't worked.

"You can have them back," Jiang Chen smiled faintly. The snowflake-shaped weapons hovering outside the magnetic light surged back to their original owner in an umbrella formation.

Though the fatty was sizable, his evasive techniques weren't to be underestimated. He was oddly nimble, and he caught all of the weapons in a casual motion using unknown methods.

This surprised Jiang Chen in turn. As casual as the counterattack had seemed, he had used real strength behind it. He hadn't expected the fatty to be just as proficient in catching weapons.

His consciousness moved to detect something else. Between the fatty's sleeves was a transparent net. The net couldn't be seen by naked sight alone, but it was the greatest support for the fatty manipulating his concealed weapons.

Jiang Chen braced himself. The fatty wasn't a simple opponent to beat. If he wasn't on his toes during battle, he would very likely be caught unawares by the net. Once caught by the net, he wouldn't be able to use his most powerful abilities.

The competition didn't allow heaven-defying treasures, but standard items with a personal bent were completely permitted. If the fatty was used to using the net on a regular basis, he wasn't breaking the rules.

Jiang Chen sneered at the fatty, who was now darting about, light as a swallow, upon the arena.

“Lin Hui, was it? It’s not easy to move like that for someone of your size. Plus, you look far more honest than you actually are. I can see how people would be tricked by you.” His cool voice echoed forth. “But if you want to compare speed, let’s do it!”

As he said this, he activated his Kunpeng Meteoric Escape. His body was as swift and unpredictable as lightning in the clouds, flickering to and fro.

The fatty found it impossible to pin down his enemy’s specific location. Threats advanced from all sides. The pressure on him mounted instantly.

Still, he kept his calm. His large physique immediately plummeted. He grasped his net a bit more tightly within his sleeves, ready to launch a lethal strike at any time. Like a poisonous cobra, the fatty was waiting for a chance to strike.

“Do you think only you have a signature weapon?” Jiang Chen stated coldly. “Your giant net might fool others, but I can see it clear as day.”

He opened a hand as he said this. Nine flying swords soared out from nothingness.

The Heavenly Chalice Sword Formation, nine blades!

This was the most basic form of the formation. He didn’t need anything stronger against a great emperor.

The nine swords continually morphed into new shapes, until they finally transformed into an endless storm of golden light. A sea of blades rained down in the fatty’s direction, casting a shadow over every cardinal.

“A sword formation?” The fatty was experienced enough to take counteraction in the face of such furious, grave danger. He wove his sleeves about, using the invisible net as a defensive tool to catch most of the lights.

Jiang Chen watched the scene with impassivity. He rubbed his hands together with a twist, bringing down blast after blast of magnetic wind.

A magnetic windstorm distorted the fabric of space itself. It wasn’t just a physical attack. Regardless of how strong the fatty’s net was, it couldn’t entirely catch the storm.

After breaking through to great emperor, Jiang Chen’s magnetic windstorms were thousands of times stronger than they had been previously. It was as if he had torn space asunder, allowing a myriad of currents to escape. For a time, chaos filled the air.

The little fatty was an experienced enough genius, but this was his first encounter with magnetic windstorms such as these. He felt his entire body being sapped of its strength. His limbs refused to move, and countless razors from the storm cut at his flesh.

Many in the audience drew sharp gasps of surprise when they saw the battle proceed. They’d seen many things in their lifetime, but the fatty’s difficult situation made them instinctively wary. What could they do, if they were to trade places with the fatty, Lin Hui?

Even some of the geniuses who had won with superior strength widened their eyes. They watched the fight with weighty looks, loath to miss anything. Many hearts were disturbed by what they were witnessing.

A thought flickered into the head of every advancing genius, including those who hadn't been eliminated. Can I beat an opponent like this?

Who knew?

Finally, the magnetic windstorm's punishment concluded. The fatty crashed to the ground, kicking up a cloud of dust.

The intense friction of the windstorm had apparently done a number on him. He looked a lot thinner and more elongated. Thankfully, he still had plenty of fat left, which cushioned him from falling to death.

Still, the fight had been decisive.

The fatty struggled a few times to get up, but fell back down with a huff. He had nothing to regret. There was no chance for him to win against someone like Jiang Chen in the first place.

Obviously, Jiang Chen didn't need to be declared the winner. After walking off stage, he felt a marked increase in respect and consideration from the gazes of those around him.

He had won too easily against Wang Kui, so although everyone had taken notice that he was a tough enemy, they hadn't actually thought of him as their greatest threat. This was no longer true now that he'd defeated Lin Hui. Ignoring the looks of those around him, Jiang Chen returned to his seat.

He was participating in this selection not to win the admiration nor fear of others. His goal remained unchanged. He wanted to get closer to the city lord and acquire more secrets, so that he could leave Winterdraw as soon as possible!

In the secret room, the advisors were heaping praise on the young man's amazing performance.

"That youth really did hide his strength. He has extraordinary foundations and knowledge, hmm? His methods are quite varied. This kid has a lot of potential."

"Hmm, that kid really is different from the others! I think he'll get into the top eight, no problem. So one of the spots is decided already, eh?"

"Well, it certainly looks like it."

"Hard to say. What if he encounters another extremely strong opponent? A match between similarly strong people is decided by the smallest of gaps."

Most officials held a favorable view of Jiang Chen's performance. A few doubted his potential performance, but not his absolute strength. They just couldn't quite accept what they'd seen just yet.

Xie Wushang was beginning to have some ideas of his own. The chief warden has commanded every faction on Winterdraw to select young geniuses. What is he planning to do with them? Are the honored guests going to be able to take their pick as slaves or send them on a mission?

The city lord didn't know what the chief warden intended, but regret was creeping in at the thought of handing the young man over.

He saw things from a much higher vantage point than his advisors. In Jiang Chen, he saw limitless possibility.

Xie Wushang didn't want to give up a genius like him for free. If a genius with his potential could stay at Sin City, he was sure to grow into greatness. In fact, the boy would be qualified to become his successor!

Hesitation wracked the city lord in these moments. Was he really going to give the young man up if the youth distinguished himself in the end?

He'd seen more than his fair share of geniuses, but this youth was entirely different.

"City Lord, do you think this young man can make it to the top eight?" an advisor asked his silent lord curiously.

Xie Wushang smiled smoothly. "Not only that, he is sure to take the crown!"

Such high praise astounded all of the officials present.

[Sovereign of the Three Realms \(WN\)](#)

Chapter 1579: The Final Opponen

"City Lord, is that kid really that strong?"

"Champion?? That requires overwhelming superiority. Many of my geniuses have just as much talent as him."

"To think the city lord thinks so highly of this youth!"

Xi Wushang waved his hand. "Do any of you have definite information about him?"

An official checked the documents. "He arrived in the city not long ago. He even had his share of run-ins with the city guards a while ago and completed several good deeds in passing."

"Good deeds?" The crowd blinked collectively.

Virtue was almost foreign to Sin City. Its inhabitants knew only evil. The city wouldn't have been called such otherwise.

"Correct. Soon after arriving in the city, he saved a poisoned middle-aged cultivator on the verge of dying. Afterwards, he ran into trouble with the city guards, but provided critical care for a guard commander's wife when that was cleared up."

The information wasn't all that important for the upper echelons in the city lord manor, so few had previously paid attention. However, as Jiang Chen's star shone brighter and brighter in the selection, they reached back to unearth more about him. Even Xie Wushang's curiosity was piqued now.

"Which guard commander?"

“Yong Peng of the third battalion, eleventh squad.”

“Do you have more precise intelligence?” Xie Wushang’s interest was thoroughly roused.

The city lord manor had a vast information network. Since they’d discovered the matter in the first place, they’d naturally acquired minute details as well.

The official quickly narrated the whole affair from beginning to end, adding, “Yong Peng’s wife had a strange illness. He hired many pill emperors to diagnosis his wife, but none found the root of her disease. For some reason, he invited a young and unfamiliar face, but lo and behold, he struck luck this time!”

Xie Wushang stayed silent for a long while. “This young man is truly something.”

“Isn’t he? Although, it’s no surprise so many pill emperors failed to diagnose the wife. Few would associate her issue with his cultivation.”

“This means this young kid is truly a good seed.”

“City Lord, we’ve really struck gold this time!”

Xie Wushang smiled wryly. “Sadly, the chief warden is the one who requested the selection. He’ll be in charge of those qualified, even if they belong to the city lord manor in name.”

The officials looked on with envy.

“City Lord, isn’t that a lucky break for these fellows? Is the chief going to grant them freedom?”

“The chief must have his reason to value the selection so highly. It might really be a great chance for these guys!”

No matter how high their cultivation, freedom was the number one dream for Winterdraw’s inhabitants. Unlike outsiders, they were deprived of it from birth, hence it was their greatest obsession.

The officials were greater than the candidates in status and cultivation, but jealousy crept in at the thought of the latter’s possible opportunity.

Xie Wushang remarked placidly, “The chief’s intentions aren’t for the likes of us to speculate. Do you think freedom will fall into their lap on its own? Even if offered the chance, they’ll have to pay a price to match, so there’s no need to be envious.”

The officials nodded in agreement after a moment of contemplation. The chief warden had ruled over Winterdraw for many years. When had he ever been so generous? There was no free lunch in the world.

True, opportunity was essential, but strength and luck were also equally important. No matter how great the opportunity, one couldn’t grasp it without enough strength.

The elimination stage proceeded unimpeded.

The fighting raged fiercer as it went on. The first round had been unremarkable, but things were much more heated now that the top thirty two vied for a spot in the last sixteen. Few candidates held an

overwhelming victory, especially this far in the competition. Most duels were intense and evenly-fought. Jiang Chen's easy victory was an exception.

Jiang Chen observed the developments, serene despite the increasingly furious battles, ready to tackle any opponent in his way.

One more. One last victory and I'll be one of elite round's winners. His eyes suddenly gleamed. He looked at a certain place inside the hall, his gaze skimming over light as a feather before looking away. It seemed that, hidden in a corner, the city lord had been observing them from the start.

The curtains finally fell on the second round's bitter head-to-heads, leaving only sixteen left.

"The second round is complete. The sixteen of you have won the right to participate in the final round. Half among you will become the lucky ones to enjoy wealth, a title, and some of the best the city lord manor has to offer. Just like the last time, you have four hours to rest. We'll begin immediately after!"

It was rather a short respite, especially for the many exhausted after two bouts. For them, four hours were a small window to recuperate. The candidates spared no expense at this stage. Those with depleted stamina tossed various recovery pills into their mouths.

The final goal was almost within reach, so no one was willing to give up. Everyone wanted to be among the last ones standing.

Jiang Chen was rather relaxed in comparison. He hadn't been greatly taxed thus far. His second fight had been a little more complicated than the first one, but still not enough to really test him.

At this moment, at least half of the other fifteen secretly prayed to not draw him for their last opponent. They'd been cowed by his earlier display.

Four hours flew by.

The supervisor smiled. "Alright, I wish I could give you more time, but we're on a tight schedule. The rules are the rules. I hope you're back to your best condition! We'll now proceed with the final bouts. I don't have to tell you what winning entails. Now, let's attribute new numbers and draw lots for the pairings."

To avoid confusion, fresh numbers were allocated after every round. The candidates were assigned a number between one and sixteen. Jiang Chen was number six, and he drew number nine.

"Tsk tsk, thank goodness the two of them have run into each other!"

"Haha, great, a clash between a tiger and a dragon. That's one less problem for us to worry about."

Number nine had also been a strong force in the previous two rounds. His first opponent had been killed in one blow, and the second effortlessly blown out of the ring.

Like the young lord, he was one of the four rising stars, so the rest sighed in relief. Not having to face these two fearsome combatants lessened their burden. It was the best news possible for them.

Number nine's coolly arrogant gaze landed a few times on Jiang Chen. Although proud, he was still on his toes against his opponent.

As for Jiang Chen, he'd already taken note of number nine before. If he recalled correctly, the man was called Su Hong and he possessed immeasurably deep fighting prowess.

The man hadn't gone all out in the previous two bouts, so Jiang Chen didn't know much about his fighting style. But that was of little consequence as for him as no opponent was worth paying particular attention to. Su Hong was a tall obstacle for others, but not much to speak of in front of the young lord.

The upcoming duel enlivened the officials.

"A clash between these two will be the pinnacle of this competition!"

"Haha, this Jiang fellow's finally met his match. I heard that young Su Hong's risen very fast in the past twenty years. He's apparently in the top three of the island's younger generation. He's well-known among the jianghu."

"Indeed, he's made quite a name for himself. It's surprising to see him willing to participate!"

"Is that truly so surprising? Despite his fame, he's nothing more than a vagrant wandering cultivator. On Winterdraw, you need a faction in your corner, so the city lord's a sensible choice."

"Haha, the fight promises to be spectacular."

"City Lord, what do you think? What are Jiang Huang's chances of winning?"

Xie Wushang was in no hurry to speak. He remained silent for a long time before sighing quietly. "Su Hong isn't bad, but my guts tell me he stands no chance whatsoever."

"What?" Had they heard wrong? Su Hong was a strong and famous genius among the island's juniors. How could he stand no hope of winning against an obscure Jiang Chen from nowhere?

The city lord's baffling judgment was too difficult for them to swallow.

[Sovereign of the Three Realms \(WN\)](#)

Chapter 1580: Image Against Image

Xie Wushang refrained from explaining himself. "Just keep watching if you don't believe me."

He had no concrete basis for his opinion. It was simply the intuition of a powerhouse, an appraisal born from sheer instinct

Su Hong wasn't half bad and did indeed deserve his spot among the island's top young geniuses. Even so, his demeanor fell short compared to this mysterious youngster surnamed Jiang.

The city lord had paid Jiang Chen little heed before his sudden rise. But when he focused attention on the youth, he'd noticed innumerable shocking things about the youngster.

Xie Wushang even had the impression that his empyrean subordinates might not be enough to cope with the power hidden inside the young man. Of course, that was nothing but intuition. He had no definite evidence.

The last round had finally arrived.

The face-off between Jiang Chen and Su Hong was last, a clear indication of the importance of their match. Since it was widely recognized as the strongest fight, saving it for last made for a powerful climax and a fitting conclusion to today's events.

The seven first duels were all the more disputed given Jiang Chen and Su Hong's absence. Many would've given up against these two superstars. But now they could see the light of hope without the twin disruptions. As a result, they fought to the bitter end.

No one showed fear or pulled their punches against opponents of the same level. They all had the same idea in mind: to give it their all and crush the opponent. The esteemed position would be theirs for the taking!

This drive drove every participant to peak performance, making their contests so much more spectacular than the previous rounds. Of course, it also brought out new levels of ruthlessness.

Jiang Chen paid little heed to them. His only opponent was Su Hong, why should he observe non-potential opponents? Fights of this level weren't worth his attention.

Su Hong must be outstanding in certain aspects to be such a hot candidate. But it seems he's not as composed as he appears.

Jiang Chen smiled coldly to himself. Su Hong had secretly looked his way more than once. The man wouldn't have made these furtive moves if his confidence wasn't merely for show.

I hope you won't disappoint me. Otherwise, this selection would really be too boring. The young lord hoped Su Hong could bring some spice to the fight.

Of course, very little would surprise him in a fight between great emperors, but this last fight might produce a worthy memory at least.

Duels followed each other, verdicts delivered after bitter fighting. Every winner walked down the stage riddled with wounds. The first four duels ended up as hard-fought victories, but the fifth one was a one-sided affair. Another acclaimed candidate crushed his opponent with relative ease.

The sixth one was again a bitter victory, and so was the seventh!

"Tsk tsk, the third round is as intense as I thought. But there's still the most anticipated duel left. It's probably going to be the most ghastly fight? I wonder who'll win."

"Of course it'll be Su Hong. Do you even need to ask?"

"Su Hong's one of the greatest geniuses of the young generation. How would he ever lose?"

"Who knows? Number six isn't to be trifled with!"

"How so? Does he have three heads and six arms?"

"Hehe, Su Hong easily won his previous matches, but it's the same for number six. It's hard to tell who will be the final victor!"

The spectators were too many to count as the selection neared its end. Almost all the city's elites had come to join the fun.

“This is the last round. Both of you, please come on stage!”

Sharp lines drew Su Hong’s face, framing his brilliant, starry eyes. His well-proportioned body gave off a feeling of utter perfection. Therein lay the reason for his fame in the city.

A sea of cheering greeted him as soon as he appeared. “Su Hong, we’re with you!”

“Su Hong, you’re the best! Remember, you gotta crush that kid!”

“Su Hong, we won’t forgive you if you don’t stomp him!”

The whole populace seemed behind Su Hong, but this level of support wasn’t surprising given his popularity.

Jiang Chen remained stoic, undaunted by his opponent’s supporters. This was merely the last fight of the selection. What did he care about Su Hong’s legion of fans?

Su Hong glanced indifferently his way, his graceful posture laced with icy arrogance. “Friend, your strength’s commendable, but you stand no chance against me.”

A aggressive challenge, simple and straight to the point. He was trying to forestall his opponent with a show of strength.

Jiang Chen laughed abruptly. “Chances in battle never come from the opponent. Stop wagging your tongue and show me your skills.”

Su Hong’s face clouded over. “Fine, be careful of what you wish for!” Exploding forward, he pounced at Jiang Chen like an eagle. “Thunder Claws!”

He soared into the sky, his figure transforming into an eagle amongst the clouds. A giant claw streaked down like a bolt of lightning towards Jiang Chen, crushing the sky and rumbling the very air with explosive booms that scared people witless.

Jiang Chen smiled coldly. An image art! An eagle, is it?

He was no stranger to attacks via images. Rather than being cowed, he found Su Hong’s move strangely laughable.

Jiang Chen wavered as he rose against the wind. His frame enlarged more than ten times its size under the Golden Light of Demons and Gods. A titanic hand slapped the enormous eagle, shattering the image into clouds of light that vanished without a trace.

The latter was faintly surprise at the destruction of his image, but he sneered when he saw Jiang Chen’s image. “A golden body? Do you think I won’t be able to break that?”

He shook his arms, gathering rays of blue light on his back. In the next moment, the image of an enormous blue eagle surged from his back like an ancient totem come to life. Its presence was that of an ancient god suddenly awakened. The entire world shook under its power; heaven and earth seemed to wail in lament.

“Ancient Divine Eagle, Sovereign’s Descent, devour!”

The eagle dove with a screech, shading the sun and shrouding the entire ring in its shadow. Its wings kicked up countless gusts that darkened the sky in a swirl of sand and gravel.

Jiang Chen was a small skiff on the verge of capsizing inside the giant maelstrom.

“Su Hong is too terrifying! He’s not a top genius for nothing!”

“That kid’s done for. Too bad he drew Su Hong, or he would’ve grabbed one of the eight spots with his strength.”

“Alas, he was too unlucky and faced Su Hong!”

Jiang Chen’s situation seemed hopeless to the spectators. After all, the divine image’s power shrouded the entire stage. The kid’s figure was enveloped by the oppressive aura.

Even the officials started doubting the city lord’s words. Wasn’t Su Hong supposed to stand no chance?

Where are the kid’s shocking methods? He didn’t even dispel Su Hong’s attack.

Then again, what kind of method a great emperor could come up with against an attack of this magnitude?

Su Hong’s offensive power was almost exceeding the limits of his realm.

At that moment, a loud chant arose in the midst of the storm.

Yes, a chant.

It was near inaudible at the beginning, but reached everyone’s ears in the next moment. It was indeed a voice lifted in chant! It brimmed with majesty, undaunted by the endless maelstrom and the colossal gusts.

And then!

A crack appeared inside the boundless tempest, followed by a sharp ray of light piercing the storm. An astounding current erupted to the clouds.

Boom!

The current lifted a blinding pillar of light!

A dragon! A true dragon!

To be more precise, the image of a true dragon! Enormous currents revolving around its body, it ripped apart the storm created by the eagle. Showing no mercy, its fangs tore through eagle’s meticulously orchestrated attack as if the latter was paper!

A roar exploded from the dragon’s mouth.

Dragon roar!

Image against image, true dragon tearing through giant eagle!

An encounter on a narrow path leaves only the brave standing!

The divine eagle was a decent fearsome existence, but a dragon was a cut above in every aspect. The latter was one of the four ancient divine creatures, a noble among its kind!

With domineering momentum, the dragon crashed into the eagle, their figures tangling together. Under the impact and a ferocious tear, the eagle image shattered with a loud rumble!

That seemingly peerless divine eagle had been torn to pieces, a flawless victory!