

Three Realms 1591

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

Chapter 1591: Continued Surprises

Without considering any other factors, Jiang Chen was only certain that his consciousness was superior, and an overwhelming advantage at that. His opponent was more than a match in terms of speed, martial potential, and combat ability.

The fight was turning white-hot. Jiang Chen noticed through his consciousness that his opponent wasn't much interested in fighting anymore after repeated failed moves. In fact, he seemed to be looking to retreat.

No way. It took a lot of effort to get him here. If he escapes, wouldn't all the clues just dead end? This compelled Jiang Chen to lead the fight to where the Soulless Powder of Wind and Cloud was scattered.

The man in the black cloak found his composure slowly turning to impatience. He hadn't expected his opponent to be still standing. His cards were largely spent. Was his opponent really just a candidate from Winterdraw?

Resentment and doubt filled his heart.

Bam!

The impact of fist against fist sent both combatants stumbling backwards. Such a direct clash taxed them equally. Both Jiang Chen's tempered body and his enemy's possession technique were quite tiring.

"Again!" Veluriyam's young lord pounced in his opponent's direction once more. His opponent fended off the attack off with a flip of his gigantic axe.

"Hold on!" A wave from the stranger signaled to pause the fight.

Jiang Chen remained poised, leering fiercely at his opponent. He wanted to see what other tricks the cloaked man had up his sleeve. The Soulless Powder was about to take full effect.

"You're quite skilled. You aren't one of the candidates from Winterdraw, are you?" The man in the black cloak hadn't quite recovered himself, but his tone now was much less arrogant than it had been at the beginning. The skirmish had forced him to swallow his pride and face reality.

Jiang Chen sneered. "I have the medallion and number to prove it. I'm from Winterdraw through and through. But, I'm certain that you're not!"

"If you don't know who I am, why not call it a draw?" the cloaked man retorted coldly. "Neither of us can take down the other."

"This isn't an arena. There's no such thing as a draw." Jiang Chen shook his head.

"Oh?" The man's voice darkened. "What're you planning to do? You want to finish this decisively? Do you think I'm scared of you?"

"What, aren't you the one scared?" Jiang Chen snickered. "Why else did you stop? Why are you thinking of retreating? You don't want the Goldensable Fleeceflower any more?"

The cloaked man almost coughed up blood. He was a proud scion of the eight houses. Any resident of Winterdraw was less than an ant to him!

He'd been unable to attain an advantage despite having fought with a so-called 'ant' for so long. His lack of success bred feelings of unease. After all, there was a time limit for the competition. He couldn't waste much time in a fight with minimal chances of victory.

No matter how strong his opponent was, he was just one of the elites from Winterdraw and only worth five points.

If the five points were out of his grasp, there was no point in sticking around. In fact, it would be downright stupid to. There were sixty elite candidates in all. Why spend time mucking around with this absurdly tough one?

The little contest between the eight houses appeared quite ordinary on the surface, but it was actually a cloak-and-dagger bout of intrigue. No one wanted to, or could afford to lose given the high stakes.

The Goldensable Fleeceflower was valuable, but what his house stood to gain from winning the competition far outweighed it. The cloaked man glared fire at Jiang Chen, as if he wanted to incinerate the youth with a look alone.

"You got lucky this time. I have other matters to attend to." He suppressed his frustration in the end. After delivering a punchy one-liner, he decided to use his speed to escape.

"Do you think you can still get away?" Jiang Chen smiled easily.

The cloaked man's look grew dour. "What? Do you think you actually have the ability to defeat me? Don't be naive. It's impossible for us to conclude our fight even with another fortnight of dueling."

"I wouldn't be so hasty." Jiang Chen's tone was layered with blackened humor. According to his calculations, the Soulless Powder was about to kick in right... now.

"Hmph. Keep dreaming." The black-cloaked man was stoic enough to ignore his seething fury. It was better to avoid conflict with such a sharp enemy.

Suddenly, his face colored as he detected something errant. A simple probing of his qi ocean plunged his mood deep into the abyss. After the short break, his qi had been sealed away by some unknown force!

An alarming chill ran down the man's spine, spreading to his limbs. A glance out of his peripheral vision saw a mocking smile hanging on his opponent's face. An ominous premonition sent cold sweat down his back.

"Submit to your fate. I don't care who you are. I gave you two choices: either you take off the cloak yourself, or I do it for you." Jiang Chen's voice held a gravity reserved for judgment.

"You underhanded bastard!" The stranger had plainly noticed the bind and danger he was in. He tossed a foreign object into the air, making an odd light to soar and scatter into the skies.

Jiang Chen wasn't quick enough to stop him from doing so. "What, calling your friends?" he snickered. "You're too naive." He stepped forward in great strides, picking up the stranger with his bare hands.

Whoosh!

The cloak was torn off in a single, fluid motion, revealing a young man with mildly sinister features. He looked several years younger than Jiang Chen.

Jiang Chen drew a sharp breath. "Just as I thought."

He recognized this youth among the honored guests that the Rejuvenation Isles had invited. Those so-called 'honored guests' had brought a group of young geniuses with them. This particular youth had been among their ranks.

"You recognize me?" the uncloaked stranger paled.

"I don't and I don't see much of a need to. You're my enemy and you wanted to kill me. For that, you deserve to die." Jiang Chen's tone grew murderous.

"You dare kill me?" the stranger screeched. "Do you know who I am? Killing me will only bring trouble to Winterdraw. The same goes for the Rejuvenation Isles!"

"Is that so?" Jiang Chen burst out into laughter. "You're only convincing me of the correctness of my actions. Winterdraw is where prisoners are exiled. Do you think we prisoners care about bringing trouble here? It's not like it'll affect our freedoms, eh?"

The stranger's heart froze. "Hmph! Do you think you'll be able to preserve yourself in the midst of calamity? No one will be left alive on Winterdraw. Can you pacify the anger of nobles from a divine nation?"

Nobles from a divine nation? Jiang Chen had guessed the honored guests to be rather important. It was quite possible they were from one of the Ten Divine Nations. His guess had apparently been proven correct.

"You're from the Ten Divine Nations?" He delayed going for the kill as his curiosity had been piqued.

His opponent was out of tricks anyway. The Soulless Powder meant that his life was unequivocally in Jiang Chen's hands. There was no harm in extracting some potentially useful information.

Or perhaps this fellow still thought he could stall until a compatriot came to the rescue?

"That's right." The black-cloaked man puffed out his chest. It remained unchanged that he felt he was owed prestige thanks to his origin.

"Which divine nation?" Jiang Chen asked coolly.

"Do you really need to know? Are you prepared to oppose a divine nation?" The stranger thought that the mere mention of a divine nation was sufficient to intimidate his captor.

His lack of responsiveness was frustrating. Suddenly, Jiang Chen's ears twitched. He sensed several energy signatures flying toward his direction. He was shaken by this revelation.

There wasn't much left he could squeeze out of this young man in particular. Nodding slightly, he walked over with a cross between a grin and a grimace. A layer of frost formed atop his right palm, shimmering like a cold, blue flame.

The stranger felt Jiang Chen's mountainous pressure. His arrogance and pretentiousness melted away. "Hold on, I'll tell you. The Polylore Divine Nation's eight houses have twenty-four geniuses here..."

His words were cut short by a scream.

An arrow had lodged itself into his chest.

Jiang Chen braced himself, stunned by the sudden appearance of the arrow. He hadn't had the time to react to it until it had already hit its mark.

Such a life-seeking projectile was fearsome indeed!

He had a feeling that a more difficult opponent had appeared — someone that Jiang Chen had no interest in staying around for. He picked up the cloaked man's storage ring, then fled with a flash of escaping light.

The cloaked man was from a place as prominent as Polylore Divine Nation. His storage ring was sure to be a treasure trove of goodies. The Nether Flames alone were enough for him to take a gamble!

His speed was unaffected by the grueling battle he had just experienced. A few moments was enough to put the battlefield behind him completely. The cloaked man's corpse remained where it was, his eyelids still open.

In the next moment, another ghostly figure landed beside the cadaver. This one wore a cloak of greyish-white.

The second stranger's eyes were even keener. It was as if they could divine all the world's truths in only a few blinks.

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Chapter 1592: The Truth

Another cloaked person. Jiang Chen was shocked by the scope of the situation. Cloaked genius after cloaked genius, each stronger than the next. The newcomer surpassed his predecessor in both poise and strength. Jiang Chen sobered up even more so.

"Polylore Divine Nation? The eight houses?" He glanced at the latest stranger with emotionless eyes.

This new stranger cut an odd figure. Whenever he moved, a watery ripple surrounded him. It was difficult to lock onto him. He bore an ancient carved bow upon his back, his eyes sharp and incisive. Someone with a weak consciousness would've been utterly crushed with a simple sweep of the eye.

"Not bad. You're rather exceptional among the natives on Winterdraw to be able to defeat that Xue Feng so handily." The new stranger's voice was as indistinct as his person.

Jiang Chen smiled faintly, his heart as astute as a polished mirror. Xue Feng huh?

"Why don't we go with this. Put down the Goldensable Fleeceflower and I'll let you have a fifteen minute head start. If you escape my pursuit after that, then you'll have escaped with your life. If not,

then it's your unlucky day. How about it?" The stranger sounded like he was having a discussion, but it was yet another judgment.

Jiang Chen snickered to himself. These geniuses from Polylore sure were a proud bunch. Did they think that everyone else's lives lay in their hands?

He had seen plenty of people like that in his time. This wasn't much to be surprised about.

"You want the Fleeceflower?" he smiled faintly. "Sure. Show me your skills." He glanced at Xue Feng. "However..." his voice was evenhanded, "I hope you're ready to follow in his footsteps."

Flippancy flashed through the stranger's eyes. "You think too highly of yourself." He shook his head with complete ease.

"I suppose Xue Feng can be called a genius, but I'm on an entirely different level. Think again if you think you can pull the same trick twice with that powder." He delivered this in a reserved tone, but there was undeniable deep-seated pride.

Jiang Chen saw little point in arguing. He had many more methods – the Soulless Powder had been one of the most trivial. The newcomer was indeed superior to Xue Feng, but not overwhelmingly so. His archery had slain Xue Feng before the latter could say more, but Jiang Chen was a master of the bow in his own right.

His storied experiences with the Da Yu bow, the Sunpiercer, and now the Holy Dragon Bow proved that he had plenty of methods in that department. The Holy Dragon Bow was a crowning treasure of the Primosanct Sect. Even right now, he could access only a fraction of its full power. Thus, he was unafraid of his opponent in the ranged combat arena.

"Polylore Divine Nation's geniuses, hmm?" Jiang Chen grinned. "Don't you think it was foolish to come to Winterdraw to throw away your lives? I think you should've stayed home today."

The new stranger's pupils contracted violently. His killing intent flared, then disappeared. "You're optimistic," he glared coldly at Jiang Chen. "If I'm correct, less than half of you thousand-odd trial-goers remain. I wonder if any will be alive still after fifteen days are up."

Jiang Chen glanced toward Xue Feng's corpse. "And him?"

"Did you kill him?" The stranger smiled faintly. "Don't forget, I did. You Winterdraw dupes are prey. P-r-e-y. Do you understand?"

"Prey?" Jiang Chen frowned.

"That's right. You were destined to be prey since the beginning of your selection. We are the proud children of Polylore Divine Nation. You're just a bunch of ragtag prisoners and fated to be no better than lambs to the slaughter.

"A thousand people and more are just toys for us real geniuses in this great hunt. Hah, did Winterdraw's chief warden make you some kind of promise? Did you think an opportunity had come? Did you think your troubles were over?" His tone was filled with mockery.

Jiang Chen drew in a sharp breath. The stranger's words raised great waves in his heart. The events surrounding the selection forced him to a painful conclusion: the stranger had in all likelihood told the truth. The so-called selection and opportunity had been a sham from the start.

The new stranger was secretly pleased at Jiang Chen's silence. "Disappointed, hmm? Angry? But what good will those emotions do you?

"Prisoners will be prisoners, and pathetic is as pathetic does. Here in Myriad Abyss, the world of martial dao is a cruel place. Your birth decides your fate. You have some skills, certainly better than most or all of the other prisoners. But that's life for you. Remember, you can't possibly overcome fate. No matter how you struggle, it won't do a thing!"

Fate?

Jiang Chen laughed out of great anger. Yes, Polylore Divine Nation was one of the strongest factions in Myriad Abyss Island. The eight houses of that divine nation were likely quite prominent in light of that.

But so what?

This newcomer's tone and behavior reminded him of House Xiahou in the Eternal Divine Nation. In particular, he felt that the enemy he hadn't seen yet – Xiahou Zong – was likely the same kind of person.

Despite not having met him, Jiang Chen was absolutely sure that he couldn't possibly be much different. Condescending, egotistical, and completely vain about their perceived role in the world – someone that could control the lives of others from above.

Jiang Chen was infinitely disgusted by this kind of attitude. At the same time, he felt utter shame for having been fooled by the selection. Perhaps Sin City's lord, Xie Wushang, had been fooled as well. The weak really were pawns to be toyed with by the strong. Sometimes, their lives were no better than inanimate objects to these rich and powerful people, used only for benefit or enjoyment.

Indignation and ire surged out from his heart, transforming into an enormous bonfire. Jiang Chen suddenly felt an indescribable hatred for all of this. Killing intent burst forth from his eyes.

"Haha, aren't you angry? Furious? Don't hide it. This is the kind of reaction you should have." The stranger seemed to like playing with his food. Jiang Chen's anger fed his joy. He was having the time of his life.

"What's your name?" Finally getting his fury under control, Jiang Chen intoned in a low voice.

"What? Do you have to know? You're about to die. Are you planning to seek revenge on me in the afterlife?" the stranger jeered.

"Identify yourself. I do not kill nameless fools." Jiang Chen declared coolly.

"Hahaha, you're certainly a braggart." The stranger cackled recklessly, his eyes full of derision.

Jiang Chen disregarded his opponent's conceit. "I'd like to thank you before you die," he nodded woodenly. "I appreciate knowing the truth. Very good. My role has changed, here and now!"

"Oh?" the stranger responded with a half-smirk.

"I am no longer the hunted, but a hunter. There were twenty-four of you geniuses from Polylore, hmm? Xue Feng was the first. You are the second. There will be a third, a fourth, and so on..." Jiang Chen was completely dispassionate as he described this.

The newcomer looked at him like he was a fool. The corner of his mouth twitched. "An ant is only stupid when it does not understand its weakness," he scoffed. "Enough bluster, kid."

He flared his aura as he said this, projecting supercooled air more frigid than a glacier. It was as if the space was being frozen over. At the same time, the ancient carved bow on his back made it into his fingers.

Most concerningly, the pensive face behind the cloak erupted with a mystic light. A third eye of energy had been opened thanks to a divine art. The extra orb was more piercing than a regular eye. It radiated a cryptic aura of malevolence.

A ray of gloom shot toward Jiang Chen, a cold will invading his consciousness through the air.

Jiang Chen snickered. "You want to surprise me with a bit of consciousness like that?"

He opened up his own consciousness to its maximum, his Evil Golden Eye blasting two beams of aureate light out of both sockets. They flew at his adversary like twin arrows.

Under the reinforcement of Jiang Chen's powerful consciousness, the Evil Golden Eye was virtually undefeatable. The golden beams shattered the eerie light, then continued towards their intended target with virtually no loss of momentum.

The stranger muttered a soft "hmm?", evidently a little surprised.

His third eye closed, then opened once more. Rippling circles of willpower rushed outwards in watery waves, creating an invisible wall that stood in the golden light's way. Even so, the Evil Golden Eye's powerful piercing stabbed the stranger's brain with pain. It was as if a gold needle had pricked his very consciousness.

The new stranger was badly shaken. He had underestimated Jiang Chen a little before now, but that was no longer the case.

How can he have such a robust consciousness and terrifying ocular skills? He hid his strength during the fight with Xue Feng? He could've beaten Xue Feng using this alone!

The grey-cloaked man had no hint of his prior smugness. He had suffered a considerable loss in the ocular duel. A pang of danger about the situation struck him. Remembering Xue Feng's loss made him extremely wary.

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Chapter 1593: Facing Off With Archery Skills

The second stranger was ranked higher than Xue Feng among the twenty-four geniuses of the eight houses. Xue Feng had been seventh or eighth, though people in the top ten often rated themselves able to compete with the top five.

In actuality, those solidly among the top five were easily head and shoulders above him. The new stranger in the grey cloak was named Xuan Rui. He was fifth among the twenty-four geniuses. He had earned his rank through repeated intense competition, and thus the number held water.

However, he was no better than that. All who were ranked higher than him deserved their ranks too.

As the fifth ranked genius among all the young geniuses of Polylore's eight houses, his talent was definitely exceptional in his generation. In fact, he was the cream of the crop in the entirety of Myriad Abyss Island. There were perhaps only two hundred able to compete with him on the same level.

Therefore, Xuan Rui had more than enough confidence to base his pride on. He just hadn't expected such a tough bone among Winterdraw's pack of prey.

As one of Polylore's best geniuses, he had a large breadth of experience. He'd suffered a minor loss in the arena of eye arts, but his morale was stoked instead. He discarded pretense and conceit, fully devoting himself to the fight.

A genius on the level of Xuan Rui was quite terrifying when he became serious.

"I didn't expect you to have refined ocular skills too. What a surprise." Xuan Rui coughed out a grating laugh. "My Wind Vision's only reached perfection, so that was just an appetizer. Don't get excited too early."

Jiang Chen smiled coolly. "Does everyone from Polylore like to run their mouth like you?"

Xuan Rui inclined his head. The acerbic comment had pierced his self-esteem in a painful way. Since first making his way into the world, he'd never encountered a genius opponent who had shamed and ridiculed him so.

The geniuses of Polylore didn't dare be so blunt in their pre-fight banter.

"Keep being so full of yourself, kid. This will be the last chance to in your life." As he said this, Xuan Rui retrieved the carved bow from his back. His entire body tensed like a living bowstring, readying himself for combat.

A master archer embodied perfection in all things, whether it came to poise, posture, or opportunity. For the highest ideal of a marksman, each arrow should ideally produce one kill.

Jiang Chen responded in kind by producing the Holy Dragon Bow with one fluid motion.

"Do you think I'm scared of you when it comes to archery?" he sneered.

Xuan Rui was mildly surprised by the maneuver. During Xue Feng's fight, this guy had used every type of method that Xue Feng had chosen. It appeared that the same was happening with him!

He didn't know what to say. Furthermore, he still couldn't lock on to his opponent after all this time!

In archery, it was imperative to lock on to one's opponent during the preliminary stage of the fight. And yet, Xuan Rui hadn't found any openings despite spending quite a while on doing so. No wonder his opponent was so confident about his marksmanship.

One man's failure was a testament to the other's skill.

Alertness filled his heart. Xuan Rui realized that his opponent was really quite capable – and well-equipped too. The bow in the other’s hands exuded an intensely ancient aura, which clearly rivaled or even exceeded the carved weapon in his own hands.

He was unfathomably curious about Jiang Chen’s identity now.

“It doesn’t make sense for Winterdraw to have a genius like you. Where did you come from? How did you come to be exiled to this island?”

Without a doubt, a crack had appeared upon his dao heart.

Jiang Chen snickered to himself. His expertise tipped him off to Xuan Rui’s insecurities. If the young genius from Polylore had been able to target him successfully, there would’ve been no reason whatsoever to bother talking any more. A single arrow to harvest a life would have sufficed.

There was only be one reason why Xuan Rui was delaying: he didn’t have the advantage he wished for.

Of course, Jiang Chen had put up his guard immediately when his opponent had drawn his bow. He was doing everything in his power to avoid losing the upper hand.

There was a bit of an impasse; neither youth could find a chance to strike at the other.

Xuan Rui sighed to himself. This opponent from Winterdraw was more difficult than he could’ve possibly imagined.

If he’d received a response, he could’ve continued further analyzing his opponent’s mindset to find any weaknesses. But his opponent was extremely disciplined and composed. Like a curled-up hedgehog, there was no quarter.

The two young men remained completely impassive. They stood in silence, glaring at each other across the space. At this crucial juncture, whoever moved first could very well lose the initiative.

After a long while, Xuan Rui’s cold voice echoed forth once more. “I admit that I’ve underestimated you, kid. But if you’re going to stand around like this, you’ll surely die first!”

“Why do you say that?” Jiang Chen smiled faintly.

“Easy. My partners will come here after they finish off the other prey. You’ll be stuck in an encirclement then. You’re worth five points for them, a valuable prize worth fighting over. As long as at least one more person shows up, my arrows will send you to the grave.” Xuan Rui began to mount a psychological attack.

Jiang Chen instantly saw through the ruse.

“Partners?” he shook his head scornfully. “I wonder who killed Xue Feng? If Winterdraw’s contestants are your prey, don’t the hunters hunt each other as well? Don’t talk like you’re battle comrades with all of them. Maybe they’ll kill you first, given this golden opportunity.”

He wasn’t making anything up. A competition between aristocratic houses was fierce and brutal. It was quite normal for there to be a lot of fatalities.

In the eyes of these scions, Jiang Chen and company were just fodder. The geniuses on the other hand, were bitter, lifelong rivals. Thus, his words rang truly.

His retort took effect instantly. Xuan Rui was shaken. Just as his enemy had said, a rival that arrived would probably place priority on him rather than the Winterdraw genius. This wouldn't be the case if someone from his own clan came, but only three had come from each house. What guarantee was there that the first visitor would be from House Xuan?

Regret flickered through Xuan Rui's heart. He could have avoided this conflict altogether, but the Goldensable Fleeceflower and the five-point prize had been too attractive. Now, he was stuck in a swamp with no easy way to leave.

Was it better to stay? Or to go? Wasting time doing nothing was the worst choice.

Whether or not his life was being threatened, he wasn't out there getting points during this delay. This was highly disadvantageous to his final score.

Xuan Rui had to warn himself repeatedly to stay calm. Otherwise, it was likely he would be slain by his opponent's arrow. He didn't suspect the truthfulness of this possibility as his opponent had more than enough ability to kill him.

Jiang Chen's strong consciousness and Boulder Heart revealed their benefits now. His dao heart was completely unmoved by the circumstances.

He had methods to break through this standstill, but there was no reason to use them. He wanted to wear down his opponent's patience through the stalemate, then make a fatal strike using his bow.

His purpose was self-improvement. In a confrontation like this, making his enemy reveal weakness first would absolutely result in a killing strike. Grasping the best timing was extremely valuable thing to practice.

Seconds passed into minutes; time ticked away.

The fabric of space seemed to freeze. All living creatures for miles around had fled at the outset of the duel. Even passing spirit creatures and beasts avoided this patch of ground. There was utter silence at the scene.

Jiang Chen lowered his eyes, as if in meditation. Only his Holy Dragon Bow was upraised. He was unmoving like a statue, rapt in the posture of killing. He awaited the right time to strike. His dao heart had never lost to anyone.

Xuan Rui's own was plenty strong, but was shaken by his defied expectations. It was difficult for him to accept the transition from an easy hunt to a difficult standoff.

As time went on, he found it harder and harder to repress his impulses. Wasn't he supposed to be the hunter? Why shouldn't he make the first move?

Had he lost his courage simply because his prey posed an actual threat? Was he a coward?

Xuan Rui felt the invisible, mocking gazes of all his opponents within the eight houses. They were waiting to laugh at him!

Things couldn't be allowed to go on like this. If someone else arrived, the fact that he had been held up by insignificant prey would get out regardless of whether the newcomer was hostile. He would be made the butt of his peers' jokes!

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Chapter 1594: Breaking Through Mid Great Emperor

As Xuan Rui thought extremely highly of himself, being made fun of was something he absolutely despised. Because of this, he could no longer control his impulses. Murderous intent rose. He was bent on going on the offensive. His archery skills would be more than enough to take the initiative, at which point he would shoot his opponent dead.

Xuan Rui roared, acting on his conclusion. His entire body rippled with energy, disturbing the air around him. His third eye opened once more.

When he saw the sight, Jiang Chen knew that his opponent could no longer sit still. He's taking risks! Fantastic.

He hadn't begun the fight because he'd wanted to compete with his opponent's dao heart. Xuan Rui's impatience and interest in fighting pleased him; now was his chance to slay his opponent in one go!

Jiang Chen and his Holy Dragon Bow began to charge up as well. He gathered power from his true dragon bloodline.

Because of the dragon blood in his veins, he could make use of draconic qi. Through repeated experimentation, he'd found that it was quite compatible with the Holy Dragon Bow. Using the qi as fuel caused the bow to be both more powerful and efficient.

It was in the next moment that Xuan Rui made his move.

Almost simultaneously, Jiang Chen moved as well, mirroring his opponent. Countless vines from his Bewitching Lotus of Fire and Ice whipped forward, transforming into images of himself in another blink of the eye. His real body disappeared into space.

The Lotus was an extremely bewitching plant, adept at all kinds of illusions and disguises. Jiang Chen had discovered this characteristic back when he was still in the sage realm.

Now that he was great emperor, the plant had all kinds of attributes it didn't possess before. Currently, over a thousand vines were Jiang Chen's images; an illusory army filling the sky.

Xuan Rui watched the sight with slack-jawed surprise. He was experiencing Xue Feng's despair. His opponent was too powerful. How could someone as terrifying as this possibly be from Winterdraw? How could he be called prey by any stretch of the imagination?

His third eye was pushed to its limits. Psychic waves radiated outward in an attempt to detect and lock onto Jiang Chen's real body.

At this, Jiang Chen stepped up next to Xuan Rui's side. "Know your place."

A dragon roar emitting from his mouth, Jiang Chen summoned forth as much draconic qi as he could muster. He pulled his bow to its fullest draw, firing an arrow that soared with fang and claw like a true dragon. The missile was before his enemy in only a moment.

Jiang Chen's Holy Dragon Bow had killed even empyrean experts. Though Xuan Rui had great potential and combat ability rivaling many empyrean experts, he nevertheless felt his body freeze over at the arrow that his opponent had shot at peak condition.

He instinctively wanted to evade it, but didn't have a chance as he was unprepared. There was no time!

With his last vestiges of intuition, he raised his own bow and fired an arrow to meet it.

It was easy enough for archery experts to find the trajectory of their opponents' arrows. Following from this, interception wasn't particularly difficult either.

But there was an important caveat: the arrow had to travel in a predictable way. If that was no longer true because of especially odd pathing, then things were difficult to say.

The Holy Dragon Bow's arrows followed trajectories that were anything but ordinary. Just as Xuan Rui's arrow was about to clash with Jiang Chen's, the other arrow zoomed right past.

"Not good!" Xuan Rui instantly knew something terrible was going to happen. Alas, it was too late. The arrow had found its mark.

Pfft!

Its shaft buried deep into his left ear, piercing out his right with a burst of red and white gore. Xuan Rui's body shivered, paralyzed in place. In the next moment, his eyes bulged out like those of a dead fish. They were full of despair and incomprehension.

It was the last expression he would ever make.

I lost... A fading thought passed through his mind before he keeled over heavily onto the ground.

Whew!

Jiang Chen took a deep breath. He felt his own mind was rather spent. Because he hadn't used any overwhelming trump card in the fight with Xue Feng, he'd finished that fight rather fatigued. He hadn't used any tricks with the fight against Xuan Rui either. He'd won in the end, but not without significant exertion.

Thankfully it'd at least been good exercise. He was sure to benefit from the experience. There was no value to his practical skills if he relied on defeating opponents through extreme trump cards alone. Use of the Confounding Puppets, the Nine Labyrinth Formation, and so on were best kept to a necessary minimum.

Now that Xuan Rui was dead, Jiang Chen saw no problem in taking his storage ring. Among the effects he took was the identification jade slip. He slammed a palm down on the corpse, reducing it to dust and erasing it from the world. He did the same for Xue Feng after confiscating the jade slip as well.

After disposal of the evidence, Jiang Chen left as quickly as possible.

Xue Feng's signal meant that someone would come over eventually. Jiang Chen had no interest in engaging once more in his current condition. He wouldn't be able to handle yet another strong opponent.

Kunpeng Meteoric Escape in full speed, he disappeared into a streak of light on the spot. He didn't stop moving until he was very far away and had found a secluded corner to recover. The fights just now had tired him out beyond his expectations. He needed to find a place to rest a little.

Jiang Chen saw several sites of fighting on his way there, with a few fragments and carcasses littered about here and there.

It was immediately obvious that they belonged to Winterdraw's contestants. He didn't feel anything for them, but he was nevertheless mildly displeased by their deaths.

After all, they were his comrades in some sense of the word. They had come to the Blackwraith Mountains together – and fallen victim to the same conspiracy together. He felt some hint of sympathy because of this.

Moreover, this further proved that Xuan Rui hadn't lied. He and the other natives of Winterdraw were only here as prey for the eight houses.

"Winterdraw Island! Rejuvenation Isles!" There was an unnameable anger in his heart. "Such shameless behavior just to suck up to Polylore!"

It took a long time for his fury to subside. During his rest, he slowly digested the experiences of the past two battles into his grander repertoire. However grueling the fights had been, they were of vital importance and usefulness for his own improvement.

"Often, it's better and faster to learn by doing. The most important lessons in a cultivator's life are largely taught in battle. There's only so much shutting oneself up in a private room can do. The climb to mastery is filled with ridges upon ridges of conflict."

Without realizing it, three days had passed by.

During this time, Jiang Chen submerged himself in a profoundly meditative state of mind. Countless martial dao secrets came to him in a torrent. Theory had been fleshed out through application, becoming inspiration.

It was time for him to break through once again. One more step, and he would be mid great emperor. Though he was in a dangerous environment, Jiang Chen didn't want to hold himself back. He allowed the marvelous sensation to surge through his body.

A desire to ascend broke through his dam of restraint.

Fwoosh!

Boundless power surged through every extremity. Putrid air poured out through his pores, replaced with spirit energy from heaven and earth.

"Mid great emperor!" Jiang Chen opened his eyes with special joy, experienced only with a cultivation breakthrough.

“At the end of the day, getting my hands dirty helped a lot,” the young man mused. “Polylore Divine Nation’s eight houses... what perfect prey that heaven’s given me!”

More than half of the trial’s time was up.

“I’m going to ignore this so-called trial from now on. I only have one mission before me: hunt down the eight houses’ geniuses.”

Jiang Chen wasn’t the kind of man that surrendered to fate. The truth had especially enraged him. Most of all, he wanted to mount a counterattack against these geniuses from Polylore.

“But I can’t hunt all of them down. Otherwise, the eight houses’ seniors will go mad. My primary objective isn’t to antagonize Polylore, nor is it to kill these geniuses. I need to get out of here.”

His reason reminded him that a hunt was fine, but only to a sensible degree. If he crossed that line and roused all of the eight houses’ accompanying experts, it would be very bad for his future plans here.

The thought allowed him to calm down.

“I have to think of an idea. I need to take advantage of Polylore’s presence here to leave Winterdraw.”

His brain whirled with designs and schemes. Suddenly, a revelation came to him. A daring notion made its way into his head like a thunderclap.

Disguise!

Both Xuan Rui and Xue Feng were dead. Because of that, their identities were technically freed up. If he could pretend to be them and find a way out through deception, would he be able to leave then?

Jiang Chen’s interest was instantly piqued. This was a golden opportunity. The stakes were high, but it was definitely worth trying!

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

Chapter 1595: Encountering More Trouble

Although Jiang Chen was thoroughly disgusted and reviled by Polylore Divine Nation’s eight aristocratic houses, and utterly hated the Rejuvenation Isles for tricking him – he was secretly rather pleased after thinking everything through. This was his big chance, the best he’d had so far after coming to Winterdraw.

Without it, heavens knew how long he would have to wait.

“Who should I pretend to be?” Jiang Chen sank into thought. It wasn’t hard for him to pretend to be Xue Feng. He had wholly absorbed the youth’s source of the Nether Flames. It wasn’t difficult to mimic the evil spirit possession or the giant sword arm, either.

The same was true for Xuan Rui. He had been the most practiced with ocular skills and archery; and so was Jiang Chen. Moreover, Jiang Chen was intimately familiar with Xuan Rui’s aura and behavior after fighting him.

But who should he choose?

He came to a decision reasonably quickly. Xuan Rui was the more suitable option. Compared to Xue Feng, he was more cruel and sinister. That marked him as someone that was likely usually antisocial.

It made pretending to be him even easier. A friendless person was less likely to be questioned about practically anything. Looks and figure were easy enough to copy. As for his cold bearing, maintaining an aura of silence and unapproachability was sufficient.

Jiang Chen rapidly turned himself into a second Xuan Rui. But there was one important problem: he needed a grey cloak. He had totally forgotten about that detail when he killed the youth.

"I need to get my hands on a cloak, hmm?" Jiang Chen had everything else that had belonged to Xuan Rui, as well as all the spoils that Xuan Rui and Xue Feng had carried with them. He was done with Polylore's test.

If he could hunt down another genius, he would have enough to show for someone of Xuan Rui's status.

The devil was in the details. Jiang Chen couldn't risk ignoring them, because his ruse would be flawed without. Though he didn't have a grey cloak in the exact same style, he had plenty of similar ones. He picked a random one for the time being.

A few adjustments later, Jiang Chen disappeared like a wraith on the spot. Now, he was the hunter rather than the hunted. He hunted not Winterdraw's cultivators, but the eight houses' geniuses.

It would be a nightmare for them if Jiang Chen were to go on a killing spree.

Thankfully, he was prioritizing other things first. The geniuses were unwittingly provided succor from the worst.

The area for the trial was stated to be some sixteen hundred miles worth of outskirts in the Blackwraith Mountains. This was a rather large space to hunt down the young geniuses in.

Jiang Chen had a specific goal in his hunt though: only those in grey cloaks were to be killed. Those outside that criterion were left alone, to avoid raising the alarm.

Now that Jiang Chen had shifted gear from picking spirit herbs to hunting down prey, he became highly efficient at his new task.

He didn't interfere in the geniuses' killings of the Winterdraw contestants. The law of the jungle reigned supreme in the world of martial dao. He had no plans of becoming some sort of universal savior for these strangers. He had a strict plan that he needed to stick to.

Alas, none of the hunters he saw wore a grey cloak. This misfortune was slightly depressing.

"The eight houses have twenty-four geniuses. So, one house should have three total. If I've killed Xuan Rui, House Xuan should still have two more. Maybe the grey cloak is unique to them?"

After a few days of observation, Jiang Chen noticed that the eight houses' geniuses wore the same style of cloak. The only difference between them was color. Perhaps that singular difference identified who was aligned with what house.

Because of this, Jiang Chen felt a sense of urgency. He only had two potential prey left, if that were the case. The Blackwraith Mountains were sprawling. It wasn't going to be easy to find two specific people here.

As he went about his business one day, his footsteps slowed. There was an indistinct sense of hostility up ahead.

"Who is it?" Jiang Chen imitated Xuan Rui's low, ruthless voice.

"Heh, Xuan Rui?" A strange cackle came within the forest. A figure in a brown cloak appeared before him.

"Another top rank genius." Jiang Chen clucked his tongue as he took in his counterpart's aura. The person who was blocking the road had a more powerful one than both Xue Feng and Xuan Rui.

Jiang Chen had been instinctively able to sense that Xuan Rui was slightly stronger than Xue Feng. Yet, the brown-cloaked man opposite seemed to be stronger still.

His heart shifted, then settled down.

"The Blackwraith Mountains are a pretty vast place, Xuan Rui, but I've bumped into you." The brown-cloaked youth remarked derisively. From the sound of it, he had some sort of grudge with Jiang Chen's assumed identity.

"Hmph. What do you want?" Jiang Chen harrumphed. He was having a hard time because he didn't know who this was. He could only poke back with insubstantial replies.

"What do I want?" The stranger laughed heartily. "We fought bitterly over our rankings back in Polylore for the longest time. You've pissed me off a long time ago. What do you think I want, hmm?"

"You looking to fight?" Jiang Chen smirked coldly.

"Give up your spoils and I, Kuang, will consider letting you go." So the cultivator's surname was Kuang, but Jiang Chen still didn't know the rest of his name.

The young man in disguise raised his head to the sky. "Isn't it daytime?" he quipped. "It's a bit early for you to sleep-talk."

The other youth's voice darkened. "I guess you intend to resist to the bitter end."

"Cut the blather. You've got to have the skills to take away my spoils." Jiang Chen didn't know how strong this Kuang person was, but he was probably slightly stronger than Xuan Rui had been. Not a decisive difference, obviously.

In a real fight, Xuan Rui hypothetically wouldn't be at a disadvantage.

Thus, Jiang Chen didn't know where the other's confidence stemmed from. However, his heart sank with a cursory probe from his consciousness. The truth was out.

There were actually two more people concealed nearby, not just the one who'd popped up. Without his powerful consciousness, they would have been impossible to notice.

What a nasty piece of work. Are those two also geniuses from House Kuang? Or are they from another one? If it's the latter, then Xuan Rui clearly failed at getting along with others.

Jiang Chen smiled coolly. Now that he knew what his opponent was cooking, he wasn't going to step into the trap. "I'll deal with you after we return to Polylore, Kuang."

He turned around as he said this, disappearing in a burst of light.

The Kuang genius had already made preparations to fight. He hadn't expected his opponent to gutlessly run away.

"Xuan Rui, you coward!" he snickered in disdain. "What else can you do other than turn tail and run?"

Jiang Chen didn't care much for responding to such pointless words. Even if he were actually Xuan Rui, he'd be a fool to not retreat from a three-person ambush.

It seems that the eight houses aren't harmonious. Just as I thought. Jiang Chen finally understood why Xuan Rui hadn't been unable to keep his cool in their confrontation earlier.

The now-dead genius knew that he had many enemies among the other houses. If a mortal enemy had come upon the scene, he would've killed Xuan Rui first without a doubt.

"There's not much time left in the half-month we were given." Jiang Chen counted the days out on his fingers. He had less than a week left. He was very much in a hurry to find another grey-cloaked person. Otherwise, his 'Xuan Rui' disguise would be slightly flawed.

Of course, Jiang Chen could kill and pretend to be another. But to do that, he would need some extra time to become acquainted with them and copy their mannerisms. He wasn't interested in pivoting on such a tight schedule.

However, the Kuang cultivator's obstinacy had not been part of his plans. In fact, the young genius had caught up to him in hot pursuit. The two other cultivators from his house noticeably lagged behind, both in speed and cultivation.

"This guy just won't give up, huh?" Though he'd originally been uninterested in complicating affairs, Kuang's pressure was negatively affecting the viability of his plan.

Fury brewed from the bottom of his heart.

"He's courting death. If I don't kill him, he might cost me my big chance. But will I cause too much of a ruckus if I do?"

"Ah, never mind. If these three are allowed to stick around, I wouldn't be able to leave Winterdraw at all. In fact, I may be chased down by frenzied seniors from the eight houses."

This wasn't an over-exaggeration. If too many of the eight houses' geniuses died, their seniors would burn with incredible vehemence.

It was possible that they would make an incursion into the Blackwraith Mountains themselves for any potential Winterdraw survivors. If that came to pass, it would significantly damage Jiang Chen's plans to depart.

Sovereign of the Three Realms (WN)

Chapter 1596: Entrapped

My plan to leave will be jeopardized if I don't kill them, but killing them also has its own risks. The eight great houses will become suspicious if too many geniuses die. My cover might be blown then.

Caught between a rock and a hard place, Jiang Chen silently swore at Kuang.

"Oh well, my plan is dead in the water anyways if I don't kill them."

After mulling it over, he finally chose to take action. He'd previously been of a mind to use this as an experience to temper himself, but now was the time for decisive killing. That was the best way to ensure he'd stay under the radar.

His mind operated at top speed as he formulated a strategy. His opponents were three, but there was an enormous disparity in their cultivation levels.

He could get rid of them one by one if everything went according to plan.

"So there's twenty four geniuses in total. Another three deaths will make it five casualties, six if I want to grab a gray cloak from a member of Xuan Rui's house. The eight great houses must know the geniuses might target each other, so one quarter isn't too conspicuous a mortality rate, is it?"

He slowed his steps, kicked off from the ground, and leapt onto a tall tree. Since they wouldn't leave him alone, he had no qualms about destroying his targets, body and soul.

Kuang was no slowpoke, but he couldn't compare to Xue Feng in that area. Though the latter was weaker overall, Kuang was soundly beat when it came to speed.

Kuang stopped abruptly when he neared Jiang Chen's hiding spot. He gazed at the tall tree from afar. "What? Not running anymore?"

Jiang Chen smiled. "What do you think of this place?"

Kuang responded mildly, "It's a decent burial ground for you."

Jiang Chen nodded. "Here then, since you seem satisfied."

He lifted the Holy Dragon Bow and without further ado, greeted his guest with an arrow. Like a revolving comet, the arrow tore through space, leaving a vicious trail in the air.

Kuang's pupils constricted, a little taken aback. Although Xuan Rui was a skilled archer, this opening seemed different from his usual tactics.

Is he skilled in that many archery styles? If so, I really can't underestimate him.

All of a sudden, a lightning-fast shadow pounced in front of him.

"What the hell is that?" He wasn't afraid of an arrow from so far away, but this sudden appearance caught him completely off-guard.

The assault was full of momentum, and more frighteningly, had occurred without warning. The attack knocked him down, leaving him paralyzed and defenseless on the ground. His body ached all over. The shadow trussed him up like a chicken and tossed him in front of Jiang Chen.

The young lord stepped on his opponent's face with a cold, unsympathetic smile. "Idiot, I didn't want to kill you, but you had to force my hand. So tell me, what's your name?"

He covered the area in a soundproofing barrier. "No one will hear you even if you shout yourself hoarse, so don't even try. I know you have two companions. Don't worry, I'll kill them too so the three of you are reunited in the afterlife."

Despite the leisurely tone, Kuang shivered from head to toe. Something seemed out of place. Why did the Xuan Rui in front of him suddenly seem like a frightening stranger?

He was now in his twenties, but had frequently fought against Xuan Rui since ten years old. Despite a few defeats, he'd overwhelmed Xuan Rui more often than not. So why had he lost so handily this time? He'd even prepared a trap with meticulous care, yet had ended up becoming the one caught.

And why had Xuan Rui asked his name? How could he not know after fighting each other for more than a decade? He seemed... so much like a stranger at the moment. Unprecedented terror gripped his heart.

Jiang Chen searched the man without waiting for a reply and found his identification seal.

"Kuang Rong?" He smiled. "So that's your name."

Kuang Rong twitched. He stared at Jiang Chen like a frightened rabbit, hissing. "You're not Xuan Rui! How's that possible?! Who are you?"

Jiang Chen calmly said, "When did I ever say I'm Xuan Rui?"

Kuang Rong trembled. At this moment, he'd rather have lost to Xuan Rui instead. "Who are you? Did... did you kill him?"

Jiang Chen acknowledged with a trace of an evil smile. "Do you want to keep him company down below? I can grant your wish."

"You! Who the hell are you? Don't you know that..."

"Shut up." Jiang Chen interrupted mildly. "It's no use scaring me with Polylore. Xuan Rui tried the same and now he's dead. I don't mind sending you off if you want to make the same foolish mistake as well. I'm sure your two companions will be more than happy to provide me with the information I want."

Kuang Rong's vicious retort died in his throat. He remained silent for a long while, regret flashing in his eyes. At long last, he'd realized his mistake.

Maybe I wasn't in his crosshairs to begin with. Why did I have to provoke this demon and court disaster?

The fellow was clearly undaunted by Polylore's prestige. How could such a man leave a living witness behind?

Kuang Rong's heart trembled. He even had the urge to slap himself.

“You have ten breaths to think it over. Will you cooperate obediently, or will you follow in Xuan Rui’s footsteps?”

“You!” As a scion of the eight great houses, when had Kuang Rong ever been threatened? But no matter how Jiang Chen’s arrogance infuriated him, his wretched life was in his opponent’s hands, so he ultimately kept his peace.

“What the hell are you trying to do? Don’t you know the dire consequences for opposing Polylore?” Kuan Rong couldn’t help but throw around the divine nation’s name.

Jiang Chen’s face clouded over. His arm rose slightly and a sharp light grazed past Kuan Rong’s cheek.

The next moment, the man’s right ear fell onto the ground, leaving a smooth and even wound behind before blood slowly oozed out of it.

“Keep up the nonsense and my blade will take your neck next.” He blew softly on his palm, scaring Kuang Rong witless.

Fear drowned Kuang Rong’s dignity as a noble scion. He stammered, his face ashen, “What do you want to know?”

“Tell me, how many from your eight great houses have come to Rejuvenation Isles? Who are they and what are their levels?” These were the young lord’s most pressing questions.

Kuan Rong beamed inwardly. Is that all he wants to know? Hmph, it’s a good chance to scare him and let him know how vast the world is. He immediately turned stern.

“Our eight great houses are the eight greatest clans outside of the royal clan. We control Polylore’s lifeline. We wouldn’t have come if not for Rejuvenation Isles imploring and begging us time and time again. The younger generation’s elites have come, accompanied by two to three seniors or elders from each house. Other than that, there’s also powerful house bodyguards. Every house is also led by a sixth level intermediate empyrean master.”

“Any greater empyrean masters?” Jiang Chen asked.

“Hmph, those are high-level existences even in the Ten Divine Nations. Do you think they have nothing better to do than come along for this jaunt?”

So-called greater empyrean masters were those at level seven and above. There were in fact quite a few of them in Myriad Abyss Island. But people at this level were usually mindful of their status and wouldn’t show themselves so easily.

In particular, a second or third tier power like the Rejuvenation Isles was quite beneath their regard.

The Isles did possess more than a couple greater empyrean masters of its own. But reality was cruel. Despite having the same cultivation, a greater empyrean master from the ten great divine nations was far more exalted.

So despite their absence, the Rejuvenation Isles had welcomed the eight great houses with the greatest pomp and circumstance. The local greater empyrean masters greeted them in person. Though they

hadn't accompanied the guests to Winterdraw, the presence of an imperial prince was also an extremely high honor.

Kuang Rong's explanation eased Jiang Chen's worries. The absence of greater empyrean threats was comforting amidst countless bad news.

Seeing his silence, Kuang Rong tried again, "Friend, I don't know what grievances you had with Xuan Rui, but please be at ease. I'm his sworn enemy. I'll definitely keep his death a secret. Honorable sir, as long as you let me go, I swear I'll write off this matter. I won't mention it to my elders, so no house seniors will hunt you. I can even shield you from House Xuan's inquiries. What do you think?" As a smart man, he tried to regain the initiative.

Jiang Chen replied with a cold smile, "Aren't you a noble from Polylore? What gives? How can you be afraid of death like the rest of us peons?"

But Kuang Rong responded without any shame, "A man needs to adapt to circumstances and know when to retreat. I'm at your mercy right now, so survival is naturally my greatest priority."

Sovereign of the Three Realms (WN)

Chapter 1597: A Clean Sweep

However, Jiang Chen wasn't fooled by the show of humility. The pride of a scion from a great houses was too deeply entrenched to conceal behind a veneer of sincerity. Given a chance to, the fellow would stop at nothing to strike at Jiang Chen, especially since the young lord was the sole witness of this so-called genius' ugly side.

There was also no need to kill Kuang Rong straight away. The man still had obvious value. Want to play? Then I'll play along.

Jiang Chen smiled faintly. "Bravo, a real man knows when to be flexible. You're smarter than Xuan Rui at least. So have a guess. What do you think I desire most right now?"

"What do you desire most?" Kuang Rong blinked. He stared at his captor for a long while before inspiration finally seemed to strike. He murmured, "I don't know your distinguished self's concrete identity. You're too strong and talented to be prey for the eight great houses. But if you're not one of the Winterdraw contestants, how could you have snuck into the Blackwraith Mountains in the first place?"

He couldn't wrap his head around the idea. How could someone from the Rejuvenation Isles be strong enough to subvert his preconceptions?

Jiang Chen responded calmly, "You're right, I'm worth precisely five points." There was no anger in his voice now, only indifference.

Kuang Rong's heart sank. "A-Are you really quarry from Winterdraw? Impossible! Is the Rejuvenation Isles blind? How can they let a genius like you rot on Winterdraw? What a waste of potential!"

His eyes shone bright. "All the more reason for us to strike a deal in that case. Even if you kill us all, you'll be hard-pressed to escape death in the end. You must be aware that we represent our houses' future. Too many of us dying in this lowly place is bound to enrage our seniors. They may even flatten

these mountains. Consider this, no matter how strong you are, how will you survive then? Are you confident you can hide from our elders and elite guards?

"Not to mention, I hear that no one's allowed to leave Winterdraw. The lethal restrictions surrounding this place prevents anyone from escaping. Won't you end up trapped? Capturing you will be as easy as shooting fish in a barrel for the aristocratic houses."

Kuang Rong put his glib tongue to good use. He found many excuses in a short time, singing his case with logic and aplomb.

However, Jiang Chen remained deaf to his arguments. He threw his captive a glance, accenting the killing intent in his eyes rather than hiding it.

Kuang Chen stiffened. And here I thought I was convincing enough. Why is this fellow still unmoved? He can't be that brash and foolhardy, can he?

"Kuang Rong, are you giving me even more reasons to kill you?" Jiang Chen asked, his tone eerie.

Kuang Rong trembled and blinked rapidly. "No no no, sir, please tell me what you want! As long as I can be of use, you simply need to ask!"

"I want to leave Winterdraw," Jiang Chen quietly replied. "I don't mind letting you off if you can find a suitable way."

"Leave?" Kuang Rong beamed delightedly. "Isn't that simple? Just pretend to be my attendant. You can easily leave later. We've mainly come to hunt this time, but no one will object if I say I've taken a fancy to your potential and want to take you with me."

Jiang Chen truly felt a rush of excitement at the suggestion.

Yet, he still decided decisively against it after mulling it over. No matter how pretty the plan seemed, it had a fatal flaw. His life would no longer be in his own hands. He would be at someone else's mercy.

A few words from Kuang Rong, a secret hint in the dark, and he'd be a lamb to the slaughter for the aristocratic houses. He might be a confident man, but escaping from a sixth level empyrean powerhouse?

Furthermore, no one could leave the island as the fellow had pointed out. He'd indeed be an easy target. No matter how fast he ran, he wouldn't escape the island's confines and would fall into enemy hands sooner or later.

Deeply aware of the truth, he was determined to remain the master of his own destiny, even if he had to brave some risk to that end. Kuang Rong's suggestion seemed the safer road at first, but there were still too many uncertain factors. A single piece of the puzzle not falling into place meant his life might be forfeit.

This wasn't his type of deal.

Kuang Rong panicked. His captor had clearly been tempted at first, yet hadn't given his assent. It seemed his persuasion had failed.

"Sir, if the idea isn't to your liking, we can discuss whatever other ideas you have. I have many ways of helping you if you simply want out."

The young lord snickered. It wasn't the man's methods, but his moral integrity that was in question. No matter what hypocritical oath he swore, a subtle hint would be enough to spell Jiang Chen's doom.

He secretly composed himself. My plan is already set. Kuang Rong is nothing but an accident. I caught him for information, not so I can be swayed. I must stay the course.

"Kuang Rong, I don't want to hear your shit. If you want to cooperate, the best you can do is to spill every detail you know about each member of the eight houses, how they relate to the others, and the relationships between the houses in general. I might consider sparing you if you're comprehensive enough."

He would no longer allow his determination to waver and would leave disguised as Xuan Rui. It'd be folly to alter his plans at the last minute.

Kuang Rong sighed in disappointment, utterly depressed. This fellow was a tough nut to crack and seemed impermeable to his smooth-talking.

"I get it, you just want to squeeze more information out of me. You'll kill me once I outlive my usefulness." His tone was bitter. "I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't. You'll take my life either way, so why should I cooperate?"

Jiang Chen merely smiled at Kuang Rong's realization. "So you don't value this chance?"

The crestfallen Kuang Rong shook his head. "Cut the chit chat and just kill me. The more people you slaughter and the greater your sins, the more alert the eight great houses will become. Want to leave? Dream on."

What use was spilling the beans if he was doomed in any case?

Not disappointed in the least, Jiang Chen looked leisurely into the distance. "Ah, your friends are here just on time. I'll bring them here to keep you company."

Kuang Rong's expression froze. "If you kill them, you'll be House Kuang's lifelong enemy."

"What? Are both of them your clanmates?" Jiang Chen crowed with laughter. "Perfect. The road to the netherworld won't be lonely with family around!"

Despair finally spilled from Kuang Rong's eyes. It would be a slap to his house's face if all three of them died on Winterdraw. It'd even shake the very foundations of House Kuang's standing among the eight great houses.

His blood ran cold at the mere prospect.

Yet, bound as he was, there was nothing he could do. He could roar at the top of his lungs, but no one outside Jiang Chen's soundproof barrier would hear him.

"Sir, please let them go. I'll tell you everything you want." Kuang Rong finally surrendered.

Jiang Chen smiled. "Too late. Letting them go will come back to bite Xuan Rui in the rear."

If Kuang Rong disappeared while pursuing “Xuan Rui,” and Jiang Chen left as the same Xuan Rui, then House Kuang would ultimately find and hunt him down. He didn’t even need to think to know what would happen then.

As the ancients said, cutting grass needed to be completed with the roots. Since the other two knew Kuang Rong had gone after “Xuan Rui,” Jiang Chen couldn’t let these two seeds of future trouble escape.

Without further ado, he summoned two empyrean Confusion Puppets to ambush the two youngsters from House Kuang.

The two men were Kuang Rong’s teammates in the current hunt and took their orders from him. They naturally weren’t as strong, so the two puppets easily captured them alive.

All three geniuses from House Kuang were dumped as captives in a tiny corner. They stared at their captor, their eyes brimming with powerless dread.

“First things first. Kuang Rong, you be quiet.” Jiang Chen knocked him unconscious, then looked at the other two with indifference. “Do you think I’ll have a hard time killing you?”

The two knew their places. They immediately shook their heads.

“Since you’re my captives, you should listen to me, shouldn’t you?” Jiang Chen remained unfazed.

“Of course. What do you want to know? Please ask at your leisure.”

“Not bad, you’re much smarter than Kuang Rong. I’ll question you separately each in turn. Remember, don’t try to fool me. You’ll only have yourselves to blame if I turn cruel once I notice the slightest discrepancy between your answers.”

Isolated interrogations were in fact rather common and most suitable in the current situation. Sure enough, cowed by the young lord, the two men obediently answered every question he had.

Separated, they could no longer collude and their stories roughly matched each other. In this way, Jiang Chen came to know all he wanted about the eight great houses.

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

Chapter 1598: Everything Comes To Him Who Sets His Mind On I

Jiang Chen relaxed after learning everything he wanted. As for these fellows, he naturally couldn’t spare them. He stripped them clean of their house possessions before sending them to the afterlife.

The thought of disguising himself as one of the three crossed his mind, but he ultimately decided against it. He’d seen very little of their fighting styles and methods, and was too short on time to study them.

He chose to stick to the original plan and keep playing the part of Xuan Rui. The three were merely an unexpected interlude. He’d been pressed for time to begin with, and they’d only made it worse. He still hadn’t obtained the gray cloak integral to his strategy.

“I really need to find the cloak in the little time I have left.” Jiang Chen remained determined.

He’d wandered all over the mountains in the past few days, but hadn’t spotted another scion of House Xuan yet.

“Xuan Rui ranks first among the three from his house. Did the other two run into danger? After all, even geniuses from the eight houses can attack each other in the Blackwraith Mountains.” He became even more tense at the thought. If the aristocratic scions were truly going to kill each other, then the final few days would be the height of the fighting.

However, he’d learned from his interrogations that the eight houses had an agreement not to fight each other to the death.

“Hopefully those two fellows are still fine.”

Rather than roam aimlessly, he decided that waiting in one or two set points would be a more productive endeavour.

His patience ended up paying off. Two days before the deadline, he finally spotted the second gray cloak.

The man in question didn’t give off as strong a presence as Xuan Rui. He was in the middle of chasing a contestant from Winterdraw when Jiang Chen sighted him. The young lord watched the pair from afar in faint surprise.

The hunters from Polylore were so much stronger than their targets. More importantly, their powers were more comprehensive, and their numerous trump cards gave them an overwhelming edge. Winterdraw’s cultivators should’ve all been killed after a couple weeks.

Even Jiang Chen wouldn’t have spent the last few days in relative peace if not for his substantial advantages. The pursuit piqued his interest.

To his surprise, the hunted was a familiar face: Su Hong, Jiang Chen’s final opponent in the last stage of the selection back in Sin City.

The man’s strength and talent had been commendable back then, but it hadn’t been the full extent of his potential, judging by the current scene. Although he presently cut a sorry figure, his situation wasn’t entirely hopeless yet.

House Xuan’s scion held the upper hand as the hunter, but his opponent was from being routed. It was all rather fascinating.

Jiang Chen secretly stalked the pair.

Su Hong might realize something’s afoot if I kill House Xuan’s man right now, but who knows how long it’ll take if I have to wait for his death? At this rate, the trial will be over before his assailant manages to kill him. Am I supposed to hasten his demise?

It was purely a fleeting thought. He didn’t act upon it. He’d never been one to tempt fate of his own volition.

Su Hong was an old acquaintance. There was no deep enmity between them. In fact, he could almost be said to a brother-in-arms. Rather than bearing a grudge because of his loss, the man had proved himself gracious in defeat, so Jiang Chen had a good impression of him.

Kicking him while he was down was out of the question, even if the young lord didn't lend a helping hand.

I'll continue sitting back. I'll attack once the Xuan fellow fails to kill his prey and gives up.

In this way, the three of them painted a living tableau of a mantis stalking the cicada, unaware of the oriole behind.

.....

One day later, on the last day of the training.

House Xuan's hunter was visibly frustrated by his lack of success. Jiang Chen himself was in disbelief at the sight of Su Hong's formidable potential on perfect display during the chase.

Although not as strong as Xuan Rui, his clanmate was still far superior to Winterdraw's youngsters.

But Su Hong wasn't an ordinary contestant. The talent and will to live he'd exhibited with his back up against the wall simply subverted common sense. Even Jiang Chen was quite bowled over by the performance.

The pursuit seems doomed to fail. It's truly unfortunate for someone as talented as Su Hong to be born on Winterdraw. Alas, what a waste.

Escaping from his assailant wouldn't guarantee Su Hong's safety. Winterdraw would certainly eliminate any potential survivors afterward.

Selecting geniuses merely to sacrifice as human prey; controversy was bound to arise if this were to spread. It would be a massive blow to Winterdraw's reputation. Who would trust their selections in the future? Even the imperial family's disgraceful deeds would be exposed. They couldn't allow the news to leak.

So Su Hong's life was forfeit one way or the other. Even if he left Blackwraith Mountains alive, only a secret execution awaited him.

Jiang Chen heaved a secret sigh of pity.

A man forced by dire circumstances to draw deep on his potential was sure to burgeon into a fearsome existence if he survived. Sadly, he'd been born in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Only four hours were left before the deadline. House Xuan's youngster had intercepted his target multiple times, but the ensuing fights had been superficial skirmishes at best.

Aware of his pursuer's strength, Su Hong had focused on running away instead of facing him head on, not giving the man time to use his trump cards.

"Now's my turn." Waiting further would hamper Jiang Chen's plan.

After lying in ambush for a long time, the young lord suddenly activated the Nine Labyrinth Formation.

The formation trapped House Xuan's youngster before he could react. He couldn't even begin to make sense of the situation before a fatal arrow from the Holy Dragon Bow lodged itself into his skull.

He might've come back to life out of pure anger if he knew he'd been killed over a trivial cloak. Fortunately for him, he remained blissfully unaware even unto death.

Jiang Chen's strike had been lightening-quick. Activating the formation and firing the lethal arrow had taken less than a breath's time.

Everything was over by the time Su Hong came to his senses. Shaking all over, he looked back. At this precise moment, his eyes happened to meet Jiang Chen's gaze. They stared at each other.

To think a single arrow was enough to kill a man who hunted me for this long.

Jiang Chen snorted coldly. "You didn't see anything."

Su Hong froze, then nodded subconsciously. "Right. What was I supposed to see, anyways? Friend, are you a candidate from Winterdraw, or are you with them?"

"Does it matter?" Jiang Chen deliberately changed the timbre of his voice.

"If the former, I need to warn you. A group of hunters have infiltrated the mountains for the sole purpose of killing us. I think almost all the thousand something contestants have died by now. If you're with them, then pretend I didn't say anything. I promise my lips are sealed tight."

Jiang Chen hadn't pegged Su Hong as the type to offer kind warnings. He nodded, slightly touched. "It can't have been easy for you to learn so much, so let me leave you a kind word as well. You must believe you'll be safe as long as you can hide from the hunters. Forget that. Winterdraw planned for the contestants to die from the very start. Even if you can leave safe and sound, it'll be difficult surviving afterward."

Su Hong trembled. His guesses about the hunters had come from what he'd seen and his personal experience. Unlike him, Jiang Chen was armed with knowledge forced from his prisoners.

Bewildered, Su Hong stood frozen. The news was a bolt from the blue.

Jiang Chen snorted lightly. "Take care of yourself then."

He held the man in high esteem, but his own survival was at risk. He was in no position to try and save someone else. And unlike him, Su Hong couldn't disguise himself as one of the hunters.

Looking pensive, the latter watched the young lord's disappearing figure, both surprise and gratitude flitting across his face. The mysterious man had saved him, and instead of killing him, had given him a warning.

The world of cultivators knew no morals. His pursuer had been killed in a single hit, so he himself could have been disposed of just as easily.

But the man had spared him at the risk of leaving a living witness behind. What could be the reason? An inexplicable thought occurred to him. He wore a hood, but why did I have a fleeting feeling that he knows me?

He hesitated now that he knew the truth. He'd originally thought he simply needed to wait half a month for the end of the trial. Everything would be over once the seal over the Blackwraith Mountains was lifted.

But reality had cruelly dealt him a harsh blow otherwise. Even if he could leave unscathed, an even more bitter fate awaited him!

Sovereign of the Three Realms (WN)

Chapter 1599: Soul Lamp Destroyed

Since he didn't kill me, there should be no reason for him to lie. Based on past experiences, I have a strong feeling that he's speaking the truth. I'll be walking right into their trap if I leave now.

Time was running out; it was time to make a decision.

After a moment's contemplation, Su Hong gave the exit a glance. A cold smirk played at the corners of his mouth. He turned decisively back and headed deeper into the mountains. Clearly, he'd dismissed the idea of leaving the mountains.

It was an extremely risky move. If the outer formation were to close, he'd never be able to leave until it was activated once more.

The environment in the Blackwraith Mountains was extremely harsh and unforgiving. Survival for half a month was perhaps doable, but death was almost certain if one had to stay for any longer than that.

Unfortunately, he had no other choice. He'd rather risk certain death than face a wrongful murder.

.....

Rewinding time back a few days.

In a distant nation roughly three hundred thousand miles away from the Rejuvenation Isles, a beautiful, prosperous, mysteriously shrouded island was seen in the middle of the ocean.

It belonged to Polylore Divine Nation, but it wasn't particularly large, roughly the same size as Skylarell Kingdom.

However, the land was extremely rich with spirit qi and could easily be mistaken for paradise. The skies were a brilliant turquoise while the surrounding ocean shone emerald green. Various radiant beams only served to make it seem even more heavenly.

House Xuan was the ruler of this island.

In one of House Xuan's secret realms, a middle-aged servant came tumbling out from one of the rooms, panic and fear clearly written over his face.

"This is bad. This is bad! Something awful has happened! Y-young lord Rui's soul lamp has shattered!"
The news exploded throughout the island like a bomb.

Bewildered, House Xuan's forefathers immediately appeared from all corners of the island.

"What did you say?" One of the forefathers hauled the servant up. "Say that again!"

The servant was as white as a sheet. “Y-y-young lord Rui. S-something bad’s happened to him.” The other elders couldn’t be bothered to listen to a servant’s ramblings. They swarmed to the sacred residence where the soul lamps were kept.

Almost every great faction had a room like this where the soul lamps of all important figures were kept. If any mishap occurred, it’d be indicated on the lamp. Thus, someone was always stationed there to monitor them.

The elders quickly found that Xuan Rui’s soul lamp had indeed shattered. They could only stare dumbly, as though struck by lightning.

“How can this be?!”

“Damn it! Something really did happen! What the hell is going on?!”

The elders wanted to pull their hair out. Xuan Rui wasn’t the only genius in the clan, but he was definitely the cream of the crop. To House Xuan, he was a promising talent that was seen only once every millenia.

A lot of hopes and expectations were riding on him, especially from the forefathers. He was their pride and joy, the genius who’d bear the weight of the entire clan on his shoulders one day. Who could’ve imagined that a genius of this caliber would die so abruptly??

Increasing numbers of Xuan experts arrived. Even the patriarch was dumbfounded by the news. Now on the scene, he was purple with rage. The elders were all gnashing their teeth.

“Isn’t Xuan Rui at the Rejuvenation Isles? Those brown-nosers have been licking our boots and sending multiple invitations to visit to the eight aristocratic houses.”

“Can this be their doing? How dare they?!”

“Damn it! It doesn’t matter if it is or isn’t their doing! They must pay for this!”

“The Rejuvenation Isles... Rejuvenation Isles!!” Some were already vowing revenge. Slowly but surely, the patriarch regained his cool. He raised his hands to beckon the crowd to calm down.

“Everyone, the eight aristocratic houses came to an agreement to visit the Rejuvenation Isles. We each sent three geniuses, escorted by our own respective guardians. No one of sound mind would dare ambush our team. Are their lamps still lit?”

“Yes. They’re fine for now.”

The patriarch nodded. “Mm. This proves that it could very well be just an accident. The Rejuvenation Isles planned to host a tempering trial for us. Perhaps an unforeseen misfortune has occurred during the trial.”

“Impossible! Xuan Fei and Xuan Yong are both weaker than Xuan Rui. Why would they be fine if Xuan Rui isn’t?”

"I concur. Patriarch, tempering trials from that backwater can't possibly prove too difficult for Xuan Rui. He also took many of our treasures with him. Xuan Rui is a cautious and talented genius. I'd be the first to doubt that he died in an accident."

"Indeed. It wouldn't be a surprise if this had happened to some other geniuses. But Xuan Rui has consistently placed fourth to fifth in peer rankings, right?"

"Can it be some sort of violence between the geniuses?" someone suggested.

"Absolutely not. It was agreed upon that there would be no bloodshed in this trial, only winners and losers. Or did someone break the rule?"

"Hard to say. The eight houses aren't all on harmonious terms. Foul play could be difficult to rule out. If we assume that there really was foul play, whoever killed Xuan Rui must be from the top four. However, not even the highest ranked House Ye can manage such a feat easily. Xuan Rui might not be stronger, but he should still be able to put up a good fight."

Such were the opinions from the upper echelons of House Xuan. Even the patriarch had to pay them heed.

"What should we do about this?" the patriarch asked with an air of despondency.

"First, we must find out the truth."

"Agreed, the truth should be our first priority."

"If it's cold slaughter, we will make the murderer pay."

"Even if it was an accident, the Rejuvenation Isles will not escape our wrath!"

As one of the greatest clans in the nation, House Xuan was known for being extremely unreasonable. One of their top geniuses had died for no reason. Rage was a given reaction.

"Are the accompanying guardians idiots?! How can they not know that something's happened to Xuan Rui??"

"Aii... they're not to be blamed. How would they know if the incident occurred within trial territory?"

"Agreed. These things can't be prevented. Right now, our main priority is to get to the bottom of this."

"And how are we going to do that? Our transmittal talismans aren't going to work when we're hundreds of thousands of miles away. We'll have to rely on a large scale transmission formation to speak to the royal family at the Rejuvenation Isles."

Only a divine being could communicate freely without being impeded by distance. This was a rule that not even a peak empyrean master could ignore. Hundreds of thousands of miles was simply too great of a distance.

Of course, this didn't mean that communication was impossible. Most great factions had some sort of platform through which they could share important news and information.

These powerful formations were available in practically every great faction in Myriad Abyss Island. A top ranking one like Polylore Divine Nation even had multiple.

House Xuan wasn't in possession of a formation of this magnitude. It could only be found in certain important areas within the nation.

"Patriarch, we can't delay this any longer. This subordinate is willing to lead a group of men to the Rejuvenation Isles for immediate investigation. We'll get to the bottom of this and make the Isles answer for their sins."

"Patriarch, we are willing to go as well. The people at the Isles must be tired of living. How dare they fail to guarantee the safety of their guests!"

House Xuan was extremely riled up. They were blaming the Rejuvenation Isles before any investigation had even taken place.

The patriarch pondered for a moment and nodded. "Elder Zun, please travel to the capital to borrow a transmission formation. Question the Rejuvenation Isles and ask why one of our geniuses has died on their island. Make sure to get a clear and precise answer."

"Understood. I shall depart at once!"

Two days later, Elder Zun finally arrived at the formation.

Naturally, the operators of the formation didn't dare be negligent to an elder from one of the eight great aristocratic houses. Contact with the royalty of Rejuvenation Isles was established within just a few moments.

Color immediately drained from imperial faces when they heard the news. The geniuses from Polylore Divine Nation should've been at a trial on Winterdraw. How could this have happened?! It felt like the sky was about to collapse in on them.

"Spare me your excuses. I'll give you three days to prepare a precise and formal answer or face our wrath." The elder was still seething. Even though there was a gap of seven generations between him and Xuan Rui, the young genius was still one of his descendants.

Most importantly, he'd spent a lot of time and effort to train the young genius and had very high hopes for him. It came as no surprise that he was the one most angered by the young genius' death.

Still fuming with anger, he exited the formation and bumped into a group of people likewise rushing into the premises. They were from House Xue!

House Xue seemed rather surprised to have encountered the elder as well.

"What are you doing here?" Elder Zun asked, surprised.

An elder from House Xue answered curtly, "To borrow the transmission formation." He realized something and returned the question. "Elder Zun, why are you here?"

He thought for a moment. "Don't tell me a genius from House Xue has died as well?"

The House Xue elder was taken aback. "What? Did the same happen to you guys?"

Almost like they'd found a common language, the two houses shared information and hurled abuse at the Rejuvenation Isles. While they were in the middle of a thorough venting session, another group of people came charging in through the doors.

Sovereign of the Three Realms (WN)

Chapter 1600: As If Armageddon

This group was even fiercer and more murderous. Furthermore, the patriarch led it personally. It was none other than House Kuang!

House Kuang was top three among the eight houses. The fact that its patriarch was here greatly surprised both Houses Xue and Xuan.

Has House Kuang also...

The elders of the two houses traded a glance. Their burning anger was strangely somewhat abated at the sight of House Kuang's more severe fury. They could see that House Kuang had it a lot worse than they did. The patriarch himself wouldn't have come otherwise.

The Kuang patriarch was a bit surprised to see the other elders. "You're elders from House Xuan and Xue, no?" he inquired coolly.

In response, the elders from the other two houses stepped aside for him.

"You came with such momentum, Patriarch Kuang. Would you like to use the transmission formation as well?" Elder Zun couldn't help but ask.

"As well?" Patriarch Kuang clearly didn't want to lose face before outsiders. He was barely holding back his rage.

The elder sighed. "If I were to guess, House Kuang has also lost geniuses in the Rejuvenation Isles, is that right? And you want to question the people there too?"

Their common plight was written over their faces.

Patriarch Kuang was indignant. "All three of House Kuang's young geniuses perished simultaneously. I say the Rejuvenation Isles don't want to live any more!" He was red-faced and eyes bloodshot. His tone sounded downright genocidal.

The two elders collectively drew a sharp breath. Their frustration was significantly reduced by the schadenfreude. There was someone even worse off! Only one genius had died from each of their houses, but House Kuang had lost all three.

That was a complete massacre, given that only three had gone from each house.

They didn't feel so bad any more.

House Xue's elder allowed the hysterical Patriarch Kuang to use the formation first. House Kuang was in a far worse spot than they were.

The patriarch bawled through the transmission formation, "Rejuvenation Isles, get your f*cking asses ready! You're going to use three thousand lives to pay for House Kuang's three geniuses!"

House Kuang lacked even the desire to find out the reason for their geniuses' deaths. They just wanted to vent their boundless hate and rage onto the Rejuvenation Isles.

"What's the situation with your houses?" Patriarch Kuang couldn't resist asking.

"Ah, our Xue Feng has unfortunately died. The Isles have gone too far."

"How about House Xuan?" Patriarch Kuang flicked a glance at Elder Zun.

"Our best genius, Xuan Rui, was lost." Elder Zun was extremely dejected.

"I'm going to the Rejuvenation Isles myself. Are you coming?" The Kuang patriarch gave both elders a once-over.

"Of course! We must! How can we live this down without getting an explanation and reparations from the Rejuvenation Isles?" House Xue's elder shouted.

House Xuan's venerated elder wasn't far behind. "Yes, I will go too. I won't rest until I get to the bottom of this."

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The Rejuvenation Isles' royal family sank into terror at the news. They immediately issued a lockdown on the information to restrict the spread of unnecessary hysteria.

"Did something unexpected happen to our plan?" The Rejuvenation emperor was particularly tense. As the highest authority in the Isles, anxiety rampaged with the situation. The shocking news had nearly scared him witless.

The harsh scolding from House Kuang's head in the end gave him a sense of impending doom. What was supposed to have been wonderful hospitality had turned into a terrible accident. The entire event had gone sour.

"My trusted advisors, have we smashed ourselves in the foot? House Kuang's head seemed like he wanted us to be responsible for the troublesome news." The emperor was as frantic as ants in a hot pan. "If any of you have any ideas, please share and don't keep them to yourself."

Doomsday was near for both the emperor and his subjects. They were transfixed by their anxiety.

"Your Majesty, I think we must send personnel to further investigate what's happened at Winterdraw. I would assume our men there are still completely oblivious as to what's transpired."

"That's right. We must lock down the premises and find out the reason."

"If there's a culprit, we must catch them."

"That's right. Only when we deliver the culprit do we have a semblance of an explanation."

"Ah, three of the eight houses have suffered casualties. I wonder if there are any others who share that misfortune... all this trouble came out of the blue."

None of the advisors were able to maintain their composure.

“Send out a team to Winterdraw straight away,” the emperor commanded. “Put Imperial Prince Huo in charge of investigations. We must get to the bottom of this!”

It took more than a day or two to travel from the capital to Winterdraw. Gathering a team together, making preparations, departing... if they were quick about it, perhaps they could get there before the trial ended, though actually doing so would be quite difficult.

Of course, they had little choice otherwise. What else could they do but investigate first?

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The trial on Winterdraw had finally ended after half a month. The eight houses’ geniuses gradually exited the Blackwraith Mountains one by one.

Among Winterdraw’s contestants, there were actually a few elites who came out as well.

They were completely oblivious as to what had transpired. As soon as they came out, they returned to their factions to complain.

“City Lord, we were attacked by unknown experts within the grounds of the trial. We suffered great casualties!”

“Vale Lord, you must serve justice for us!”

These cultivators hadn’t yet reacted to their circumstances. They hadn’t realized that those who’d attacked them were Polylore’s geniuses, from its eight houses.

The lords of Sin City and Nefarious Vale were completely impassive. “Go complain to the chief warden.”

The cultivators noticed that the atmosphere was awry. Several of the chief warden’s experts came by, their expressions serious. “You are charged with trespassing in forbidden territory in the Blackwraith Mountains. Come along quietly with our investigation.”

It appeared that Jiang Chen’s judgment had been correct. Death awaited the survivors of the hunt outside the mountains. They were going to die at the hands of people who were supposed to be on their side.

“We’re innocent! We didn’t take a single step into the forbidden territory. We were in the designated area the whole...”

The chief warden’s experts didn’t wait for them to finish. The survivors were slapped into unconsciousness and picked up by the nape of their necks.

Everyone had seemingly come to an astonishing consensus about them. No one said a word. In fact, everyone pretended that they were invisible.

The poor survivors were thus tragically sacrificed for the sake of Winterdraw and Rejuvenation Isles’ reputation. Only when they were silenced could the entire affair become shrouded in mystery. It wasn’t good for future selections to be negatively impacted.

After a lengthy waiting period, it appeared that everyone still alive and intact had already come out. Those who had not were likely to be dead within the mountains.

Aside from Su Hong, of course.

The eight houses' geniuses were counted. Most houses found all three of their geniuses whole and accounted for. Said geniuses came to the tabulation area of the eight houses, handing in their spoils in an orderly fashion.

In fact, the majority of the geniuses were accounted for.

House Xue however, was missing a Xue Feng. Its seniors looked about anxiously, but he was nowhere to be found.

It was the same with House Xuan. Only one of their scions had come out, the weakest among the three who'd gone in. Xuan Rui and Xuan Fei hadn't appeared.

House Kuang's seniors were the most distressed. None of the house's geniuses had come out. The senior executives felt an uncertain panic about their disappearance. Why hadn't they come out yet? Shouldn't everyone be out by now? Or had they gathered together to come out together?

All three houses with absent geniuses were jittery and restless.

It was at this moment that Jiang Chen came forth wearing a grey cloak. He appeared from within the Blackwraith Mountains at a moderate speed, looking at House Xuan's group as he approached.

"Xuan Rui, you're out! Have you seen Xuan Fei?" House Xuan's seniors brightened at the sight of 'Xuan Rui'.

"No." Jiang Chen feigned Xuan Rui's voice.

He went to the tabulation area to hand in the spoils. Because the trial had in itself been a competition, they needed to score the number of prey each genius had taken down to decide the victor.

The item to confirm kills were the medallions that Winterdraw's contestants had been given.

Jiang Chen handed in a portion that he assumed would be appropriate for Xuan Rui's skill. He didn't want to seem too excessive. There was no need to show more prowess than his ranking dictated.

Everything was done in an orderly manner. Jiang Chen was cautious, but not nervous.

In the last bit of time, two more geniuses appeared. After that, no more came out from the Blackwraith Mountains.

House Kuang's people were beside themselves with agitation.

"How could this be? Not a single one of my house's geniuses made it out?"

"Our Xue Feng didn't come out either!"

"Our Xuan Fei as well!"

A head count revealed five missing geniuses. All had died at Jiang Chen's hands.

It seems that the eight houses did have an agreement that killing between them wasn't allowed. Otherwise, there would be far more deaths than these.