

Cultivating 261

Chapter 261: Two Major Talent Abilities

The annual True Martial Sect competition concluded successfully.

The performance of the many young disciples greatly satisfied Luo Wentian and others. With these rewards, these disciples are bound to become even stronger in the coming year. With such diligent practice year after year, it won't be long before they can truly bolster the True Martial Sect.

Taking on disciples themselves, Luo Wentian and the other two have made a good start.

He Yan, Sun Chuanhai, and others all had thoughts in their minds. Now that they are all in the Gang Essence Realm, and their cultivation is advancing rapidly, they are fully qualified to take on disciples. They resolved to observe closely in the future and find suitable inheritors.

After the competition, it was rare for all the senior and junior brothers to gather together again.

Taoist Longshan also emerged from seclusion.

Master and disciples rejoiced, discussing the changes of the past year. Upon learning that he had a few new grand-disciples, Taoist Longshan was greatly pleased and even offered gifts upon their meeting.

The atmosphere of the year-end was lively.

But amid this reunion, everyone couldn't help but sigh and think:

"I wonder how Wu (Fifth Senior Brother) is doing now?"

...

Lei State.

Deep in Yan Mountain.

In an unnamed valley, snow weighed down branches, icicles hung low, and a few lively little animals scurried silently, adding some vitality to the winter.

A few small wooden huts were set here, looking like a few pine nuts sprinkled on the snow.

Jiang Baishan and Lin Ruhua were secluded here.

This was a place they discovered during an earlier training experience. The scenery was beautiful, and it was seldom visited by people. Although there were occasionally some exotic beasts, they were no problem for the two. After descending from True Martial Mountain and dealing with a few matters, they quietly came to this place.

Although it was lonely here, the two shared deep affection, comforting each other, studying martial arts daily, and enjoying the scenery. Though they did not interact with others, their days were still fulfilling.

"In the new year, I hope we can always be together!" Lin Ruhua gazed into Jiang Baishan's eyes, making a wish.

A warm fire, hot wine, grilled meat... the warm glow of the fire shone upon them.

Jiang Baishan was also filled with happiness.

"We will definitely always be together!"

Even though he said this, his thoughts couldn't help but drift to True Martial Mountain. In past years, at this time, he would have gathered with his master and fellow brothers, joyous and harmonious. This year was a rare exception.

His face didn't reveal a thing, but Lin Ruhua understood him so well that just a subtle change in his expression was enough for her to know what Jiang Baishan was thinking.

She paused, then softly said:

"Baishan, I went out once when you were in seclusion a few days ago."

Jiang Baishan became instantly anxious:

"Ruhua, why did you go out? You know the Demon Sect is looking for us now, and if they discover our whereabouts, they definitely won't let it go easily!"

Lin Ruhua just gently shook her head:

"Don't worry, I was very careful. I have some good news for you."

She smiled, with a hint of amazement in her eyes.

"A few days ago, Blade Demon went up to True Martial Mountain, intending to challenge True Man Tianjian, but ended up being defeated by him. This Blade Demon ranks third on the Celestial Being List, and I didn't expect Senior Tianjian to be so strong."

Seeing Jiang Baishan's dumbfounded look, she laughed and recounted the details of Blade Demon's challenges along the way, which made Jiang Baishan extremely excited.

Lin Ruhua said with a smile:

"With Senior Tianjian guarding True Martial Mountain, the Demon Sect may not be able to threaten the True Martial Sect. Can you be at ease now?"

Jiang Baishan was filled with gratitude. He held Lin Ruhua in his arms and kissed her forehead:

"Thank you, Ruhua."

The two of them nestled together, their shadows gradually merging under the firelight.

Suddenly.

Lin Ruhua's shy murmur sounded:

"Baishan, there's one more thing I need to tell you."

Jiang Baishan froze, then was taken aback by Lin Ruhua's next words:

"I... I think I am pregnant."

Jiang Baishan stood frozen in place, then his pupils suddenly dilated with joy. Soon, the valley was filled with Jiang Baishan's excited laughter.

The two were secluded here.

The arrival of a little life was undoubtedly a symbol of hope and surprise.

...

Ning Qi naturally didn't know that his Fifth Senior Brother was about to become a father.

After the year-end reunion, he returned to the Seeking Tao Institute again.

Nowadays, everyone in the True Martial Sect is very busy, each Elder having their own duties.

Internally, they are focused on development, needing to refine many processes step by step, while externally facing threats from the Demon Sect and the Southern Border. True Martial disciples are only allowed to go down the mountain for training once they reach the standards set by Luo Wentian, to avoid unnecessary dangers.

Ning Qi couldn't help much with these mundane affairs. The only thing he could do was to continually strengthen his abilities and be the ultimate backup.

After the year-end.

He would resonate with the bloodline within the White Ape every few days.

Although each time the image shattered when the Silver Giant Ape looked back, making it impossible to see what happened next, Ning Qi still gained a lot. After several attempts, he gradually grasped some principles of the Golden Pupil of Illusion-breaking.

He only needed to continue along these deductions, and turning the Golden Pupil of Illusion-breaking into a Secret Technique he could practice was only a matter of time, and not long at that.

On this day.

Zhuang Chen excitedly stepped into the Seeking Tao Institute:

"Ninth Senior Brother, the Resonance Secret Technique you taught me, I succeeded in practicing it!"

Zhuang Chen had powerful insight in Sword Dao, especially after the Sword Bone was broken and reestablished, even more so, but in practicing other Secret Techniques, he couldn't compare to the White Ape. He got the Secret Technique two or three days later than the White Ape, yet it took him over ten days longer to succeed in practicing it.

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Ning Qi smiled faintly, somewhat expectant.

Ever since seeing that scene from the depths of the White Ape bloodline, he has been wondering if the deepest parts of Zhuang Chen's Innate Sword Bone would have a similar scene.

Now, Zhuang Chen has finally achieved success.

"Come over, Shi." He waved, and the White Ape instantly showed an immensely sympathetic look. During these days, he experienced pain mixed with joy, as each resonance enhanced the degree of bloodline development significantly, despite the unpleasant sour and refreshing sensation.

Watching Zhuang Chen about to follow in his footsteps, he couldn't help but grin and laugh.

Zhuang Chen thought the White Ape was teasing him and returned a playful face.

Though Zhuang Chen was a few years older than Ning Qi, he wasn't taller. He had a chubby figure and a plump face. After Ning Qi improved the Dreaming Gluttony Secret Technique for him, such side effects stopped, but he remained fat due to his gluttony.

"Ninth Senior Brother, how should I cooperate with you this time?" Zhuang Chen asked expectantly.

Ning Qi laughed and said:

"Same as before, but this time you'll need to keep the Resonance Secret Technique running without interruption unless you pass out. If successful, I'll teach you a Secret Technique even stronger than the Innate Sword Body."

Upon hearing this, Zhuang Chen's eyes lit up, completely missing the White Ape's sneaky smile.

He thumped his chest with a thunderous sound, cheerfully saying:

"Bring it on, Senior Brother, I am ready!"

Ning Qi chuckled softly and then said solemnly:

"Close your eyes, adjust your breath, and operate the Secret Technique!"

Zhuang Chen became serious, starting to resonate with his internal Innate Sword Bone. He couldn't help but let out a low roar, as the sound of swords echoed from within, as if a Divine Sword was being unsheathed. It remarkably resembled the White Ape's involuntary manifestation of the Ape King's true form.

Ning Qi was slightly astonished.

Then he manipulated the vast Power of Heaven and Earth to gather around. He felt more at ease than before, as his Sword Dao had already reached an exceedingly high realm.

The surrounding area seemed to resonate with thousands of Divine Swords.

Zhuang Chen's face abruptly twisted, with the White Ape rejoicing in his misery, as he realized resonating internally and externally wasn't as easy as he assumed. Struggling, Zhuang Chen let out a low shout, feeling like countless ants were gently tearing his flesh, a torment even more terrifying than the pain of rebuilding after the Sword Bone's fracture.

But Ning Qi wasn't worried. Zhuang Chen's nature was far more resilient than before.

He gathered his Divine Intent and, along with the gentle Gang Qi, probed Zhuang Chen's Sword Bone.

Buzz!

After a strange buzzing sound, Ning Qi's spirit trembled. Soon he found himself in a Void Space.

Various Sword Intent floated in the Void Space, stronger than any Sword Intent Ning Qi had ever seen. Even his own Sword Intent seemed insignificant here. Unfortunately, these Sword Intent were quite blurry, as if separated by layers of time and space, preventing detailed perception of their mysteries.

Ning Qi only knew of their strength, but could not investigate what made them strong. He regretted that if he could fully absorb these Sword Intent nutrients, it was unimaginable what heights his Sword Dao could reach.

Meanwhile, he gradually realized:

"Could it be...that these are the Sword Intent of various Innate Sword Bone possessors?"

Just as this thought arose.

The Void Space underwent inexplicable changes.

Various Sword Intent floated back and forth, then displayed similar scenes. The cries of newborn babies sounded, and Ning Qi saw an incredible power from Heaven and Earth entering the bodies of babies being formed in the wombs.

"Is this the truth behind the formation of Innate Sword Bone? Originally, I thought the Innate Sword Bone, like the Heavenly Beast bloodline, might originate from some extremely powerful Sword Dao ancestor from ancient times. But now, it appears not to be so; it's purely of natural and earthly nurturing!"

"From this, it is highly likely that Innate Blade Bone and Innate Spear Bone also exist, just not yet discovered by me."

Ripples arose in Ning Qi's heart.

He surmised that the power entering the infants must be some kind of force related to the Sword Path Origin and the Power of Heaven and Earth, something he could not currently comprehend.

As he continued watching.

His heart was shaken.

He saw from some blurred scenes newborn babies actually absorbing the Power of Heaven and Earth!

"Newly born and able to control the Power of Heaven and Earth? This is precisely what a 'Celestial Being' is! So not only are there naturally favored Heavenly Beasts, but similar existences also reside among the Human Race. Innate Sword Bone possessors are one such, and possibly all humans with special constitutions are like this."

Ning Qi's pupils slightly dilated.

He discovered an incredible secret.

Then he couldn't help but wonder:

"But why isn't Shi like this at all? If he naturally could absorb the Power of Heaven and Earth, he wouldn't possess only this level of power."

Ning Qi was puzzled.

Thoughts continuously flashed through his mind, operating at maximum speed, with various information flowing within. Suddenly, a terrifying speculation arose within him:

"Could it be...some changes occurred in the world preventing the later-born Innate Sword Bone from possessing the ability to absorb the Power of Heaven and Earth, leaving only a Sword Dao enhancement?"

This explanation seemed most reasonable.

Ning Qi recalled the great terror perceived by both him and the Blade Demon, exhaling deeply.

The truth was getting closer.

The disappearance of Heavenly Beasts, the changes in Innate Sword Bone, a great terror from the world itself, all three must be linked somehow.

"What exactly has changed?"

Ning Qi continued watching.

The Void Space calmed down again, and unlike the Resonating White Ape Bloodline experience, he wasn't forcibly 'ejected', which surprised him. Perhaps this was due to their differing origins, but this was beneficial. When the Void Space settled, a peculiar wave gradually emanated.

Ning Qi carefully sensed it, gradually feeling delight.

This peculiar wave indeed contained the innate abilities of the Innate Sword Bone.

"Innate Divine Sword Qi? This is the powerful capability contained within the Innate Sword Bone, comparable to the natural Golden Pupil of Illusion-breaking, yet to transform it into a controllable Secret Technique requires effort."

However, Ning Qi had confidence. For him, it wasn't too difficult, especially with nearly a ready-made template.

He needed to turn an innate talent into an acquirable Secret Technique, a task tiresome for others but doable for Ning Qi.

In the midst of comprehension.

The Void Space shook, ending Ning Qi's resonance state.

It wasn't that his Divine Intent gave way, but rather Zhuang Chen fell into unconsciousness.

Ning Qi chuckled.

After checking Zhuang Chen's body and confirming nothing was wrong, he relaxed. To Zhuang Chen, it was advantageous, as each resonance increased control over his Innate Sword Bone.

Moreover, once Ning Qi developed the Innate Divine Sword Qi Secret Technique, Zhuang Chen could awaken his Sword Bone's innate ability early, exceeding the White Ape, who had long mastered the Golden Pupil of Illusion-breaking.

After having the White Ape settle Zhuang Chen, Ning Qi pondered carefully on the Golden Pupil of Illusion-breaking and Innate Divine Sword Qi, these two innate abilities.

He made a decision.

After converting these two innate talents into controllable Secret Techniques, he would go down the mountain to pursue enemies.

The Demon Sect and Southern Border had deep reserves, unknown if they possessed methods surpassing the Celestial Human Realm; naturally, enhancing his strength was the safest route, lest he fall into the enemy's trap.

Time slowly passed.

Another half month went by.

Ning Qi's progress in researching the two innate abilities was encouraging, especially with the Innate Divine Sword Qi. Due to his Divine Intent's endurance, it succeeded first.

Today, with the Golden Pupil of Illusion-breaking Secret Technique also successfully created.

Ning Qi's goal was finally achieved.

Chapter 263: Crimson Thunder, Descending the Mountain

In the Seeking Tao Institute.

Ning Qi was reviewing the two Secret Techniques he had just created.

The Enlightenment Tea Tree grew even more verdant, maintaining its vitality even in the cold winter snow. Sitting cross-legged under the tree, Ning Qi found it easier to enter a state of Enlightenment.

Strands of Power of Heaven and Earth swirled around him, forming a barrier at Ning Qi's side.

But the more astonishing transformation was happening inside of Ning Qi.

Sword Intent fluctuated in a special way, the Primordial Core within constantly vibrating, while strands of pure Gang Qi began to circulate along a specific route, then fused uniquely with the Sword Intent, eventually birthing a power of unmatched sharpness that continued to nurture.

"This is the Innate Divine Sword Qi!" Ning Qi felt joyous at the power surpassing the Heavenly Sword Technique.

The key to this Secret Technique lies in nurturing Sword Qi.

Combining the Innate Divine with Sword Intent and Gang Qi to form an incredibly terrifying Sword Qi, capable of releasing earth-shattering power.

According to Ning Qi's deductions, the Innate Divine Sword Qi he was nurturing was actually a diluted version, because real Innate Divine Sword Qi requires, not Gang Qi, but the kind of power refined from Power of Heaven and Earth.

Ning Qi sighed with emotion:

"From the scenes I observed before, the Innate Sword Bones were born able to absorb Power of Heaven and Earth. That's why Innate Sword Bones of that era were born with such powerful innate abilities. However, for the later Innate Sword Bones to awaken these abilities, they probably had to ascend to the Martial Saint Realm."

"But that was before. With the Secret Techniques I've created, Gang Qi is enough to substitute for the power of the Martial Saint, though the power will be somewhat reduced."

"Yet even so, it cannot be underestimated. The Innate Divine Sword Qi now can be considered my strongest attack! Even if I fully exert the Heavenly Sword Technique, it can't compare."

His mouth curled slightly; this time, the gains were indeed significant.

To this day.

The Heavenly Sword Technique that Ning Qi had mastered was actually slowly moving towards a path of relying on quantity to win, simply because his essence of power couldn't break through, and Sword Intent couldn't be enhanced in a short time. If Ning Qi exerted his full strength now, he could condense over a thousand Celestial Swords to form a Thousand Stars Sword Array.

And if he stepped into the Celestial Being Realm Perfection, achieving All Swords Return to the Root wouldn't be a problem. That would represent a significant breakthrough.

But for now.

The power of the Innate Divine Sword Qi had already surpassed the Thousand Stars Sword Array, becoming Ning Qi's strongest means.

"Moreover, when I step into the Martial Saint Realm in the future and replace Gang Qi with the power of the Martial Saint, the limits of this Innate Divine Sword Qi will be truly unleashed. This is a Supreme Secret Technique that will shine even in the Martial Saint Realm!"

Ning Qi once again marveled at the prowess of the Innate Sword Bone, though regretting that in this era, the Innate Sword Bone had already been lost.

He conducted an Inner Observation on himself, hiding deep the formidable Sword Qi nurtured within, as a trump card that would not be used easily.

Then.

He experimented with the other Secret Technique.

Golden Pupil of Illusion-breaking.

Its prowess was in no way inferior to the Innate Divine Sword Qi, but this Secret Technique wasn't intended for combat.

"Like the Innate Divine Sword Qi, the Golden Pupil of Illusion-breaking actually requires the power of the Martial Saint to be fully activated. At present, I'm merely using Gang Qi as a clever substitute, yet it still yields impressive results."

With a thought, Ning Qi's eyes began to emit faint golden light, exuding majesty.

Wherever his gaze shifted, everything seemed to slow down, the snowflakes drifted very slowly, and the howling of the wind drew out strangely. Looking at the Enlightenment Tea Tree, he could directly see the essence being nourished and transported within the roots and stems of the tree. Looking at the Power of Heaven and Earth, he could even see strands of magical veins permeating the air.

"The so-called illusion-breaking, means to break through illusion. With the Golden Pupil of Illusion-breaking, most things in the world have no secrets in front of me, which matches perfectly with my understanding and helps me better achieve Enlightenment."

"Moreover, it's highly beneficial for combat, easily seeing through the enemy's true state. Powers of Heaven and Earth, Sword Intent, and Blade Intent—all are revealed before me, and even... it might have some effect on the Martial Saint Realm as well."

Although Ning Qi had never seen the Martial Saint Realm, he had a strong intuition about this.

Mastery of the two major Secret Techniques had further advanced Ning Qi's strength, making him feel more at ease.

He looked up at the sky, suddenly feeling curious.

"To use the Golden Pupil of Illusion-breaking to observe the Thunderous Forbidden Zone?"

Since he hadn't completed his cultivation lessons for the day, he felt a bit moved.

Silently, Ning Qi rose into the sky, his speed was extremely fast, reaching High Heaven with familiar ease, where the Thunderous Forbidden Zone still raged and churned, like Thunder Dragons fighting fiercely within it.

Ning Qi's eyes emitted golden light, gazing towards the Thunderous Forbidden Zone.

The originally raging thunder seemed to slow down, his gaze crossing space, peering deeper into the forbidden zone, where purple-black thunder, black thunder, black-red thunder, blood-colored thunder...

Countless terrifying thunders permeated within. The aura they emitted alone made Ning Qi's soul tremble.

He wished to see even deeper, but a bloody light soared to the sky, bearing terrifying power, seemingly tracing his gaze back to him. Startled, his heart shouted, and he quickly dispelled the Golden Pupil of Illusion-breaking, still feeling a lingering fear.

"That blood-colored thunder is truly terrifying; it destroys not only the body but can also obliterate the spirit and will!"

Yet Ning Qi couldn't help but feel a surge of curiosity.

"Who knows if, beyond the blood-colored thunder, there are even more terrifying thunders, or perhaps... some other entities?"

Chapter 264: Crimson Thunder, Descending the Mountain_2

He sighed a little, the secrets of this world are truly numerous, but unfortunately, he is not yet strong enough to delve deeper.

Adjusting his state of mind, Ning Qi cut off distractions and began cultivation.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

Strengthening oneself is still more important.

For now, he just needs to wait for news from Luo Wentian. Once there's a trace of the Blood King Gu, he will descend the mountain immediately.

Time passed slowly.

Ning Qi didn't have to wait long.

On this day.

Luo Wentian stepped into the Seeking Tao Institute.

"Jiu, I've collected the information. Indeed, there are several suspected locations where the Southern Border Alliance is cultivating the Blood King Gu, but they are very secretive, with only sparse clues, and it could also be a trap deliberately set by the Southern Border. The Imperial Court suffered losses from this aspect before."

"Perhaps... it's better not to descend the mountain."

He seemed to want to say more but stopped.

On one hand, he hopes Ning Qi can preemptively eradicate the threat of the Martial Saints from the Southern Border and Demon Sect while they are still in the cradle. On the other hand, he doesn't want Ning Qi to fall into a perilous situation. Whether from the perspective of a senior brother caring for his junior or considering Ning Qi as the future of the True Martial Sect, he doesn't wish such danger upon him.

So he's been conflicted these past few days.

But there's no alternative; avoiding the problem won't solve it. In the end, he decided to leave the choice to Ning Qi.

Ning Qi took the dossier, smiled reassuringly, and said:

"Senior brother, don't worry. I've made progress recently. I believe even if a Martial Saint truly comes, I'll have no problem escaping alive."

Upon hearing this.

Luo Wentian felt a little relieved. He knew his ninth junior brother never spoke rashly and might even be understating, but he still seriously advised:

"Jiu, promise your senior brother, this time when you descend the mountain, if there's an opportunity, do your utmost to eliminate the threat. But if there's none, prioritize your survival. The Demon Sect and

Southern Border are deeply rooted. While there may not be a Martial Saint born yet, they could have reserves at that level. Be cautious and never underestimate them."

Ning Qi nodded solemnly and smiled:

"Rest assured, senior brother, I'm intent on achieving longevity and won't rashly throw my life away."

The Demon Sect's ability to entangle with the Great Yan Imperial Court for so many years is no small feat, and the Southern Border's ability to secure a foothold in the treacherous Hundred Thousand Mountains surely means they have their reliance; neither are simple.

Hearing Ning Qi's half-joking words, Luo Wentian couldn't help but smile knowingly.

He was well aware of how, when Ning Qi was just six months old, he declared his intent for longevity to their master—something Taoist Longshan privately praised several times to the other disciples.

Martial arts should have ambition.

As for how elusive that ambition might be, it's not a problem; it's simply about taking steady steps forward.

All these years.

Ning Qi has been reclusive within the Seeking Tao Institute, practicing what he preaches about his ambition. Others might not say it aloud, but they all greatly admire Ning Qi in their hearts, far exceeding them in this regard.

Luo Wentian remembered something and added:

"There's one more thing. Recently, the Taoist Baishan from the True Profound Sect has entered the Celestial Human Realm and is planning to hold a Celestial Being Grand Ceremony in six months. He

specially wrote an invitation for our master to attend, and he also mentioned you, hoping you could come as well."

The relationship between the True Profound Sect and the True Martial Sect has been quite good recently. When Taoist Longshan held his Celestial Being Grand Ceremony, True Man Baihe personally attended, and the True Profound Sect contributed significantly during the major Taoist sect rankings. They even put pressure on the Formless Sect when they sent spies.

With a new Celestial Being rising in the True Profound Sect, it would be both reasonable and courteous for us to go and offer congratulations.

Ning Qi thought of the unconventional Taoist Baishan, his eyes showing some surprise:

"That old Taoist really stepped into the Celestial Human Realm?"

The last time they met was years ago when Taoist Baishan kept coaxing Ning Qi to go with him to Tao State, intending to raid other Taoist sects.

Ning Qi had vaguely sensed that this Taoist Baishan was extraordinary, though he was prone to boast that once he stepped into the Celestial Human Realm, he would advance rapidly and even reach Martial Saint.

Now that he truly entered the Celestial Human Realm, perhaps Ning Qi could see if it's true.

"Let's talk after I return from descending the mountain. If conditions allow, maybe I could make a trip." Ning Qi pondered and said, indeed having some interest in the various Taoist sects in Tao State.

Luo Wentian also nodded.

After all, it's not like the Celestial Being Grand Ceremony is happening immediately, and they could decide later.

He gave some more advice about matters related to descending the mountain, then left in large strides.

The next day.

After arranging all the matters with Yuan Tiancheng, Ning Qi announced his retreat from the world, then quietly descended the mountain.

...

The heavy snow had begun to slow, but for ordinary people, it still posed a great threat as extreme weather.

Traveling from True Martial City, Ning Qi clearly saw the worsening state of the cities along the way. The commoners at the bottom struggled to survive, with frozen corpses occasionally lying on the roadside or in the wilderness, causing Ning Qi to sigh. He would occasionally help some people as much as he could, but it was like a drop in the ocean.

Over two thousand years of Great Yan Dynasty rule, even the most enlightened Royal Family would develop decadence after such a long lineage, and some long-standing issues were becoming increasingly severe.

Adding to this, the combined assault from the Southern Border and the Demon Sect.

In reality, the foundation of the Great Yan Dynasty has begun to show signs of instability.

The resentment in the hearts of many commoners is gradually accumulating to a tipping point, waiting for the right moment to erupt.

Of course.

In this world where martial artists reign supreme, the ordinary people at the bottom can't accomplish anything significant. Ultimately, it requires some martial sects pushing from behind to make a difference.

Ning Qi traveled onwards.

Settled in Black Stone City in Shi State.

The first piece of information provided by Luo Wentian pointed to this location, more accurately, in the Black Stone Mountain Range outside of Black Stone City. Some intelligence suggested that powerful martial artists' corpses were transported here and then disappeared.

The Black Stone Mountain Range possibly harbors a blood pool for nurturing the Blood King Gu.

Ning Qi sat in the inn, savoring the delicacies, which had a unique appeal.

Since he rarely descends the mountain, he wouldn't be too hard on himself. Even though this trip carries important business, it must proceed step by step, without haste.

Observing the myriad facets of the world is also a form of cultivation, especially for someone like Ning Qi, who has spent years cultivating on the mountain.

The Wind Sensing Chapter has already been running silently, and though he was in the inn, Ning Qi had already locked onto a few suspicious figures from the intelligence. He was looking for a chance to enter the Black Stone Mountain Range quietly, avoiding alarming the enemy.

"Bang!"

A dull thud made Ning Qi raise his eyebrows.

It turned out that two people in the inn had started a fight.

One was a swordsman, the other a blademan.

The swordsman, face flushed and eyes aflame with anger, spat:

"How dare you belittle True Man Tianjian? Blade Demon was defeated not long ago, and yet you, a mere clown, dare to question?"

Seeing many eyes cast their way, the blademan looked somewhat unnatural and coldly snorted:

"I revere True Man Tianjian, but what I said was only that True Man Tianjian might not be a match for the Wind-listening Old Man—is that belittlement? Hmph! No matter how strong True Man Tianjian is, what does it have to do with a trash like you who hasn't even mastered swordsmanship?"

The two continued their exchange of insults and soon came to blows.

Ning Qi couldn't help but chuckle quietly.

One of them turned out to be a fan of his, and a particularly devoted one at that, willing to risk their life. He had heard many discussions about True Man Tianjian along his journey, but this was the first encounter he had seen firsthand.

When he saw the swordsman gradually gaining the upper hand, even as his life was still at risk, Ning Qi was quietly pleased. As a gesture of fate, he subtly pointed a finger, infusing a delicate trace of Sword Intent onto the swordsman's blade, thinking that it might help the man advance in his Sword Dao easily in the future.

The swordsman didn't inflict any real harm, but instead reiterated many feats of True Man Tianjian, drawing cheers from the onlookers.

Ning Qi enjoyed the strange feeling this elicited in him.

Seeing that he had spent enough time there and gathered all the information he needed, he left the inn and headed towards the Black Stone Mountain Range.

Chapter 265: Jiang Baishan, Danger

The Black Stone Mountain Range is also a well-known mountain range within Great Yan's territory, with a powerful Beast King residing deep inside. Ordinary martial artists must tread cautiously when entering.

But for Ning Qi, it's no big deal.

Now the only existence that can make him wary is one at the level of the Beast Emperor.

Ning Qi walked casually down the street. No one noticed him—a young man passing by—his presence reduced to a minimum. Sometimes people would notice after he'd passed, but upon closer recall, they couldn't remember the person's exact appearance, only feeling immensely surprised.

Ning Qi naturally wasn't wandering aimlessly.

Earlier at the inn, he'd already perceived the few suspicious individuals mentioned in the intelligence. Noticing they were heading towards the Black Stone Mountain Range, he immediately followed.

Up ahead were three people, two men and one woman, all middle-aged, chatting and laughing. They appeared no different from ordinary adventuring martial artists entering the Black Stone Mountain Range.

But once they entered the range, their demeanor changed, and the three, initially seeming of equal status, instantly shifted to being led by the woman.

"Lord, what should we do now?" asked the two men.

The woman replied,

"Proceed according to the old rules!"

Listening, Ning Qi couldn't help but be invigorated.

He executed the Silence Technique, quietly trailing them. As he watched the trio wander around, occasionally encountering exotic beasts, one of the men with metal gloves dealt with them. This man's cultivation was unexpectedly higher than intelligence indicated, clearly having reached the Primordial Core Realm.

Later, the three stopped in a valley.

From within the valley came a low voice:

"Registration number."

The leading woman sternly replied,

"Southern Border One Dot Red, which brother of the Holy Sect is here?"

"North Wind Pass of the Wind Character Hall of the Holy Sect, greeting Lord Hong."

"No need for formalities."

The two groups exchanged pleasantries, then Ning Qi discovered corpses hiding within the valley. It was evident these corpses once belonged to powerful martial artists. He raised an eyebrow, feeling a tinge of familiarity with the scene.

He understood that the Demon Sect was assisting Southern Border in collecting martial artists' corpses, shifting from quantity to quality to avoid detection.

Led by the Southern Border trio, the Demon Sect members continuously advanced through the Black Stone Mountain Range, carrying corpses.

There was barely any conversation during the journey.

After circling for some time, they stopped in a forest, where the Southern Border trio turned and smiled:

"Brothers of the Holy Sect, thank you for your hard work. Please leave the bodies here."

The Demon Sect's leading figure didn't hesitate, waving for the group to place the corpses at their feet, then remarked:

"Lord Hong, until we meet again!"

With that, everyone departed together.

Ning Qi silently praised their decisiveness, noting that a wisp of aura had attached itself as well. Even though the strongest among them was only at the Gang Essence Realm, discovering they belonged to the Demon Sect was a clue.

He discerned that the Demon Sect sent different people each time to deliver corpses.

He was somewhat expectant.

Given such a cautious and orderly exchange, this site was quite possibly genuine.

Unexpectedly, the first location he chose after descending the mountain yielded results, which pleased Ning Qi. Once he obtained another Blood King Gu, he could begin investigating other Blood King Gus' existence to eradicate the Southern Border threat ahead.

He waited silently.

After confirming the Demon Sect's departure, the leading Southern Border woman took out a small box from her bosom, releasing an unknown red Gu insect that soared high into the air.

Before long.

A group of martial artists emerged from the distance, each carrying a wooden box.

"Lord Hong, we've made quite the haul this time; those Demon Sect folks have kept their word." The newcomers jovially packed corpses into wooden boxes.

The leading woman merely snorted lightly:

"If we in Southern Border weren't helping them, would they be so obliging? It's merely mutual benefit, after all."

Though they didn't know why the higher-ups were collecting corpses, they surmised the Demon Sect wouldn't lend a hand without reason. They'd vaguely heard the Demon Sect had interests in the Hundred Thousand Mountains—an exchange of favors, basically.

Soon enough.

The corpses were packed, and the group sped away carrying wooden boxes, halting before another valley under Ning Qi's watchful eyes.

Again, strict inspection ensued.

From one person's whispered complaint, Ning Qi learned the code varied each time they entered or exited, seemingly tailored to attendees' traits, making impersonation exceedingly difficult.

Ning Qi faintly sensed this might be related to the Qing State site he'd previously destroyed, and precaution against disguisers was intentional.

Luckily.

Ning Qi now surpassed his past capabilities.

Since reaching the Celestial Human Realm, his skills had become increasingly diverse.

At this moment.

Seizing the opportunity, he soundlessly stepped into the valley, rendering martial artists' perception ineffective.

"Celestial Human Realm? And more than one?" Ning Qi's heart skipped a beat as he detected multiple perceptions imbued with the Power of Heaven and Earth scanning his hidden location—no less than four of them. For ordinary folks attempting to sneak in, it'd be utterly impossible.

He faintly sensed something was amiss.

So many experts at a single site?

Even given Southern Border and Demon Sect's profound foundations, such extravagance seemed excessive, wouldn't it?

Following the procession carrying wooden boxes.

Ning Qi finally paused before a palace.

His expression slightly complex, tinged with self-mockery.

He didn't even need to enter to realize he was delighting in vain.

No trace of Blood Pool aura existed within the palace, nor any remnants of Blood King Gu aura—instead, the Celestial Human Realm martial artists' auras were blindingly radiant, poised for action.

By now, he fully understood.

This was a trap.

Clearly a fishing ploy.

If the people from the Imperial Court recklessly barged in, they would likely get themselves killed. For a stronghold of this scale, the Imperial Court being able to send two Celestial Realm warriors would already be quite impressive. After all, there are too many places the court needs manpower, and unless there's accurate information, it's impossible to arbitrarily deploy numerous experts.

"They really can't be underestimated." Ning Qi sighed softly, putting away his previous bit of disdain before descending the mountain.

With his ability, he initially thought this was truly a base for cultivating Blood King Gu. Needless to say, others would too.

Someone had already discovered Ning Qi's presence.

"Who is it!"

A furious shout erupted from the depths of the palace, layers of Heaven and Earth Power exploded outward, a blue-haired figure soared into the sky, followed by three other powerful figures who rushed out, surrounding Ning Qi in an instant.

The many martial artists within the stronghold all charged fiercely.

The others were somewhat bewildered, but still joined in to encircle Ning Qi.

The blue-haired elder looked at the young Ning Qi, somewhat disappointed:

"Only a little shrimp like this? What have you all been doing, letting someone sneak in without anyone noticing?"

He said so, but Ning Qi's Golden Pupil of Illusion-breaking had already detected him secretly gathering all his strength, obviously realizing that Ning Qi, having reached this place alone, was definitely not an easy opponent.

Ning Qi's expression remained calm.

He released his aura intentionally.

Since he was already here, although it wasn't a Blood King Gu base, killing some Southern Border people would still alleviate some threat.

Sensing the surroundings, he spoke lightly:

"Very well, not missing a single one."

Those Celestial Realm warriors were about to scold Ning Qi for not knowing the immensity of heaven and earth, but in the next moment, they all froze in place. They could only feel an ocean-like vastness of Heaven and Earth Power gathering, making it difficult to breathe, and the oppressive feeling made their souls tremble.

Ning Qi slowly ascended into the air, forming a fist seal.

He didn't want to use his Sword Intent and thought the Heaven-Suppressing Fist of the Town North King was rather handy.

The Heaven and Earth Power suppressed everything, and the enormous fist seal descended like a mountain.

Everything was utterly obliterated.

Within the valley.

Battle erupted.

The fluctuation of Heaven and Earth Power, the sounds of screams always came to an abrupt stop.

A moment later.

Ning Qi turned and left.

Only chaos remained behind.

After using the Soul Capturing Eye Technique for questioning, those Celestial Realm warriors also didn't know more information. Their only task was to ambush any potential powerful members of the Imperial Court and deeply trap the court.

Moreover, Ning Qi discovered that these Celestial Realm beings had a special Gu insect in their bodies, which could stabilize their minds and resist his Soul Capturing Eye Technique, clearly the Southern Border had made precautions in this regard.

Slightly silent, Ning Qi then took a deep breath.

Since there were no traces here, he would just move to the next location. He didn't believe he wouldn't find any clues.

As for the aftermath here, that would be for the Imperial Court to handle.

Ning Qi returned to Black Stone City.

Slightly depressed, as he initially thought he had gained something, only to find it was a mere illusion.

This made him realize that things might not be as simple as he previously thought, having witnessed the Demon Sect and Southern Border's measures.

To have power but no target is in vain as well.

If the Demon Sect and Southern Border decided to hide wholeheartedly, they would indeed be difficult to find.

"But even if I can't find any trace, delaying them would be good. If nothing truly comes of it, I'll return to the mountain and focus on enhancing my strength!" Ning Qi secretly resolved.

Though he would practice Three Flowers every day when outside, ultimately, he had wasted much time on Enlightenment.

"I'll limit it to two months. If I find nothing, I won't waste time any longer."

Ning Qi exhaled slowly, calming his mind.

Half a day later.

Ning Qi set out to a different suspicious location recorded in the intel.

...

Time passed.

In the blink of an eye, more than a month had gone by.

During this time.

Ning Qi's path covered five or six states, following Luo Wentian's intel, but unfortunately, he almost came up with nothing. Without exception, it was either a trap or a smokescreen.

It was as if the Southern Border people were no longer cultivating Blood King Gu within Great Yan.

With repeated failures, even Ning Qi's temperament started to get restless.

The only gain was dismantling several ambush sites, killing nine Celestial Realm experts from the Southern Border and Demon Sect. The Demon Sect and Southern Border had become more restrained, knowing an unparalleled expert from the Imperial Court was investigating traps, which was perhaps the greatest comfort.

But for Ning Qi, the most important thing was still to find the Martial Saint's secret land. Otherwise, no matter how many Celestial Realm beings he killed, it would be meaningless. After all, he couldn't possibly slaughter every Demon Sect and Southern Border Celestial Realm expert.

"A few days ago, senior brother sent a letter saying Town North King had already dispatched elites to investigate the Northern Barbarian. We can only wait and see if there's any news from that side."

With constant failures, everyone suspected the Southern Border had long moved Blood King Gu cultivation to Northern Barbarian or elsewhere.

However, that place wasn't Great Yan's territory, making investigations much more difficult.

Ning Qi took a small sip of wine.

He sat in the tavern, lost in thought.

Suddenly.

His body shook, pupils slightly contracted, unable to resist looking southward.

"This is... the fluctuation of Gang Essence Sword Seed!"

He was in Cang State at the moment, and if he hadn't misperceived, the direction of that fluctuation should be... Lei State.

Ning Qi's mind tightened.

When Jiang Baishan and Lin Ruhua descended the mountain, he had given them a pair of Mandarin Duck Jade Pendants, within which contained Gang Essence Sword Seed. If they encountered a crisis, they could unleash it. And now, the Sword Seed had erupted, didn't that mean Jiang Baishan and his wife were in danger?

He couldn't sit still any longer.

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Lei State.

Deep within Yan Mountain.

In front of the wooden house, two figures were practicing swordplay. Each move they executed was filled with deep affection, like the sun and moon reflecting each other's light, subtly showing brilliance between sunrise and sunset. This Combined Sword Technique requires two people to be in perfect harmony to unleash its astonishing power, with an underlying ambush of killing intent that should not be underestimated.

A moment later.

Jiang Baishan and Lin Ruhua stopped their swords. Lin Ruhua's eyes were filled with happiness:

"Baishan, your perception is truly unrivaled. This Sun and Moon Swordsmanship, when used by the two of us, can definitely contend with a Primordial Core Realm expert."

The fact that her beloved was a martial arts genius made her both admire him and be immensely proud.

Jiang Baishan smiled slightly and then said:

"My little perception is far from being unrivaled. If you knew about Jiu, you definitely wouldn't think so."

Lin Ruhua was a bit curious. Jiang Baishan rarely mentioned Ning Qi, and her impression of Ning Qi was only from the last True Martial Peach Assembly they attended, during which Ning Qi gifted them a pair of Mandarin Duck Jade Pendants, which still hung at their waists.

Back then on the mountain, she had sensed that Ning Qi was no ordinary person, which was somewhat apparent from the attitude of others.

Such a prodigious disciple of the True Martial Mountain, yet almost unheard of, was indeed strange, but she hadn't asked much about it.

Now hearing Jiang Baishan bring it up on his own, she finally couldn't resist asking:

"Tell me about the wonders of Junior Brother Jiu."

Jiang Baishan laughed, gently caressing Lin Ruhua's belly, his thoughts seemingly traversing time back to when Ning Qi first began learning martial arts:

"By calculation, Jiu should now be over eleven years old, but do you know how long he's been practicing martial arts?"

"Eight years."

Lin Ruhua's eyes widened.

In that case, doesn't this mean Ning Qi started down the Martial Path at three years old?

This was unheard of.

Jiang Baishan continued:

"That year, just as Jiu stepped into the Martial Path, he already showed a prodigious talent. Ruhua, you also know that I've been cultivating the Suanni Stance, one of the True Martial Nine Stances. Back then, it took me three years to cultivate it to the Divine Intent Perfection level, but do you know how long it took Jiu?"

"A year?" Lin Ruhua hesitated. She thought it was already very outrageous.

Jiang Baishan shook his head with a smile, filled with emotion:

"It was one day. Even, not necessarily a whole day."

Lin Ruhua was dumbfounded.

To cultivate a superior stance skill to its highest level in just one day was utterly fantastical. If it hadn't been her husband saying it, she wouldn't have believed it at all.

Jiang Baishan laughed:

"In fact, since then, we no longer probe into Jiu's realm. We senior and junior brothers sometimes avoid this topic when mentioning him because we all know that perhaps Jiu has quietly surpassed us by far."

"He's only eleven; his future is boundless. Becoming the strongest in the world is only a matter of time. It would be great if our child could have even half of Jiu's talent in the future."

He spoke with heartfelt emotion.

Lin Ruhua instinctively nodded as well.

A mother naturally holds unlimited hope for her child, believing their child to be forever superior. Hearing about Ning Qi's talent described this way by Jiang Baishan, she genuinely wished their child could be as extraordinarily gifted as Ning Qi in the future.

She couldn't help but touch her lower abdomen, her face full of affectionate care.

Jiang Baishan also came close.

He placed his large hand on Lin Ruhua's abdomen, his eyes filled with anticipation. This was their love's fruition, especially at this moment, it was like a light of hope shining in their hearts.

The two nestled together, watching the sunset, speaking of their hopes for the future child.

Suddenly.

Both of their bodies trembled, gazing into the distance.

Almost simultaneously, they drew their swords and stood ready, sensing several unabated powerful auras approaching from all sides. A deep laughter rang out:

"How wonderful indeed, that the daughter of a dignified Vice Sect Leader of the Holy Sect would debase herself, mingling with a disciple of the True Martial Sect, willing to betray the Holy Sect, and even giving birth to a bastard. How truly wonderful!"

The voice laughed, but the anger in it was perceptible to all.

Lin Ruhua's face turned pale, and all her hopeful thoughts vanished.

"It's an elder from the Demon Sect who's been in the Celestial Human Realm for a long time. Though not at the Celestial Being List level, he's still not to be underestimated."

She spoke hastily, her voice barely a mosquito's buzz in Jiang Baishan's ear:

"Baishan, listen to me. Later, I'll hold them off, you find a chance to escape. Rest assured, my mother is, after all, the Vice Sect Leader of the Demon Sect. They wouldn't dare harm me, but it's different for you. If they catch you, they'll undoubtedly use you to threaten the Master and Senior Brother!"

Jiang Baishan's expression changed, firmly shaking his head:

"It's just death; how can I abandon my wife and child and leave alone? Moreover, they came prepared. Even without considering this Celestial Human Realm expert, I can't escape from those Gang Essence Realm experts."

He knew that the people from the Demon Sect might not harm Lin Ruhua's life, but what would happen after taking her back was completely unknown, and the chances of saving their unborn child were absolutely impossible.

He was already prepared for a fight to the death.

Their hearts ached.

Just moments ago they were imagining the future, and in the blink of an eye, they fell into such a desperate situation.

Lin Ruhua's eyes were filled with guilt:

"If I hadn't gone out by myself a few days ago, there might not have been any traces left. Baishan, it's my fault."

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Jiang Baishan held her right hand, firmly shaking his head:

"We are one, no need to say such things. Even our unborn child will surely be unafraid!"

The two exchanged a look, suddenly smiling, both seeing the resolve in each other's eyes.

In that case, there was nothing left but to fight to the death.

Perhaps there was still a glimmer of hope?

In just a short moment.

A dozen or so martial artists in black quietly appeared near the cabin, surrounding it completely, all of them with Gang Essence Realm cultivation, and there were several at the Primordial Core Realm.

Then an elder with a jujube-red complexion slowly descended from the sky, hovering and looking down on the two, filled with an oppressive aura; it was he who had just spoken.

"Miss Lin, it seems your judgment is not that great after all. Instead of choosing the Holy Sect's unparalleled Saint Heir, you chose this mere White Mist Realm kid, truly blind." The elder sneered.

Lin Ruhua knew why.

Because of Lin Xueshuang's power and status, she had always been sought after within the sect, with many wanting to marry her to gain Lin Xueshuang's support. Qin Yun was just one of them, and the Elder Ye before her was another supporter of the candidate Saint Heir, Ye Qin.

She was secretly angry, but did not show it:

"Elder Ye, please spare us. If you let him leave, I can return with you, even marrying Ye Qin."

Lin Ruhua laid her cards on the table right away, which made Elder Ye reveal a trace of surprise, but he soon snorted:

"Ridiculous, I originally asked you to marry him openly and you refused, and now as a used shoe you want to marry Qin'er? Truly laughable! I tell you, today the wild man next to you must die, the wild seed in your belly can't be saved, and as for you? You must return and await the orders of the Grand Elder!"

Lin Ruhua's gaze turned cold:

"Elder Ye, aren't you afraid my mother might fully lean towards Jiang Tianlong's side?"

That was another candidate Saint Heir.

Since Qin Yun's downfall, Jiang Tianlong and Ye Qin have been competing fiercely, and everyone knows that once the Holy Sect's Martial Saint is born, the Saint Heir will become the next generation's Martial Saint designate.

Hearing this, Elder Ye simply laughed coldly:

"It seems Miss Lin doesn't yet know the situation within the Holy Sect. In that case, come back with me and see for yourself."

Lin Ruhua's heart sank.

She was always clever, and hearing Elder Ye's words, she could roughly guess what had happened on her mother's side.

But now was not the time to worry about her mother, she outwardly stalled Elder Ye, while actually observing which direction would be best to break through. Jiang Baishan suppressed his inner anger, drawing a few lines on Lin Ruhua's right hand with his palm.

The two had a tacit understanding; a glance and a gesture were enough to convey their intentions to each other.

Lin Ruhua took a deep breath, about to speak, but in the next instant, she and Jiang Baishan simultaneously erupted, their long swords in hand wielding Gang Qi like two dragons merging, presenting a scene as radiant as the sun and moon, with the Sword Gang aimed east, their cooperation seamless.

They erupted so suddenly.

An east-facing Demon Sect martial artist at the Jade Liquid Realm was instantly killed, and the two broke free and fled into the distance.

Elder Ye was slightly taken aback, looking at their moves with a bit of appreciation, but then smirked coldly.

He waved his hand.

The remaining martial artists all rushed to attack.

In the distance, several more martial artists suddenly appeared to block Jiang Baishan and Lin Ruhua's path.

The joy that had just appeared on their faces vanished instantly, as they hadn't expected the Demon Sect to send so many people; just these fifteen or sixteen Gang Essence Realm martial artists were enough to trap them in a deathly situation.

Jiang Baishan didn't hesitate, swallowing a Blood Burning Pill, while using the Secret Technique that Ning Qi had extended with the Virtual Sword Pill Dissolution Technique.

"Kill!"

In an instant, his Gang Qi surged even more fiercely, and together with Lin Ruhua, they managed to force several Primordial Core Realm opponents into a difficult position, mainly because Jiang Baishan was fighting recklessly, risking his life for theirs, which made the other Demon Sect martial artists somewhat hesitant.

But the gap in hard power was evident, Jiang Baishan was already wounded, with deep cuts visible to the bone, causing Lin Ruhua's eyes to blur with tears.

Blood had already unknowingly flowed onto the Mandarin Duck Jade Pendant around his waist.

Elder Ye, seeing this scene, couldn't help but snort lightly:

"A bunch of incompetent fools!"

Seven or eight times the number, several of them at the Primordial Core Realm, yet they couldn't take down two Jade Liquid Realm martial artists; it made him angry but also somewhat appreciative.

"This True Martial Sect kid indeed has some skill, a rare talent. Given time, he would surely become an unparalleled strongman. Unfortunately, he's not one of my Holy Sect." He shook his head slightly, his body rising into the air.

He didn't intend to waste any more time.

Jiang Baishan and Lin Ruhua felt even darker in their hearts, as they sensed the terrifying pressure approaching.

The gap between the Celestial Human Realm and the Gang Essence Realm was immense, not to mention that neither of them was even at the Primordial Core Realm.

At this moment.

Elder Ye struck with a palm, and a large palm seal immediately came crashing down, the wind howling, as if weeping.

Jiang Baishan stood in front of Lin Ruhua, feeling as if his bones throughout his body were about to break, his hairpin shattered, his wild hair whipping about as he roared:

"Ye Old Dog, if I don't die today, one day I'll slaughter your entire clan!"

It was the only thing he had said since the fight began.

His eyes were fierce like a wolf's, giving Elder Ye a chill in his heart. This young boy indeed had world-class potential, and if he let him escape, it would be a never-ending trouble in the future. He coldly laughed:

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"There will never be such a day; today you will surely die, crushed to pieces!"

The palm seal pressed down, its might overwhelming.

He deliberately took his time, wanting Jiang Baishan to savor the suffocating feeling of despair looming over him.

The Gang Qi before Jiang Baishan shattered inch by inch. His eyes reddened; he could no longer roar in fury, only watch helplessly as the palm seal descended upon him. Lin Ruhua's eyes were blurred with tears. She wanted to plead but, also suppressed by the Power of Heaven and Earth, couldn't open her mouth, only able to helplessly watch Jiang Baishan face calamity.

Everyone watched jeeringly.

The palm seal was less than a dozen feet from their heads, like a mountain pressing down. Jiang Baishan half-kneeled on the ground, bleeding all over, yet undaunted. Suddenly, his spirit shook as he sensed a wave emanating. He lowered his gaze and found the source of the wave was the Mandarin Duck Jade Pendant gifted by Ning Qi. However, the jade pendant was now stained with blood, appearing somewhat sinister.

He was about to ponder.

"Buzz!"

A buzzing sound resounded in everyone's ears. Elder Ye was instantly alert and swiftly leapt into the air.

Only to see Jiang Baishan's jade pendant at his waist shatter, unparalleled sword intent soaring, and terrifying Sword Qi erupting all around.

Everything happened in a flash.

No one had time to react, not even Jiang Baishan and Lin Ruhua themselves, who were in a daze, but soon the screams that followed shocked them awake. The Sword Qi was terrifyingly powerful, the black-clad men around had no power to resist, being instantly annihilated.

Elder Ye was pursued by the most fearsome Sword Qi, fleeing into the distance. The two saw from afar, Elder Ye screamed in pain, blood gush forth, and an arm was pulverized by the Sword Qi.

The two were dumbfounded, stupefied by the sudden turn of events.

"Is this... the jade pendant Little Jiu gave us?"

Jiang Baishan clutched a fragment of the jade pendant, his heart filled with turbulent waves.

Lin Ruhua touched the intact jade pendant at her waist, also full of shock.

The scene before their eyes was simply too astonishing.

Emerging from a desperate situation, they couldn't help but cry tears of joy. Fortunately, the two knew the situation didn't allow time for much thought.

Lin Ruhua lifted Jiang Baishan and hurriedly said:

"Baishan, Old Ghost Ye has only lost an arm; we must escape immediately. Otherwise, if he reacts and catches up, even injured, we are no match for him."

Jiang Baishan nodded quickly.

The two gathered their Gang Qi, trying to erase their tracks as they fled into the mountains and forests.

They fled rapidly.

Jiang Baishan looked miserable but hadn't actually suffered severe injuries. Now having a brief respite, he couldn't help recalling the terrifying Sword Qi eruption:

"Ruhua, don't you think the Sword Qi and Sword Intent just now felt familiar?"

Lin Ruhua also pondered this.

Upon hearing this, she instinctively said:

"True Man Tianjian!"

Jiang Baishan nodded vigorously:

"That's right, it's Senior Tianjian, the Sword Intent is exactly like that of the True Martial Sword Stele and the moments when the senior took action!"

As the two ran, they exchanged glances, seeing the shock in each other's eyes.

"Little Jiu... what is his connection with Senior Tianjian?"

"Perhaps... Junior Brother Jiu is favored by Senior Tianjian?"

Various speculations arose in their hearts. Hearing Lin Ruhua's explanation, Jiang Baishan found it reasonable but also felt something was amiss. But if True Man Tianjian was Little Jiu, that was too unbelievable.

He shook his head, dismissing many stray thoughts, yet his heart was incredibly warm. Regardless of the precise relationship between True Man Tianjian and Ning Qi, to have Senior Tianjian produce such a powerful artifact was no easy task, impossible without deep brotherhood.

"We really owe it to Little Jiu this time."

Jiang Baishan let out a long breath and said solemnly:

"Ruhua, our biggest trump card now is the remaining jade pendant you have. We must use it well, or we won't escape Old Ghost Ye's pursuit."

Lin Ruhua nodded firmly, handing over the jade pendant:

"You use it! Soon Old Ghost Ye will catch up; strive to kill him in one strike, only then can we have a chance to escape. From my understanding of the Demon Sect, they never act through just one force, there are surely more people coming, we must shake off Old Ghost Ye before they arrive."

Jiang Baishan did not refuse.

The two, while running in the forest, stuffed various pills into their mouths to optimize their conditions.

Meanwhile, Elder Ye.

Finally recovered from the shock.

"This Sword Intent is somewhat similar to the Sword Intent mentioned in the intelligence regarding True Man Tianjian. It seems True Man Tianjian sealed two Sword Qi for them, hateful!" Elder Ye looked at his severed left arm and gnashed his teeth.

He had unexpectedly failed miserably due to carelessness, ending up maimed.

"The jade pendant on Jiang Baishan is gone, now only the one with Lin Ruhua remains. I must be more careful." Finally extricating the lingering Sword Intent, he was extremely wary of True Man Tianjian while also harboring deep hatred for Jiang Baishan and Lin Ruhua.

He swore silently, if he captured the two, he would ensure they wished for life and begged for death!

Without hesitation, he soared into the sky.

Chasing along the trail they had fled.

The speed of flying for someone in the Celestial Human Realm is incredibly fast, moreover with the two being wounded, they couldn't hide their tracks. Thus, Elder Ye soon caught up to the two, his face gloomy:

"You little brats, still trying to run?"

His voice was grand, overlapping, the mountains and forests rippling like waves, great trees breaking under the Power of Heaven and Earth, exposing their figures.

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Jiang Baishan sneered mercilessly:

"Old dog, doesn't it feel bad to lose an arm?"

Elder Ye was furious:

"Good! Soon I'll let you see what real cruelty is!"

"Old thing, come if you have the guts!" Lin Ruhua raised the Jade Pendant in her hand, holding it in her palm with only a corner exposed, causing Elder Ye's pupils to shrink involuntarily.

The two fled swiftly, rushing through the depths of Yan Mountain. Despite the mighty Power of Heaven and Earth, it was too far away to reach them, allowing Jiang Baishan and Lin Ruhua to narrowly escape amid their predicament. Piece after piece of forest was destroyed by Elder Ye in his rage, trying to probe them, gradually lowering his altitude as the pressure on the two increased.

Suddenly.

Lin Ruhua paused her step, raised the Jade Pendant:

"Old dog, behold the Sword Qi!"

Elder Ye's heart was startled, immediately flying up to gain altitude, the shadow of his severed arm still fresh in his mind.

But little did he know.

No Sword Intent exploded at all. Jiang Baishan and Lin Ruhua seized this opportunity, diving back into the forest, leaving mocking laughter:

"What a timid old dog!"

Elder Ye was furious, veins bulging on his forehead, wishing to tear the two into pieces for being toyed with like this.

A moment later.

He tried to approach once again.

Lin Ruhua repeated her tactic.

Elder Ye, frightened, pulled away once more, keeping distance. Though he knew Lin Ruhua might be bluffing, he dared not gamble, for fear of losing another arm, which would be disastrous.

In the forest, Lin Ruhua's laughter was crisp and clear, piercing to Elder Ye's ears, his face dark as if about to drip water.

Being toyed with continuously by two juniors was a great humiliation.

During the chase.

They went deeper into Yan Mountain, where it's rumored the Beast King resides. Jiang Baishan and Lin Ruhua intended to drive the tiger to swallow the wolf, to escape with their lives.

Elder Ye clearly noticed this too.

He waved his hand, driving the Power of Heaven and Earth to exert stronger pressure. Frustrated by Lin Ruhua's tricks, his form lowered further; each time he pulled away frightened, the alighting distance shortened. The two kept spitting blood, as the shockwave of the Power of Heaven and Earth at this range was enough to harm them.

Jiang Baishan swung his sword, being swept away by the shockwave of the Power of Heaven and Earth.

Lin Ruhua raised the Jade Pendant again:

"Old dog, watch the sword!"

But this time, Elder Ye sneered and descended instead of ascending, aiming to strike psychologically, catching the two off guard. The Power of Heaven and Earth swept over, unleashing the full might of a Celestial Human Realm expert, throwing Lin Ruhua into the air.

"You really were deceiving me!" Elder Ye laughed madly, reaching to grab Lin Ruhua.

But almost instantly, the laughter stopped abruptly.

Lin Ruhua released her hand, and the Jade Pendant fell. It was clearly a fragment of the Jade Pendant, the one Jiang Baishan had before.

Elder Ye's hair stood on end.

A surge of Unparalleled Sword Intent exploded instantly behind him, terrible Sword Qi striking, forcing him to scream involuntarily.

Jiang Baishan's slightly manic laughter echoed:

"Old dog, the real sword is with me!"

The two had acted crazily all along, finally convincing Elder Ye that the Jade Pendant was in Lin Ruhua's hand. Yet he never realized they had exchanged them from the start, and now it was finally effective.

Jiang Baishan supported the battered Lin Ruhua, the two rising to see the Sword Qi's might.

Sword Qi swept towards Elder Ye, cutting through his manipulations of the Power of Heaven and Earth instead of being obstructed, slashing through barriers with its sharpness.

A scream of agony.

Half of Elder Ye's body was cut away, his aura diminished to the utmost, plummeting from the void.

Jiang Baishan and Lin Ruhua were overjoyed.

This triumph was even greater than they had imagined.

They did not consider finishing off Elder Ye, for even weakened, he was still of the Celestial Human Realm. If he had some trump card and counterattacked, they'd be in trouble. Their only thought now was: escape quickly!

As soon as they stepped forward, Elder Ye's sorrowful voice reverberated through the sky:

"Aren't you going to act? If you let them escape, would you bear the responsibility?"

Jiang Baishan and Lin Ruhua froze, shock seizing their hearts, as they turned their gaze towards the forest ahead.

Rhythmic sounds of footsteps breaking branches could be heard.

Then.

A cold-faced, white-haired youth emerged, stepping into their view.

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The young man with white hair was clad in a black robe, his appearance strikingly handsome, as he gazed at Jiang Baishan with a hint of indifference:

"Fifth Brother, long time no see."

The person coming was none other than Qin Yun.

He had been hunting Exotic Beasts among the Hundred Thousand Mountains to obtain Inner Cores, but a few days ago, he received a transmission from Ghost Mask, instructing him to capture Jiang Baishan and Lin Ruhua.

He understood.

This was the Demon Sect giving him one last chance.

If he was willing to carry out the task and personally kill Jiang Baishan, it would mean he was ready to sever ties completely with the True Martial Sect, perhaps still having a chance to return to the power center of the Demon Sect, as neither Ghost Mask nor the Grand Elder had completely abandoned him.

But if he was unwilling, it would show he still had sentiments for the True Martial Sect, and what awaited Qin Yun was a lifetime of being a henchman. As for leaving the Demon Sect, it wasn't realistic since he bore the mark of the Demon Sect's Secret Technique, tracking him down even if he escaped to the ends of the earth.

Therefore, Qin Yun came.

He remembered the hardships of these days in the Hundred Thousand Mountains, recalled Lan Yiyi's confessions, and ultimately, he came.

Jiang Baishan looked at the young man with white hair before him, his gaze sweeping over the strands that showed signs of weariness, landing on the familiar yet distant face, with a bitter smile:

"Indeed, it's been a long time. Counting the days, Ba, you've been down the mountain for five years now."

He clenched Lin Ruhua's hand, already having given up the idea of escaping.

The fluctuation of the Power of Heaven and Earth around Qin Yun undoubtedly displayed his strength.

Celestial Human Realm!

Now, the two Jade Pendants left by Ning Qi were completely used up, leaving the two of them nothing but lambs to the slaughter against a Celestial Human Realm expert.

Jiang Baishan was a bit shocked, for Qin Yun, so young, had actually stepped into the field of the Celestial Human Realm, which was simply incredible.

But then, he inexplicably felt a pang of heartache. Although not knowing what had happened, stepping into the Celestial Human Realm at this age without paying some sort of price was impossible, just by looking at Qin Yun's full head of white hair one could get a glimpse.

Back when Qin Yun went down the mountain, Jiang Baishan was the most furious. He cursed Qin Yun as a traitor, even swearing that if one day he met Qin Yun, he would personally break his legs and bring him back to True Martial Mountain to kneel before the master for repentance.

But now.

Upon truly seeing this long-lost eighth junior brother, Jiang Baishan realized the complexity of his emotions.

Qin Yun's eyes showed a trace of complexity, which quickly disappeared:

"Yes, five years, who would have thought it has been so long. How is Master's health?"

Jiang Baishan, with a hint of sarcasm:

"You, as a dignified Saint Heir of the Demon Sect, with eyes and ears everywhere, wouldn't know Master's condition?"

When mentioning Taoist Longshan, he was extremely angry, knowing that when Qin Yun went down the mountain, the most heartbroken was not his fellow senior and junior brothers, but their master himself—it was tantamount to walking towards estrangement with one akin to a child. At one point, it even made Taoist Longshan doubt whether he had a problem with his teaching.

It wasn't until later when the Divine Sword Old Man entrusted his final wish before passing that he began to slowly untangle his heart knot.

Qin Yun was silent, his heart twisted with pain.

At this moment.

In the distance, Elder Ye was already sitting cross-legged, striving to expel the lingering Sword Intent from his wound. Hearing the two practically engaging in casual conversation, he was overwhelmed with anger and shouted:

"Qin Yun, do not forget your task this time! Quickly capture these adulterers!"

Qin Yun merely glanced at Elder Ye indifferently:

"Elder Ye, you might want to worry about your injury first, or you may become crippled."

He had already been there, merely concealing his presence until witnessing the Sword Qi from the Jade Pendant severely injure Elder Ye, only revealing his aura in shock. Though already aware of True Man Tianjian's many achievements, and even having personally seen this unparalleled master in action before, it was only now, in such close proximity, that he truly felt it.

Elder Ye was both shocked and angry.

Soon, he began focusing entirely on healing his injury, as long as Qin Yun didn't let these two people go, he would deal with them personally once he recovered a little.

Qin Yun withdrew his gaze, focusing on Jiang Baishan and Lin Ruhua.

"True Martial Sect... How is everything now?"

Jiang Baishan was about to sarcastically remark, "No need for you to worry," but upon seeing Qin Yun's familiar face, merely coldly snorted:

"Everything is good, under the management of the senior brother, everything is in order. In less than ten or twenty years, the True Martial Sect will surely astonish the world! Recently, senior brother, second senior brother, and third senior sister have even taken on disciples, and Jiu is doing well too."

Perhaps sensing he was about to die, Jiang Baishan was more talkative, discussing some of the happenings in True Martial Sect over the years, not touching on confidential details, just matters related to the various senior and junior brothers and Taoist Longshan.

Qin Yun listened ever more silently, he turned away, not letting Jiang Baishan and Lin Ruhua see the redness in his eyes. Occasionally, a smile would appear on his lips, especially when hearing about Ye Qinghe brewing Peach Blossom Wine again and again, sincerely smiling.

Regret brewed in his chest.

If it hadn't been for that brief moment of misjudgment years ago, he's sure he would have been part of these events, not just a mere listener. If possible, he would rather use all his cultivation to make things right again.

"Thank you, Fifth Brother." Qin Yun's voice sounded calm, yet seemingly a bit reconciled.

Hearing these things from his senior brother's mouth couldn't compare with cold, hard information, harboring a warmth he had longed for.

Jiang Baishan also felt a pang in his nose, he took a deep breath and said: