

Doctor 1011

Chapter 1011: Gao Shuxian's New Backer

Tu Hu's cultivation team had emerged from their mountain trial this time with a collection of a dozen low-tier Spiritual Medicines, two three-hundred-year-old low-rank Spirit Beasts, and a single medium-tier Spiritual Medicine that was roughly five hundred years old.

In Tu Hu's view, his team's acquisition of these Cultivation Resources gave them a strong chance to rank within the top ten of this trial, thereby attaining favor from the higher-ups of the Martial Academy and a substantial reward of Cultivation Resources.

However, the appearance of Huang Miao's team instilled a sense of crisis in Tu Hu.

Tu Hu knew that the Cultivation Resources brought back by Huang Miao's team were only a part of their total haul, and their real "trump card" lay in the antlers from the dozens of Antlered Silver Lions.

Even though those antlers weren't from mid-tier Spirit Beasts, their combined value could easily surpass the total gains of Tu Hu's team.

This meant that with Huang Miao's team in the picture, Tu Hu's team would likely be pushed back a rank.

Tu Hu's gaze shifted as he silently observed the cultivation teams gathered in the square and was delighted to discover that, out of the hundred or so teams that had gone on the mountain trial, only seven or eight had achieved more, led by Personal Transmission Disciples.

In other words, even if Huang Miao's team's Cultivation Resources surpassed theirs, it wouldn't pose an obstacle to their entry into the top ten.

Assured of a hopeful spot in the top ten, Tu Hu let out a relieved sigh, while also marveling at the good fortune of Huang Miao's team, who had Fang Bai, a deeply concealed and unfathomably strong member at their helm.

Tu Hu believed that without Fang Bai, Huang Miao and the rest probably couldn't have even crossed the Nether River, let alone secure dozens of antlers as Cultivation Resources.

During their trial in the Bitao Mountain Range, Tu Hu had clashed with Fang Bai over the dozens of antlers, and despite pushing his body to its limits to increase his strength, he was unable to defeat Fang Bai. Instead, he ended up passing out from the side effects of forcing his potential, and it was Fang Bai who lent him a hand.

That encounter made several members of Tu Hu's team view Fang Bai with newfound respect and a hint of wariness.

Without Fang Bai, Tu Hu's team would have easily taken the dozens of Antlered Silver Lions' antlers from Huang Miao's team in the Bitao Mountain Range, and with those antlers, Tu Hu's team could have aspired to rank in the top five.

It was no exaggeration to say that Fang Bai alone had made Huang Miao's team successful.

Since Tu Hu's team knew about the dozens of antlers acquired by Huang Miao's team, there was no intention to conceal it. They planned to hand them over to the Martial Academy according to the rules, in exchange for the Cultivation Resources rewarded by the Academy.

Antlers from the Antlered Silver Lions were an exceptionally rare and precious commodity, but ever since Fang Bai had found dozens of medium-tier Spiritual Medicines in the Ice Peak region, Huang Miao and the others cared less about the antlers.

The dozens of antlers were hanging on the waists of the five individuals in Fang Bai's team. As they were also carrying various Spiritual Medicines and Spirit Beasts on their backs, which obscured the antlers, many members of the cultivation teams in the square initially didn't notice them.

It wasn't until Huang Miao and the others laid their Spiritual Medicines and Spirit Beasts at their feet that the antlers on their waists were revealed, which instantly drew gasps of admiration from many members of the cultivation teams in the square.

Those who had a good relationship with Huang Miao's team came forward to congratulate them, while those who bore grudges stood in the distance and watched with cold eyes.

"Hmph, just lucky, what's so great about that!" Gao Shuxian's gaze had been glued to Fang Bai, Liu Qingqing, and Liu Liehu ever since they appeared in the square, her expression barely concealing her hatred, which deepened into envy as she noticed the dozens of Antlered Silver Lions they brought back.

During this mountain expedition, Gao Shuxian joined a cultivation team led by Ouyang Jian, the top-ranked personal transmission disciple in terms of combat power, only to have him go missing by the Nether River, his fate unknown. Without him, the courage of the other team members to venture deeper into the core area dwindled, and they hastily returned to Bitao Martial Academy with some Spirit Beasts and Spiritual Medicine they had previously acquired.

Although the cultivation resources that Gao Shuxian and her group obtained under Ouyang Jian's lead ensured their place within the top ten of the team, they had difficulty breaking into the top three, resulting in the worst performance in the history of Ouyang Jian's teams.

In recent years, the disciples from Bitao Martial Academy who teamed up with Ouyang Jian for expeditions, apart from Gao Shuxian who had an ambiguous relationship with him, were all his admirers and followers. Now, Ouyang Jian's probable fall in the Bitao Mountain Range was nothing less than a massive blow to Gao Shuxian and the others.

At the very least, in future expeditions, they would lack a pillar to rely on, making it difficult to achieve good results. They would have to look for a new backer.

Gao Shuxian was a proud and extremely vain woman. She would not be a faithful follower of anyone; she was only true to herself.

After crossing the Nether River and learning that Ouyang Jian's fate leaned more towards misfortune, Gao Shuxian, considering her own safety, immediately urged the other team members to return to Bitao Martial Academy.

On her way back, Gao Shuxian had already decided that since she had lost the support of Ouyang Jian, it was time to find a new one.

Among the personal transmission disciples, apart from Ouyang Jian, the strongest was Shen Yulin. However, Shen Yulin had always had a poor relationship with Ouyang Jian, and she also held Gao Shuxian—who used her beauty to seduce disciples of Bitao Martial Academy—in disdain.

Therefore, if Gao Shuxian planned to seek refuge with Shen Yulin, it was purely a humiliation to herself, and it was impossible that she would be accepted by Shen Yulin.

Behind Shen Yulin, ranked third among the personal transmission disciples, was Yang Gang, who was reclusive and independent, not keen on forming cliques. It was also unlikely that Gao Shuxian could seek refuge with him.

Half of the disciples below Yang Gang were on good terms with Shen Yulin. The others, who had originally sided with Ouyang Jian, now faced his probable fall during the mountain excursion. They began to change sides, seeking to mend their relations with Shen Yulin, making it even less likely that they would offend Shen Yulin for the sake of Gao Shuxian.

Gao Shuxian understood this very well, so she decided that when choosing a new backer this time, she should not pick among the disciples of Bitao Martial Academy but aim higher and more long-term.

In fact, before this, Gao Shuxian already had a suitable target in mind and had even made contact with him.

That person was Zhuang Zhi, one of the eight stewards of Bitao Martial Academy.

In Bitao Martial Academy, the position of steward was higher than that of personal transmission disciples and ranked among the higher echelons of the academy, only below the four Great Elders, the two Vice Deans, and the Dean.

Zhuang Zhi was a man who greatly enjoyed the company of women, with a household full of wives and concubines and numerous mistresses outside. Even though he was now over sixty, his nature remained unchanged. He used his high status within the Martial Academy to engage in affairs with numerous female disciples.

In the True Martial Realm, powerful men could have many women, and powerful women could also have many men. Such matters of mutual pleasure were entirely normal and no one would intervene.

It was precisely because of Zhuang Zhi's fondness for women that Gao Shuxian sought an opportunity to make contact with him, intending to use her beauty to bewitch Zhuang Zhi and thereby achieve her own goals.

Chapter 1012: Enforcement Hall Elder

Zhuang Zhi was a Desolate Level Martial Artist, although only at the initial stage of Desolate Level, but his strength far exceeded that of Ouyang Jian, a Direct Disciple who had reached Heaven Level Perfection.

If Gao Shuxian could cozy up to Zhuang Zhi, she would have a backer many times stronger than Ouyang Jian.

Though Gao Shuxian and Zhuang Zhi had met only once, and Zhuang Zhi had not explicitly agreed to protect Gao Shuxian in the future, from the crafty sparkle in Zhuang Zhi's small triangular eyes, Gao Shuxian caught a hint of desire.

At that moment, Gao Shuxian knew her beauty had successfully piqued Zhuang Zhi's interest, and that beguiling Zhuang Zhi to serve her own ends was only a matter of time.

With Zhuang Zhi, a Desolate Level Martial Artist as a supporter, who would dare to provoke her among the thousands of disciples at the Bitao Martial Academy in the future?

Thinking this, Gao Shuxian couldn't help feeling smug, her gaze towards Fang Bai and others acquired a hint of malevolence, thinking to herself, "Just wait and see, you few. Once I settle things with Steward Zhuang, I'll find a chance to deal with you! Hmph, messing with Gao Shuxian won't end well!"

Hundreds of Cultivation Teams gathered in the vast square in front of the Bitao Martial Academy, with some of the teams that were on good terms clustering together, comparing the gains from their mountain training excursion.

Teams that had harvested a lot were naturally beaming with pride, exuberant.

Those with smaller hauls hung their heads in dispiritedness, looking gloomy.

Especially the few teams hopeful of making the top ten were exceptionally excited, their voices much louder than those of other teams, occasionally flaunting the Cultivation Resources they had collected.

By contrast, Huang Miao's team, although they had amassed plenty of Cultivation Resources, were very low-key. After exchanging brief courtesies with peers they were on good terms with, they formed a small circle, guarding the Cultivation Resources their team had acquired, patiently waiting for the appearance of the Martial Academy's upper echelons.

Once the Martial Academy's upper echelons arrived, they would rank the top ten based on the Cultivation Resources gathered by each Cultivation Team, then award them.

Traditionally, the rewards included two types: a sum of Cultivation Resources and a chance to receive personal instruction from one of the upper echelons of the Academy.

The importance of Cultivation Resources to a Martial Artist goes without saying, and the opportunity to receive guidance from the upper echelons of the Bitao Martial Academy is also something the disciples yearned for.

Over the years, these two rewards from Bitao Martial Academy have motivated many disciples to risk venturing deep into the core areas of the Bitao Mountain Range, hunting Spirit Beasts and harvesting Spiritual Medicine, all to achieve a good ranking during the training.

Among them, many powerful or lucky disciples of Bitao Martial Academy received rewards from the upper echelons, emerged as elites of the Academy, and some even eventually joined the ranks of the Academy's upper levels, becoming figures of admiration to other disciples.

Of course, many disciples also fell during these ventures, leaving behind no trace, a situation that elicited sighs of lamentation.

The number of Bitao Martial Academy disciples gathered in the square grew continuously, and eventually, the thousands of disciples who went to train in the mountains were mostly present. The

several hundred who hadn't made it were likely to have fallen in the Bitao Mountain Range, never to return.

This means that the number of fallen disciples accounted for about one tenth of the total who went for the mountain training.

The loss was significant.

However, many older disciples of Bitao Martial Academy seemed to have grown accustomed to this, their faces showing little surprise.

Fang Bai briefly observed that among the hundreds of fallen disciples, the majority were new disciples who had joined the Bitao Martial Academy at the same time as him. The main reason for their demise was that the new disciples were not strong enough and lacked experience. However, driven by impulsivity and a desire to prove themselves, they recklessly ventured deep into the mountain range and ultimately died under the attacks of Spirit Beasts.

But in the True Martial Realm, many Martial Artists fall every moment for various reasons, and it had become common sight. Apart from some close friends who would feel sorrow for the deceased, most people remained indifferent.

Thousands of disciples from Bitao Martial Academy gathered at the square, making a bustling noise.

Moments later, the thousands of disciples erupted into cheers like a tidal wave as a dozen top executives of Bitao Martial Academy, led by Dean Ren Jingbo, strode to the stone platform at the front of the square, standing proudly.

Dean Ren Jingbo and others, indeed being Desolate Level Martial Artists, though few in number, exuded an aura that enveloped the entire square when they stood there. This immediately made the thousands of disciples on the square feel a tremendous pressure.

"Disciples, quiet down and listen to Dean Ren's speech!"

Steward Tie Xing of the Enforcement Hall stood out and swept his cold, severe gaze over the thousands of disciples below, speaking in a harsh tone.

His voice was not loud, but it clearly reached the ears of every disciple on the square.

Though not the strongest among the four Great Elders of Bitao Martial Academy, Tie Xing was the one most feared by the thousands of disciples.

This was because Tie Xing was in charge of enforcing the academy's laws. He was impartial and did not show favoritism. If any disciple violated the academy's rules, no matter who came to intercede, he would not give any leeway, not even to Dean Ren Jingbo.

Furthermore, Tie Xing always wore a serious expression and never smiled at anyone, which made him even more formidable when dealing with others.

Therefore, as soon as Tie Xing finished speaking, the square fell silent. Nearly everyone tightly pursed their lips and widened their eyes, gazing in the direction of the stone platform. They were even afraid to breathe too heavily, lest the Enforcement Elder catch them in the act and punish them on the spot.

Seeing the thousands of disciples fall silent, Tie Xing nodded in satisfaction and quickly stepped back behind Ren Jingbo.

Dean Ren Jingbo, with a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, stepped forward and let his gaze wander among the thousands of disciples below for a moment before slowly beginning to speak, "Disciples of Bitao Martial Academy, the one-month trial officially ends today. You have all worked hard!"

There should have been applause here, but with Tie Xing standing beside Dean Ren Jingbo, many disciples had not yet shifted their focus from him. Therefore, after Dean Ren Jingbo finished speaking, silence fell once more until four of the old leaders behind Dean Ren started clapping, prompting the thousands of disciples to react and then a thunderous applause ensued.

Dean Ren Jingbo's expression remained unchanged, his smile still featuring his trademark touch. He cleared his throat and continued, "Over this month, I know you have all faced many perils and

tribulations. Some disciples were injured, and even some have fallen. To those fallen disciples, I express my deepest regrets!"

As he spoke, his voice suddenly rose slightly before he added, "However, such is the life of a Martial Artist, with life and death unpredictable! From the moment you embarked on the path of Martial Dao, you were destined to face hardships and challenges, and the scythe of the Grim Reaper could claim your lives at any time! If you want to escape this predicament, you only have the option to diligently cultivate, enhance your strength, and take control of your own destiny..."

Chapter 1013: Ranking

Ren Jingbo's speech was brief, yet it resonated deeply.

Thousands of disciples in the square, after listening to Ren Jingbo, burst into deafening applause and cheers, each feeling profoundly inspired and eager to immediately enter seclusion to cultivate, enhancing their own strength to serve the Dean and bring glory to the Martial Academy.

Ren Jingbo, twirling his beard, exchanged meaningful glances with the high-ranking officials of the Martial Academy beside him, all revealing satisfied smiles in their eyes.

Following this, Elder Situ Min, in charge of the Reception Hall, tallied the casualty figures of the disciples during the mountain cultivation exercise, and then reported to Ren Jingbo.

When Ren Jingbo heard that hundreds of disciples had fallen, including Ouyang Jian, the top-ranked direct disciple in combat prowess, the corners of his mouth twitched involuntarily, and his expression turned somewhat grim as he sighed, "The number of disciples lost this year has increased significantly compared to previous years! Could it be that the Spirit Beasts in the Bitao Mountain Range have become more numerous and ferocious?"

He asked a few direct disciples and learned that many cultivation teams had suffered fierce attacks from the spirit beasts in the Nether River during their crossing, resulting in numerous casualties. Ouyang Jian seemed to have fallen in the Nether River area.

"I will go to the Nether River immediately, slaughter the spirit beasts in the river, and avenge those fallen disciples!"

Elder Lei Li, who managed the Classics Hall, exclaimed, deeply agitated upon hearing of Ouyang Jian's demise.

The Classics Hall, just like the Elixir Hall, was an important part of the Bitao Martial Academy, strictly off-limits to outsiders and casual visitors.

Lei Li's strength ranked second among the four great elders, only behind Ge Feng, the elder of Elixir Hall.

There were ten direct disciples in Bitao Martial Academy, each taught by four elders.

Lei Li had three direct disciples under his tutelage, and Ouyang Jian was the most talented and strongest among them. He had a great chance to progress to the Desolate Level Realm within ten years and join the high echelon of the Martial Academy, but unexpectedly, he perished in the mountains during this cultivation exercise, which infuriated Lei Li.

Seeing Lei Li preparing to leave, Ren Jingbo hastily stopped him, forcing a bitter smile, "Elder Lei, do not be rash! Do not be rash! The Nether River is teeming with countless spirit beasts; how could you possibly kill them all? Ah, I too am deeply pained by Ouyang Jian's death, but throughout history, many Martial Dao geniuses have met their ends prematurely! Ouyang Jian's death was his destiny."

"A promising young disciple is gone just like that, those spirit beasts are truly detestable!"

Lei Li stomped his foot and cried out in grief.

In truth, Lei Li didn't genuinely intend to go and slay the spirit beasts to avenge Ouyang Jian; as Ouyang Jian's master, he only had to put on a show for the other disciples, otherwise, it would appear as though he lacked compassion and loyalty. With Ren Jingbo's persuasion, he conveniently stayed.

Ouyang Jian had been attacked and killed by thousands of blood-sucking giant bats summoned by Fang Bai, and later his remains were carried off by spirit beasts of the mountains to somewhere unknown, making it a rather tragic death.

However, Fang Bai's involvement was kept extremely secretive, and aside from himself, no one else knew about Ouyang Jian's death.

After tallying the casualty statistics from the cultivation exercise, Ren Jingbo announced on the spot that injured parties would receive certain consolations.

The consolation included receiving a sum of cultivation resources and the opportunity to listen to a Martial Dao lecture by high-ranking officials of the Martial Academy once a month.

As for the deceased who fell in the mountains, if their bones could be recovered, they would be buried thickly on the back mountain, and a stone tablet would be inscribed to memorialize them.

If the bones could not be found, then in the "Life Soul Hall" of the Martial Academy, a wooden tablet bearing the deceased's name would be erected as a tribute, proving that they had once been a member of the Bitao Martial Academy.

This treatment was common among many sects in the True Martial Realm and was also a form of respect for the deceased.

After Situ Min, it was Ge Feng's turn to step forward.

Ge Feng, the Elder in charge of the "Elixir Hall", ranked first among the four Great Elders, second only to Dean Ren Jingbo and the two Vice Deans, truly standing below three and above thousands.

Ge Feng did not waste words; he immediately began to check the Cultivation Resources harvested by the various Cultivation Teams and ranked them according to the amount of resources they had gathered.

With the assistance of the eight Stewards of the Martial Academy, the Cultivation Teams led by Direct Disciples with the harvested resources took the stage first to undergo scrutiny by Ge Feng and others.

As expected, the team led by a Direct Disciple with Shen Yulin gathered the most resources, followed by Yang Gang's team...

Although the Direct Disciple's foremost representative, Ouyang Jian had perished, his team's harvested resources still ranked third among those led by Direct Disciples, to the delight of Gao Shuxian and others.

After the top ten Direct Disciples were the teams led by the top ten Core Disciples, followed by the teams of the Inner Court Disciples, External Courtyard Disciples, and Menial Servant Disciples.

In past training sessions, teams ranking in the top ten were solely from Direct and Core Disciple teams, with no suspense.

However, what left thousands of attendees astonished this time was the emergence of two "dark horses" from the Inner Court Disciple Teams, which effectively pushed back the rankings of the Direct and Core Disciple Teams.

The first dark horse was the team led by Tu Hu, who had harvested two low-level Spirit Beasts with three hundred years of beast age, dozens of low-grade Spiritual Medicines, and one mid-grade Spiritual Medicine aged about five hundred years. With these results, they "surpassed all rivals" and ranked eighth.

The second dark horse was the team led by Huang Miao. They harvested two low-level Spirit Beasts with three hundred years of beast age, dozens of low-grade Spiritual Medicines, and two mid-grade Spiritual Medicines of five hundred years, along with dozens of pairs of antlers from Antlered Silver Lions.

Without the antlers of the Antlered Silver Lions, Huang Miao's team's resources would have been similar to those of Tu Hu's team. However, with the addition of dozens of pairs of antlers, their achievements soared to third place, surpassing many Direct Disciple teams.

When Ge Feng recited the names of the five members of Huang Miao's team, they excitedly walked up to the Stone Platform with their harvested Cultivation Resources, receiving praise and commendation from the Martial Academy authorities under everyone's gaze, significantly standing out.

In comparison, the teams of Shen Yulin, who won first place, and Yang Gang, who took second, ended up being overshadowed and stood somewhat awkwardly.

If Fang Bai had not been aiming for a low profile, by merely producing two more mid-grade Spiritual Medicines, he would have been the undisputed first place in this mountain entering training.

But for Fang Bai, the difference between first place and third place was merely nominal, the main difference being a slightly larger gain in Cultivation Resources.

Within Fang Bai's Spatial Ring, the dozens of "Tears of Crystal" could be exchanged for Cultivation Resources at the Martial Artists Trading Market in an amount many times over what they currently received as rewards, hence Fang Bai had little interest in the first place.

Moreover, as the saying goes, 'the nail that sticks out gets hammered', and Fang Bai certainly did not wish to be that nail.

Chapter 1014: Doubt

When Huang Miao's team laid out the cultivation resources they had gathered on the stone platform, it sparked a wave of amazement among the thousands of disciples in the square, many of whom had expressions of disbelief on their faces.

Even Ren Jingbo and the other high-ranking officials of Bitao Martial Academy exchanged glances with each other, finding it somewhat hard to believe.

One must know that Huang Miao's team was composed of three Inner Court disciples, one External Courtyard disciple, and one menial servant disciple. Such a cultivation team, in terms of overall strength, could only be considered average among the hundreds of teams that had ventured into the mountains.

Yet it was this very team that nobody had high hopes for that reaped a bountiful harvest on this mountain venture, securing the impressive rank of third place, so it was no wonder that it aroused everyone's surprise and bewilderment.

"Huang Miao, how did you get so many antelope horns?"

After carefully examining the antelope horns, Ren Jingbo couldn't help but ask in amazement.

If they had obtained a pair of antelope horns, it could be explained as good luck, but to suddenly obtain dozens of pairs, it could no longer be attributed merely to luck. Ren Jingbo, like everyone else present, was filled with curiosity and wanted to understand clearly.

"It went like this..."

Huang Miao told Ren Jingbo the story of how her team encountered an attack from a group of Antlered Silver Lions, took refuge in the Stone Forest, and came out to find the group of lions dead.

These words had all been told to Huang Miao by Fang Bai, and now Huang Miao was merely recounting them.

After listening, Ren Jingbo and the high-ranking officials of the Martial Academy looked at each other, all with complex expressions.

Dozens of Antlered Silver Lions, three to four hundred years old, with formidable attack power, could not possibly be killed by a Desolate Level Martial Artist. Unless, while Huang Miao and others took refuge in the Stone Forest, a Vast Level Expert intervened, killing those dozens of Antlered Silver Lions.

In the True Martial Realm, where there were many martial artists, it was not unusual for disciples of prominent clans and loose cultivators to engage in cultivation experiences all year round. Thus, the possibility of a Vast Level Expert appearing in the Bitao Mountain Range was not strange.

However, what puzzled Ren Jingbo and others was that Vast Level Experts usually held themselves above others, even dismissing Desolate Level Martial Artists. Why would they intervene to help Huang Miao and her team?

Moreover, having killed dozens of Antlered Silver Lions, why didn't the Vast Level Expert take the most valuable antelope horns with them? Why leave them behind, giving Huang Miao's team such a windfall?

"Could it be that the Vast Level Expert noticed Fang Bai and Liu Qingqing had Innate Spiritual Roots, and did this as a favor, wishing to take them as disciples?"

Ren Jingbo suddenly thought of this possibility, his eyelids twitching rapidly as he turned his gaze nervously towards Fang Bai and Liu Qingqing, asking, "On your journey into the mountains, did you encounter any strangers?"

While the True Martial Realm had many martial artists, Innate Spiritual Roots were so rare that they might only appear once in a million people. As such, they were coveted by the major sects and prominent clans. Both Fang Bai and Liu Qingqing possessed Innate Spiritual Roots, especially Fang Bai, who had a Dual Attribute Innate Spiritual Root. If nurtured properly, he might have a future prospect of becoming a Pharmacist.

If a Vast Level Expert came across Fang Bai and Liu Qingqing, they might be tempted by their extraordinary talents, showing favor first and then trying to win them over. Fang Bai and Liu Qingqing were young and guileless, likely unable to resist the temptation of a Vast Level Expert.

If the two were to leave Bitao Martial Academy, it would be a tremendous loss for the academy.

Of course, all of these were nothing more than Ren Jingbo's speculations.

But Ren Jingbo felt uneasy and still wanted to ask them clearly.

Fang Bai and Liu Qingqing had no idea Ren Jingbo was thinking so much. They looked at each other and shook their heads in unison, saying, "No."

"Really none at all?"

Ren Jingbo couldn't help but to ask again.

"There's really none!"

Fang Bai and Liu Qingqing still shook their heads.

"That's good... that's good..."

Seeing that Fang Bai and Liu Qingqing did not seem to be lying, Ren Jingbo secretly breathed a sigh of relief, his face regaining its smile.

"Perhaps I was overthinking it. Maybe a Vast Level Expert just happened to pass by Huang Miao and the others' hiding place in the Stone Forest and ended up being attacked by the Antlered Silver Lions, killing them all in a fit of rage? As for why the Vast Level Expert didn't take the antlers... hmm, probably because those Antlered Silver Lions weren't mid-tier Spirit Beasts, and the Vast Level Martial Artist didn't deem them worth the effort!"

Ren Jingbo comforted himself with these thoughts.

Soon, Elder Ge Feng of the Elixir Hall announced the ten teams with the best results in this year's mountain expedition and publicly revealed their rewards.

To motivate the disciples to diligently cultivate, this year's rewards included more Cultivation Resources than in previous years, and the opportunity to receive guidance from high-level members of the Martial Academy also increased, causing envy and even jealousy among other disciples.

"May the disciples who received rewards continue to strive and achieve even better results in next year's expedition! And to those who did not receive any rewards, don't lose heart, there will be another chance next year..."

Ren Jingbo delivered an impromptu and passionate speech on the spot, inspiring the thousands of disciples assembled in the square.

The Cultivation Resources awarded to the top ten teams would soon be delivered to each member's residence by disciples assigned by Elder Ge Feng from the Elixir Hall.

As for the opportunity to receive guidance from the Martial Academy's high-level members, it would be personally assigned by Academy Head Ren Jingbo, who would appoint an Elder. That Elder would then choose the time and gather the awarded disciples for guidance in the Martial Dao.

How much one could comprehend during the guidance depended on the individual.

Some disciples would have a moment of enlightenment after guidance from the high-level members of the Martial Academy and could make breakthroughs in a short time, advancing their strength even further.

While others would be utterly confused, making no progress and squandering the opportunity.

"Following tradition, it is now time for your free challenge period! If any disciple feels that their strength has progressed during the expedition, they may issue a challenge to their peers to prove themselves! Myself and the high-level members of the Martial Academy will serve as your witnesses!"

After Ren Jingbo finished speaking, he and a dozen high-level Martial Academy members turned and walked to a row of stone chairs at the north end of the Stone Platform and sat down.

Every year after the Bitao Martial Academy's disciples completed their mountain expedition, they could publicly issue challenges to their peers on the stone platform in the square, witnessed by the high-level members of the Academy. For the victorious challengers, it was a great honor.

According to the rules set by the Martial Academy, menial servant disciples would issue challenges first, and the only challengers for them could be the External Courtyard disciples who were just one rank above them.

Of course, if a menial servant disciple defeated the number one ranked External Courtyard disciple, they could earn the right to challenge an even higher-ranked Inner Court disciple.

After the menial servant disciples finished their challenges, it was the External Courtyard disciples' turn to challenge the Inner Court disciples.

Similarly, if an External Courtyard disciple could defeat the number one ranked Inner Court disciple, they could also go on to challenge a Core Disciple.

However, such cross-rank challenges, though they had happened before, were extremely rare.

After all, it was not common for a disciple to be capable of a cross-rank challenge after just a month of training, unless they had a great fortune or were a heaven-defying talent.

Chapter 1015: The Femme Fatale

Menial servants and disciples from the External Courtyard, though numerous, were too weak. When it came to mountain training, few dared to venture into the core area, thus missing many opportunities for advancement. As a result, not many stood out to issue challenges.

Even if a few menial servants and External Courtyard disciples stepped onto the Stone Platform to issue challenges, most ended in failure, causing figures like Ren Jingbo from the higher echelons of the Martial Academy to shake their heads in disappointment, utterly disheartened.

That changed when the menial servant Liehu stepped up to challenge and successively defeated the top-ranked menial servant and the tenth-ranked disciple from the External Courtyard. Only then did smiles reappear on the faces of Ren Jingbo and other senior figures of the Martial Academy.

Previously guided by Fang Bai, Liehu had been progressing steadily. During his mountain training, he discovered a set of Desolate Level Martial Arts Techniques imprinted on a stone pillar in the Stone Forest, gleaned much insight from it, which led to rapid and immense growth in his abilities.

Liehu, previously silent, now astonishingly powerful, defeated both menial servant and External Courtyard opponents, earning a spot in the top ten of the External Courtyard disciple power rankings—causing quite a stir among both menial and External Courtyard disciples.

Many from the Bitao Martial Academy only then realized that Liehu, only fourteen or fifteen years old and previously overlooked by his peers, had progressed astonishingly fast. Who would dare underestimate him now?

"Good! Well done!"

Liehu's performance invigorated Ren Jingbo, who couldn't help but loudly praise.

In fact, if Liehu had exerted his full strength, breaking into the top three of the External Courtyard disciple power rankings would have been no problem. However, Fang Bai timely intervened using the

secret technique of Thread Condensation Sound Transmission, advising him to hold back and quit while he was ahead.

"The taller the tree, the stronger the wind it attracts."

Liehu was too young. If his abilities appeared too extraordinary, it would draw excessive attention, which was not beneficial.

Fang Bai believed with his guidance and the Desolate Level Martial Arts Techniques Liehu gleaned from the Stone Forest, along with massive future Cultivation Resources, his strength would quickly rise as long as he continued diligently.

Liehu now needed to learn subtlety and restraint, as his extraordinary performance could draw unwanted attention from certain quarters before he could defend himself, potentially leading to trouble.

Always compliant to Fang Bai's advice, Liehu immediately leaped off the Stone Platform and obediently stood behind Fang Bai upon hearing his sound transmission.

During this training session, Huang Miao and Hou Ziping also improved significantly, confident in challenging any Inner Court disciple. However, they aimed higher—at the Core Disciples—planning to wait until they achieved another breakthrough before issuing challenges.

For now, they would quietly observe the battles.

"Qingqing, it's time for you to enter the Inner Court."

Seeing Liu Qingqing standing by indifferently, understanding her mild and peaceful nature and her lack of desire for competition, Fang Bai smiled and said, "You don't have to shine too brightly, just make it into the top ten of the Inner Court. Go ahead!"

Entering the Inner Court meant more monthly Cultivation Resources and an elevated status within the Martial Academy, a significant advantage for an External Courtyard disciple like Liu Qingqing.

Originally, Liu Qingqing had not intended to step up for a challenge, feeling no difference between staying in the External Courtyard or the Inner Court regarding her Cultivation. But since Fang Bai suggested it, she nodded and lightly, like a nimble swallow, leaped onto the Stone Platform.

"Look, Senior Sister Liu from the External Courtyard has stepped up!"

"I wonder who Senior Sister Liu is challenging!"

"Senior Sister Liu, we menial disciples support you!"

"Junior Sister Liu, all of us in the Inner Court welcome you!"

"Keep it up, I believe in you!"

...

After Liu Qingqing's slender figure landed on the Stone Platform, thousands of Bitao Martial Academy disciples below immediately stirred, with some male disciples even clapping and cheering loudly, encouraging Liu Qingqing.

"Hmph, you little brat, I'll drive you out of the Martial Academy one day!"

Hearing the crowd's cheers, Gao Shuxian, who was among them, felt a surge of jealousy and muttered to herself.

Before Liu Qingqing joined Bitao Martial Academy, Gao Shuxian was hailed as the most beautiful woman in the academy. Since she possessed the Innate Fire Spirit Root, her path in the Martial Dao was boundless, earning her immense popularity throughout the academy and the admiration of many, attracting attention wherever she went. This made Gao Shuxian, who already had a high opinion of herself, even more arrogant and disdainful of others.

Moreover, Gao Shuxian was a narrow-minded and malicious woman. In Bitao Martial Academy, if she found any female disciple rising in prominence and potentially overshadowing her, she would use various means to suppress them or even make them disappear from the world forever.

Thus, those who knew Gao Shuxian saw her as a venomous beauty.

Although Liu Qingqing had only been a disciple of Bitao Martial Academy for a few months, she had already posed a significant threat to Gao Shuxian.

In terms of beauty, Liu Qingqing surpassed Gao Shuxian;

In terms of aptitude, both possessed Innate Spiritual Roots;

In terms of strength, both were Heaven Level beginning stage Martial Artists;

In terms of status, both were External Courtyard disciples...

Gao Shuxian secretly compared herself and was shocked to find that she had no advantages over Liu Qingqing.

Furthermore, Liu Qingqing had one advantage that Gao Shuxian could never match — her age.

Liu Qingqing, in her late teens, was filled with the vibrant spirit of a young girl, while Gao Shuxian appeared much more mature.

Liu Qingqing was more beautiful and approachable than Gao Shuxian, who was haughty and overbearing, giving the Bitao Martial Academy disciples an excellent impression of her. Therefore, her popularity in the academy soared, already surpassing Gao Shuxian, with many female disciples becoming her supporters.

So, seeing Liu Qingqing leap onto the Stone Platform brightened the gaze of many disciples, who applauded and cheered for her.

Seeing this, Gao Shuxian's eyes seethed with hatred and she clenched her teeth, vowing to find an opportunity to severely deal with Liu Qingqing.

However, with Fang Bai, a disciple from the Inner Court, backing Liu Qingqing, Gao Shuxian dared not touch her directly, and could only pin her hopes on Zhuang Zhi, one of the academy stewards.

Little did she know whether Zhuang Zhi, an old man corrupted by lust, would take a liking to Liu Qingqing's beauty, and under the allure of her charms, would be reluctant to harm her.

"It looks like I have to sacrifice my own body to win over that old man and get him to do my bidding! How infuriating! Hmph, once my strength surpasses that old man, I will be the first to eliminate him, to clear this disgrace!"

Gao Shuxian's eyes shifted, looking at Zhuang Zhi who was seated to the left of the Stone Platform, her eyes showing a hint of disgust.

Chapter 1016: Liu Qingqing's Challenge

Zhuang Zhi was over sixty years old, and although he appeared amiable and righteous on the surface, he was actually a lecherous creep with a keen interest in women. Despite Gao Shuxian's utter dislike for him, she had to ingratiate herself with him as she needed his help.

What made Gao Shuxian grit her teeth in hate was that, although Zhuang Zhi had a liking for women, he wouldn't easily let lust cloud his judgment. If a female disciple from the Martial Academy sought his help but couldn't offer sufficient cultivation resources as a reward, he would demand that she cultivate with him physically.

While Zhuang Zhi's demands were excessive, they were mutually agreed upon, and some female disciples, eager for his assistance, would only be able to embrace and submit to him.

Having understood the temperament of Zhuang Zhi, Gao Shuxian knew that it was impossible to get him to do her bidding without some sacrifice. Lacking ample cultivation resources, the only thing that could sway the old man was her own body, which was greatly desired by men.

The perceptions of a Desolate Level strong person were sharp. Zhuang Zhi, seated on the stone platform, quickly noticed someone observing him. He frowned and then sharply fixed his gaze towards Gao Shuxian.

Gao Shuxian, trying to avoid Zhuang Zhi's gaze, found it was too late and could only put up a pitiful and loving appearance, flashing Zhuang Zhi a charmingly coy smile.

Although Gao Shuxian's beauty fell a notch below that of Liu Qingqing, she naturally exuded seductiveness. Her smile showcased the epitome of feminine charm and allure, deeply tempting.

Observing Gao Shuxian in silence, the male disciples of the Martial Academy nearly popped their eyes out at the sight, their nostrils flaring up as if fluid was about to escape.

Zhuang Zhi on the stone platform also brightened up, subtly nodding towards Gao Shuxian.

Having encountered numerous women over the years, Zhuang Zhi had recognized at first sight that Gao Shuxian was a top-grade woman with an Innate Spiritual Root body. Cultivating together with her would not only offer him extreme pleasure but would also greatly benefit his cultivation.

Initially, when Gao Shuxian approached Zhuang Zhi seeking his protection, he didn't respond immediately—instead, he intended to tantalize her appetite. Now, seeing Gao Shuxian casting amorous glances at him, Zhuang Zhi thought she was ready to offer herself. Looking at her lascivious demeanor provoked his yearning.

If it were a private setting, Zhuang Zhi would have already torn off his hypocritical mask and pinned Gao Shuxian to the ground to revel in pleasure.

Gao Shuxian and Zhuang Zhi exchanged glances from one platform to another. Apart from a few male disciples infatuated with Gao Shuxian who noticed something unusual, most other disciples did not pay attention to them but focused instead on Liu Qingqing on the stone platform.

Apparently unaccustomed to such public scrutiny, Liu Qingqing stood there after jumping onto the platform, her cheeks blushing shyly, and her clear, doe-like eyes flickered anxiously, momentarily forgetting her purpose up there.

To the many Bitao Martial Academy disciples watching below, Liu Qingqing at that moment resembled a startled little rabbit, evoking an instinctive sense of pity and the urge to protect her.

Compared to Liu Qingqing's naturally occurring anxiousness and shyness, Gao Shuxian's seductive act seemed somewhat contrived and made her appear inferior.

"Liu Qingqing, whom do you plan to challenge?" asked Situ Min jovially, one of the Great Elders of Bitao Martial Academy.

From the moment he first saw Liu Qingqing, who possessed the Innate Water Spirit Root and was a pure and lovely beauty, Situ Min took a liking to her. He planned to recruit her as his direct disciple once she qualified, and personally teach her the martial arts techniques.

"Elder Situ, I... I want to challenge Brother Bai Zhiyuan, the top-ranked combatant of the External Courtyard disciples. Then... also challenge Brother Chang Dengfeng, the tenth-ranked of the Inner Courtyard disciples..."

Liu Qingqing glanced at Fang Bai below the stage, saw a smile in the corner of his mouth, and a look of encouragement in his eyes, which bolstered her courage to speak.

As soon as she finished speaking, the thousands of disciples below immediately burst into discussion. Some thought that Liu Qingqing might have a hope in challenging the top-ranked disciple of the External Courtyard's Power Rankings, but challenging the top ten of the Internal Courtyard's Power Rankings seemed unlikely to result in victory.

After all, Bai Zhiyuan, who ranked first in the External Courtyard Power Rankings, and Chang Dengfeng, who ranked tenth in the Internal Courtyard Power Rankings, were incomparable in strength.

If Bai Zhiyuan were to compete against Chang Dengfeng, Bai Zhiyuan surely couldn't withstand three moves from Chang Dengfeng.

Thus, although Liu Qingqing could defeat Bai Zhiyuan, she might not necessarily be a match for Chang Dengfeng.

Many disciples on the scene thought that Liu Qingqing challenging Chang Dengfeng was a bit too arrogant.

"Just entered the Martial Academy a few days ago and dared to challenge Senior Brother Chang, really overestimating yourself! Humph, just wait and see how unlucky you get!"

Gao Shuxian snorted coldly, her words dripping with sarcasm.

"Why are you badmouthing my sister, you vile woman?"

Liu Liehu was standing not far from Gao Shuxian. He felt his blood surge upon hearing her words and walked over quickly, glaring angrily at her.

Fang Bai's gaze also shifted their way.

Fang Bai's look was calm, devoid of any killing intent, yet it put immense pressure on Gao Shuxian.

Gao Shuxian took a deep breath and looked away from Fang Bai, glancing dismissively at Liu Liehu and said coldly, "What if I spoke ill of her? Don't think I would be afraid of you just because you've entered the top ten of the External Courtyard Power Rankings! Kid, just get lost!"

Liu Liehu had just defeated two External Courtyard disciples strongly, breaking into the top ten power rankings, surpassing Gao Shuxian in both strength and status. This elicited both envy and resentment from Gao Shuxian, making her particularly irritable towards Liu Liehu.

Gao Shuxian had decided to use her body to gain the support and protection of Zhuang Zhi, and with this new confidence, she no longer feared even Fang Bai.

"Vile woman! I'll smash your mouth!"

Hearing Gao Shuxian call him "little brat", Liu Liehu became furious. True Yuan flowed within him, his fighting spirit soared, and he clenched his fists, ready to punch her.

"Disciples below the stage, no shouting!"

Zhuang Zhi had been watching over Gao Shuxian as if she were his own possession and had been paying attention to the altercation. Seeing that Liu Liehu was about to hit Gao Shuxian, he immediately bellowed out.

Zhuang Zhi, a Desolate Level Martial Artist, aimed this loud shout specifically at Liu Liehu, embedding a thread of True Yuan into the sound waves, which exploded like thunder beside Liu Liehu's ears.

Under the assault of Zhuang Zhi's Sonic Wave Strike, Liu Liehu's body shuddered violently, his blood churned uncontrollably, and he barely managed to hold back from spitting out blood. However, the intense pain he felt was evident from his flushed, red face.

Chapter 1017: Different Factions

Zhuang Zhi's actions were clearly seen by those with discerning eyes; he was protecting Gao Shuxian and intimidating Liu Liehu.

"Steward Zhuang, conflicts and disputes between disciples should be resolved by Elder Tie Xing stepping forward. By doing this, you're overstepping your authority!"

Situ Min had a very good impression of Liu Qingqing and already considered her a future Appointed Disciple. Knowing that Liu Liehu was Liu Qingqing's brother, under the influence of her fondness for the sister, she spoke out to protect Liu Liehu.

"Steward Zhuang, as a high-ranking official of the Martial Academy, it's beneath you to bully the weak like this!"

Ge Feng twirled his beard, casting a dismissive glance at Zhuang Zhi before speaking up.

The disciples of Bitao Martial Academy all knew that among the four Great Elders, Ge Feng and Situ Min had a good relationship; it was within reason that he would side with Situ Min.

Zhuang Zhi, even though he was a Desolate Level Martial Artist and one of the high ranks of the Martial Academy, had an involvement with many female disciples and neither his character nor his reputation were good. Many high-level officials of the Martial Academy, including Situ Min and Ge Feng, despised his behavior and held him in contempt.

Among the more than a dozen high-level officials of the Martial Academy, aside from a few who were friendly with Zhuang Zhi, most believed his actions were inappropriate.

Even the Dean Ren Jingbo frowned slightly, indicating his dissatisfaction with Zhuang Zhi.

"There are thousands of disciples in our Martial Academy, and disputes arise every day. Elder Tie Xing can't be everywhere at once. Besides, Steward Zhuang is also one of the high-ranking officials of the Martial Academy and has a duty to discipline the disciples. Liu Liehu was in the wrong, and Steward Zhuang's minor punishment is, in my opinion, not inappropriate!"

Elder Lei Li of the Classics Hall suddenly spoke up in Zhuang Zhi's defense.

Over the years, Zhuang Zhi had been particularly close to Lei Li, often bestowing upon Elder Lei Li tributes of Cultivation Resources to gain his favor, and in return, Lei Li reciprocated by becoming Zhuang Zhi's support. As a result, Zhuang Zhi, who had violated many Academy rules, escaped punishment due to Lei Li's protection.

Zhuang Zhi's behavior had once sparked considerable dissatisfaction among the Academy's disciples and higher-ups; even a high-ranking official reported Zhuang Zhi's frequent breaches of regulations to Dean Ren Jingbo, asking for a ruling.

Considering the unity of the Martial Academy's high-level officials and the fact that Zhuang Zhi's offenses were not unforgivable, Ren Jingbo turned a blind eye and did not punish Zhuang Zhi.

Dean Ren Jingbo's indulgence only emboldened Zhuang Zhi, making him even more brazen.

Especially with women, Zhuang Zhi went from persistently harassing to using both hard and soft tactics on some of the beautiful female disciples to achieve his vile goals. Those who suffered his bullying were

afraid to speak out against him, not only intimidated by his Desolate Level Martial Artist's strength but also aware that Elder Lei was shielding him and fearful of retaliation and risking their lives.

However, Zhuang Zhi's deeds could be concealed from other disciples but not from Elders like Situ Min and Ge Feng, who were filled with disdain for the morally bankrupt Zhuang Zhi and also dissatisfied with Lei Li backing him.

This caused both sides to split into two camps, almost always at loggerheads with each other.

Tie Xing, the head of the Enforcement Hall, was impartial and unaffiliated with either camp, standing only on the side with justice.

Ren Jingbo also recognized the discord between the two sides. What he could do was merely to mediate, hoping to prevent the disagreement from escalating into a conflict that could affect the destiny of the entire Bitao Martial Academy.

"Liu Liehu has done wrong indeed, but Gao Shuxian is also not without fault. Why does Elder Lei only mention Liu Liehu's mistakes and not Gao Shuxian's? Moreover, may I ask Steward Zhuang, why do you only punish Liu Liehu and not Gao Shuxian? Could there be some unspeakable reason behind this?"

Situ Min's gaze swept coldly over the faces of Lei Li and Zhuang Zhi as she asked.

Her last sentence was clearly mocking the illicit affair between Zhuang Zhi and Gao Shuxian.

Zhuang Zhi's old face flushed red, and he harbored silent hatred, but knowing he was no match for Situ Min in strength, he did not dare to speak back.

"This old hag is quite hateful too! The day I surpass you in the Martial Dao will be your death day!"

Gao Shuxian clenched her silver teeth in anger, also harboring hatred toward Situ Min.

"Liu Liehu keeps calling Gao Shuxian 'foul woman,'" didn't Elder Situ hear that? Moreover, Gao Shuxian is an elder sister, Liu Liehu's actions are insulting to and disrespectful of one's seniors, a punishable offense! Therefore, Steward Zhuang did nothing wrong!"

Lei Li countered with a cold heh heh and said.

"Gao Shuxian uses extraordinary language, calling Liu Liehu a 'little brat.' Any martial artist would probably find that intolerable, right? So Liu Liehu calling Gao Shuxian a 'foul woman' is a justified and reasonable counterattack!"

Situ Min said unyieldingly.

Seeing the two Great Elders start to argue right then and there, Ren Jingbo felt a headache coming on. To prevent their disagreement from intensifying, he shouted loud enough for all to hear, "Enough! Can you both say less, will that be alright? Our Bitao Martial Academy has been oppressed by the third-rank sect, Purple Flame Sect, for a long time, and if we want to break free from this situation, it requires the sincere unity and effort of everyone, from the top down! But you... You're actually beginning to fight among yourselves before we even settle the external insults!"

Situ Min and Lei Li wanted to speak, but Ren Jingbo waved his hand and said, "This matter ends here, and no one should bring it up again! As for Liu Liehu... Steward Zhuang, give him a bottle of Healing Pills as compensation."

Ren Jingbo could also see that Liu Liehu might have sustained a slight internal injury from the Sonic Wave Strike unleashed by Zhuang Zhi, and by having Zhuang Zhi offer Liu Liehu a bottle of Healing Pills, he hoped to dissipate some of Liu Liehu's resentment.

Zhuang Zhi did not dare defy Ren Jingbo's order, and with a sullen expression, he stood up, walked over to the Stone Platform, took out a bottle of Healing Pills from his person, and tossed it to Liu Liehu who was below the platform.

"I have no use for your trash!"

When Liu Liehu saw the bottle flying towards him, he did not reach out to catch it, but instead slapped the bottle with his palm, sending it whistling back towards Zhuang Zhi.

"Hmph, refusing wine only to be forced penalty wine!"

Zhuang Zhi caught the medicine bottle in his hand, his face growing even uglier, and glanced at Ren Jingbo, seemingly asking for guidance on what to do next.

Ren Jingbo felt quite helpless toward Liu Liehu's response, but had no solution.

"Qingqing, are you all prepared?"

Situ Min, prioritizing the overall situation, no longer engaged in disputes with Zhuang Zhi and Lei Li and turned her attention back to Liu Qingqing, who was standing on the Stone Platform.

Once Liu Qingqing entered a state of combat readiness, she would become completely immersed, casting aside her initial panic and shyness, to be replaced by determination and decisiveness. The verbal exchanges between Situ Min, Lei Li, and the others went unheard by her, as she swiftly calmed down from her impulsive fervor.

"Elder Situ, I'm ready!"

Liu Qingqing answered loudly.

Having said this, she walked to the center of the Stone Platform and quietly waited for her opponent to take the stage.

Chapter 1018: The Strong are Entitled to Arrogance!

A green shadow leapt out from among the thousands of disciples standing below and floated lightly down in front of Liu Qingqing on the Stone Platform.

The green shadow was none other than Bai Zhiyuan, the top-ranked disciple in terms of combat power from the External Courtyard.

Bai Zhiyuan, who was thirty-five years old this year, was not tall but looked rather rugged, with an eagle-like sharp gaze. When he looked at Liu Qingqing, he carried an air of condescending arrogance.

"Junior Sister Liu, please! External Courtyard disciple Bai Zhiyuan, accepting your challenge!"

Bai Zhiyuan expressionlessly saluted Liu Qingqing with a cupped fist gesture, then circulated his True Yuan, assumed a stance, and adopted a defensive posture.

Being the senior, Bai Zhiyuan naturally felt embarrassed to launch an attack on Liu Qingqing first, so he opted to start defensively and then look for an opportunity to counterattack and defeat her in one fell swoop.

Although Bai Zhiyuan was also a man, he had dedicated all his thoughts to Martial Dao, showing little interest in women and was devoid of any sentiments of cherishing the fairer sex; even the most beautiful woman, in his eyes, was but a heap of white bones.

Therefore, despite Liu Qingqing's beauty, which had captivated the vast majority of male disciples at the Martial Academy, making her extremely popular, Bai Zhiyuan was one of the very few male disciples who had never really looked at her directly.

Moreover, Bai Zhiyuan was an exceedingly proud man. He believed that although he didn't possess an Innate Spiritual Root, his talents were not much inferior to those who had, attributing his lack of strong power to a lack of opportunities rather than a lack of diligence in cultivation.

After entering the Bitao Martial Academy, Liu Qingqing had always kept a low profile, avoiding conflicts with anyone. Thus, though her appearance was striking, her talents were notable, and her popularity was high, her strength was not among the top ranks of the External Courtyard, except for the moment she dazzled during her entrance tests to the academy, after which she then faded into obscurity.

In Bai Zhiyuan's opinion, although Liu Qingqing possessed an Innate Spiritual Root and had great potential in Martial Dao, her time at the Martial Academy was too short, and her current cultivation level wasn't high. Even if she were to ascend the platform to challenge someone, it was unlikely she would overestimate her capabilities to challenge him.

However, to Bai Zhiyuan's surprise, not only had Liu Qingqing named him directly for a challenge, but her next target was also Senior Brother Chang Dengfeng, who ranked tenth among the Inner Court disciples.

Bai Zhiyuan had already a poor impression of Liu Qingqing, and hearing that she intended to challenge him reinforced his perception of her as overly arrogant and ignorant of her limits, deciding to teach her a lesson once he ascended the platform.

From Bai Zhiyuan, Liu Qingqing sensed a strong hostility, which left her slightly startled, unable to understand why this Senior Brother Bai appeared so antagonistic towards her, considering they rarely interacted.

Could it be that her challenge had upset him? But wasn't challenging one another a common practice among the disciples of the Bitao Martial Academy?

"Senior Brother Bai, hello!"

Despite Bai Zhiyuan's attitude baffling Liu Qingqing, she still returned the salute with a cupped fist.

"You may begin now!"

One of the four Great Elders presiding over the challenge, Elder Tie Xing, seeing that both Liu Qingqing and Bai Zhiyuan were ready, spoke in a grave voice.

Liu Qingqing looked at Bai Zhiyuan with an indifferent gaze and, unlike what Bai Zhiyuan had anticipated, did not launch an attack. Instead, she stood there with her arms dangling naturally and her body relaxed, not even assuming a posture for attack or defense.

Her casual demeanor made Bai Zhiyuan feel humiliated and immediately angered him.

After all, only a martial artist who believes their strength far surpasses their opponent would hold themselves so aloof as Liu Qingqing was doing.

"Junior Sister Liu, make your move! As your senior brother, I will let you make three moves first!"

Bai Zhiyuan suppressed the rage in his heart and said coldly.

Liu Qingqing pursed her lips, smiled faintly, and shook her head, "Senior Brother Bai, you should not spare me. Within three moves, we can resolve the fight!"

Bai Zhiyuan didn't understand the meaning in Liu Qingqing's words for a moment and said, "Although you are not as strong as me, it won't be easy for me to win within three moves..."

Liu Qingqing said, "Senior Brother Bai, what I mean is... within three moves, I will defeat you!"

Bai Zhiyuan was stunned, then laughed angrily toward the sky, "Junior Sister Liu, only the strong have the right to be arrogant! And you, you are not yet qualified!"

"Senior Brother Bai, since you will not make a move, then I must offend you!"

Liu Qingqing seemed tired of arguing with Bai Zhiyuan. Her True Yuan circulated through her meridians, and her Martial Artist aura released instantly. Her beautiful eyes flashed sharply, and with a twist of her petite body, she reached forward with her right palm and launched an attack at Bai Zhiyuan.

Having been instructed by Fang Bai, Liu Qingqing had progressed rapidly. Moreover, after comprehending a set of Desolate Level Martial Arts Techniques among the columns in the Stone Forest, her strength had once again improved. She was on the verge of reaching the mid-level of Heaven Level, just one step away from breaking through and advancing.

Although Bai Zhiyuan and Liu Qingqing were of the same realm and cultivation level, in terms of actual combat power, Liu Qingqing had long surpassed Bai Zhiyuan.

In their duel, even without utilizing her ability to challenge higher levels, Liu Qingqing could easily defeat Bai Zhiyuan.

Liu Qingqing casually struck with her palm; surrounded by her palm, the mist-like Water Element Qi swirled and surged, containing a tumultuous, heart-thudding power.

"How has this woman suddenly become so strong?"

As soon as Liu Qingqing made her move, Bai Zhiyuan felt a surge of True Essence Force that he couldn't counter, which startled him greatly. However, if he retreated to avoid it, he would lose face, so he frantically spurred the True Yuan in his body, concentrating the True Essence Force on his right fist, and then, bracing himself, he swung it out to meet Liu Qingqing's palm head-on.

"Junior Sister Liu joined the Martial Academy not long ago, yet her progress is astoundingly fast. Truly worthy of having an Innate Spiritual Root! It seems Bai Zhiyuan is going to lose... and lose miserably," Ren Jingbo, being a Desolate Level Perfection strong warrior with extraordinary vision, although Liu Qingqing and Bai Zhiyuan hadn't yet made contact, had discerned the strength and weakness of both and knew that Liu Qingqing's palm had already secured the victory.

When Liu Qingqing and Bai Zhiyuan's fists and palms touched, the True Essence Force concentrated at the ends of their fists and palms exploded outward simultaneously, like two waves colliding.

Boom!

With a loud noise, the force from their colliding True Essence Force caused the entire Stone Platform to tremble.

Fortunately, the Stone Platform was not made of ordinary stone, but was exceptionally sturdy. Even Desolate Level Martial Artists dueling on it would not damage it.

If Bai Zhiyuan's True Essence Force was like a small wave, then Liu Qingqing's True Essence Force was like a giant wave. At the instant of their collision, Bai Zhiyuan's small wave was crushed and dissipated.

"Uh..."

Bai Zhiyuan grunted, his body feeling as though it had been harshly struck by a giant mallet. He was sent flying backward and fell off the Stone Platform, passing out.

Liu Qingqing, being good-natured, had not applied her full power in that palm strike, which was an act of mercy. Hence, Bai Zhiyuan was not injured. However, the backlash of his own True Yuan had briefly obstructed his meridians, disrupting the circulation of his True Yuan and causing him to pass out. He would recover on his own after lying down for about three to five two-hour periods.

Chapter 1019: Challenge Inner Court Disciple

Thousands of disciples below the stage had thought they would witness an exciting duel, unclear to be settled quickly, yet few could have imagined that it would take only one palm strike for Bai Zhiyuan to be knocked off the stage by Liu Qingqing, rendered unconscious.

The change had come so quickly that the majority of the thousands of disciples at the scene had yet to react before the duel was already over.

A brief silence fell over the scene, thousands of gazes turned towards Liu Qingqing on the stone platform, their expressions filled with disbelief and amazement.

However, after a moment of silence, there came thunderous applause and cheers.

"Liu Senior Sister has won! I admire her so much!"

"One strike to victory, Junior Sister Liu is so strong!"

"She is the pride of our External Courtyard's disciples!"

"I was worried about Junior Sister Liu, but now it seems she indeed has the strength to challenge Chang Dengfeng, Senior Brother Chang, who ranks tenth among the Inner Court disciples!"

"I bet Junior Sister Liu will win!"

"Liu Senior Sister, I will always support you!"

"Junior Sister Liu, hurry to the Inner Court!"

"..."

...

Though Liu Qingqing's defeat of Bai Zhiyuan pleased many, none were happier than her devoted admirers.

Liu Qingqing's victory made each admirer's face beamed with joy, seemingly more exhilarated than if they had won the challenge themselves. They cheered and jumped, their heads tilted upwards gazing at Liu Qingqing poised on the stone platform.

At that moment, a breeze swept by, fluttering Liu Qingqing's hair and the hem of her dress, giving her an ethereal, almost flying appearance.

At that instant, Liu Qingqing's admirers watched on, enchanted, thinking that the sister they fancied was not a mortal being but a fairy demoted to the human world, their hearts filled with deeper fascination.

Even the self-loving and narcissistic Gao Shuxian felt a pang of inferiority when she saw Liu Qingqing's graceful figure, her jealousy intensified.

Thousands of gazes were fixated on Liu Qingqing, while Liu Qingqing's gaze was directed towards Fang Bai below the platform.

Seeing Fang Bai smiling and giving her a thumbs-up, Liu Qingqing knew he was expressing his approval, her expression radiant, smiling beautifully.

Her smile blossomed like spring flowers, displaying the enchanting beauty of a young girl, staggering thousands of male disciples.

"When it comes to beauty, this Liu Qingqing sure is unparalleled. It's just a pity that Situ Min, that old woman, is overly fond of her, considering her a chosen disciple; I dare not lay hands on her. Otherwise, after taking down Gao Shuxian, I would take her down too! Such a pity... such a pity..."

Zhuang Zhi, always fond of women, saw Liu Qingqing's smiling charms and couldn't help but furrow his brows and get lost in thought, feeling she even surpassed Gao Shuxian. If both women could be his, it would indeed be blissful, but he was wary of Situ Min and dared not frivolously pursue Liu Qingqing.

"External Courtyard disciple Liu Qingqing versus External Courtyard disciple Bai Zhiyuan, Liu Qingqing wins! The next match, External Courtyard disciple Liu Qingqing will face Inner Court disciple Chang Dengfeng!"

After Bai Zhiyuan had been carried back to his residence by two Martial Academy disciples for recovery, Elder Tie Xing of the Enforcement Hall once again let out a deep shout.

At his shout, another figure leaped onto the stone platform, none other than Chang Dengfeng, ranked tenth among Inner Court disciples.

Chang Dengfeng and Bai Zhiyuan were about the same age, but Chang Dengfeng was far superior in appearance; he was tall and handsome, the very image of a fair-faced young man.

With both looks and strength, such a male disciple was invariably popular among the female disciples.

Chang Dengfeng had once been infatuated with Gao Shuxian, but Gao Shuxian, having Ouyang Jian the number one personal transmission disciple as her support, naturally looked down on Chang Dengfeng, who was only ranked in the top ten among the inner court disciples in terms of combat power.

Later, when Liu Qingqing entered the Bitao Martial Academy and became an external courtyard disciple, Chang Dengfeng, disheartened, saw her and was stunned by her celestial beauty, and from then on, he became one of her admirers.

Chang Dengfeng, believing in his status as an elder brother in the Inner Court, thought that by lowering his stance and pleasing her in every possible way, he could win Liu Qingqing's heart. However, despite

his few attempts to approach Liu Qingqing, she was not as dismissive as Gao Shuxian but her indifference carried a respectful yet distant attitude.

This attitude of Liu Qingqing made Chang Dengfeng feel crushed. He couldn't understand what she found lacking in him.

Could it be, Liu Qingqing already had someone special in her heart?

With this thought in mind, Chang Dengfeng began to pay more attention to the people around Liu Qingqing and eventually discovered that she had a deep relationship with Fang Bai.

Especially just now, Liu Qingqing's city-entrancing smile, which had captivated countless male disciples, was clearly because of Fang Bai, causing Chang Dengfeng, who had been silently observing her, to feel sorrowfully heartbroken.

Regarding Liu Qingqing's challenge, Chang Dengfeng was not angry. He felt that Liu Qingqing was not intentionally targeting him, but like her brother Liehu, wanted to prove her strength through it.

In this duel concerning the honor of martial artists, although Chang Dengfeng was fond of Liu Qingqing, he was not going to give up his position on the combat power ranking so easily. However, if Liu Qingqing were not a match for him, he would definitely show mercy.

Chang Dengfeng, standing on the stone platform, glanced at Fang Bai with a hostile look, but when he turned toward Liu Qingqing, his eyes filled with tenderness.

"Junior Sister Liu, inner court disciple Chang Dengfeng, I come to seek your esteemed guidance!"

Chang Dengfeng, with a smile at the corner of his mouth, cupped his fist toward Liu Qingqing and spoke.

Although he guessed that Fang Bai and Liu Qingqing were a couple, Chang Dengfeng still hoped to win Liu Qingqing over from Fang Bai's side.

Chang Dengfeng, with his handsome appearance and as a figure standing tall like a lofty tree, possessed quite a high ranking on the inner court's combat power list. Therefore, he also had many female disciples in the Bitao Martial Academy who fancied him either openly or secretly. Seeing him leap onto the stone platform, those admiring female disciples were exceptionally excited, unable to help but cheer his name, only to be sternly suppressed by the gaze of Tie Xing.

Chang Dengfeng's enthusiasm, however, did not elicit an active response from Liu Qingqing. With an indifferent expression, Liu Qingqing also cupped her fists towards Chang Dengfeng, saying, "Senior Brother Chang, you are too polite, it should be me who learns from you!"

"You can start now!"

With possibly many more challengers waiting to take the stage, to save time, Tie Xing allowed each pair of disciples only a moment or two for pleasantries, then he would urge them to begin.

"Senior Brother Chang, forgive me!"

The moment Chang Dengfeng stepped onto the platform, Liu Qingqing began to gather energy, and as soon as Tie Xing's words ended, she immediately made her move.

Just like when she had dealt with Bai Zhiyuan earlier, Liu Qingqing still utilized the same set of fist techniques and the same force.

Clearly, it was a kind of probing attack.

"Junior Sister Liu, Junior Sister Liu, if you do not fight with all your might against me, I'm afraid you won't stand a chance!"

Chang Dengfeng frowned, thinking to himself.

Actually, what Chang Dengfeng now hoped for the most was not to fight with Liu Qingqing, but to persuade her to acknowledge the difficulties and withdraw, to avoid hurting their mutual friendship by fighting.

However, Liu Qingqing had already nearly reached him with her attack, putting Chang Dengfeng in a situation where he had no choice but to respond.

Chapter 1020: Defeat the Opponent Again

From the jade palm that Liu Qingqing slapped towards him, Chang Dengfeng felt a force of True Yuan that was no weaker than his own and couldn't help being greatly surprised in his heart.

Chang Dengfeng originally thought that even if Liu Qingqing had made progress during the mountain training, she would definitely not be his match.

But now, as Chang Dengfeng truly faced Liu Qingqing, he suddenly realized that this beautiful girl, whom he had been fascinated with for a long time, had grown to a level on par with himself.

This discovery left Chang Dengfeng feeling surprised, yet also disheartened and dispirited.

No wonder he tried so hard to please her, Junior Sister Liu kept him at a distance of a thousand miles. It turned out that the strength he took pride in was no longer significant in her eyes.

And that Fang Bai, before the mountain training, had already defeated Yang Lin, who was ranked third among the Inner Court disciples in terms of combat strength, and it was said that he and Junior Sister Liu came from the same village, making them childhood sweethearts.

In terms of appearance, Fang Bai was no less attractive than himself and possessed an ineffable extraordinary aura, making him more popular among the female disciples.

In terms of Cultivation Level, Fang Bai was on par with himself, but clearly superior in combat strength.

In terms of potential in the Martial Dao, Fang Bai had a Dual Attribute Innate Spiritual Root and a boundless future ahead, while he himself had only ordinary talent and, without a great opportunity, his path in the Martial Dao would likely end here.

In terms of familiarity, Liu Qingqing treated him like a stranger, yet exchanged glances and banter with Fang Bai on and off the dais...

Chang Dengfeng sadly realized that no matter what aspect he compared himself in, he was not as good as Fang Bai. To take Liu Qingqing away from Fang Bai, there was almost no hope.

If Fang Bai were not in the picture, perhaps he would have had a great chance of capturing Liu Qingqing's heart, wouldn't he?

So thought Chang Dengfeng to himself.

Seeing Liu Qingqing's palm strike in front of him, Chang Dengfeng, who was secretly gathering strength, also struck out with his palm.

However, the difference was that Liu Qingqing's strike was spontaneous, without any Martial Arts technique or full effort, while Chang Dengfeng gave it his all.

This was not because Chang Dengfeng did not cherish beauty and was ungentlemanly, but because Liu Qingqing's casual palm strike put a lot of pressure on him. He felt that if he did not use all his strength, he probably wouldn't be able to receive Liu Qingqing's palm strike.

Moreover, Chang Dengfeng understood that if he were to be defeated, he wouldn't only lose face but would also lose his position among the top ten combatants of the Inner Court disciples. Although he liked Liu Qingqing, he was not willing to give up everything for her just yet.

Chang Dengfeng's Cultivation Level was one minor realm higher than Bai Zhiyuan, and thus his strength was naturally much greater. When their palms met, after a loud echo, the palm strength that sent Bai Zhiyuan flying did not shake Chang Dengfeng.

However, in his heart, Chang Dengfeng secretly cursed his luck.

The first clash of palms between the two seemed evenly matched, with neither being able to do anything to the other, but in reality, Chang Dengfeng took a big hidden loss.

After facing Liu Qingqing's right palm, a wave of Water Element Qi beyond his imagination surged into his body like a deluge, rattling his blood, and a mouthful of fresh blood surged upwards, nearly spewing out on the spot. It was only by forcibly swallowing it back that he avoided embarrassment.

With just one move, Chang Dengfeng gained a new understanding of Liu Qingqing's strength and no longer dared to underestimate this Junior Sister whose reputation was not prominent in the External Courtyard.

A delicate cry rang in his ears, a whiff of fragrance brushed past his nose, and Liu Qingqing's right palm rose slightly, striking towards Chang Dengfeng once again.

It was still a casual palm strike, but the Water Element Qi contained in her palm seemed even more profound than the previous one.

Chang Dengfeng had just managed to suppress his surging blood and Qi and hadn't yet had the chance to regulate his breath when, all of a sudden, a fair hand, delicate as jade, wielding formidable strength, rapidly enlarged in his pupils.

At the same time, the Martial Artist Aura emanating from Liu Qingqing transformed into an intangible oppressive force, enveloping Chang Dengfeng, making him feel as if he was trapped in a cage.

"Finished!"

Chang Dengfeng lamented in despair, his heart turning to ashes.

At that moment, Chang Dengfeng finally understood that Liu Qingqing's strength exceeded his own by more than a measure.

It was laughable that just a moment ago, he had been contemplating how to show mercy to her after defeating her in order to win her favor.

Now, whether or not he would get injured was up to whether Liu Qingqing chose to show mercy.

Suddenly, Chang Dengfeng thought of Bai Zhiyuan; if he, like Bai Zhiyuan, was knocked down off the Stone Platform by Liu Qingqing, it would be too embarrassing to face anyone.

Chang Dengfeng was not one to easily give in and admit defeat. Knowing he could not counter Liu Qingqing's palm, he did not resign himself to fate but instead, he concentrated all his strength into his right palm, filled with heroic resolve as he met Liu Qingqing's palm.

Bang!

As their palms met again, Chang Dengfeng's body shook, only to feel the Water Element Qi in Liu Qingqing's palm like a colossal wave crashing over him. He couldn't keep his footing and staggered back seven or eight steps before finally managing to steady himself, his feet already at the edge of the Stone Platform.

There was no earth-shattering force as he had expected, and his body did not fly backward to fall off the Stone Platform... Chang Dengfeng was momentarily stunned, the outcome he had imagined was not supposed to be like this.

When Chang Dengfeng looked up at Liu Qingqing, he noticed a slight softening in her indifferent expression. Her eyes, like twinkling stars, quietly observed him and she did not immediately launch another attack.

"Is she... showing me mercy? She must be waiting for me to concede," Chang Dengfeng mused, quickly surmising Liu Qingqing's intention.

As a clever man, he wouldn't let pride cloud his judgment. Thus, knowing that admitting defeat was embarrassing, but at least allowed for a graceful exit, he immediately spoke out loud, "Junior Sister Liu, I am defeated! I admire your strength!"

When Liu Qingqing saw that Chang Dengfeng understood her intention, she responded with a light smile and gave a fist salute, saying, "Senior Brother Chang, please forgive me for any offense!"

Chang Dengfeng's lips moved, intending to say something more, but upon seeing Liu Qingqing's suddenly indifferent gaze return, he ultimately restrained himself from speaking out, sighed, gave her a fist salute, and leaped off the Stone Platform.

With a single move, she defeated Bai Zhiyuan, and with two, she defeated Chang Dengfeng. Liu Qingqing's successive victories won her clean and resounding success, earning the admiration and respect of many Martial Academy disciples.

After Chang Dengfeng jumped off the Stone Platform, thunderous applause erupted once more. Many Martial Academy disciples, disregarding the icy stare of Elder Tie Xing from the Enforcement Hall, shouted Liu Qingqing's name loudly.

"The match between External Courtyard disciple Liu Qingqing and Inner Court disciple Chang Dengfeng, Liu Qingqing wins!"

Following the announcement of the result, Elder Tie Xing from the Enforcement Hall nodded towards Liu Qingqing, with a rare smile flickering at the corner of his mouth.

As an Elder devoted to the Bitao Martial Academy, seeing the emergence of a genius like Liu Qingqing made Tie Xing optimistic about the Martial Academy's future rise, filling his heart with joy.

Both Liu Liehu and Liu Qingqing, having taken the platform in succession to issue challenges, easily defeated their opponents, leaving behind an impressive tale among the Martial Academy disciples. Many were thinking that this pair of siblings would surely make their mark in the Martial Academy in the future.