

Doctor 1381

Chapter 1381: Brother Li asked me to pass on his regards to you!

As Zhou Yuruo had predicted, amidst the whistle from a high-ranking member of Ruoshui Palace, a black figure shot out lightning-fast from the Palace Master Hall, soared upward, and appeared dozens of meters in the air.

The black figure was a female expert at the Innate Realm whose apparent age matched Zhou Yuruo's. However, her aura was far stronger than Zhou Yuruo's.

Her eyes sparkled like lightning, emitting cold beams of light. Her body was surrounded by a chilling Martial Artist Aura, making those standing slightly closer involuntarily shudder.

The woman's speed was astonishing. After only a few breaths, she appeared right in front of Zhou Yuruo, suspended in the air just a few meters apart. Their gazes collided sharply in midair.

The woman was none other than Zhou Qingyan, the current Palace Master of Ruoshui Palace.

Behind Zhou Qingyan stood over a dozen Innate Experts, their True Essence Wings gently fluttering. They hovered in the air while gazing at Zhou Yuruo, who wore a black veil. Their expressions were heavy with mixed feelings and silent sighs.

All of them knew that Zhou Yuruo was Zhou Qingyan's daughter. Back then, the Palace Master had invested greatly in grooming Zhou Yuruo, hoping her daughter would compete for the position of the next Palace Master of Ruoshui Palace. However, Zhou Yuruo ended up eloping with the Loose Cultivator Zhuge Dingtian.

This incident had deeply shocked and infuriated Zhou Qingyan.

Enraged, Zhou Qingyan hardened her heart and decreed that disciples of the law enforcement must capture Zhuge Dingtian and her daughter Zhou Yuruo. She swore that if caught, Zhuge Dingtian would be killed on the spot, while Zhou Yuruo would be returned to Ruoshui Palace and imprisoned in Reflection Valley, forbidden to leave the palace for the rest of her life.

Later, Ruoshui Palace law enforcement disciples tracked down Zhuge Dingtian and forced him into a lethal and inescapable dead end, while Zhou Yuruo vanished without a trace.

The disciples of Ruoshui Palace thought the matter would quietly fade away—the missing Zhou Yuruo, no matter if she were alive or dead, would never dare to show herself again.

Yet to their astonishment, more than ten years later, after almost everyone within Ruoshui Palace had forgotten about Zhou Yuruo, she suddenly reappeared near the palace.

Many of the Innate Experts of Ruoshui Palace thought Zhou Yuruo's return was astonishingly foolish.

Even though Zhou Yuruo was the Palace Master's daughter, the current Palace Master had undergone a personality shift, growing cold and unyielding. If captured, Zhou Yuruo would likely face a far harsher punishment.

Reflection Valley, extending merely a hundred meters in area, would feel worse than death for a Martial Artist condemned to lifelong imprisonment.

"You still know how to come back?"

Zhou Qingyan's icy gaze locked onto her daughter as she raised her hand abruptly and pointed at her, her voice sharp and commanding, "You finally realize your mistakes from back then, don't you? Even though you are my daughter, palace rules are firm and merciless! Now, return with me to Ruoshui Palace and accept punishment!"

"Heh..."

Zhou Yuruo let out a cold laugh.

She had hoped that despite everything, the fact that she and Zhou Qingyan were mother and daughter would count for something. After more than a decade apart, surely her mother would show at least some concern for her well-being, no matter how severe her heart might have grown.

Yet at this moment, looking into Zhou Qingyan's eyes, Zhou Yuruo saw only anger and rigid coldness—none of the maternal warmth she had hoped for.

Zhou Yuruo felt deeply heartbroken and disappointed.

With the cold laughter, her tears welled up once more.

She turned to glance behind her and saw her daughter Zhuge Lian along with the young Martial Artist not retreating, but instead inching closer to her. Suspended in the air not far behind, Zhou Yuruo sighed inwardly, knowing that with Zhou Qingyan taking action, escape for her daughter and the young Martial Artist would never be allowed.

Her daughter, if captured, would at worst face imprisonment akin to her own, likely spared of death. But the young Martial Artist, his fate was almost certain—he wouldn't survive this encounter.

"Zhou Qingyan, you're wrong! I did not return to apologize, but to confirm one thing..."

As she spoke, Zhou Yuruo's gaze turned razor-sharp, locking with her mother's as she asked intensely, "Tell me—when Zhuge Dingtian was hunted down by Ruoshui Palace law enforcement disciples years ago, did he live or die?"

Zhou Qingyan's expression froze for a moment, then she sneered coldly, saying, "Ruoshui Palace's law enforcement disciples may not have managed to kill Zhuge Dingtian directly, but they forced him into a place of despair, a lethal dead end. That dead end, even for experts at Innate Realm perfection, is a place where survival is a one-in-ten thousand chance. How could he have survived?"

Hearing this, Zhou Yuruo knew her mother wasn't lying. Otherwise, why would she have waited painfully for over a decade, yet Zhuge Dingtian had never been heard from? Her heart felt as if pierced by countless needles, her vision blackened, her body faltered, and obstructed Essence Energy caused her to plummet toward the ground.

"Mother!"

Zhuge Lian cried out and tried to intervene, but Fang Bai's Wind Wings had already vibrated swiftly as he rushed to the falling Zhou Yuruo. He caught her gently, then brought both mother and daughter safely to the ground.

"Mother?"

Zhou Qingyan's attention shifted to Zhuge Lian, noticing the faint resemblance between her facial features and Zhou Yuruo's. She immediately understood this was her daughter's child, her own granddaughter.

Her heart softened momentarily, and her eyes revealed an affectionate glimmer. But when her gaze fell on Fang Bai nearby, her pupils widened, her cold and stern demeanor returned. Her expression was one of deep hostility—he reminded her vividly of Zhuge Dingtian.

"Hmm? A twenty-something Innate Realm perfection expert... Which Sect disciple could he possibly belong to?"

Descending to the ground, Zhou Qingyan fixed her gaze on Fang Bai, her eyebrows furrowed in disbelief.

The next moment, her face darkened with killing intent. She thought to herself, "My granddaughter, as a descendant of Ruoshui Palace, naturally belongs to the palace. This boy dares to be with her—today, I will kill him to uphold palace rules!"

Sensing Zhou Qingyan's killing aura, Fang Bai smiled faintly and turned to Zhuge Lian. "Take care of your mother. Leave everything else to me."

Fang Bai stepped forward, stopping three meters in front of Zhou Qingyan. He sized her up for a few moments before chuckling coldly and saying, "So you're Zhou Qingyan, huh? Brother Li Li Chenzhou asked me to pass along his regards!"

At the mention of "Li Chenzhou," Zhou Qingyan trembled violently as if struck by lightning. Her face flushed red, and she exclaimed uncontrollably, "Li Chenzhou, he's still alive? Where... Where is he?"

"Young man, you... You know my father?"

Behind Fang Bai, Zhou Yuruo, having just regained some Essence Energy, became emotionally charged upon hearing the name "Li Chenzhou." Ignoring the presence of her daughter, she asked shakily.

Zhuge Lian chimed in, "Mother, Brother Fang and Grandpa are very close friends!"

After glancing at Zhou Qingyan, she added quietly, "Mother, let me tell you—Grandpa is currently in Huaxia Sect and overseeing things for Brother Fang!"

Last time when Zhou Yuruo secretly observed Zhuge Lian, Fang Bai and Li Chenzhou had not yet arrived at Huaxia Sect, so she hadn't seen them. Otherwise, she might not have risked returning to Ruoshui Palace.

"Is what you're saying true?"

Zhou Qingyan heard her granddaughter's words loud and clear, but she still struggled to believe.

"Of course it's true. Grandmother, if you don't believe me, you can go to Huaxia Sect and see for yourself!"

Zhuge Lian replied coolly.

Chapter 1382: Kill You First, Then the Unfaithful!

Regarding the grudges between her grandmother Zhou Qingyan and her parents from years ago, Zhuge Lian had gained significant understanding through Fang Bai's retelling of her father Zhuge Dingtian's final words. Unable to forgive her grandmother for destroying her parents' relationship and indirectly causing her father's demise in the mortal world, Zhuge Lian spoke bluntly, harboring resentment.

However, at this moment, Zhou Qingyan's mind was occupied entirely with matters concerning Li Chenzhou's life or death, and she paid no attention to Zhuge Lian's tone.

"He's still alive? He's truly still alive? Haha... Hahaha... HAHAHA..."

Zhou Qingyan muttered in a low voice for a while before suddenly bursting into cold laughter. Under the bewildered gazes of Fang Bai, Zhou Yuruo, and Zhuge Lian, her bloodshot eyes burned with intensity as she shouted, "That heartless man! Since he is alive, why hasn't he come to see me all these years? Why?"

Fang Bai pursed his lips, looked up at the sky, and ignored Zhou Qingyan, who appeared on the brink of madness.

Zhou Qingyan continued, "I understand now. That heartless man feels guilty and doesn't dare face me! He's in Huaxia Sect, isn't he? Fine! I will mobilize the full force of Ruoshui Palace to march to Huaxia Sect, slay that traitorous man, and avenge these years of torment in my heart!"

Zhou Yuruo never expected her outwardly graceful and noble mother to say such chillingly ruthless words. Infuriated, she retorted, "He is not only my father but also your Martial Dao companion! How... how can you bear to harm him?"

Zhou Qingyan's gaze was as sharp as a knife, stabbing fiercely at Zhou Yuruo's face as she replied hoarsely, "After I gave birth to you, that heartless man left to train and never returned. Even to this day, he has not once come back to Ruoshui Palace... Tell me, such a cruel Martial Dao companion who abandoned his wife and child—isn't he deserving of death?"

Zhou Yuruo was rendered speechless.

From a young age, Zhou Yuruo's father Li Chenzhou was absent from her life. Whenever she asked about him, her mother would initially cry, but later her temperament grew extreme. Any mention of her father would send her into fits of rage, and Zhou Yuruo would even get slapped for it.

From then on, Zhou Yuruo grew fearful of her mother, not daring to bring up her father in front of her again.

By now, the image of her father Li Chenzhou had become completely blurred in her mind.

"That's not the truth!"

Zhuge Lian, who had met her grandfather Li Chenzhou at Huaxia Sect, knew the real reason her grandfather never returned to Ruoshui Palace and shouted, "Grandmother, you're mistaken! Grandfather didn't come back to Ruoshui Palace because he had his reasons..."

"Enough! Don't say another word!"

Overcome by rage, Zhou Qingyan refused to listen to any defense about Li Chenzhou. She interrupted Zhuge Lian with evident impatience and coldly declared, "There's no need for you to make excuses for that heartless man! If I don't kill him, my hatred will never be quenched! Once I deal with all of you here, I'll head to Huaxia Sect!"

Zhou Yuruo felt the heavy killing intent emanating from her mother Zhou Qingyan, and the overwhelming pressure left her trembling. She realized that her mother's decision was unwavering and unchangeable. Overcome by anguish, her tears began to flow uncontrollably.

Zhuge Lian held Zhou Yuruo's trembling arm as her own eyes reddened. Her gaze shifted to Fang Bai.

Although Huaxia Sect currently boasted dozens of Innate experts and had unprecedented strength, its disciple count was merely around ten thousand. If Ruoshui Palace truly sent all its forces of one hundred thousand disciples to seek vengeance, it would undoubtedly place immense pressure on Huaxia Sect.

If the situation spiraled out of control and conflict erupted, the ultimate outcome—who would emerge victorious—was hard to predict.

However, one certainty existed: if the two factions clashed, no matter who won or lost, the price paid would be catastrophic.

This was the scenario Zhuge Lian wished to avoid at all costs. Thus, she hoped Fang Bai could dissuade her grandmother Zhou Qingyan from engaging in reckless actions.

"No wonder Brother Li was furious upon learning about everything you've done in these years. He didn't even want to come see you..."

With Zhuge Lian's hopeful gaze fixed on him, Fang Bai stared expressionlessly at Zhou Qingyan and coldly remarked, "Brother Li mentioned that while you, this woman, were once stubborn, proud, and self-centered, your feelings for him back then were heartfelt and genuine. But the current you has completely changed—you resort to harsh punishments even against your own disciples, show no mercy to your daughter and son-in-law, and are utterly ruthless, defying all reason!"

After a pause, noticing Zhou Qingyan already at the brink of exploding, Fang Bai smirked and continued, "Originally, Brother Li intended to accompany the two of us to visit Ruoshui Palace. But after hearing about all the extreme deeds you've committed over the years, he was greatly disappointed and chose not to come..."

Zhou Qingyan screamed sharply, "The extremes I've gone to were all because of his wrongdoing! What right does he have to feel disappointed in me?"

"Alright, alright! The grudges between you two from the past can't be explained so easily!"

Fang Bai waved his hand to interrupt Zhou Qingyan's words, laughing mockingly, "Brother Li is now a member of my Huaxia Sect. If you want to kill him, first ask me if I will allow it!"

Zhou Qingyan's eyes gleamed coldly, her killing intent skyrocketing as she declared furiously, "Then I'll kill you first, and then that heartless man!"

In her right hand, a flicker of black light appeared, and out emerged a two-foot-long black short sword.

The black sword reflected a chilling glow in the sunset, its sharpness undeniable. The immense pressure and fierce killing intent emanating from the blade revealed it to be a rare water-attribute Holy Grade Spiritual Artifact of the True Martial Realm.

Although it was a low-tier Holy Grade artifact, the sword increased Zhou Qingyan's Martial Artist Aura by thirty percent the moment it was wielded.

Within a radius of several dozen meters around Zhou Qingyan, except for Fang Bai, other martial artists could not withstand the oppressive force and retreated one after another.

"Kill!"

Zhou Qingyan roared sharply, thrusting the sacred short sword forward like a venomous tongue striking its prey, aiming for Fang Bai's chest.

With this strike, the black light radiated intensely. The chilling aura carried by the blade seemed to freeze the air, solidifying it.

To freeze water into ice—the hallmark of mastering water-based cultivation techniques to an extreme realm.

Zhou Qingyan's cultivation level had precisely reached the peak of the Innate Realm.

Knowing this young martial artist before her was a worthy opponent unlike any before, Zhou Qingyan dared not underestimate him. Thus, she delivered this attack with her full strength.

The duel between two Innate experts who had achieved perfection was not something anyone could interfere with; others could only spectate from a distance.

Zhou Yuruo, meeting Fang Bai for the first time, was unaware of his combat capabilities. She knew that if he lost, death awaited him. Seeing her daughter care so deeply for him, Zhou Yuruo realized that should he perish at the hands of her mother Zhou Qingyan, it might spark relentless resentment between her daughter and grandmother.

Of course, Zhou Yuruo also did not wish to see her mother Zhou Qingyan harmed by Fang Bai.

Regardless, Zhou Qingyan was still her mother—her own flesh and blood, whose bond could not easily be severed.

Yet, how could battles between such mighty warriors avoid injury and death?

Thinking of this, Zhou Yuruo tightly grasped her daughter Zhuge Lian's hand, her heart suspended in utter tension.

Chapter 1383: Long Time No See, How Have You Been?

Zhuge Lian held her mother Zhou Yuruo's hands tightly, feeling the slight tremor in her palms. She knew what her mother was worried about, and couldn't help but sigh softly. She thought to herself, wasn't she just as concerned?

The two people facing off in front of her—one was the man she admired and respected, the other was her grandmother. Though this grandmother stirred feelings of displeasure within her, she was, after all, a blood relative.

Thus, she wished for neither of them to be harmed.

However, the long-standing feuds between her parents and grandmother, and her own lack of interaction with her grandmother, had rendered their familial bond faint, almost nonexistent.

As such, deep in her heart, Zhuge Lian was more concerned about the safety of Fang Bai, who was not only her mentor and friend, but also her confidant.

Zhuge Lian was well aware of Fang Bai's strength. Back in the Huaxia Sect, her grandfather Li Chenzhou had sparred with Fang Bai several times and had always conceded defeat, admitting he was no match.

And according to her grandfather, her grandmother's cultivation level had been comparable to his own back then. But it had been over a decade since; who could say whether or not her grandmother had improved further?

Thus, the outcome of this battle was unpredictable.

Zhou Qingyan's Holy Grade Spirit Weapon was called the "Love Severing Sword."

Years ago, when Li Chenzhou left on a training journey and never returned, Zhou Qingyan believed he had cruelly abandoned both her and their daughter. With resentment in her heart, she spent an

enormous sum to commission one of the top Artifact Refiners in the True Martial Realm to forge this sword-type Spiritual Artifact.

The sword was named "Love Severing" because Zhou Qingyan intended to use it to sever all ties with Li Chenzhou. From that moment on, if they ever crossed paths again, it would mean a battle to the death—either you or me.

When Zhou Qingyan thrust the "Love Severing Sword" forward, Zhou Yuruo and Zhuge Lian were both extremely tense; instinctively, they closed their eyes, unable to bear watching.

"Ah..."

Just as Zhou Qingyan's sword plunged forward, a sigh echoed in the ears of everyone present.

This sigh was a sound familiar to Fang Bai, Zhuge Lian, and Zhou Qingyan alike.

For Zhou Qingyan in particular, the sigh was one that had been deeply etched in her heart.

The sound of the sigh struck Zhou Qingyan like a clap of thunder by her ear, causing her body to tremble violently. The sword that had been inches away from Fang Bai's chest abruptly halted a full yard away. She jerked her head around suddenly, looking toward the source of the sigh.

The other martial artists present, influenced by Zhou Qingyan's reaction, also turned to look in the direction of the sound.

"Brother Li, weren't you voluntarily staying behind to guard the Huaxia Sect? Why have you come here?"

Fang Bai slowly turned around, gazing at the middle-aged man who had appeared atop the distant Snow Peak, and smiled bitterly as he asked.

The middle-aged man, like Fang Bai, was dressed in simple white robes. His brows were sharp like swords and his eyes clear like stars, exuding elegance and charm. With his neatly trimmed mustache, who else could it be but Li Chenzhou?

Zhuge Lian had originally wanted her grandfather Li Chenzhou to accompany her to Ruoshui Palace, but when he had learned of Zhou Qingyan's various extreme actions over the years—particularly how she had broken apart lovers and indirectly caused the death of his son-in-law—he was deeply disappointed in her.

Burdened by unresolved emotions, Li Chenzhou had refused to go to Ruoshui Palace to meet Zhou Qingyan, choosing instead to stay behind at Huaxia Sect and watch over its safety.

Who would have thought that at this critical moment, Li Chenzhou would suddenly appear? His arrival caught Zhuge Lian and the others completely off guard.

Yet Fang Bai had already sensed Li Chenzhou tailing them remotely with his Divine Sense long ago. He had simply chosen not to speak of it.

Fang Bai speculated that the reason Li Chenzhou had followed them all this way was because he was still uneasy about the situation at Ruoshui Palace.

In other words, despite everything, Li Chenzhou still cared deeply for Zhou Qingyan.

"Mother, Grandfather has come!"

When Li Chenzhou appeared, Zhuge Lian was shocked yet overjoyed. She thought to herself that her grandfather's arrival might just resolve the tense standoff before her.

Zhou Yuruo stared blankly at Li Chenzhou, her lips trembling as tears streamed down her face.

Though Zhou Yuruo's memory of her father had long grown fuzzy, she had imagined his appearance countless times in her mind.

In her imagination, her father was a tall, handsome, free-spirited, and kind man, the epitome of perfection.

To her astonishment, the Li Chenzhou standing before her now matched the image of her father in her dreams almost perfectly. This filled her with overwhelming excitement and joy.

Though there hadn't yet been time to acknowledge him as her father or exchange more than a glance, Zhou Yuruo's heart had silently accepted this man as her father.

"I hadn't planned on coming, but after some thought, I realized that there are matters I need to handle personally. So, here I am."

Responding to Fang Bai, Li Chenzhou descended from the thousand-foot-high Snow Peak, stepping as though he were walking down an invisible Heavenly Ladder.

Zhou Qingyan looked up at Li Chenzhou, her expression shifting unpredictably. Her heart was a whirlwind of love and hate, and before she realized it, tears had already covered her face.

Zhou Qingyan had once loved Li Chenzhou with all her heart and hated him just as much.

Time and again, she had vowed to herself that should she ever see Li Chenzhou again, she would grind his bones to dust and ensure he met a miserable end. Yet now, with Li Chenzhou truly standing before her, her first reaction was utter bewilderment.

"Qingyan, it's been so many years. How have you been?"

Li Chenzhou descended the Snow Peak and stood before the stunned Zhou Qingyan. Upon seeing her dazed demeanor, much of the resentment he had felt over her actions in recent years dissipated. He asked her in a soft voice.

"How have I been? How have I been? Ha... Haha... Hahaha..."

Zhou Qingyan snapped out of her stupor, meeting Li Chenzhou's gaze with a cold, bitter laugh.

It wasn't until Li Chenzhou's brow furrowed slightly that she stopped laughing. Raising her hand to point at him, she burst into a hysterical rage and shouted, "You heartlessly abandoned me and our daughter all those years ago, disappearing without a trace. I bore the enormous burden of raising Yuruo all on my own..."

When Li Chenzhou heard her mention "Yuruo," his gaze shifted toward Zhou Yuruo. Knowing that she was his daughter, a trace of fatherly affection appeared at the corner of his mouth.

"Father..."

Feeling a warm surge in her heart, Zhou Yuruo, with Zhuge Lian supporting her, stood up shakily and called out in a trembling voice.

Li Chenzhou nodded with a smile and said, "Good child, let's talk more later."

"Li Chenzhou, she is my daughter! You're not allowed to touch her!"

Zhou Qingyan screamed sharply, "You asked me how I've been all these years? Let me tell you now: every single day has been a living hell of torment and anguish! Every waking moment, I told myself that if I ever saw that heartless man again, I would use this Love Severing Sword to tear open his chest and see for myself whether his heart is cold or warm, red or black! Why did you abandon us so cruelly and heartlessly?"

"Qingyan, it seems that after all these years, you still don't truly understand me!"

Li Chenzhou sighed once again, his gaze fixed on Zhou Qingyan as he said, "You should know—better than anyone—who I, Li Chenzhou, am and how I treated you back then. You accuse me of heartlessness? You are the woman I, Li Chenzhou, chose as my own—how could I ever betray you?"

Zhou Qingyan responded with a cold, wordless sneer.

Over the years, Zhou Qingyan's belief in Li Chenzhou's betrayal had become an unshakable obsession. In her mind, his explanations were merely excuses. How could she possibly believe him so easily?

Chapter 1384: Sword Light Flashes, Blood Splatters!

"Qingyan, you've changed..."

Li Chenzhou looked at Zhou Qingyan, whose face bore a cold sneer, and felt a faint ache in his heart.

He could hardly believe that the once lively, cheerful, and smiling confidante had become so cold, ruthless, obsessive, and extreme.

Back in Spirit Lake City, Li Chenzhou had overheard numerous negative rumors about Ruoshui Palace from some Innate Experts, particularly about its current Palace Master, Zhou Qingyan, who had become a name feared by many.

It was said that since Zhou Qingyan took over as Palace Master, she implemented exceedingly strict palace rules, including one particularly inhumane decree: female disciples were forbidden from privately forming relationships with Martial Dao partners. Violators faced severe punishment—the male Martial Artist would be killed, and the female disciple would be imprisoned for life in Ruoshui Palace's Reflection Valley.

However, affection between men and women is a natural human inclination. Despite the strict rules, many young Ruoshui Palace disciples, naive in matters of love, still found themselves forging connections and forming bonds with male Martial Artists they encountered during external training missions.

The most famous among such cases was Zhou Qingyan's own daughter, Zhou Yuruo.

Years ago, Zhou Yuruo met Zhuge Dingtian and instantly fell in love. Knowing full well that even as the Palace Master's daughter, her transgression of palace rules would not spare her from harsh punishment, Zhou Yuruo was undeterred. Like a moth drawn to flame, she resolutely fled Ruoshui Palace to elope with Zhuge Dingtian.

Yet, for Zhou Yuruo and all other disciples who had violated the Ruoshui Palace rules, the outcomes were consistently tragic.

Some disciple had apparently leaked information to the outside world, revealing that over the years, Ruoshui Palace had imprisoned more than a hundred female disciples for their romantic entanglements, and their Martial Dao partners had also been hunted down and executed by the palace's enforcement disciples.

Li Chenzhou initially refused to believe Zhou Qingyan could commit such cruel acts, but after verifying it through various sources, he reluctantly accepted the truth.

Li Chenzhou, a man of justice and zero tolerance for evil, was outraged and gave up on his intention to visit Ruoshui Palace and meet Zhou Qingyan.

However, after Fang Bai and Zhuge Lian left Huaxia Sect, Li Chenzhou began to contemplate the situation carefully. Zhou Qingyan's dramatic change in personality made him apprehensive. Were she to discover Zhuge Lian's identity, the consequences would likely be dire, and conflict between them seemed inevitable.

Despite Ruoshui Palace commanding a force of ten thousand disciples and over a dozen Innate Experts, Fang Bai's formidable combat skills and mastery of formations meant he could escape with Zhuge Lian with ease, albeit at great cost to Ruoshui Palace.

Though Li Chenzhou harbored resentment toward Zhou Qingyan, their long years of marriage made the prospect of her suffering at Fang Bai's hands unbearable. Furthermore, he pitied the innocent disciples of Ruoshui Palace. Thus, he decided to follow them.

Li Chenzhou intended to intervene at a critical moment to prevent a clash between both sides. Yet he didn't expect Zhou Qingyan to act impulsively and attack Fang Bai directly. Left with no choice, he sighed deeply and revealed himself atop the Snow Peak.

It was his sigh that caused Zhou Qingyan's attack to pause.

"I've changed?"

Holding the Love Severing Sword, Zhou Qingyan pointed it at Li Chenzhou and said sharply, "Indeed, I've changed! But if not for you, how would I have become like this? Li Chenzhou, you made me this way. Shouldn't you feel ashamed for this?"

Li Chenzhou opened his mouth but found himself at a loss for words.

"What, no response? No argument? Do you deny being a heartless man?"

Zhou Qingyan sneered coldly, twirling the Love Severing Sword into an intricate pattern of sword flowers before thrusting it forward.

But this strike was not aimed at Fang Bai—it turned toward Li Chenzhou, targeting his heart.

Li Chenzhou quietly watched the long sword as it hurtled toward him, his face calm, unmoving, his voice barely above a whisper, "You're not wrong. Had I not insisted on venturing out for training back then, I wouldn't have faced calamity, nor failed to return... I do owe you a great deal. If my life can erase your hatred and restore you to who you once were, then take it."

Zhou Qingyan heard his soft murmurs clearly. Her brows furrowed with hesitation, but she gritted her teeth and sped up the sword's momentum.

The full-force strike of an Innate Expert at perfection level was utterly overwhelming.

The Love Severing Sword's two-foot blade seemed to unleash a raging torrent of waves from its tip, crashing toward Li Chenzhou with unstoppable force.

Li Chenzhou closed his eyes, his face serene and unwavering, awaiting the arrival of Zhou Qingyan's deadly thrust.

"Mother, don't!"

"Grandfather, dodge!"

Two cries of alarm came simultaneously from Zhou Yuruo and Zhuge Lian. Both threw themselves forward to stop Zhou Qingyan's life-snatching strike.

But how could Zhou Qingyan's sword be so easily halted?

"Pfft!"

A flash of blade, a splash of blood.

The Love Severing Sword in Zhou Qingyan's hand pierced into the flesh of Li Chenzhou's chest.

Just two more inches, and the tip of the sword would penetrate Li Chenzhou's heart—a wound no gods or immortals could heal.

As the blade entered Li Chenzhou's flesh, Zhou Qingyan felt as though she herself was also stabbed, her heart twisting painfully beyond endurance, tears blurring her vision instantly.

Was this the end for the man she once loved with all her heart yet came to loathe so deeply? Had he truly perished by her hand?

Just a little more forward, and she could easily end the life of the hateful man before her. Yet why did she feel not a shred of joy, only a soul-crushing despair?

"No! I cannot kill him! If I do, I'll lose my Martial Dao partner forever; Yuruo will lose her father forever; Lian'er will lose her grandfather forever... They will hate me for a lifetime, and I will live out my days in compounded agony!"

At that moment, Zhou Qingyan was overwhelmed by stark regret. She tried to withdraw the sword, but the momentum was already loosed, the True Yuan released, and there was no way to reclaim it.

"Clang!"

A soft sound rang out, and the trajectory of Zhou Qingyan's Love Severing Sword halted abruptly, as though locked in place by tremendous force, unable to move forward even an inch.

Zhou Qingyan's gaze sharpened, and she discovered that the blade of the sword had been pinched between two fingers—those belonging to the young Martial Artist standing beside her granddaughter.

Shock overwhelmed Zhou Qingyan.

Her strength was at the pinnacle of the True Martial Realm, and she prided herself as one of the top-tier Martial Artists within the realm. Yet her all-out thrust had been casually stopped by Fang Bai's two fingers, which still seemed relaxed and capable of more.

This realization caused a momentary blankness in Zhou Qingyan's mind, followed closely by fear.

Behind Zhou Qingyan, the high-ranking members of Ruoshui Palace were equally flabbergasted. Many had readied themselves to praise their Palace Master for her strike, but now stood dumbfounded, unable to utter a word.

"Palace Master Zhou, to attack even your own husband? That's crossing a line, don't you think? Brother Li is my friend and an honorary Elder of Huaxia Sect—I won't allow you to harm him."

Fang Bai, having pinched the Love Severing Sword with two fingers, released it after speaking, casually flicking the sword's blade.

Zhou Qingyan let out a startled cry, her body trembling as if struck by lightning, retreating rapidly with the Love Severing Sword in hand.

Chapter 1385: Deep Love, Intense Hatred

When a true expert makes their move, one can instantly tell their caliber.

Zhou Qingyan unleashed a strike with her Holy Grade Spiritual Artifact, pouring her full strength into the blow. How formidable was its power?

And yet Fang Bai effortlessly neutralized Zhou Qingyan's attack using just two fingers, sending her retreating backward.

This display of strength left the dozen or so senior members of Ruoshui Palace utterly dumbfounded, their disbelief apparent.

In the eyes of these high-ranking figures, Palace Master Zhou Qingyan, who had long reached the perfection of the Innate realm, was one of the top-tier martial artists of the time—undefeated from birth.

Yet today, the Palace Master had clearly encountered a formidable opponent.

Moreover, this opponent's strength seemed so overwhelming that it appeared capable of entirely crushing Palace Master Zhou Qingyan.

The shock roiling within Zhou Qingyan herself far surpassed that of the onlookers from Ruoshui Palace.

Previously, Zhou Qingyan had discerned Fang Bai's cultivation level as also being at the perfection of the Innate realm but was confident he could not be stronger than her.

To Zhou Qingyan, Fang Bai was merely a young man in his early twenties, whose attainment of the Innate perfection realm must have been due to extraordinary fortuitous encounters.

And martial artists who achieved their realm through "forceful and early acceleration" often had unstable foundations, deficient combat experience, and certainly weren't her match as a seasoned veteran of the Innate perfection realm.

But what Zhou Qingyan could never have anticipated was the degree to which Fang Bai's power would far surpass her imagination.

Zhou Qingyan had fought hundreds of battles throughout her life, encountering numerous masters of the Innate perfection realm, and yet she had never once been defeated, nor feared any opponent.

But now, after being repelled by Fang Bai's mere flick of his fingers, facing Fang Bai's hostile expression, she felt fear for the first time.

"You, woman! You accuse Brother Li of being heartless, abandoning you and your daughter, yet do you even know of the deadly peril Brother Li faced during his adventures, trapped in dire straits and narrowly escaping death? You blame your drastic change in temperament on Brother Li, but haven't realized that it is your own excessive suspicions, your self-righteousness, your stubborn ego that are to blame!"

Fang Bai's face was icy-cold, his gaze sharp as a blade as he advanced step by step toward Zhou Qingyan. His sardonic smile was filled with contempt as he said, "As a wife, you doubted your own husband; as a mother, you destroyed your daughter's happiness; as a grandmother, have you ever cared about your granddaughter? With your distrust, cruelty, and aloofness, for Brother Li to have chosen you back then—his judgment must have been blind!"

Fang Bai spoke each word with the precision of a blade, and each statement pierced Zhou Qingyan's heart like arrows, leaving her shaken.

Zhou Qingyan felt an overwhelming pressure envelop her. As Fang Bai drew closer, she couldn't help but retreat step by step.

Her mind buzzed with confusion, her forehead breaking into a cold sweat.

The once composed and resolute Zhou Qingyan now appeared dazed and lost, utterly at a loss.

In her retreat, her foot caught on a small stone. She stumbled and fell to the ground, with the Love Severing Sword—a Holy Grade Spiritual Artifact—rolling out of her grip to one side.

Her gaze wandered blankly across her surroundings, perceiving the cold laughter and disdain in the eyes of those watching her.

"Over the years, how many martial couples have you torn apart? How many innocent martial artists have perished by your hand? And how many children like Lian'er have lost their parents because of you? Zhou Qingyan, these sins—they are all your doing. It's you who should feel guilt, not Brother Li!"

Fang Bai stepped up to Zhou Qingyan, fixing her with an unforgiving gaze and spoke in a chilling tone.

His words rang in Zhou Qingyan's ears like thunderclaps, shaking her to the core, making her tremble in terror.

"Brother Fang, enough..."

Seeing Zhou Qingyan clutch her head in pain, on the verge of collapse, Li Chenzhou's heart softened, and he stepped forward to speak up.

Earlier, Fang Bai had fortunately intervened in time to stop Zhou Qingyan's strike, leaving Li Chenzhou with only minor injuries.

However, while his physical injuries were negligible, the wounds to his heart were deep and irreparable.

Zhou Qingyan's strike had been so merciless and unfeeling that it had thoroughly broken his heart.

Trapped for years in the underground Essence Stone Vein of the Eternal Death Zone, Li Chenzhou had barely escaped and survived, longing for a reunion with Zhou Qingyan to rekindle their marital bond. What he awaited, though, was a cruel and devastating end to his hopes.

A heartbroken Li Chenzhou resolved to leave this place of sorrow, never again to see his wife.

"Zhou Qingyan, it wasn't I, Li Chenzhou, who wronged you—but you yourself who ruined everything for yourself! Our ties as husband and wife are severed. You... take care of yourself!"

With that final remark, Li Chenzhou turned and walked away.

When he reached Zhou Yuruo and Zhuge Lian, the grim and serious expression on his face softened slightly as he asked, "Yuruo, Lian'er, are you willing to leave with me?"

Zhou Yuruo and Zhuge Lian exchanged a glance and then nodded in unison.

Zhou Qingyan's heartless and cold actions had burned into their minds, leaving them numb with her betrayal and bereft of any lingering attachment to her.

"Alright... Alright... Let's go to the Huaxia Sect..."

A faint smile tugged at the corners of Li Chenzhou's lips.

Though ending his marital ties left him deeply sorrowful, the presence of his daughter and granddaughter with him provided some solace.

Fang Bai glanced at Zhou Qingyan, still collapsed on the ground, her face full of despair, and then turned to join Li Chenzhou and the others.

"Brother Li, are you truly leaving like this? Not giving her even a shred of a chance?"

Fang Bai asked.

Li Chenzhou sighed, "That strike just now—it wounded not only my heart but also the hearts of Yuruo and Lian'er... Let's go. There's nothing left here worth staying for."

Fang Bai nodded silently.

"Chenzhou, all of this is my fault! Yuruo, Lian'er, don't leave! I was wrong... I was wrong... Please forgive me... If you all leave, what will I do? Please don't go..."

Watching the four of them depart swiftly, Zhou Qingyan suddenly jolted to her senses. Then, like a madwoman, she leaped forward, chasing after them, and clasped Li Chenzhou tightly from behind, tears streaming as she pleaded.

Li Chenzhou did not turn back. His voice was devoid of emotion as he said, "Our bond as husband and wife is at its end. Let go."

"I won't let go!"

Zhou Qingyan pressed her tear-stained face against Li Chenzhou's back, gripping him even tighter, and spoke sorrowfully, "Chenzhou, it was my deep love for you that drove me to such intense hatred! I've realized my mistakes—please forgive me! Yuruo needs her mother; Lian'er needs her grandmother. Let's reunite as a family and never separate again. Don't you think that's better?"

Li Chenzhou replied, "A family reunion? And what of Yuruo's husband, Zhuge Dingtian? Without him, would it truly be called a family reunion?"

Zhou Qingyan's entire body stiffened, her hands gradually releasing their grip on Li Chenzhou. She turned hesitantly to face her daughter Zhou Yuruo, only to meet a pair of sorrowful, resentful eyes.

"Yuruo, I... I've wronged you! I know you hate me—if beating me or scolding me can ease the hatred in your heart, then do it!"

Zhou Qingyan hurriedly approached her daughter Zhou Yuruo, grasping her hand as she sobbed uncontrollably.

Chapter 1386: Lion's Roar

Zhou Yuruo's heart softened. Seeing her mother Zhou Qingyan crying so bitterly, her nose twitched involuntarily, and with reddened eyes, she called out "Mother." Then, she turned to Li Chenzhou, her gaze carrying a touch of pleading.

Zhuge Dingtian's downfall in the mortal world back then could be said to be caused single-handedly by Zhou Qingyan. Zhou Yuruo held resentment against her mother for years because of this.

But now, as time passed, Zhou Yuruo's bitterness had mellowed considerably.

In Zhou Yuruo's heart, her parents and daughter were all present here. If the family could dissolve their grudges and live together harmoniously from now on, it was truly what she hoped to see.

"Qingyan, do you... truly repent?"

Li Chenzhou turned around, his gaze like lightning, directly meeting Zhou Qingyan's eyes.

Nearby, Fang Bai heard this and rolled his eyes, letting out a silent chuckle.

Fang Bai understood that Li Chenzhou still couldn't bear to let Zhou Qingyan go. Otherwise, he wouldn't have stopped and certainly wouldn't have asked such a question.

In other words, if Zhou Qingyan's repentance were genuine, Li Chenzhou might give her a chance.

Though Fang Bai felt that Li Chenzhou forgiving Zhou Qingyan so easily was truly letting her off lightly, this was Li Chenzhou's family matter, and Fang Bai naturally wouldn't interfere.

Fang Bai's speculation wasn't wrong; Li Chenzhou was a man of deep emotions. After all, he had been married to Zhou Qingyan for years and had a daughter with her. This bond had long been engraved in his bones—how could it be cut off so easily?

His earlier harsh words, claiming the love between husband and wife was over, were merely a deliberate front.

In his heart, he hoped Zhou Qingyan's conscience hadn't completely faded, that she would actively admit her mistakes and apologize. If so, there might still be a glimmer of a chance for their relationship to be reconciled.

Otherwise, if Li Chenzhou were truly determined to leave, he could have vanished a thousand meters away in the blink of an eye. How could he let Zhou Qingyan catch up?

Of course, if Zhou Qingyan remained stubborn and unrepentant, Li Chenzhou would lose hope in her completely, leaving resolutely and never meeting her again.

"Yes, Chenzhou, I am genuine!"

Zhou Qingyan, being a clever woman, realized that Li Chenzhou asking the question meant he had already forgiven her. She couldn't help but feel both surprised and overjoyed, wiping the tears from her face as she nodded repeatedly.

Actually, the moment Li Chenzhou had spoken about his hardships during his journey away—his ordeal and inability to return—Zhou Qingyan had already believed him. She understood that all these years, she had truly been wrong to blame him.

With a heart filled with remorse, Zhou Qingyan reflected on the array of extreme and irrational things she had done over the years, suddenly giving rise to intense self-loathing.

Seeing Li Chenzhou silent, seemingly hesitating, she bit her lip and said loudly, "Over these years, I've committed many wrongs and sins. I should pay for them!"

As her words fell, she raised her right hand high, shaping her palm into a blade, then in a flash struck it toward her outstretched left arm.

An Innate perfection expert's Palm Blade was even sharper than a high-grade Spiritual Artifact.

If this Palm Blade were to land, her left arm would undoubtedly be forfeit.

"Qingyan!"

Li Chenzhou was shocked, completely unprepared for Zhou Qingyan to redeem her mistakes in such a self-destructive manner. He wanted to intervene but was already too late.

"Roar!"

A lion's roar rang out, like a bolt of thunder from a clear sky, its overwhelming Sonic Wave Strike expanding outward rapidly. In an instant, it engulfed an area within a ten-zhang radius.

The penetrating force of the sound wave was immense. Even someone like Li Chenzhou, an Innate perfection expert, felt his True Yuan churn as he resisted it, but his ears hummed and his mind reeled from dizziness.

Zhou Yuruo and Zhuge Lian fared even worse, collapsing to the ground, clutching their ears tightly with expressions of agony.

Even the dozen Ruoshui Palace elites observing from a distance couldn't withstand the shockwaves, retreating tens of zhang in haste.

Among them, Zhou Qingyan, whose cultivation level was not inferior to Li Chenzhou's, seemed to fare the worst.

After the roar was unleashed, her body trembled violently, her eyes rolled white, and she collapsed limply, completely unconscious from the impact.

"My apologies for rushing to the rescue. I didn't control my strength well!"

Facing Li Chenzhou's incredulous gaze, Fang Bai chuckled embarrassedly as he spoke.

What Fang Bai had just used was the "Lion's Roar Sonic Wave" from the "Dragon-Tiger-Lion-Elephant Technique." Though this cultivation technique was relatively common, when Fang Bai executed it, it became a masterpiece, unleashing immense force.

If Fang Bai had intended malice, then the dozen Ruoshui Palace elites, including even the distant observers, would not have escaped unscathed from the Sonic Wave Strike.

As for Fang Bai's comment about "not controlling his strength," Li Chenzhou of course knew it was insincere.

Someone whose power surpassed even an Innate perfection expert could hardly struggle to control their own strength.

After careful thought, Li Chenzhou grasped Fang Bai's intention, smiling bitterly as he thought, "This rascal is more vengeful than I am! He clearly doesn't want me to let Qingyan off too easily; that's why he chose this indirect way to punish her!"

Despite thinking this, Li Chenzhou didn't feel the slightest anger.

Considering the extreme and vile deeds Zhou Qingyan had committed in recent years, some punishment was deserved. But to lose an arm as penance seemed overly severe.

It must be understood that for a strong martial artist to suddenly lose a limb, their strength would diminish by at least thirty percent, requiring years of arduous cultivation to recover.

"Brother Fang, for the sake of my reputation and Lian'er's sake, could we let Qingyan's matter rest here? I believe from today onward, Qingyan will certainly undergo great change."

Li Chenzhou spoke to Fang Bai in an imploring tone.

Fang Bai knew his thoughts couldn't escape Li Chenzhou's perception. Smiling, he clasped his fists and said to Li Chenzhou, "Brother Li, congratulations on your family's reunion!"

Hearing this, Li Chenzhou felt a weight lifted from his heart. Smiling, he clasped his fists in return, saying, "Congratulations to us all!"

While the two conversed, the dozen Ruoshui Palace elites observing from afar spotted their unconscious Palace Master. One by one, they became frantic but dared not approach Fang Bai or Li Chenzhou. Knowing Li Chenzhou's history as the Palace Master's martial partner, they hesitated to intervene.

After a brief moment, an elderly Ruoshui Palace elite in his sixties cautiously stepped closer to inquire about the Palace Master's condition.

"Don't worry. Your Palace Master is just temporarily unconscious. She'll wake up shortly. Oh, by the way, you should prepare some rooms at Ruoshui Palace. The few of us need a place to stay and rest for a while."

Li Chenzhou delivered his words in an undeniable tone, then waved his hand, signaling the elder to leave.

In his demeanor, there was an overwhelming, unassailable authority. Hesitant for only a moment, the Ruoshui Palace elder finally agreed quickly and rushed away.

To this resident of Ruoshui Palace, Zhou Qingyan was indeed their Palace Master, but Li Chenzhou was her former martial partner. After witnessing Zhou Qingyan's tearful embrace and heartfelt pleas with Li Chenzhou moments earlier, the elder was already deeply shaken.

In the elder's heart, Li Chenzhou's words now carried even more weight than Zhou Qingyan's. She dared not disobey.

Chapter 1387: Rushi and I, we're old acquaintances!

Very quickly, Ruoshui Palace made the arrangements. Li Chenzhou carried the unconscious Zhou Qingyan into the Palace Master Hall of Ruoshui Palace, patiently waiting for her to wake up.

Meanwhile, Fang Bai, Zhou Yuruo, and Zhuge Lian were arranged to rest in the Elder Hall of Ruoshui Palace.

The news of Zhou Qingyan's coma spread rapidly among the hundred thousand disciples of Ruoshui Palace, stirring a wave of unease and apprehension.

Eventually, a dozen elders and stewards of Ruoshui Palace convened for a brief discussion before jointly approaching Zhou Yuruo to ask her to temporarily assume the role of Palace Master to stabilize the situation.

After consulting her father, Li Chenzhou, Zhou Yuruo nodded and agreed.

In the days that followed, Zhou Yuruo, acting as the Palace Master of Ruoshui Palace, launched sweeping reforms. She abolished some of the overly rigid palace rules established by her mother in the past and released disciples imprisoned in Reflection Valley behind the mountain.

The revitalized Ruoshui Palace exuded a fresh atmosphere. Smiles returned to the faces of the young female disciples, and the previously solemn and oppressive ambiance lightened, becoming cheerful and lively.

The entirety of Ruoshui Palace displayed a flourishing and vibrant scene.

The vast majority of disciples secretly wished that Zhou Yuruo would permanently helm the position of Palace Master, while hoping Zhou Qingyan would remain unconscious indefinitely.

The period with Zhou Yuruo in charge was the most relaxed, joyful, and reassuring time for Ruoshui Palace disciples, including its dozen senior leaders. None of them wished to return to the days of walking on eggshells and living in constant apprehension.

During this time, Zhuge Lian alternated between assisting her mother, Zhou Yuruo, in managing Ruoshui Palace and accompanying her grandfather as he kept watch over her grandmother in the Palace Master Hall.

On the other hand, Fang Bai became the most leisurely individual in Ruoshui Palace.

With nothing better to do, Fang Bai wandered alone around the expansive grounds of Ruoshui Palace. Whenever he encountered female disciples practicing cultivation, he would banter jovially with them.

In just a few days, Fang Bai became acquainted with most of the female disciples of Ruoshui Palace, earning their affection as the amiable and approachable "Brother Fang."

The story of Fang Bai defeating Palace Master Zhou Qingyan with a mere two fingers had long circulated within Ruoshui Palace. Some bold female disciples, seizing the rare opportunity to meet such a powerful expert, summoned their courage to ask Fang Bai for clarification on their Martial Dao cultivation doubts.

When seeking advice, these disciples often lacked confidence, fearing that Fang Bai would disdain discussing martial arts with weak disciples like them. To their surprise, Fang Bai consistently answered their questions, patiently offering guidance and insight.

Though Fang Bai's responses often consisted of only a few simple words, to these female disciples, each word was imbued with profound truths of the Martial Dao. His teachings reverberated in their minds like a great bell or drum, awakening them to invaluable realizations.

Many talented female disciples of Ruoshui Palace found themselves enlightened after hearing Fang Bai's explanations. Some sat cross-legged immediately, cultivating on the spot and successfully advancing to higher realms.

Thus, Fang Bai became revered as a legendary master among the disciples of Ruoshui Palace.

One day, while Fang Bai was instructing a group of Inner Court female disciples on Martial Dao, he suddenly sensed a familiar and extraordinary aura, causing him to become extremely excited.

"What is your name?"

Following the thread of that aura, Fang Bai approached a petite Inner Court female disciple with delicate features, suppressing the excitement in his heart as he asked.

"Ah? I... I..."

The petite disciple didn't expect Fang Bai to ask for her name. Her cheeks flushed red, and she lowered her head, stammering, "My name is Yang... Yang Hongying."

Fang Bai nodded and pointed at the jade pendant hanging around Yang Hongying's neck, asking, "Yang Hongying, is it? Can you tell me where this jade pendant came from?"

Yang Hongying touched the jade pendant at her neck and hesitated briefly before speaking softly, "This jade pendant... was given to me by Junior Sister Rushi. She and I are good friends. Once, I went out to train in a dangerous area, and Junior Sister Rushi was worried about my safety, so she gifted me the pendant..."

Before she could finish her sentence, her vision blurred as Fang Bai clasped both his hands firmly on her shoulders.

Startled, Yang Hongying felt some pain in her shoulders from Fang Bai's grip and instinctively struggled.

Realizing his slight impropriety, Fang Bai released her shoulders and apologized, saying, "Sorry," before excitedly asking, "The 'Rushi' you mentioned—is she called Dongfang Rushi?"

In truth, upon seeing the jade pendant and hearing the name "Rushi," Fang Bai already suspected the answer. He merely asked Yang Hongying for final confirmation.

Yang Hongying nodded, her curiosity evident as she asked, "Brother Fang... How do you know Junior Sister Rushi's name? Do you know her?"

Upon learning news of Dongfang Rushi, Fang Bai's excitement was uncontrollable. Laughing heartily, he exclaimed, "Of course I know her! Rushi and I are old acquaintances! Quickly, tell me—where is Rushi now?"

A female disciple with a few freckles on her nose eagerly interjected, "I know! I know! Junior Sister Rushi went to the Heaven-Reaching Mountain range to participate in the 'Tianjiao List' battle!"

Having heard about the "Tianjiao List" before, Fang Bai's thoughts stirred. He began asking the disciples for details about the Tianjiao List.

When the female disciples mentioned the Lotus Pool Secret Realm and Seven-Colored Lotus Pool, Fang Bai's interest was piqued. He realized that such treasures were exceedingly rare and resolved to seize the opportunity to visit them himself.

"Junior Sister Rushi and Junior Sister Mingyue only entered the sect recently yet earned the chance to compete in the 'Tianjiao List' battle. How enviable! And the 'Fortune's Blessing' sisters—they're not even twenty years old but have already become Core Disciples and qualified for the Tianjiao List! When will it be my turn?"

One female disciple muttered wistfully.

Though unknowingly spoken, her words struck a chord.

When Fang Bai heard the phrase "Junior Sister Mingyue," his emotions, which had already settled, surged again.

He immediately grasped the shoulders of the disciple who had just spoken and asked loudly, "The 'Junior Sister Mingyue' you mentioned—Is she called Baili Mingyue?"

The disciple, an outgoing and lively personality, rolled her eyes playfully as she pretended to sulk. "Brother Fang, you're hurting me! Lighter, please!"

Once Fang Bai released her, she grinned mischievously, saying, "I'll tell you the answer—but do I get a reward?"

She assumed that an expert of Fang Bai's level could casually present treasures that would be incredibly rare for someone of her modest mid-Universe Level cultivation.

It was a rare opportunity, and Fang Bai was well-known as kind-hearted and approachable, so she figured that if she mentioned it casually, he just might gift her something valuable.

Chapter 1388: Heaven-Reaching Mountain Range

"Benefits? Of course, there are benefits!"

Fang Bai saw the female disciple asking him for benefits and couldn't help but laugh heartily. He casually retrieved two bottles of elixirs from his spatial ring and placed them in her hands, saying, "One bottle of Gathering Yuan Pills, one bottle of Creation Pills—both are of high-grade superior quality. They should

be sufficient to help you progress to the high-rank Universe Level realm! All right, now answer my question!"

The female disciple looked at Fang Bai, then at the two bottles of elixirs in her hands, and suddenly squealed with excitement, leaping with joy.

The "benefits" she had in mind were that Fang Bai might provide her with additional guidance on cultivation techniques and martial arts, but to her surprise, Fang Bai was so generous as to gift her two bottles of high-grade superior-quality elixirs outright.

One must know, high-grade superior-quality elixirs are the top-tier cultivation elixirs in the True Martial Realm. Even for an Innate expert at the stage of perfection, acquiring two bottles at once is no easy feat, highlighting their immense value.

"Junior Sister Mingyue? That's Baili Mingyue! She entered the Ruoshui Palace along with Dongfang Rushi. They've both gone to the 'Heaven's Chosen List' this time!"

After receiving the two bottles of elixirs, the female disciple from Ruoshui Palace tossed these words to Fang Bai before running off in excitement to brag to her fellow sect members.

The other female disciples watching her leave had eyes filled with envy, almost turning red with jealousy.

Fang Bai remained standing in place, his face glowing with delight as he muttered to himself, "Rushi and Mingyue are both in Ruoshui Palace... With this, my friends and loved ones from the Secular World are almost all reunited..."

Thinking of Dongfang Rushi and Baili Mingyue heading toward the Heaven-Reaching Mountain Range to participate in the battle for the 'Heaven's Chosen List,' vying for the chance to enter the Lotus Pool Secret Realm, Fang Bai's heart couldn't help but race with anticipation.

Fang Bai's cultivation level had already reached the pinnacle of this world. Progressing even further was arduous, almost impossible to achieve the Foundation Establishment Realm.

Even so, Fang Bai still hoped to solidify his foundation, so that when advancing to the Foundation Establishment in the future, it would be smoother.

Since the Lotus Pool Secret Realm and the Seven-Colored Lotus Pool in the Heaven-Reaching Mountain Range are highly beneficial for a Martial Artist's cultivation, Fang Bai decided to take his chances there. He hoped to assist Dongfang Rushi and Baili Mingyue while also gaining some benefits for himself.

Resolved to act, Fang Bai left that very day, politely declining Li Chenzhou, Zhou Yuruo, and Zhuge Lian's attempts to persuade him to stay. He mounted a Swiftwind Horse and rode off unrestrainedly.

Zhuge Lian wished to accompany Fang Bai to the Heaven-Reaching Mountain Range, but she needed to assist her mother, Zhou Yuruo, in managing the affairs of Ruoshui Palace and help her grandfather, Li Chenzhou, care for her unconscious grandmother, Zhou Qingyan.

Furthermore, according to some Ruoshui Palace disciples, the Heaven-Reaching Mountain Range and its surroundings were teeming with Innate Spirit Beasts and fraught with extreme danger. Given Zhuge Lian's level of strength, accompanying Fang Bai would likely only hinder him.

Helplessly, Zhuge Lian could only stay behind in Ruoshui Palace and agree to reunite with everyone after her grandmother regained consciousness.

...

The Heaven-Reaching Mountain Range, located at the far eastern end of East Shengzhou, is the mightiest and most expansive mountain range in East Shengzhou and even the entire True Martial Realm.

The range rises high in the east and descends in the west, extending tens of thousands of miles. From an aerial view, the entire range resembles a massive dragon on the verge of soaring into the sky.

The legendary Lotus Pool Secret Realm resides at the "head" of the highest peak in the range.

On the left of the Heaven-Reaching Mountain Range lies an endless expanse of primeval forest, while on the right stretches an infinite ocean.

It is said that over half of the Innate Spirit Beasts in the True Martial Realm are gathered within this primeval forest and the Heaven-Reaching Mountain Range.

Riding his Swiftwind Horse, Fang Bai followed the route indicated by the Ruoshui Palace elders, galloping swiftly. Within a day, he reached the edge of the primeval forest on the left side of the Heaven-Reaching Mountain Range.

An ordinary Innate expert would never dare venture into this primeval forest alone. Disturbing the Spirit Beasts inside could result in being besieged by countless Spirit Beasts, a veritable life-or-death scenario.

Thus, for each 'Heaven's Chosen List' battle, the disciples of the Innate sects participating would always travel in groups. Typically, two Innate experts at high ranks would lead teams of twenty talented disciples with high-rank Universe Level or perfect Universe Level cultivation levels.

Such a Martial Artist team would possess a combined strength equal to one Innate expert at the stage of perfection. Even when attacked by Innate Spirit Beasts, they could still fend them off with confidence.

The primeval forest comprises towering ancient trees, some reaching tens of feet or even over a hundred feet high.

Standing outside the forest and peering into its depths, one could see an impenetrable darkness, shadowy and foreboding, as though facing the wide-open maw of a primordial beast, ready to devour at any moment.

The Swiftwind Horse under Fang Bai seemed to sense the presence of formidable Spirit Beasts deep within the forest. It grew restless, whinnying anxiously.

Fang Bai dismounted, letting the Swiftwind Horse run off on its own. After observing the edge of the primeval forest for a moment, he prepared to venture inside.

At that moment, a team of twenty Martial Artists riding Swiftwind Horses approached quickly from the distance, soon appearing within Fang Bai's sight.

"Hmm? Him?"

Among the Martial Artist team, Fang Bai unexpectedly recognized a familiar face, his brow arching slightly.

"Senior Fang? Haha... I never expected to see you here! Are you also heading to the Lotus Pool Secret Realm?"

One of the leaders of the Martial Artist team spotted Fang Bai from afar as well. His face immediately lit up with a smile. Even before reaching Fang Bai, his laughter filled the air, his demeanor replete with flattery and respect.

When he got within a dozen or so yards of Fang Bai, the leader jumped off his horse and approached quickly.

The other nineteen Martial Artists also dismounted and followed shortly behind.

"Elder Gu, long time no see!"

Fang Bai greeted the approaching leader with a wide grin and said, "Your Divine Fire Sect is based in the Land of Extreme South. The Heaven-Reaching Mountain Range must be over a hundred thousand miles away. Did you travel all this way to compete for a spot to enter the 'Lotus Pool Secret Realm'?"

The "Elder Gu" Fang Bai mentioned was none other than Gu Yan, a Divine Fire Sect elder Fang Bai had encountered during their brief meeting in the Eternal Death Zone.

After departing from the Eternal Death Zone, Gu Yan returned to the Divine Fire Sect with a few fellow disciples. Yet here he was again, spotted near the Heaven-Reaching Mountain Range not long after.

The Divine Fire Sect, where Gu Yan resided, was one of the Innate sects in the True Martial Realm. It was self-evident that they had arrived here to participate in the 'Heaven's Chosen List' battle.

Having witnessed Fang Bai's prowess in the Eternal Death Zone, Gu Yan dared not display the slightest arrogance before him. Chuckling, he replied, "The Lotus Pool Secret Realm opens once every five years. For Universe Level experts, it's a rare opportunity to advance to Innate status. How could our Divine Fire Sect miss out?"

At this, a thought crossed his mind, and he asked, "Senior Fang, are you aware that when the Lotus Pool Secret Realm opens, entry is limited to only one hundred Martial Artists?"

Chapter 1389: Heavenly Ladder

Previously, when in the Ruoshui Palace, Fang Bai had already gained a thorough understanding of the entire process of the "Heavenly Exalted Rankings" battle from the mouths of the more than ten high-ranking members of Ruoshui Palace.

Thus, regarding the matter of the various Innate Sects of the True Martial Realm gathering at the Heaven-Reaching Mountain Range and competing through martial contests to vie for one hundred spots to enter the Lotus Pool Secret Realm, he was naturally well informed.

Hearing Gu Yan mention this matter, Fang Bai glanced at him. Noticing the flicker in Gu Yan's eyes, as though he had words but was hesitant to speak, Fang Bai said, "Elder Gu, if there's something on your mind, feel free to speak."

Gu Yan grinned and said in a low voice, "Senior Fang, I suppose you came this time intending to take a stroll within the Lotus Pool Secret Realm?"

Fang Bai did not deny this and nodded calmly.

Gu Yan hesitated for a moment before saying, "In that case, might Senior Fang be interested in collaborating with us from the Divine Fire Sect?"

Fang Bai was taken aback and asked in confusion, "Collaborate? What do you mean?"

Gu Yan, brimming with enthusiasm, replied, "Let us join forces to first secure spots to enter the Lotus Pool Secret Realm. Then, together, we ascend the Heavenly Ladder on the Heaven-Reaching Peak..."

"Wait!"

Fang Bai interrupted Gu Yan and asked with a frown, "What do you mean by ascending the Heavenly Ladder?"

From Gu Yan's words, it seemed that ascending the Heavenly Ladder was of even greater importance than fighting for those one hundred spots to enter the Lotus Pool Secret Realm.

However, when Fang Bai had discussed the "Heavenly Exalted Rankings" battle with Ruoshui Palace's high-ranking members, they had not mentioned anything about the significance of the Heavenly Ladder.

Gu Yan said solemnly, "Senior Fang, it must be your first time here at the Heaven-Reaching Mountain Range, so you wouldn't know the marvel of the Heavenly Ladder! To us martial artists, the ninety-nine-and-eighty-one steps of the Heavenly Ladder on Heaven-Reaching Peak — if one can climb ten, or even eight steps, and then sit cross-legged to cultivate, the effect surpasses even soaking in the Seven-Colored Lotus Pool!"

Pausing, Gu Yan noticed the glimmer of curiosity in Fang Bai's eyes and realized he was intrigued. With a hidden smile, he added with a long sigh, "Only, the Heaven-Reaching Peak is easy to reach, but the Heavenly Ladder is hard to climb!"

Fang Bai asked, "Why is it so difficult?"

Gu Yan gestured toward the primeval forest ahead. "Senior Fang, shall we walk and talk?"

Fang Bai nodded and strode into the darkly shaded primeval forest alongside Gu Yan and another elder from the Divine Fire Sect.

The dozen or so disciples of the Divine Fire Sect followed closely behind, spiritual artifacts in hand.

Both Gu Yan and the other elder of the Divine Fire Sect were high-rank Innate Experts, while Fang Bai was at the peak of the Innate Realm. With their combined strength, they had no fear of attacks from Innate-level spirit beasts.

However, most of the dozen disciples from the Divine Fire Sect were high-rank or peak Universe-level martial artists. If they failed to remain completely alert during a sudden attack by an Innate-level spirit beast, they might end up in peril.

"The Heavenly Ladder on Heaven-Reaching Peak? No one knows who built it, but it seems to have existed since ancient times..."

Walking alongside Fang Bai, Gu Yan explained, "The Heavenly Ladder consists of a total of ninety-nine and eighty-one steps. With each step one climbs, the pressure and resistance faced grow incrementally stronger. However, at the same time, the Heaven and Earth Origin Energy surrounding the climber grows purer and denser. That said, martial artists whose cultivation hasn't yet reached the Innate Realm cannot even ascend Heaven-Reaching Peak, let alone step onto this miraculous Heavenly Ladder."

Upon hearing this, Fang Bai's interest in the Heavenly Ladder on Heaven-Reaching Peak grew even more intense. He asked, "Elder Gu, what's the highest step you've climbed?"

Gu Yan's old face reddened slightly, and he chuckled bitterly, "Shameful as it is! Back when my cultivation was at the initial stage of the Innate Realm, I managed to reach the twentieth step of the Heavenly Ladder before I couldn't go any further. So, on the twentieth step, I sat cross-legged and cultivated for forty-nine days. When I exited my cultivation state, I had broken through to mid-stage Innate..."

"Forty-nine days, and you elevated one minor realm? Is it really that fast?"

Fang Bai raised his eyebrows, his heart stirred.

If what Gu Yan said was true, then this "Heavenly Ladder" was indeed a rare and extraordinary cultivation treasure. No matter what, he had to check it out on this trip.

"May the heavens strike me down if I speak a single lie!"

Seeing the suspicion on Fang Bai's face, Gu Yan solemnly swore an oath before continuing, "But it's a pity. The Lotus Pool Secret Realm can only be opened once every five years, and for only forty-nine days at a time. After breaking through, I couldn't continue staying there and had to leave."

Fang Bai asked, "And five years later? Did you advance to your current high stage of the Innate Realm at that time?"

"No, no..."

Gu Yan shook his head repeatedly and said, "If I were a prodigy, perhaps I could have leveraged the Heavenly Ladder to advance another minor realm within five years. Unfortunately, my aptitude is mediocre. It ultimately took me four trips up the Heavenly Ladder to reach the fortieth step, where I cultivated for forty-nine days and finally advanced to the high stage of the Innate Realm."

At this point, he pointed to the other elder from the Divine Fire Sect beside him. "My potential has its limits, so my hope of advancing further is slim. This time, I've mainly come along to accompany Elder Liu Che. Among the four elders of our Divine Fire Sect, Elder Liu holds the greatest hope of advancing to the peak of the Innate Realm. He has already attempted the Heavenly Ladder three times and made some progress each time. We hope he can achieve a breakthrough this time."

Fang Bai glanced at Liu Che, sensing that his aura as a martial artist was indeed slightly stronger than Gu Yan's. With sufficient external support, there was indeed a possibility of him advancing to the pinnacle of the Innate Realm.

Additionally, Fang Bai speculated that the Heavenly Ladder must surely have been created by some immensely powerful being from a higher plane. Its placement on Heaven-Reaching Peak might have been intended to provide martial artists of the True Martial Realm with opportunities for advancement.

As the two conversed, their steps were swift and unhesitating, and in no time, they had ventured over a hundred miles deep into the primeval forest.

Along the way, a few spirit beasts with strength comparable to human martial artists at the initial Innate stage crossed their path. But upon sensing the formidable auras of Fang Bai and the others, these beasts fled far away, unwilling to provoke them.

"Elder Gu, has anyone ever reached the highest step of the Heavenly Ladder?"

Fang Bai suddenly asked.

Gu Yan thought it over carefully before responding, "That's hard to say. The Heavenly Ladder is incredibly tall, with each step spanning a hundred zhang. By this calculation, the eighty-one steps of the ladder would total nearly ten thousand zhang in height. On top of that, the ladder is located at the summit of Heaven-Reaching Peak, making its overall altitude even more astonishing. The highest dozen or so steps of the ladder are lost within the clouds, rendering the view of what lies above completely obscured..."

Upon learning that the Heavenly Ladder was so towering, Fang Bai couldn't help but be taken aback. He thought to himself that above ten thousand zhang in the sky, the wind would howl ferociously and the air currents would surge violently — conditions unbearable for ordinary Innate-level experts.

Gu Yan continued, "However, in the past century, it's been said that a few peak Innate-level experts have reached the final dozen or so steps above the clouds. Whether or not they truly reached the summit, though, remains unknown."

Fang Bai asked curiously, "Why is that?"

Gu Yan explained, "Because those peak-level Innate experts never descended after ascending. Many speculated that perhaps the final dozen or so steps above the clouds were too perilous, or that those experts encountered some dire misfortune, resulting in all of their deaths."

Chapter 1390: Cooperation

Fang Bai listened to Gu Yan talking about the Heavenly Ladder, keeping his expression calm on the surface, yet his heart was brimming with excitement.

Back in Spirit Lake City, Fang Bai had used the Soul Capturing Heart Refining Technique to extract information from Zu Hanjiao's mind. He learned about her background, as well as the location where she first arrived in the True Martial Realm—none other than the Heaven-Reaching Mountain range.

At that time, Fang Bai speculated that the Heaven-Reaching Mountain range might contain a teleportation array leading to the Three Thousand Grand Worlds.

Unfortunately, Zu Hanjiao's mind held no specific details about any teleportation arrays, which left Fang Bai feeling somewhat disappointed.

Now, linking together Gu Yan's mention of the Heavenly Ladder with the legends of Innate Experts reaching its top and never returning, Fang Bai believed that the Heavenly Ladder was likely a teleportation array connecting the True Martial Realm to one of the Three Thousand Grand Worlds.

Based on Fang Bai's prior-life understanding of teleportation arrays between realms, the difficulty in climbing the Heavenly Ladder was undoubtedly a test of a martial artist's strength.

Only those whose strength met the recognized threshold of the ladder's realm could reach another plane and continue their cultivation journey.

Gu Yan continued, "The Heavenly Ladder holds far greater allure for Innate Experts than the Seven-Colored Lotus Pool does for Universe-Level martial artists. Therefore, whenever the Lotus Pool Secret Realm opens, major Innate Sects not only send their most talented disciples but also dispatch senior members with potential advancements to compete..."

Before Gu Yan could finish, Fang Bai interrupted with a sneer, his face full of disdain. "The Heaven-Reaching Peak where the Heavenly Ladder resides is located within the Lotus Pool Secret Realm. So, you're saying that the hard-won slots secured by those talented disciples from Innate Sects might ultimately be shared with their higher-ups, am I right?"

As soon as Fang Bai said this, both Gu Yan and Liu Che blushed with guilt.

Gu Yan forced a laugh and responded, "Indeed, that used to be the case. Both Elder Liu and I have benefited from the efforts of sect disciples to enter the Lotus Pool Secret Realm, making it possible for us to ascend the Heavenly Ladder for cultivation. However..."

At that moment, he crossed his hands and struck upward, knocking away an Innate-level Poisonous Spider that had suddenly pounced down from above. Only then did he continue explaining, "However, starting from the last 'Heavenly Talents Ranking,' the major Innate Sects agreed to allocate ten out of the hundred slots for entering the Lotus Pool Secret Realm. These ten slots are now contested by two selected Innate Experts from each sect..."

The nearby Elder Liu—Liu Che—picked up the explanation. "There are dozens of Innate Sects participating in the 'Heavenly Talents Ranking' battles. With each sect sending two Innate Experts, it amounts to one or two hundred Innate Experts competing for just ten slots. The competition is extremely fierce. Those Innate Experts with slightly weaker cultivation levels stand no chance of entering the Lotus Pool Secret Realm and thereby lose the opportunity to ascend the Heavenly Ladder."

Gu Yan continued, "Since the Heavenly Ladder's benefits for Innate Perfection-level experts are limited and considering past tragedies where Innate Perfection-level experts reached the top of the ladder only to vanish without a trace, no Innate Perfection-level experts from the True Martial Realm have attempted to ascend the ladder in recent years. Hence, the experts vying for the ten slots are all below the realm of Innate Perfection."

By now, Fang Bai had a vague understanding of the situation. With a sly smile on his face, he asked, "Elder Gu, this cooperation you mentioned... What exactly does it entail?"

Gu Yan glanced at Elder Liu Che beside him and sighed, "I won't hide it from you, Senior Fang. Elder Liu feels uncertain about whether he can secure one of the ten slots to enter the Lotus Pool Secret Realm. As for me, I had the honor of witnessing Senior Fang's strength back in the Eternal Death Zone. If Senior Fang would be willing to use the title of Divine Fire Sect Elder to fight for slots for Elder Liu and yourself, that would be ideal."

Gu Yan was unaware that Fang Bai was now an Innate Perfection-level expert.

When Gu Yan had encountered Fang Bai in the Eternal Death Zone, Fang Bai had not yet reached the realm of Innate Perfection but had demonstrated the strength to challenge Innate Perfection-level experts. Gu Yan believed that if Fang Bai fought under the banner of the Divine Fire Sect, securing two slots to enter the Lotus Pool Secret Realm would be a simple feat.

Fang Bai raised an eyebrow and asked curiously, "So does this mean each Innate Sect gets two chances to fight? And it can even be the same person competing both times?"

Gu Yan nodded. "Exactly."

Fang Bai did not reveal that he was now an Innate Perfection-level expert. Instead, he grinned and asked, "If I team up with the Divine Fire Sect, what benefits would I gain?"

Gu Yan's spirits lifted as he replied, "The Lotus Pool Secret Realm has long been controlled by Innate Sects of the True Limitless Realm. Whenever it opens, only disciples from Innate Sects are allowed to enter. Loose cultivators like Senior Fang are typically barred from access. If you were to force your way in, you'd face the combined might of dozens of Innate Sects..."

Fang Bai frowned slightly, understanding that dozens of Innate Sects equated to hundreds of Innate Experts. If they worked together against him, that level of power was truly beyond his ability to resist.

"So, I must join as an Elder of some sect in order to enter the Lotus Pool Secret Realm, correct?"

Fang Bai asked with a hint of resignation.

Gu Yan nodded and, worried that Fang Bai might refuse out of pride, hurriedly added, "If Senior Fang can enter the Lotus Pool Secret Realm alongside Elder Liu, the two of you can join forces to withstand the Heavenly Ladder's pressure and resistance, climb higher steps, and achieve better cultivation results."

"Alright, I accept," Fang Bai said promptly.

Gu Yan's words had barely fallen before Fang Bai agreed to the cooperative arrangement.

Teaming up with the Divine Fire Sect meant eliminating many potential conflicts with other Innate Sects. Why not take advantage of such an opportunity?

Gu Yan had not expected Fang Bai to agree so readily. After a brief pause, he exchanged a look with Liu Che. Both Divine Fire Sect elders displayed hints of joy in their eyes.

Gu Yan had previously communicated with Liu Che via voice transmission, mentioning that Fang Bai's strength rivaled that of their Sect Master. Liu Che trusted Gu Yan's words, as the two were not only elders from the same sect but also longstanding confidants. He knew Gu Yan wouldn't joke about such matters.

With a powerhouse like Fang Bai assisting them, securing two slots to enter the Lotus Pool Secret Realm seemed almost guaranteed. Once Liu Che ascended the Heavenly Ladder, there was a chance he could advance further and become an Innate Perfection-level expert, potentially bringing a profound boost to the Divine Fire Sect's overall strength.

Fang Bai's agreement to cooperate brought joy to everyone involved, lifting the spirits of Fang Bai, Gu Yan, and Liu Che alike. Their pace quickened as they moved through the primal forest, eager to reach the outskirts of the Lotus Pool Secret Realm.

Guided by Gu Yan and Liu Che, who were well-acquainted with the terrain, they deftly avoided the areas most densely populated by spirit beasts and rapidly advanced toward the Heaven-Reaching Mountain range.

Even so, as they passed through the depths of the primal forest, they still encountered numerous attacks from Innate-level spirit beasts.

It was during these encounters that Fang Bai displayed combat prowess that left the Divine Fire Sect disciples utterly astonished.

Even Gu Yan and Liu Che, two seasoned elders of the Divine Fire Sect, were forced to summon their Spiritual Artifacts and fight with full force against the relentless attacks of Innate-level spirit beasts.

Yet Fang Bai relied solely on his fists and feet, charging into a throng of Innate-level spirit beasts, moving freely and unimpeded.

Every punch, every kick resulted in the demise of an Innate-level spirit beast.