

Doctor 931

Chapter 931: Latent Threat

"Heaven Level beginner... Innate Water Spirit Root..."

One of the four Elders suddenly stood up, muttering to himself, his voice shaking with barely suppressed excitement.

"Good! Our Bitao Martial Academy finally has another Innate Spiritual Root!"

"Only seventeen years old and already a Heaven Level Martial Artist, even surpassing our External Courtyard disciple Gao Shuxian by a good margin!"

"Haha, may the Ancestor bless us! The rise of Bitao Martial Academy is hopeful!"

The other three Elders were also brimming with excitement, laughing and looking at each other, and when they looked at Liu Qingqing, it was as if they were gazing upon a priceless treasure.

"I didn't have much hope for this round of disciple recruitment, but to think, such a delightful surprise awaited us! This is an auspicious sign! I have a feeling that there may be more surprises in store for us!"

One Elder spoke with eyebrows dancing with delight.

"This girl has an Innate Water Spirit Root; once she has been honed in the Academy for some time, she will become my disciple!"

The only female Elder among the four said with a chuckle, her expression full of joy.

Upon hearing her words, the other three Elders, though visibly displeased, found themselves unable to argue with the female Elder.

Since that female Elder was also a cultivator of Water System Techniques, it would be most appropriate for her to pass on the Martial Arts Techniques to Liu Qingqing in the future.

Liu Qingqing's emergence had captured the attention of everyone present, yet just at that moment, a female disciple from the External Courtyard of Bitao Martial Academy, responsible for maintaining order on the western side of the square, glared at Liu Qingqing with fury in her eyes, her teeth itching with hatred.

This External Courtyard female disciple of Bitao Martial Academy was dressed in a red dress, in her early twenties, and quite beautiful—the same Gao Shuxian whom Fang Bai and his friends had encountered in the Dashan Mountains outside Liuhu Village.

Gao Shuxian was also considered a favored daughter of heaven within the Bitao Martial Academy, with many admirers. However, she was arrogant and proud due to her status, and there were also many who disliked her.

Not long ago, Gao Shuxian went on a training expedition with several Bitao Martial Academy disciples. In the Dashan range outside Liuhu Village, they clashed with Fang Bai and the others. Fang Bai gave her a harsh lesson, leaving her in a sorry state and humiliated in front of her peers, and thus she held deep hatred for Fang Bai and his companions.

In fact, Gao Shuxian had already noticed Liu Liehu when he stepped up for the test, and right after she saw Liu Qingqing and Fang Bai waiting below the stage.

Gao Shuxian was a woman with a narrow heart and an eye for revenge. Upon discovering Fang Bai and his two companions, her rage burned fiercely, and she would have loved nothing more than to rush over and seek retribution. She was, however, aware that acting on impulse at such an event would displease the Elders, so she managed to control herself.

When it was Liu Qingqing's turn to undergo the test, her astonishing performance drew the attention of all the Martial Artists present, and even the four Elders showed her considerable favor. This made Gao Shuxian extremely jealous.

Gao Shuxian was till now the only disciple with an Innate Spiritual Root in the entire Bitao Martial Academy apart from the head of the Academy. The Academy thus placed great importance on her, investing an immense amount of Cultivation Resources in her and showering her with affection.

Yet the appearance of Liu Qingqing made her feel an imminent threat.

Liu Qingqing was also endowed with an Innate Spiritual Root and had already attained a level of strength comparable to hers. However, Liu Qingqing's younger age was a clear advantage over her.

Gao Shuxian could even imagine that once Liu Qingqing entered the Bitao Martial Academy, she would become the new darling of the Academy's higher-ups. If her strength were to surpass her own in the future, then she would be thoroughly crushed by Liu Qingqing.

"This woman poses too great a threat to me; she must die! Humph! Once she's in the Bitao Martial Academy, I have a hundred ways to kill her!"

Gao Shuxian looked at Liu Qingqing hatefully, a trace of murderous intent flickering in her eyes.

As murderous intent surged in her heart, Fang Bai, standing in the square, glanced over in her direction, intentionally or otherwise, and a cold smile graced his lips.

Liu Qingqing, having completed her test, walked to the side and stood with her brother, Liu Liehu. The siblings exchanged a smile, knowing that becoming disciples of the Bitao Martial Academy was nearly a certainty, and their hearts were filled with endless joy.

They turned their gaze to Fang Bai, full of anticipation for his performance.

The siblings had known Fang Bai for a long time but had never been able to grasp just how strong he really was, only aware that he was shrouded in mystery and seemed to be unfazed by any difficulty.

Before the Ruyi Stone, however, no martial artist's cultivation level could escape exposure, and the siblings were eager to take this chance to see Fang Bai's true strength.

In the hearts of the brother and sister, there was no question of Fang Bai becoming a disciple of the Bitao Martial Academy; the key was the realm of his cultivation level when he joined.

Based on the strength Fang Bai had shown before, the siblings felt that his cultivation level was at least that of the middle stage of the Heaven Level realm.

If the result of the Ruyi Stone test reflected this, then upon entering the Bitao Martial Academy, Fang Bai could immediately become a disciple of the Inner Court.

At this thought, Liu Liehu couldn't help feeling a bit downhearted.

Liu Liehu's cultivation level was at Earth Level Perfection, and upon entering the Bitao Martial Academy, he could only be a menial servant disciple, unable to cultivate in the External Courtyard with his sister Liu Qingqing, let alone cultivate with Fang Bai in the Inner Court.

However, what consoled Liu Liehu was that the martial arts techniques Fang Bai had taught him before were exquisite. According to Fang Bai, as long as he persisted in his cultivation, he would soon advance to the Heaven Level realm and become a disciple of the External Courtyard, possibly joining his sister Liu Qingqing.

Fang Bai was in the same queue as Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu. After Liu Qingqing's test, it was his turn next.

With a smile on his lips, he walked leisurely to the Ruyi Stone, extended his right palm, and gently placed it upon the stone.

"This man is even more loathsome than Liu Qingqing; he must also die!"

From a distance, Gao Shuxian, upon seeing Fang Bai, felt her hatred intensify and the murderous look in her eyes grow thicker.

Gao Shuxian knew she was not as powerful as Fang Bai, but within the Bitao Martial Academy were many who admired her, including some disciples stronger than herself.

Confidently, Gao Shuxian believed that, with a single call from her, many academy disciples would risk their lives for her, presenting numerous opportunities to kill Fang Bai.

Even though the Bitao Martial Academy strictly forbids disciples from killing one another, every year the academy organizes disciples to go on external cultivation experiences, and casualties are a common occurrence during these times. Then, by coordinating with some disciples to kill Fang Bai without anyone noticing, who would know?

While Gao Shuxian was proudly entertaining these thoughts, she was suddenly interrupted by a chorus of gasps rising from the square.

She focused her gaze and realized that those gasps were due to Fang Bai.

Fang Bai's test results had come out, and Gao Shuxian glanced at the Ruyi Stone before him, standing frozen in shock, her complexion turning extremely ugly.

"Fang Bai, twenty years old, middle stage Heaven Level, Dual Attribute Innate Spiritual Root of Fire and Wood!"

When the disciple from the Inner Court standing beside the Ruyi Stone in front of Fang Bai announced the test results, the gasps from the crowd grew louder, and all eyes fell upon Fang Bai.

The four elders from the Bitao Martial Academy also rose from their stone chairs, their expressions filled with ecstasy.

Chapter 932: If You Exist, I Do Not; If I Exist, You Do Not!

Twenty years old, Heaven Level middle rank, dual attribute Innate Spiritual Root of fire and wood...

When Fang Bai's test results came out, the Martial Artists present were shocked.

In the nearly ten thousand years of Bitao Martial Academy's history, Martial Artists with Innate Spiritual Roots were rare, and those with Dual Attribute Innate Spiritual Roots were even more exceptional.

As for a Martial Artist like Fang Bai who possessed Dual Attribute Innate Spiritual Roots and reached Heaven Level middle rank in his early twenties, one could say he was truly unique.

Such aptitude, let alone Bitao Martial Academy, even in the entire True Martial Realm, would be seen as a monstrous talent, and if cultivated with effort, his achievements on the Martial Dao would be incalculable.

This was also the reason why the four Elders of Bitao Martial Academy were overjoyed.

One of the Elders, with a ruddy complexion and a youthful appearance despite his white hair, was so excited that he shed tears, murmuring, "We just had someone with an Innate Water Spirit Root, and now there's another with fire and wood Dual Attribute Innate Spiritual Roots. This is a harbinger of prosperity for our Bitao Martial Academy! Our founding master has truly shown his spirit!"

The other two male Elders looked at Fang Bai as if they saw a peerless treasure, rubbing their hands together and itching to take action, wishing they could rush forward and claim him for themselves.

"This young man has fire and wood Innate Spiritual Roots; if he's carefully nurtured, perhaps he could become the first Alchemist in the history of our Bitao Martial Academy!"

exclaimed the only female Elder among the four, her voice filled with excitement.

"With an Alchemist in our Bitao Martial Academy, we'll no longer have to pay dearly for inviting other Alchemists to concoct Elixirs for us!"

"That's right! Every time we invite an Alchemist to concoct Elixirs, we not only have to share half of the Elixirs with the Alchemist but also pay a certain amount of Essence Stones as an alchemy fee. How is that different from plundering Cultivation Resources?"

"If our Bitao Martial Academy can also cultivate an Alchemist, the disciples' Cultivation will no longer be subject to others, and it will also save a lot of Cultivation Resources! Perhaps in the future, Martial Artists will even come seeking us!"

...

The four Elders of Bitao Martial Academy, each taking turns speaking, couldn't hide their excitement.

Gao Shuxian, observing the Elders' reactions from a distance, felt even more envious of Fang Bai.

In Gao Shuxian's view, the better Fang Bai performed, the greater the threat to her future, and with the enmity already between them, they were destined to be rivals in Bitao Martial Academy, with no chance for peaceful coexistence.

Gao Shuxian had not expected that the two opponents she had made during her adventures would become her Sect mates, one utterly surpassing her in strength and talent, and the other showing great potential to overtake her as well.

Previously, Gao Shuxian had been revered in Bitao Martial Academy, praised by the upper levels and admired by her fellow disciples. She had diligently practiced Cultivation and became the youngest Heaven Level Martial Artist in the history of the academy.

Now, with Liu Qingqing able to contend with her for glory and Fang Bai completely overshadowing her brilliance, her status in the academy was undoubtedly diminished, and the Cultivation Resources she received would also decrease.

This was something she did not wish to see.

Actually, for a brief moment earlier, Gao Shuxian felt a slight regret, but this fleeting feeling was quickly replaced by jealousy and hatred.

"From now on, in this Bitao Martial Academy, there will be no place for you if I am here, and no place for me if you are here!"

Gao Shuxian's expression was cold, her eyes narrowed slightly, and as her gaze swept over Fang Bai and Liu Qingqing, the corner of her mouth twitched and a more intense murderous intent brewed in her chest.

At this moment, nearly everyone's attention was focused on Liu Qingqing and Fang Bai, with no one noticing Gao Shuxian's unusual expression.

After Fang Bai completed his test, he walked over to Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu with a smile. He was indifferent to the sounds of amazement that rose around the square and the myriad gazes cast his way.

"Such a young man possesses a god-given talent, yet he is neither arrogant nor impetuous, truly rare!"

Fang Bai's demeanor, observed by the four Elders of Bitao Martial Academy, made them think even more highly of him.

"Brother Fang, congratulations!"

Liu Qingqing's eyes brimmed with a smile, her bright and beautiful eyes fixed on Fang Bai beside her, her face full of delight.

"Brother Fang, with your strength, you could directly become a disciple of the Martial Academy's Inner Court!"

Liu Liehu said with a look of envy on his face.

"You all did well, too!"

Fang Bai said with a slight smile.

"Compared to you all, I am far behind!"

Liu Liehu scratched his head, yet there was no sign of discouragement on his face. Clenching his fist, he encouraged himself, "But it doesn't matter. Brother Fang once said that Martial Artists often make faster progress in adversity. If the treatment for menial servants is poor, I'll take it as a kind of adversity to motivate myself. I believe it won't be long before I can transfer from a menial servant disciple to an External Courtyard disciple."

Fang Bai patted his shoulder and said earnestly, "I believe in you!"

"I believe in you, too!" Liu Qingqing added.

An entire day passed before the strength testing was finally over.

Out of the thousands of Martial Artists who took part in the test, only one hundred stood out and became official disciples of the Bitao Martial Academy.

The other Martial Artists who were eliminated only had the option to wait and try again after three years.

Luckily, in the True Martial Realm, Martial Artists have long lifespans, and three years can pass by in the blink of an eye.

Those who were eliminated left with dim expressions and heads hung low.

The Martial Artists who became disciples of the Bitao Martial Academy, however, were overjoyed, some even to the point of tears.

That evening, the one hundred new disciples temporarily stayed in the "Reception Residence," which the Bitao Martial Academy used to accommodate guests.

The next morning, guided by four Elders, the one hundred new disciples arrived at the Lingtian Peak of the Bitao Martial Academy, and in the Lingtian Hall, they met with Ren Jingbo, the head of the Bitao Martial Academy.

Ren Jingbo appeared to be a middle-aged man, but in reality, he was over a hundred years old; such is the benefit of reaching a certain realm in their Cultivation Levels.

Ren Jingbo's current Cultivation Level was at Desolate Level Perfection, which is precisely why the Bitao Martial Academy was ranked as a fourth-grade Sect.

Having a Martial Artist with Cultivation Level of Desolate Level Perfection is the "standard" for belonging to a fourth-grade Sect.

Although a fourth-grade Sect is the lowest grade in the True Martial Realm, it has many advantages over those insignificant small Sects.

For example, a fourth-grade Sect can control at least one country or an area with a radius of a thousand miles. Within this range, any Cultivation Resources belong to that fourth-grade Sect.

This is a default rule in the True Martial Realm.

Of course, in a world where the strong prey on the weak, and power is supreme, a fourth-grade Sect must seek the protection of a more powerful Sect to exist securely.

Ever since the foundation of the Bitao Martial Academy, it has paid a certain amount of Cultivation Resources every year to a third-grade Sect thousands of miles away; these resources essentially acting as "protection money."

That third-grade Sect, in turn, also pays "protection money" to some second-grade Sect.

Above the second-grade Sects, there are even more powerful first-grade Sects keeping them in check.

These large and small Sects may seem independent, but they all have some connections with each other.

Chapter 933: Martial Academy Dean

Currently, Bitao Martial Academy only has the Dean, Ren Jingbo, with the power of Desolate Level Perfection, which is the weakest the academy has been in hundreds of years.

Once Ren Jingbo falls in the future, and if Bitao Martial Academy fails to cultivate a successor of the same Desolate Level Perfection realm, then Bitao Martial Academy will be stripped of its title as a fourth-rank Sect, and other Sects will be able to meddle with the Cultivation Resources within their territory at will.

If some of the smaller Sects manage to cultivate Martial Artists with the power of Desolate Level Perfection, they will overthrow Bitao Martial Academy and become the new rulers of this area spanning a thousand miles.

This scenario is the last thing Bitao Martial Academy wants to see happen.

Because once they lose access to Cultivation Resources, the disciples of Bitao Martial Academy will face the dilemma of 'a skillful woman can't cook without rice,' affecting their cultivation, and preventing the improvement of the disciples' strength.

This vicious cycle will doom Bitao Martial Academy to an inevitable decline, and rising again will be incredibly difficult.

Therefore, with each new recruitment of disciples, Ren Jingbo, as the Dean, pays more attention than anyone else.

In Ren Jingbo's eyes, out of the nearly ten thousand disciples currently at Bitao Martial Academy, only Gao Shuxian has the potential to advance to the realm of Desolate Level Perfection, which somewhat worries him.

One must understand that a Martial Artist faces various risks and numerous challenges in the process of growth. A single misstep could lead to their downfall.

If anything were to happen to Gao Shuxian, Bitao Martial Academy would be left without a successor, which would be a massive blow to Ren Jingbo and the entire Bitao Martial Academy.

If Bitao Martial Academy had two or more geniuses like Gao Shuxian, Ren Jingbo would be much more at ease.

Yesterday, when two Innate Spirit Root Martial Artists appeared among the one hundred disciples recruited by Bitao Martial Academy, Ren Jingbo couldn't help but burst into loud laughter, dancing with excitement, and immediately went to the Grandmaster Hall at the back mountain to light incense and pray.

What excited Ren Jingbo the most was that among those two recruited Innate Spirit Root Martial Artists, one possessed a Dual Attribute Innate Spiritual Root of fire and wood, an unprecedented Martial Dao Genius since the founding of Bitao Martial Academy tens of thousands of years ago.

Moreover, a Martial Artist with a Dual Attribute Innate Spiritual Root of fire and wood is also the basic requirement for becoming an Alchemist. If Bitao Martial Academy truly cultivates an Alchemist, there will be a steady supply of elixirs for the disciples' cultivation in the future, marking the start of the academy's rise.

With excitement, Ren Jingbo arrived at Lingtian Hall early today, ready to meet the one hundred newly admitted disciples of the Martial Academy.

Under the guidance of four Elders, the one hundred new disciples led by Fang Bai and Qingqing filed into Lingtian Hall.

The one hundred new Martial Academy disciples bowed to Ren Jingbo, who sat high on a stone chair, as a sign of respect to the Dean.

"You are Fang Bai?"

After the hundred new disciples had finished their bows, Ren Jingbo's gaze landed on Fang Bai. He examined him carefully for a moment and found that he truly was a Mid Heaven Level Martial Artist, and from the Martial Artist Aura on him, he could sense the fluctuations of both wood and fire Essence Energy, which greatly reassured him.

"Responding to the Dean, I... I am indeed Fang Bai!"

Fang Bai's real strength was equivalent to that of a Vast Level Perfection expert in the True Martial Realm, capable of challenging even Cosmic Level experts, which made him far more powerful than the current Dean of Bitao Martial Academy, who only had the strength of Desolate Level Perfection.

So when Fang Bai bowed to Ren Jingbo and respectfully called himself a disciple, he couldn't help but feel the situation was somewhat absurd. In this world where strength was paramount, it should be Ren Jingbo addressing him as a senior.

However, Fang Bai, who had endured tens of thousands of years of arduous cultivation in his previous life and was now reborn through possession, had an exceptionally strong mindset, and apart from feeling slightly awkward about it, he didn't really take it to heart.

Fang Bai was open-minded and cheerful, provided his bottom line and pride were not provoked, all could be well discussed.

Moreover, Fang Bai entered Bitao Martial Academy with a purpose this time, and wouldn't quibble over such matters of address.

"Good! Very good! Fang Bai, you are excellent! Fire and Wood Dual Attribute Innate Spiritual Roots... you really have given me an enormous surprise!"

Ren Jingbo clapped Fang Bai's shoulders vigorously with both hands, his excitement causing his beard to curl upwards.

Facing Ren Jingbo's somewhat excessive enthusiasm, Fang Bai felt quite helpless, but it was not appropriate to say anything, so he could only stand there with a smile on his face.

His attitude, light as the wind and calm as the clouds, unaffected by honor or disgrace, made Ren Jingbo hold him in even higher regard.

"After entering the Martial Academy, you must be self-disciplined, diligently cultivate, and must not slacken in the slightest, nor become arrogant and complacent due to talent..."

Ren Jingbo first praised Fang Bai with spirited compliments, then earnestly encouraged him, before finally saying, "Without rules, there will be no standards. Your current cultivation level is at the mid-stage of Heaven Level, so begin as an Inner Court disciple! Your treatment will be the same as other Inner Court disciples too!"

Worried that Fang Bai might feel disappointed, he added, "You'll first temper yourself in the Inner Court, and as your cultivation level advances, your status and treatment will naturally rise with it! Fang Bai, do you understand my good intentions?"

Fang Bai smiled faintly and nodded to show his understanding.

Ren Jingbo breathed a sigh of relief, his heart filled with gratification.

Next, Ren Jingbo praised and encouraged Liu Qingqing with the same attitude, clearly very satisfied with her as well, for Liu Qingqing too was a possessor of an Innate Spiritual Root, destined to become a mainstay of Bitao Martial Academy in the future.

Ren Jingbo's enthusiasm seemed to be specifically for Fang Bai and Liu Qingqing only; for the other ninety-eight new martial academy disciples, he became serious, delivering a stern lecture from start to finish. It was only at the very end that he seemed to suddenly remember to give a few words of encouragement to those dozens of new disciples.

"Liu Qingqing will enter the External Courtyard, with treatment same as the other External Courtyard disciples!"

"Liu Liehu will be a menial servant disciple, with treatment same as the other menial servant disciples!"

"Zhou Tong will be a menial servant disciple, with treatment same as the other menial servant disciples!"

"Yan Qi..."

The four Elders took turns announcing the assignments and treatment of the one hundred new martial academy disciples, while Dean Ren Jingbo, with a face full of satisfaction, returned to his high seat in Lingtian Hall.

He looked down on the one hundred new martial academy disciples in the grand hall, his mouth too happy to close.

In this round of disciple recruitment, aside from the monstrously talented Fang Bai and Liu Qingqing, the overall qualifications of the other ninety-eight martial artists were also better than before, so how could Ren Jingbo not be pleased?

Soon, all one hundred new martial academy disciples had their assignments, with the vast majority starting as menial servant disciples, just like Liu Liehu.

Liu Qingqing and Fang Bai entered the External Courtyard and Inner Court, respectively, becoming the figures the menial servant disciples looked up to.

After leaving Lingtian Hall, Fang Bai was led by an older Inner Court disciple to the area where Inner Court disciples usually lived and cultivated.

Chapter 934: Do You Recognize Gao Shuxian?

The elder Inner Court disciple named Hou Ziping appeared to be around forty years old, with a pointed chin and monkey-like cheeks, a slender frame, and a green robe that would have looked elegant and free-spirited on someone else, but on him, it seemed slightly misfitting—as if a monkey had donned human clothes, which looked rather comical.

Hou Ziping seemed like an honest person and apparently was not faring well in the Inner Court. Some of the other Inner Court disciples looked at him with disdain, as if they held him in contempt.

Even some of the newer Inner Court disciples who had joined after him showed no respect at all, not even bothering to call him 'Senior Brother.'

A few Inner Court disciples who were more senior than Hou Ziping laughed and called him "monkey" with obvious insult in their tone.

However, Hou Ziping seemed to have become accustomed to this and was not angry; instead, he greeted everyone with a smile and was exceedingly polite.

Yet Fang Bai caught a glimpse of silence and helplessness deep within Hou Ziping's eyes.

There were several hundred Inner Court disciples at the Bitao Martial Academy, and their living and cultivation areas were in a mountain area that spanned dozens of miles. There, hundreds of ancient-looking houses and courtyards had been built for the disciples to live in.

Fang Bai was quite satisfied with the living environment here. There were mountains and rivers, flowers and trees, a quiet and tranquil atmosphere, and the Heaven and Earth Origin Energy was denser than in other places.

What made Fang Bai even more delighted was that there were many Spiritual Medicines planted nearby, some of which had been growing for hundreds of years. If he wanted to practice alchemy in the future, he wouldn't be short of resources.

Fang Bai asked Hou Ziping and learned that a large portion of these Spiritual Medicines would eventually be harvested, with some delivered to a certain third-grade Sect as "protection fees" and others given to a certain Alchemist to request the crafting of Elixirs.

The Elixirs crafted would naturally be distributed among Bitao Martial Academy disciples for their cultivation.

"Junior Brother Fang, this will be your residence from now on."

Hou Ziping brought Fang Bai to a small courtyard, his face wearing a flattering smile as he introduced: "Only Inner Court disciples with higher qualifications and potential for advancement on the Martial Dao are entitled to live in houses with courtyards like this. Junior Brother Fang, having just joined the Bitao Martial Academy and being allocated such a residence, clearly shows how much the higher-ups of the Academy value you!"

After a pause, he continued, "Junior Brother Fang has a Dual Attribute Innate Spiritual Root, which is unprecedented in the history of our Academy. Your future is boundless. Living here, I feel, is still too modest for Junior Brother Fang!"

Fang Bai smiled indifferently, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

"Junior Brother Fang, please rest for now; I won't disturb you any further!"

After looking at the room together and wanting to chat with Fang Bai to establish a rapport, Hou Ziping was mindful not to annoy him and made as if to leave.

Fang Bai smiled and said, "Senior Brother Hou, if you have no urgent matters, feel free to stay a while longer. Being new here, I would actually like to learn more about the Martial Academy from Senior Brother Hou!"

Hou Ziping was overjoyed and nodded, "Good! Then I'll stay a little longer and keep Junior Brother Fang company for a chat!"

The two sat down at the stone table in the small courtyard. Fang Bai asked with a smile, "Senior Brother Hou, how many years have you been at the Bitao Martial Academy?"

After thinking for a bit, Hou Ziping replied, "A full twenty years."

His expression revealed a hint of nostalgia, and with a ton of emotions, he said, "Twenty years ago, I stood out among tens of thousands of martial artists and became a menial servant disciple at Bitao Martial Academy. Back then, I was full of pride and ambition, believing that I could achieve great success in the Martial Dao and would enter the External Courtyard, the Inner Court, and even become a Core Disciple, a Direct Disciple..."

He reached this point, let out a light sigh, and said with a wry smile, "Although my dreams were beautiful, the reality dealt me a merciless blow. During the twenty years at the Martial Academy, my progress was quite noticeable at first. I spent just three years going from a menial servant disciple to an External Courtyard disciple, and then another five years to become an Inner Court disciple. However..."

His expression darkened, and his face shifted from frustration to pain as he continued, "However, in the twelve years since entering the Inner Court, no matter how hard I tried, my Cultivation Level remained stagnant, without the slightest advance. Consequently, the higher-ups of the academy gave up on me, and the fellow disciples in the Inner Court began to scorn and mock me... As much as I was troubled, what could I do? In this world, if you're strong, you naturally earn people's respect; if you're weak, you get stepped on by others."

Once he started, he couldn't seem to stop himself, unloading his woes onto Fang Bai.

Fang Bai consoled, "Senior Brother Hou is only forty years old this year, which is still very young for us martial artists, so there's no need to belittle yourself."

Hou Ziping sighed, "I'm not belittling myself. The bitter Cultivation of these twelve years has brought no return that I deserve, leaving me disheartened and utterly hopeless. Perhaps I'm just of mediocre talent, and this is as far as I go on the path of the Martial Dao!"

Fang Bai stated firmly, "The path of the Martial Dao does not solely rely on arduous cultivation; it also requires certain opportunities. Perhaps Senior Brother Hou's advancement is just awaiting the right moment!"

Hou Ziping replied with a bitter smile, "Junior Brother Fang, you think just like I used to. These past years, I've also kept deluding myself with 'the opportunity has not yet come.'"

Fang Bai said, "I believe Senior Brother Hou will definitely become a core disciple of the Martial Academy."

In Bitao Martial Academy, above an Inner Court disciple, is the Core Disciple, and the Cultivation Level of a Core Disciple is at the High Rank of Heaven Level.

That is to say, only when an Inner Court disciple's Cultivation Level reaches the High Rank of Heaven Level, can they be promoted to the eagerly sought-after position of Core Disciple.

Ever since Hou Ziping entered the Inner Court twelve years ago, his Cultivation Level has been hovering at the Middle Rank of Heaven Level without progressing to the High Rank. Therefore, he has been unable to become the Core Disciple that every Inner Court disciple dreams of becoming.

Hou Ziping had already lost hope for himself, but seeing Fang Bai's full confidence in him, he felt somewhat grateful and said, "Junior Brother Fang, thank you for your kind words!"

Fang Bai continued to inquire about various matters concerning Bitao Martial Academy. With twenty years of experience there, Hou Ziping was extremely familiar with everything about the academy and spoke candidly to Fang Bai without hiding anything.

Although Fang Bai was a cultivator of unparalleled talent with a promising future, he showed enough respect to his senior brother Hou Ziping, not once looking down on him for his mediocrity, which greatly increased Hou Ziping's fondness for him, giving Hou a feeling of having met a kindred spirit.

"Since I've got nothing better to do, I might as well accompany Junior Brother Fang for a walk around Bitao Martial Academy."

Hou Ziping had Fang Bai dress in the attire of an Inner Court disciple of Bitao Martial Academy, and then they walked shoulder to shoulder out of the yard, slowly making their way along a mountain path.

"Senior Brother Hou, do you know an External Courtyard disciple named Gao Shuxian?"

When they reached a secluded area, Fang Bai suddenly asked.

Upon hearing the name "Gao Shuxian," Hou Ziping's face showed a subtle change, a flash of hatred appearing and quickly fading in his eyes. Then, he looked at Fang Bai with a wary expression and asked, "How does Junior Brother Fang know Gao Shuxian?"

Chapter 935: Junior Brother Fang, Thank You!

Hou Ziping's eyes revealed a hint of hatred, which Fang Bai keenly captured, realizing there must be some grudge between Hou Ziping and Gao Shuxian.

Fang Bai said earnestly, "To be honest with Senior Brother Hou, I had a falling out with Gao Shuxian before entering Bitao Martial Academy. I want to know more about her, to better understand both her and myself... If it's inconvenient for Senior Brother Hou to speak of it, then forget I asked. I'll inquire with someone else."

Upon hearing what Fang Bai said, Hou Ziping let out a sigh of relief and spoke, "I thought Junior Brother Fang was friends with that woman Gao Shuxian, but it turns out she's an enemy of yours too."

No longer concealing his hatred towards Gao Shuxian, he said angrily, "That woman Gao Shuxian is arrogant and haughty because of her talents; she looks down on anyone in Bitao Martial Academy weaker than herself and fawns over those stronger than her. Moreover, she is narrow-minded and malicious. Anyone who crosses her, she'll find ways to strike back at them. There are no small number of disciples within Bitao Martial Academy who have suffered at her hands."

"It seems Senior Brother Hou has also suffered at her hands!"

Fang Bai said with a slight smile.

"It's more than just suffering; I was nearly killed by that woman!"

Hou Ziping suddenly punched out, breaking a tree as thick as a bowl at the side of the mountain path, seemingly venting the anger in his heart.

Fang Bai asked, "Gao Shuxian is a disciple of the External Courtyard, and her strength is only at the beginner's level of Heaven Level; how could she harm you, Senior Brother Hou?"

Hou Ziping said, "I originally didn't have much to do with Gao Shuxian. During a training period, we happened to meet, and Gao Shuxian, knowing I was a disciple of the Inner Court, attempted to seduce me with her charms..."

His face turned red as he paused to take a deep breath and then continued, "Gao Shuxian is quite beautiful and is a disciple whom the Martial Academy's higher-ups focus on cultivating. Many male disciples within the academy... including myself, were quite fond of her. After interacting with Gao Shuxian for a while, I was so bewitched by her that I foolishly agreed to a demand she made..."

"Gao Shuxian had a dispute with a disciple from the External Courtyard and asked me to teach him a lesson, promising to repay me with her body after the fact. My head was hot and I found that disciple from the External Courtyard, giving him a severe beating. But what I didn't expect was that after I left, that disciple from the External Courtyard mysteriously died..."

He spoke with a deep sense of self-reproach, sighing lengthily before continuing, "I found out later from Gao Shuxian herself that after I injured the disciple from the External Courtyard, and his strength greatly diminished, she killed him while lurking in the shadows. She then threw his body into the mountains where it was devoured by Spirit Beasts. When I learned of this, enraged beyond measure, I gave her a severe slap."

"Because of that slap, Gao Shuxian harbored a grudge against me. She went to the Martial Academy's director and framed me, claiming I was the one who killed that disciple from the External Courtyard. Fortunately, I had left immediately after injuring the disciple to go on a training expedition with several fellow disciples, so I had no opportunity to commit the murder, and thus was able to clear myself of suspicion."

"At that time, I reported to the Martial Academy's director that Gao Shuxian was the real murderer, but she managed to bring along a group of fellow disciples to prove her innocence. Those fellow disciples, whatever enchantments Gao Shuxian used on them, all spoke out in her defense, resulting in her walking away scot-free, while I was reprimanded and punished for falsely accusing a fellow disciple."

"After that incident, Gao Shuxian arrogantly came to me, mocking and sarcastically threatening me to stay in line, or I'd end up like the deceased disciple from the External Courtyard. I knew she meant what she said and could do it too, so for the sake of my own life, I had no choice but to shrink back..."

"Ha, to think a disciple of the Inner Sect is actually afraid of a disciple from the External Courtyard—it's laughable when said out loud! Junior Brother Fang, don't you think I'm spineless?"

As Hou Ziping spoke, he continuously observed Fang Bai's expression, having braced himself for contempt or disdain from Fang Bai, ready to endure Fang Bai's ridicule. However, Fang Bai simply shook his head indifferently and said, "When you're not as strong as your opponent, choosing to play it safe is the right thing to do. If you had tried to be brave back then, you might have lost your life."

"Junior Brother Fang, thank you!"

Hou Ziping's eyes were somewhat moist as he gratefully said, "Even though I know you're comforting me, I still feel very happy!"

Soon after, he began to worry for Fang Bai, frowning as he said, "That woman Gao Shuxian is very cunning and has a wide network of connections within the Martial Academy. Now that you've made an enemy of her, you must be very careful of her in the future!"

Fang Bai dismissed the concern, "When the soldiers arrive, block them, when the water comes, cover it with earth. If Gao Shuxian doesn't come looking for me, so be it, but if she dares to come, I will certainly make her regret it!"

Hou Ziping thought Fang Bai was like a newborn calf not fearing the tiger, unaware of the extent of Gao Shuxian's power behind her. He hurriedly advised, "Junior Brother Fang must not underestimate Gao Shuxian! Even though she isn't as strong as you, she has many admirers and supporters in the Martial Academy, including menial servant disciples, External Courtyard disciples, Inner Court disciples, and even Core Disciples."

Fang Bai knew that the Core Disciples of the Bitao Martial Academy were merely at the Heaven Level High Rank realm, and he chuckled dismissively.

As the two of them walked and talked, they saw disciples of the Inner Court ahead, so they stopped discussing Gao Shuxian to prevent eavesdropping.

Hou Ziping accompanied Fang Bai, showing him around many places in the Inner Court. After making sure Fang Bai was familiar with the area, he planned to return.

They had not gone far back the same way, when they encountered several Bitao Martial Academy disciples coming toward them. The man and woman in the lead were walking shoulder to shoulder, chatting intimately, their lively conversation revealing their identities as disciples from the External Courtyard and Inner Court, respectively, by their attire.

"It's her!"

The moment Hou Ziping saw that female disciple, his anger flared, and his face twisted with rage.

However, Fang Bai remained composed, his eyes slightly narrowed, watching as Gao Shuxian and her group approached.

Gao Shuxian was obviously very familiar with the Martial Artists beside her, frequently turning to talk to them and occasionally bursting into a charming "giggle."

Her laughter was like silver bells, causing her to tremble like a flower in the wind, making the Martial Artists around her eyes shine with greed.

The mountain path was narrow; if two people were to meet head-on, one of them had to step aside to make way.

Although Hou Ziping hated Gao Shuxian, he knew his place. He wasn't afraid of Gao Shuxian, but of the Inner Sect disciple walking shoulder to shoulder with her. As they drew closer, embracing the principle that less trouble is better than more, he subconsciously thought of stepping aside.

"Junior Brother Fang, a step back opens up a whole wide world!"

Seeing Fang Bai standing in the middle of the mountain path without any intention of giving way, Hou Ziping felt anxious and whispered his advice.

Chapter 936: Inner Court Disciple Power Rankings

Walking side by side with Gao Shuxian was an Inner Court disciple named Yang Lin, who was just over thirty years old. Before Fang Bai entered the Inner Court, Yang Lin had been the youngest disciple there.

Although Yang Lin was not an Innate Spirit Root Martial Artist, his talents were among the best of ordinary martial artists. Furthermore, he had once had an opportunity during his travels that allowed him to ascend to the top three in terms of strength among the Inner Court disciples.

In Bitao Martial Academy, to motivate the lower-ranking disciples to strive for excellence, the higher-ups had established power rankings for the menial servant disciples, the External Courtyard disciples, and

the Inner Court disciples, and each ranking listed only the top one hundred disciples in terms of strength.

Those who made it onto the rank lists naturally gained prestige and, to preserve their positions or even climb higher, dared not slack off in their cultivation practices and were even more diligent and hardworking.

Disciples not listed felt ashamed and regarded it as a disgrace, hence they exerted all their effort in cultivation, determined to see their names appear on the rankings.

These few power rankings stirred up the enthusiasm for cultivation among the tens of thousands of disciples in Bitao Martial Academy, keeping the entire academy in a near-frenetic state of cultivation.

The positions on these rankings were not fixed but fluctuated with the strengths of the Martial Academy disciples.

Those who were not on the list could challenge those who were at any time, and if they won, they could replace them.

Similarly, disciples who were lower on the rankings could challenge those ranked higher at any time; should they win, they would take the other's place and thus lift their heads high in triumph.

This demonstrates just how fierce the competition for the rankings was.

Yang Lin, having distinguished himself among the hundreds of fierce competitors in the Inner Court, ranked third on the Inner Court disciples' power ranking, clearly showing his formidable strength.

Yang Lin was not only young but also had strikingly handsome features, with sword-like eyebrows, starry eyes, a jade-like face, and thin lips. Combined with his status among the Inner Court disciples in Bitao Martial Academy, he was very popular among the female disciples.

However, Yang Lin was proud and had high standards. Ordinary female disciples from the Martial Academy did not catch his eye. Instead, he had held a long-standing affection for Gao Shuxian from the External Courtyard, and even often humbled himself to win her favor.

Gao Shuxian also fancied Yang Lin and wanted him to become her devoted subordinate, entirely at her beck and call. The two exchanged glances and quickly got together.

Yesterday, when Fang Bai, Liu Qingqing, and Liu Liehu became disciples of Bitao Martial Academy, Gao Shuxian felt a hint of danger. She had suffered a great loss at the hands of Fang Bai and hated him down to her bones but dared not seek revenge on him personally. Therefore, she thought of Yang Lin.

In Gao Shuxian's view, although Fang Bai had high talent and strong strength, Yang Lin was also not to be underestimated, having ranked third among the Inner Court disciple strength rankings. Using Yang Lin to teach Fang Bai a lesson would be perfect.

Gao Shuxian was a woman with a malicious heart; her aim was not just to teach Fang Bai a lesson but to kill him.

As long as Fang Bai died, Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu would not be able to stir any trouble and would fall completely under her control.

The Bitao Martial Academy allowed disciples to challenge each other, as long as they did not intentionally maim or kill. This time Gao Shuxian approached Yang Lin to set him up to challenge Fang Bai and give Fang Bai a lesson.

Gao Shuxian wanted to use someone else's hand to kill Fang Bai. Acting within Bitao Martial Academy was not feasible. She had already schemed and planned to find an opportunity during future trials so that Fang Bai could die without anyone being the wiser.

When Fang Bai and Hou Ziping saw Gao Shuxian and Yang Lin, Gao Shuxian and Yang Lin also saw them.

"Fang Bai!"

Gao Shuxian's eyes, filled with hatred, fixed on Fang Bai, her teeth clattering angrily, wishing she could bite a chunk of flesh from his body.

"Junior Sister Gao, is that Fang Bai?"

Yang Lin saw Gao Shuxian's sudden change in expression and followed her gaze, his brows slightly furrowing.

Yesterday, when Bitao Martial Academy was recruiting disciples, Yang Lin was not present, but he had heard that among the new recruits, two possessed Innate Spiritual Roots, one of whom had a Dual Attribute Innate Spiritual Root.

And the disciple with the Dual Attribute Innate Spiritual Root was indeed named Fang Bai.

When Yang Lin first received this news, he was also very surprised. He knew very well what a Dual Attribute Innate Spiritual Root meant for Bitao Martial Academy and knew that Fang Bai would definitely become a key focus of cultivation by the academy's higher-ups, with an immeasurable future ahead.

Originally, Yang Lin had planned to find time to get to know this new Inner Sect disciple named Fang Bai, but unexpectedly, Gao Shuxian suddenly approached him, asking him to confront Fang Bai.

Yang Lin had no personal grudge against Fang Bai and initially did not want to conflict with him. However, Gao Shuxian tempted him with her own body as bait and promised that once she became part of the academy's higher-ups, she would provide Yang Lin with considerable cultivation resources, which made him consider the offer.

Gao Shuxian possessed an Innate Spiritual Root, and combining cultivation with her would yield better effects than any Essence Stone Elixirs.

Furthermore, given Gao Shuxian's potential, she might very likely become part of the academy's higher echelons, even possibly inheriting the position of dean. At that time, Yang Lin would gain a continuous supply of cultivation resources.

The two conditions Gao Shuxian offered greatly tempted Yang Lin, making them difficult to refuse, so he agreed to help Gao Shuxian confront Fang Bai.

When Yang Lin first saw Fang Bai, he was somewhat surprised; he had not expected him to be so young. Moreover, seeing his straight figure, handsome appearance, and vibrant energy gave Yang Lin a sense of inferiority.

"Yes, that's Fang Bai."

Gao Shuxian, sensing a hint of jealousy in Yang Lin's expression, sneered inwardly and provoked him, "After Fang Bai became a disciple yesterday, the academy's higher-ups were very warm towards him; they clearly intend to focus on cultivating him. I think, in the future within this Inner Sect, Fang Bai will dominate! And Senior Brother Yang, I'm afraid you will soon be pushed out of the top three ranks of the Inner Sect disciple combat strength list!"

Yang Lin's fist tightened suddenly, and his gaze towards Fang Bai turned frosty.

Yang Lin had been in the third position on the Inner Sect disciple combat strength list for a long time, unchallenged. For him, this was a symbol of power as well as a great honor.

But as Gao Shuxian said, the arrival of Fang Bai might change all that.

Fang Bai, with his Dual Attribute Innate Spiritual Root and extraordinary talent, was already a mid-level Heaven Level Martial Artist at just twenty years old. If the academy's higher-ups fully supported him with ample cultivation resources, his strength would undoubtedly increase rapidly. And that would inevitably rewrite the rankings on the Inner Sect disciple combat strength list.

If he were pushed down from the top three positions, it would be a great disgrace.

Yang Lin couldn't accept such an outcome.

Chapter 937: Afraid You Can't Bear It

Seeing the gloomy expression on Yang Lin's face, paired with the cold glint in his eyes, Gao Shuxian felt a surge of secret joy in her heart.

She knew that she had successfully instigated hostility toward Fang Bai from Yang Lin, and from then on, even if she did not further encourage him to attack Fang Bai, he would inevitably find ways to suppress Fang Bai to prevent Fang Bai from surpassing him.

"Senior Brother Yang, as long as Fang Bai is in the Bitao Martial Academy, there will be no day for you and me to rise. Therefore, this Fang Bai..."

Before she could finish her words, she saw Yang Lin walking briskly towards Fang Bai.

A smirk of triumph appeared at the corners of her mouth as she followed Yang Lin toward Fang Bai.

The several disciples of the Martial Academy who were with them also followed suit.

"Junior Brother Fang, that man named Yang Lin is ranked third among us in the Inner Court's combat power list, very formidable. His relationship with Gao Shuxian is close; you must be careful of him."

Seeing the unfriendly expressions on Yang Lin and the others as they approached, Hou Ziping's eyes revealed a hint of fear, and he quickly warned Fang Bai.

Hou Ziping, currently at the bottom in terms of strength among the Inner Court disciples, had long become the object of ridicule and sarcasm, whereas Yang Lin was a strong contender, ranked third in the combat list of the Inner Court disciples. Even though they were both Inner Court disciples, the gap between them was substantial.

Hou Ziping was destined to have a bleak future, and Yang Lin usually did not even bother to look at him or even speak a word to him.

And Hou Ziping, acknowledging his own limitations, never tried to ingratiate himself with Yang Lin yet also dared not offend him.

However, now, Hou Ziping was feeling bitter inside because he knew that Gao Shuxian and Yang Lin must have already noticed him standing with Fang Bai and might already consider him Fang Bai's "accomplice". From now on, he feared that he wouldn't have any good days within the Inner Court.

Given the circumstances, Hou Ziping simply decided to be defiant, and after warning Fang Bai, he stood tall and proudly beside Fang Bai.

In his heart, Hou Ziping still harbored a glimmer of hope, which rested on Fang Bai.

In Hou Ziping's view, Fang Bai was highly regarded by the upper echelons of the Martial Academy. He was confident that Yang Lin and others would not dare to harm him lightly, and as long as Fang Bai was willing to protect him, then Yang Lin and the others couldn't do anything to him either.

Moreover, Fang Bai's direct admission to the Inner Court demonstrated his strong capabilities, and with his Dual Attribute Innate Spiritual Root's exceptional talent, as long as the senior figures of the academy were willing to invest substantial effort in his training, his strength would surely surpass that of Yang Lin in the future.

By then, once Fang Bai's position was solidified in the Inner Court, he too could benefit from his association.

Unconsciously, Hou Ziping had already linked his fate with that of Fang Bai.

Fang Bai, of course, could not guess what Hou Ziping was thinking. He looked calmly at Yang Lin who was striding towards him, guessing his intent.

"I heard that a new Junior Brother named Fang Bai has joined the Inner Court, is that you?"

Yang Lin walked up to Fang Bai, sized him up, and then asked expressionlessly.

Fang Bai just looked at him calmly and did not respond verbally.

"I'm talking to you! Are you deaf?"

Seeing that Fang Bai appeared to regard him as if he did not exist, Yang Lin raised his voice significantly, and his voice already contained a hint of anger.

"Why should I answer you? Do I know you?"

Fang Bai slowly spoke.

Yang Lin was taken aback, then took a deep breath, suppressed the rising anger in his chest, and glanced coldly at Hou Ziping, saying, "I assume Senior Brother Hou has already told you who I am?"

Seeing a trace of coldness in Yang Lin's gaze, Hou Ziping could not help shivering, knowing that he was already hated, and couldn't help but smile bitterly to himself.

"Yang Lin, third-ranked in the Inner Court Disciple Combat Ranking."

Fang Bai replied indifferently, his expression unruffled.

This attitude made Yang Lin even more displeased, thinking to himself: I, Yang Lin, joined the academy before you and am your senior brother, how can you show not even a hint of respect?

Moreover, since you know I, Yang Lin, am ranked third on the Inner Court Disciple Combat Ranking, don't you have even a shred of admiration?

Feeling belittled by Fang Bai, Yang Lin was somewhat frustrated. He snorted coldly, puffed up his chest, and said proudly, "Now that you know who I am, as a junior brother seeing his senior brother, why don't you pay your respects?"

In the Bitao Martial Academy, seniority is clear: juniors must pay respects to their elders, disciples to their seniors. Anyone who breaches this protocol must be punished.

Fang Bai smiled and countered, "Then why doesn't Senior Brother Yang pay his respects to Senior Brother Hou?"

Yang Lin was startled and then burst into loud laughter.

Hou Ziping's face turned somewhat unsightly, and with an awkward smile, he whispered to Fang Bai, "Junior Brother Fang, there's an unspoken rule in our academy: a stronger disciple need not pay respects to a weaker one."

"Junior Brother Fang, did you hear that? Although Senior Brother Hou joined the academy before me, I have long surpassed him in strength. Paying respects to him would be more than he could accept, haha..."

He looked at Hou Ziping with contempt and laughed unrestrainedly, attracting the attention of some passing disciples nearby.

Behind him, Gao Shuxian and others also laughed aloud, no one considering Hou Ziping, a "senior brother" with no future in the Martial Dao, worth their attention.

Their laughter was filled with disdain and mockery, like slaps striking Hou Ziping's face, his complexion turned red, his fists clenched, and his eyes revealed his frustration.

Yet Hou Ziping was aware of his limitations and knew that confronting Yang Lin and the others would only bring him humiliation. Thus, though filled with anger, he dared not erupt and could only forcefully contain it.

"Hehe..."

Fang Bai suddenly laughed too, looking disdainfully at Yang Lin, and said, "Since that's the rule, then I also need not pay respects to Senior Brother Yang."

Yang Lin's laughter stopped abruptly, and he glared at Fang Bai, snapping, "Fang Bai, what do you mean by that?"

Fang Bai replied lazily, "What I mean is... I am stronger than you! Paying respects to you would be more than you could accept!"

This statement, originally made by Yang Lin to Hou Ziping, was now hurled back at Yang Lin by Fang Bai, the mockery evident.

Yang Lin's face twitched, his eyes gleaming with fury, and murderous intent surged in his chest.

Influenced by Gao Shuxian, Yang Lin had been looking for a reason to teach Fang Bai a lesson, but he had not expected Fang Bai to provoke him first, bringing him a mix of shock and secret delight.

Fang Bai's challenge was the perfect excuse for him to take action.

Without anger but with a smile, Yang Lin said, "It's good for a martial artist to be proud, but overweening pride turns it into a vice. Junior Brother Fang, since you think you are stronger than me, how about we find a time to spar? If you beat me, then I will willingly cede the third rank on the Inner Court Disciple Combat Ranking to you."

With this statement, he issued a challenge to Fang Bai.

Chapter 938: Maybe I Could Win?

In the Bitao Martial Academy, it's quite normal for disciples to challenge each other.

However, under usual circumstances, it is the disciples with weaker abilities who challenge those stronger than themselves in order to take their place.

But now, Yang Lin, who was ranked third in the Inner Court disciple combat rankings, was challenging Fang Bai, who had just entered the Inner Court. To some of the onlooking disciples, it seemed like Yang Lin was bullying the weak, as even if he won, it would be seen as an unworthy victory.

"Junior Brother Fang, don't agree to his challenge!"

Hou Ziping knew that Yang Lin's challenge must have been instigated by Gao Shuxian, and once Fang Bai let his temper get the better of him and accepted the challenge, he would be falling right into the trap of Gao Shuxian and Yang Lin.

Although the martial academy's upper echelons had stipulated that challenges between disciples must not lead to disability or death, injuries were almost inevitable, and Hou Ziping was worried that Yang Lin might exploit this to his advantage.

For example, Yang Lin could severely injure Fang Bai, rendering him bedridden for ten days to half a month, thereby affecting Fang Bai's cultivation.

And once Fang Bai recovered from his injuries, Yang Lin could challenge him again. If Fang Bai refused to fight, he would be looked down upon by the other disciples, who might even mock him by calling him a coward or the like. Thus Fang Bai's reputation would be ruined, and he would struggle to hold his head up high in the academy.

If Fang Bai did fight, he might face the possibility of being severely injured again... In such a never-ending cycle, where would Fang Bai find the time and peace of mind to cultivate?

Of course, all of this was based on the assumption that Fang Bai was no match for Yang Lin.

Though Hou Ziping had not witnessed Fang Bai's combat powers, he believed that Fang Bai was no match for Yang Lin.

Yang Lin, ranked third in the Inner Court disciple combat rankings, often went out on excursions and battled fierce Spirit Beasts, an experienced veteran, long renowned for his prowess.

Whereas Fang Bai was just a newly promoted Inner Court disciple. Despite his unparalleled talent, he was still too young to have undergone much hardship, and his lack of real battle experience made him like a wolf that had been caged from a young age. How could he possibly fight against the wild wolves of the wilderness?

Hou Ziping saw through the conspiracy of Gao Shuxian and Yang Lin, hence he urged Fang Bai to refuse the challenge.

While he would indeed be mocked as weak by the other disciples, Fang Bai could immerse himself in rigorous training, and once his strength grew, he could then find an opportunity to defeat Yang Lin and regain his reputation in one fell swoop.

In Yang Lin's view, this was the most prudent course of action.

"Monkey, mind your own business and keep your mouth shut! Otherwise... Senior Brother Yang will get angry, you know!"

Gao Shuxian said with a smile that was both charming and disarming.

Her smile was enchanting, but to Hou Ziping, it sent a shiver down his spine.

Hou Ziping knew that the more charming Gao Shuxian's smile, the more venomous her thoughts were. If he spoke out of turn again, there was no telling what kind of methods she would use against him.

"Alright, let's have a match when we have the time!"

Fang Bai said leisurely, which was effectively accepting Yang Lin's challenge.

Hou Ziping's face showed a change of color, and he inwardly groaned in distress.

Yang Lin, Gao Shuxian, and the others exchanged glances, all sharing a sense of triumphant conspiracy.

Yang Lin chuckled, "I didn't expect Junior Brother Fang to be such a decisive person! Good, three days from now, at dusk, let's not miss each other at the Inner Court disciple Practice Battle Arena! I hope you don't disappoint me then!"

Fang Bai nodded with a smile, "You definitely won't be disappointed!"

"Junior Sister Gao, let's go!"

Having successfully challenged Fang Bai and thinking about how he would win Gao Shuxian's body after defeating him in three days, Yang Lin felt extremely pleased, walking shoulder to shoulder with Gao Shuxian past Fang Bai.

As she brushed past Fang Bai, Gao Shuxian cast him a glance, her lips curling into a meaningful smile.

"Junior Brother Fang, Gao Shuxian and Yang Lin are clearly filled with malice towards you! How... how can you accept Yang Lin's challenge? You... Ah, what should I say about you?"

Watching Gao Shuxian and Yang Lin walk away, Hou Ziping stamped his foot in frustration and spoke to Fang Bai as if he were disappointed in him.

Fang Bai smiled indifferently and said, "I've accepted, so I've accepted. Maybe I can win?"

"Maybe..."

Hou Ziping was speechless.

"Forget it, since you've already agreed, there's no way to go back on it now. Junior Brother Fang, you have three days, go back and prepare well!"

With a shake of his head and a sigh, Hou Ziping left resignedly.

Fang Bai wandered around the area by himself, familiarizing himself with the environment, before returning to his own small courtyard.

Fang Bai didn't take the duel in three days to heart at all. With his strength, defeating Yang Lin would be an effortless task, akin to squashing an ant.

What Fang Bai was concerned about now was how many cultivation resources he could get each month as a new disciple of the Inner Court.

Hou Ziping had said that, under normal circumstances, based on one's bodily attributes, an Inner Court disciple could receive a thousand Essence Stones and ten bottles of Gathering Yuan Pills every month.

However, disciples like Yang Lin, who had a lot of potential, received special treatment. The cultivation resources he could receive each month were about twice that of the average Inner Court disciple.

As for how many cultivation resources Fang Bai could receive each month, even Hou Ziping wasn't sure.

With Fang Bai's current cultivation level, he needed to consume at least a thousand Essence Stones in one night of cultivation. Even if he could receive ten thousand Essence Stones a month, it wouldn't be nearly enough for him.

Fang Bai set his sights on the abundant spiritual medicines scattered around him, thinking to secretly harvest some spiritual medicines for his own alchemy and cultivation if the resources he received were insufficient.

After all, spiritual medicines were everywhere within a hundred miles of Bitao Martial Academy, and no one would notice if he harvested some every day.

The only thing that Fang Bai regretted was that the spiritual medicines here were all of low grade, which could only be used to refine low-quality spirit pills. They weren't very effective for increasing his cultivation level, but having some was better than none.

Fang Bai set to work immediately. That very night, he concealed his martial artist aura, harvested nearly a hundred spiritual medicines from nearby mountains, then returned to his residence. Using his own palm as an alchemy cauldron, he circulated fire and wood cultivation techniques and refined hundreds of elixirs overnight.

Inside Fang Bai's space ring, the huge Five Elements Origin Qi Cauldron still lay within.

Fang Bai had studied the Five Elements Origin Qi Cauldron extensively and deduced that it was a rare spiritual artifact, but he was completely unable to discern its exact rank.

The Five Elements Origin Qi Cauldron was similar to an alchemy cauldron, and Fang Bai had tried alchemy within it. However, he found that with his current cultivation level, he couldn't control the cauldron at all and had to give up, resorting to using his palm for alchemy.

Fang Bai had indirectly asked Hou Ziping where he could buy an alchemy furnace and, upon learning that they were available in the Martial Artists Trading Market of Thousand Lakes Capital City, he made plans to visit the capital city when he had the chance, aiming to acquire a good alchemy cauldron.

With a superior cauldron, he could refine more effective elixirs and save a lot of spiritual medicines. Therefore, most pharmacists typically have a good cauldron specifically for alchemy.

Chapter 939: Elixir Hall

The next morning, Fang Bai donned his brand-new Inner Court disciple uniform and headed to the Elixir Hall at Bitao Martial Academy to collect the Elixirs and Essence Stones designated for him.

Along the way, Fang Bai noticed that numerous Martial Academy disciples were pointing and whispering about him, their gazes filled with peculiarity.

"Did you hear that yesterday, our Inner Court's third-ranked in combat power, Senior Brother Yang Lin, challenged Junior Brother Fang? And Junior Brother Fang actually accepted."

"Has Junior Brother Fang lost his mind? How can he possibly be a match for Senior Brother Yang?"

"Yes! Even though all of our Inner Court disciples are at the middle stage of the Heaven Level, there is still a significant gap in strength between individuals of the same level. For example, there's a huge difference in strength between those ranked at the top and those at the bottom of the Inner Court combat power leaderboard."

"Senior Brother Yang became a middle-stage Heaven Level Martial Artist many years ago and has a wealth of real battle experience. Whereas this Junior Brother Fang probably only advanced to middle-stage very recently, he surely lacks real combat experience. Therefore, this battle will undoubtedly end in a defeat for Junior Brother Fang!"

"It's all about how many moves Junior Brother Fang can withstand under Senior Brother Yang. If he can last thirty to fifty moves, it shows that Junior Brother Fang has the potential to enter the top one hundred of the Inner Court combat power leaderboard. Even if he loses, his defeat will still be honorable."

"Does Senior Brother Yang have any grievances with Junior Brother Fang? Otherwise, why would he condescend to challenge Junior Brother Fang?"

"Hehe, are you out of the loop? From what I heard, it isn't that Senior Brother Yang has any personal grudge against Junior Brother Fang. Instead, it's because Junior Sister Gao Shuxian from the External Courtyard had some conflicts with Junior Brother Fang before. Senior Brother Yang is stepping up for Junior Sister Gao!"

"Why did Junior Brother Fang have to provoke Junior Sister Gao of all people? Now he's really in for it!"

...

The Martial Academy disciples' discussions reached Fang Bai's ears, and most of them were pessimistic about Fang Bai's chances, thinking it impossible for him to beat Yang Lin.

In fact, winning or losing the challenge was secondary for Fang Bai; the main issue was that he had antagonized Gao Shuxian, which might seriously hinder his future cultivation within the Academy.

Many Martial Academy disciples felt sorry for Fang Bai; no matter how exceptional his talents were, without a conducive cultivation environment, even the best talents could be wasted.

As Fang Bai walked along the path to the Elixir Hall, faced with unusual gazes, he smiled subtly and appeared composed, as if oblivious to the surrounding murmurs.

The Elixir Hall was built on a low mountain peak, storing a vast amount of Essence Stones and Elixirs, its importance even surpassing that of the Lingtian Hall where the Academy's head, Ren Jingbo, resided.

Therefore, the surroundings of the Elixir Hall were heavily guarded by many powerful figures from Bitao Martial Academy, both overtly and covertly, to prevent any issues.

At the foot of the mountain of the Elixir Hall, Fang Bai ran into siblings Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu, who were also there to collect Essence Stones and Elixirs.

"Brother Fang, I heard that you've run into some troubles with Inner Court disciple Yang Lin, is that true?"

Upon seeing Fang Bai, Liu Qingqing's eyes lit up; then, recalling the rumors that had been circulating in the Academy from yesterday till now, she couldn't help but ask, her face full of worry.

Although Liu Qingqing was an External Courtyard disciple, she had been keeping tabs on Fang Bai's situation and had done some research on the Inner Court, knowing that Yang Lin was powerful and closely associated with Gao Shuxian. Yang Lin challenging Fang Bai was surely not a good sign.

Compared to Liu Qingqing's concerns, Liu Liehu was visibly excited, his eyes shining as he eagerly said, "Brother Fang, you must do your best! It's clear that Yang Lin and Gao Shuxian are joining forces to bully you. You must show them what you're made of! What does being third on the Inner Court combat power leaderboard mean? Once Brother Fang is in the Inner Court, all those top-ranked disciples will have to make way for you!"

Although his words seemed rather arrogant, Fang Bai did not refute them, instead simply smiling and saying, "Honestly, I came here just wanting to focus on my cultivation and incidentally to protect you both. I am not really interested in that Inner Court combat power leaderboard! But as Liehu said, if someone comes knocking for a face-off, then I suppose I should show them something impressive!"

Although he spoke lightly, his words were filled with strong confidence that unconsciously influenced others, making them fully confident in him.

"Then... then, Brother Fang, you must be careful when you fight Yang Lin!"

Liu Qingqing knew that once Fang Bai promised something, it could not be changed. She sighed softly and whispered a reminder.

"On the day of the fight, my sister and I will definitely come to cheer you on!"

Liu Liehu waved his fists as he spoke.

Fang Bai nodded with a smile.

The three of them climbed the mountain together and arrived at Elixir Hall, where they handed over their disciple tokens, which represented their respective statuses, to an Elder guarding the Elixir Hall.

This Elder was one of the four Great Elders of Bitao Martial Academy, named Ge Feng, who possessed a mid-tier Desolate Level cultivation base and was highly esteemed in Bitao Martial Academy, virtually second only to one and above tens of thousands.

"Menial servant disciple Liu Liehu, five hundred Essence Stones, five Elixirs."

"External Courtyard disciple Liu Qingqing, two thousand Essence Stones, twenty Elixirs."

"Inner Court disciple Fang Bai, five thousand Essence Stones, fifty Elixirs."

Ge Feng checked the disciples' tokens and then his gaze swept over Liu Qingqing and Fang Bai, a slight smile appearing on his face.

"Cultivation resources will be delivered to your residences by a designated person soon. You all go back and wait peacefully. Fang Bai, Liu Qingqing, the Martial Academy has high hopes for both of you. We hope that once you receive the cultivation resources, you will cultivate diligently and uphold the prestige of our Academy!"

After checking the disciple tokens, Ge Feng returned them to Fang Bai and the others, encouraging them in a friendly manner.

Although Ge Feng did not release his Martial Artist Aura, his demeanor and actions still carried an intimidating presence, making Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu feel pressured and unconsciously develop a sense of awe.

Fang Bai, however, was smiling, appearing untroubled and unaffected by Ge Feng.

"We will surely remember Elder Ge's advice!"

Fang Bai bowed respectfully to Ge Feng without servility or arrogance, then led Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu away from the Elixir Hall.

"Five hundred Essence Stones, five Elixirs... compared to you guys, it's pitifully little! Menial servant disciples really have no rights!"

After they descended the mountain, Liu Liehu sighed deeply, looking dejected.

Liu Qingqing comforted him, "If you diligently practice the Martial Arts Techniques taught by Brother Fang, it won't be long before you become a Heaven Level Martial Artist and then enter the External Courtyard. By then, you will receive much more cultivation resources."

Fang Bai looked at Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu and spoke seriously, "Let me remind you again, the Martial Arts Techniques I have taught you should only be practiced in private. Never let others see them, or it might bring disaster. You must remember this!"

Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu already knew that the Martial Arts Techniques Fang Bai taught them were of high tiers. Being exposed to unscrupulous Martial Artists could lead to trouble. Hearing Fang Bai mention it again made them more cautious, and they nodded together.

Chapter 940: Killing the Chicken to Scare the Monkey

After parting with Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu at the foot of the mountain, Fang Bai returned to his residence, took a seated position, and patiently waited for the Elixir Hall to deliver his share of cultivation resources.

The mountain area inhabited by disciples of the Inner Court was rich and abundant with Heaven and Earth Origin Energy merged with the Essence Energy released by numerous Spiritual Medicines, making it a precious land for cultivation. Martial Artists benefited greatly by residing and cultivating here.

About an hour later, several menial servant disciples, driving a few Swiftwind Horses laden with Essence Stones and Elixirs, delivered the cultivation resources allocated to Fang Bai to his courtyard and then hurriedly left, continuing to the next Inner Court disciple's residence.

Although the cultivation resources distributed monthly by the Bitao Martial Academy were hardly sufficient for Fang Bai, having them was still better than nothing.

After the menial servant disciples had gone far, Fang Bai closed the courtyard gate, casually stored the pile of cultivation resources in his Spatial Ring, and then took out the Five Elements Origin Qi Cauldron to study it carefully.

At night, Fang Bai once again concealed his aura to pick Spiritual Medicines and returned to continue refining Elixirs with them.

For two consecutive nights, Fang Bai had stealthily picked over a thousand Spiritual Medicines, all of which were of older medicinal age. Fortunately, as Spiritual Medicines were abundant here, no one noticed anything unusual.

The next day, Fang Bai went to the living area of the External Courtyard disciples and menial servants, found Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu, and shared with them some of the Elixirs he had refined over the past two nights.

The Elixirs refined by Fang Bai, although of the same grade as those distributed by the Bitao Martial Academy, were much more effective.

"Brother Fang, where did you get these Elixirs from?"

Liu Liehu, fiddling with the Elixir Fang Bai had given him, clearly felt that the Heaven and Earth Origin Energy contained in this Elixir was better than what the Bitao Martial Academy had provided and asked excitedly.

Fang Bai said, "I'll tell you later. Knowing now isn't good for you! Also, you must keep the matter of me giving you Elixirs a secret. Don't let others know."

Seeing his serious tone, Liu Liehu and Liu Qingqing both nodded unanimously.

After waving goodbye to Liu Liehu and Liu Qingqing, Fang Bai, on his way back to his own courtyard, overheard some Inner Court disciples discussing Hou Ziping. It seemed that Hou Ziping had gotten into a conflict with a fellow sect disciple last night, suffered severe injuries, and was now recuperating in hiding at his residence.

Fang Bai had a fairly good understanding of Hou Ziping's character. Knowing that he was cautious and aware that his strength ranked low among the Inner Court disciples, Hou Ziping was always polite and kept a smiling face in front of everyone in the Inner Court.

In the years since entering the Inner Court, Hou Ziping had never provoked trouble. Even if others ridiculed or bullied him, he endured the humiliation and submitted without conflict with any fellow disciples.

Yet now, this very person had been severely injured. Fang Bai furrowed his brows, thinking there must be something fishy about this.

Why was Hou Ziping not beaten earlier or later but precisely after he and Yang Lin had set a date for their challenge fight?

Did this incident involve Gao Shuxian or Yang Lin?

Could it be because after his entry into the Inner Court, Hou Ziping had grown closer to him, and they wanted to kill the chicken to scare the monkey, showing him a lesson? Or could it be intended to disturb his state of mind before the scheduled fight?

With these questions, Fang Bai turned his steps toward Hou Ziping's residence.

Regardless, Hou Ziping was the first fellow disciple he had met after entering the Inner Court and had been quite warm towards him. Additionally, the incident of Hou Ziping being beaten might have arisen because of him. By both emotion and reason, he ought to go see him.

When Fang Bai arrived at Hou Ziping's residence, he found the place eerily quiet.

With his minimal strength ranking at the bottom among the Inner Court disciples and little prospect in the Martial Dao, few fellow disciples were willing to associate with him. Although the news of his severe injury had spread throughout the Inner Court, not a single fellow disciple had come to visit him.

Although Hou Ziping was also a disciple of the Inner Court, due to his low aptitude and weak strength, he was almost abandoned by the upper echelons of the Martial Academy, which made his treatment among the Inner Court disciples among the worst.

Hou Ziping's residence was just a small stone house, neither as exquisite as Fang Bai's house nor surrounded by a small courtyard. It stood lonely on a hilltop, looking quite rudimentary.

Fang Bai saw Hou Ziping's small stone house from a distance and sensed Hou Ziping's presence as well.

Hou Ziping's presence was very weak, which indicated that his injuries were severe, far beyond Fang Bai's expectations.

A hint of coldness appeared in Fang Bai's eyes, and he became more certain that this matter was related to Yang Lin and Gao Shuxian.

Normally, when disciples of the Bitao Martial Academy sparred with each other, it was enough to defeat the opponent. They would never inflict such severe injuries. Hou Ziping's condition clearly indicated that his opponent had done it intentionally.

Inside the stone house, intermittent low moans of pain could be heard, coming from Hou Ziping, who was obviously enduring great agony.

The door of the stone house was open, and Fang Bai walked in slowly. The first thing he saw was Hou Ziping lying on the stone bed.

Hou Ziping lay on the bed, his presence faint, his complexion pale, and his Inner Court disciple uniform was in tatters.

He was covered with injuries, his hair was in disarray, and many parts of his body were torn and bleeding profusely, soaking his clothes, making him look extremely miserable.

The visible injuries were not the worst of it. Fang Bai's divine sense revealed that several of Hou Ziping's bones were broken, and the breaks were in critical areas,

and if treated with ordinary methods, it would take two or three months for a complete recovery.

"Senior Brother Hou!"

Fang Bai walked to the stone bed, sat down beside Hou Ziping, and said softly, "I came to see you!"

Hou Ziping had been staring at the ceiling, but upon hearing Fang Bai's voice, he slowly turned his head, his previously listless eyes now showing a bit of vitality.

"Fang... Junior Brother Fang, you came?"

Hou Ziping tried to smile, but his face quickly contorted with pain again.

"Who injured you?"

Fang Bai did not waste words and asked sternly.

Hou Ziping hesitated for a moment, a look of indignation flashed in his eyes, and he answered, "It was Yang Wei. He is Yang Lin's cousin and also an Inner Court disciple. He ranks eighteenth on the combat strength list of the Inner Court disciples."

Fang Bai's eyes narrowed slightly, thinking this matter was almost as he had suspected. It indeed involved Yang Lin, and behind Yang Lin was Gao Shuxian. This incident was their doing, to injure Hou Ziping was merely to intimidate him.

That meant Hou Ziping's injury was a result of being involved with him.

"Senior Brother Hou, it's my fault you were involved! Rest assured, this matter will not end like this. We must seek justice!"

Fang Bai said solemnly.