

Doctor 961

Chapter 961: Tu Hu's Knife

Zhou Tong's chest burned with raging fury, his fists clenched tightly, his fighting spirit rapidly climbing, his whole being entering a state of readiness for battle, like a bow drawn taut, ready to unleash the most fierce and violent attack upon his adversary at any moment.

The nine team members behind Zhou Tong also released their Martial Artist Auras, pressing toward Tu Hu and his companions across the way.

Although in terms of numbers, Tu Hu's side, with the addition of Huang Miao's team, had a significant advantage, the various Martial Artist teams spectating from afar believed that when considering overall strength, Zhou Tong's party still held absolute superiority.

After all, Zhou Tong was a Core Disciple with Heaven Level High Rank strength; he alone was enough to match up against the combined forces of Inner Court Disciples like Tu Hu, Huang Miao, Hou Ziping, and Fang Bai.

The majority of the nine team members behind Zhou Tong were also formidable fighters listed on the Inner Court Disciple power rankings, and they were more than capable of dealing with the rest of Tu Hu's team.

Therefore, once the two sides started fighting, no one believed Tu Hu's party stood a chance.

For Zhou Tong's team, all ten members looked down upon and scorned the teams of Tu Hu and Huang Miao, confident that crushing them would be a piece of cake.

What pleased Zhou Tong and the others was that Tu Hu and Huang Miao's teams had apparently reaped a bountiful harvest in the mountain this time; defeating them would mean taking all their gains for themselves.

Each mountain expedition organized by Bitao Martial Academy allowed teams to compete against each other and even attack one another, so long as they didn't deliberately take lives. Such fierce competition facilitated the enhancement of the Martial Artists' strength.

The standoff between Zhou Tong's and Tu Hu's teams arose because Zhou Tong wanted to seize the Cultivation Resources that Tu Hu and the others had acquired. Then, Huang Miao, Fang Bai, and others arrived and unwaveringly joined Tu Hu's side, which Zhou Tong saw as a direct challenge to his authority as a Core Disciple and it infuriated him greatly.

Zhou Tong had initially set his sights on Huang Miao as his next conquest, but her behavior today had greatly displeased him. Moreover, seeing that she had no admiration or respect for him as a Core Disciple incensed him even further.

"If I want this Huang Miao to become my woman, it seems I'll have to assert my dominance with my fists and make her submit completely. Hmm, Tu Hu is the strongest among them; I'll start with him then!"

Having thought this, Zhou Tong no longer paid attention to Huang Miao and the others. He raised his hand, pointing at Tu Hu, and with a killing intent said, "Junior Brother Tu, do you dare to come and fight me? If you can withstand a hundred moves from me, I'll let you all go! Otherwise... it's just your bad luck! Of course, you can choose to fight as a group, but you'll bear the consequences!"

No sooner had he finished speaking than everyone's eyes turned to Tu Hu.

Zhou Tong and Tu Hu, one a Core Disciple at the Heaven Level High Rank realm and the other an Inner Court Disciple at the Heaven Level Middle Rank realm. Despite what seemed like a small difference in realms, it was enough for Zhou Tong to easily crush Fang Bai.

Apart from Tu Hu, Fang Bai, and a scant few others, everyone believed that it would be very difficult for Tu Hu to last a hundred moves against Zhou Tong.

Although Fang Bai was very optimistic about Tu Hu, Huang Miao still felt some anxiety knowing that if Tu Hu were defeated by Zhou Tong, the consequences would be severe.

Despite having little interaction with Zhou Tong, Huang Miao had heard that he was ruthless and merciless. Once he bore a grudge against a fellow disciple, he disregarded any sense of camaraderie and would use any method or means to torture the other party to a miserable state.

In the look Zhou Tong gave Tu Hu, Huang Miao saw intense Killing Qi, indicating that Zhou Tong had already harbored the intent to kill him.

If Tu Hu were defeated, he would certainly be gravely injured, and being in a place close to the deep mountain's belly, if he were to encounter a powerful Spirit Beast attack afterwards, he might not even be able to save his own life.

Huang Miao desperately wanted to join forces with Tu Hu to fight against Zhou Tong, but she also knew that Tu Hu, proud as he was, would absolutely refuse to team up with her.

"Senior Brother Tu, let's fight as a group!"

Huang Miao urgently said to Tu Hu.

In Huang Miao's eyes, a group fight might give them a chance since they had a numerical advantage, but if it were a one-on-one duel, Tu Hu's defeat was already assured.

"Heh..."

Tu Hu suddenly burst into laughter and said to Huang Miao, "Thank you for your concern, Junior Sister Huang. You all just watch the battle here! Core Disciples may be strong, but they are not invincible!"

As he spoke, he had already started moving his feet, striding forward to stand in front of Zhou Tong.

Zhou Tong was very angry, really wanting to kill Tu Hu.

That's because in the gaze from Tu Hu, he actually caught a sense of contempt and disdain. It was like a silent provocation that he couldn't bear.

"Surprising. Junior Brother Tu seems to have some courage!"

Seeing Tu Hu walk out alone, clearly wanting to duel with him, Zhou Tong laughed. He thought that he would not stop until he had beaten him half to death.

"I am prepared to fight Senior Brother Zhou with a blade. Please, Senior Brother Zhou, draw your weapon as well!"

Tu Hu extended the long saber he always carried with his left hand, grasping the hilt with his right, and slowly drew the blade from its black beast-leather sheath.

Suddenly, the gleaming blade appeared under the daylight, a chilling killing qi emanating from the blade, which also carried a faint scent of blood.

"What a good saber!"

Seeing the shiny long saber in Tu Hu's hands, someone from one of the several teams watching from a distance couldn't help but exclaim.

"Senior Brother Tu didn't used to use a saber. After his last failure in challenging a Core Disciple, he got a saber from somewhere and has not been without it since. However, if I recall correctly, this is the first time he has used a saber in a duel with a Martial Artist."

Huang Miao whispered to Fang Bai and others by her side.

Fang Bai's gaze swept over the long saber in Tu Hu's hands, and he felt a slight movement in his heart.

He could tell at a glance that the long saber had tasted a lot of blood, which was somewhat similar to the Blood-Drinking Mad Blade in his own Spatial Ring. Both were lethal to men, and a blade must drink blood whenever it is unsheathed.

However, the grandeur of the two sabers was not to be mentioned in the same breath.

Tu Hu's long saber was just a purely offensive weapon, a lifeless object that had some evil qi because it had killed many people.

But Fang Bai's Blood-Drinking Mad Blade transcended ordinary weapons, as it was a Spiritual Artifact for attacking, possessing some initial spirituality. Fang Bai could control it with his Divine Sense to launch attacks and defenses.

In comparison, Fang Bai's Blood-Drinking Mad Blade was like a ferocious tiger, whereas Tu Hu's long saber was like a gentle kitten. The disparity in strength was obvious at a glance.

"To defeat a mere Inner Court Disciple like you, do I even need a weapon? I can beat you with my bare hands!"

Zhou Tong laughed heartily, his arrogance laid bare.

Tu Hu didn't get angry but instead calmed down. He also turned his saber around, pointing the tip towards Zhou Tong, who was still laughing.

Chapter 962: A Stunning Debut

"Uh..."

The moment Tu Hu's long knife pointed at Zhou Tong, who was laughing loudly, was like someone suddenly and forcefully choking him, cutting off his laughter abruptly.

Because Zhou Tong realized that Tu Hu, who clearly only had a mid-level Heaven Level Cultivation Level, had a sudden increase in aura and a climbing fighting spirit in the instant his knife pointed at him. His entire demeanor surged.

At the same time, a sharp and invisible blade aura emanated from the tip of Tu Hu's knife, enveloping him and giving Zhou Tong the chilling sensation of a thorn at his back.

"High Rank Heaven Level! How... how is this possible?"

Zhou Tong's pupils suddenly constricted, his face drastically changed, and he couldn't help but exclaim in shock, his gaze filled with astonishment and disbelief as he looked at Tu Hu.

The other disciples of Bitao Martial Academy at the scene also felt Tu Hu's abruptly enhanced Martial Artist Aura, and upon hearing Zhou Tong's astonished cry, their expressions altered and their demeanor gained a few shades of reverence.

Initially, the disciples at the scene thought that although Tu Hu was the top-ranked competitor among the Inner Court disciples, there was still a significant gap in strength compared to a Core Disciple like Zhou Tong, and that he was bound to lose in this duel.

Yet, who could have anticipated that right before the duel commenced, Tu Hu would surprisingly exhibit a High Rank Heaven Level Cultivation Level!

At High Rank Heaven Level, existing in the same realm as a Core Disciple, the outcome between Tu Hu and Zhou Tong had now become unpredictable.

Ever since his crushing defeat when challenging a Core Disciple two years ago, Tu Hu had become quiet and reserved, not initiating challenges against other Martial Academy disciples. Everyone thought he might continue to decline, but unexpectedly, he had ascended to a High Rank Heaven Level Realm and attained strength equivalent to a Core Disciple.

This Tu Hu indeed kept a deep secret!

Even if Tu Hu loses to Zhou Tong in this battle, it still doesn't change the fact that he is a High Rank Heaven Level Martial Artist. It is certain that after this trial ends, Tu Hu will enter the ranks of Core Disciples and attract significant attention and nurture from the senior levels of the Martial Academy.

Many Bitao Martial Academy disciples watching from a distance were now thinking to act with greater humility and respect towards Tu Hu in future interactions.

After being shocked, Huang Miao let out a sigh of relief and thought, "Who would have thought that Senior Brother Tu, after lying low for two years, would not only make an appearance but do so spectacularly, ascending to a High Rank Heaven Level Martial Artist!"

Looking at Fang Bai standing beside her, she thought again, "Just now, Junior Brother Fang said Senior Brother Tu's combat strength might be better than Senior Brother Zhou's, and I was somewhat skeptical. Now, it seems very likely indeed!"

"Go Captain Tu!"

"Captain Tu must win!"

"We support you!"

...

The nine team members, originally thinking Tu Hu no match for Zhou Tong and mentally prepared for Zhou Tong's retaliatory wrath, were shocked and exhilarated to witness Tu Hu displaying equal cultivation level as Zhou Tong. Some could no longer hold back and began shouting loudly, cheering for Tu Hu.

For these nine team members, if their captain, Tu Hu, defeats Zhou Tong, they too share in the glory, and their team's prestige would be bolstered. Any other team thinking about targeting their Cultivation Resources would have to think twice about their capabilities.

"Brother Fang is really amazing! Although Senior Brother Tu had hidden himself well, he still couldn't escape Brother Fang's discerning eyes!"

Liu Liehu watched as the two High Rank Heaven Level strong men were on the brink of clashing, eyes wide in anticipation of the battle, and he grew even more admiring of Fang Bai.

In his eyes, since Fang Bai could see through Tu Hu's real strength, he certainly had the capability to defeat Tu Hu.

"What an adeptly hidden Junior Brother Tu, I underestimated you before!"

Facing Tu Hu, who held a long saber with his battle intention continuing to rise, Zhou Tong found it somewhat difficult to swallow, feeling uneasy for the first time when facing a disciple from the inner court.

Feeling fear before battle is a taboo for martial artists, especially when two opponents of equal strength are about to duel. Once fear sets in, it undoubtedly proves fatal.

"Senior Brother Zhou, come at me!"

Tu Hu was adept at seizing the opportunity. The moment Zhou Tong felt fear, Tu Hu roared loudly, his figure shooting forward like a bullet and instantly appeared in front of Zhou Tong.

As he moved, the True Yuan swirling around his body surged forward like raging waves, enveloping Zhou Tong with his movement.

At the same time, the long saber in his hand swung down in a fatal arc.

The saber's light flashed like lightning, tearing through the void, aiming at Zhou Tong's left shoulder.

The Bitao Martial Academy allowed disciples to fight each other, but while causing injury was acceptable, causing death was not and would result in punishment under the academy rules.

Had it not been for the academy's rules, Tu Hu's strike might have aimed for the top of Zhou Tong's head.

Facing the fierce slash from Tu Hu, Zhou Tong felt an unprecedented intense crisis, as if he was facing an attack from a direct disciple.

This Tu Hu, his strength was surprisingly formidable!

Zhou Tong gasped in shock, the bit of fear in his heart turning into endless terror.

Direct disciples are even stronger than core disciples, representing the strongest among thousands of disciples in the Bitao Martial Academy, with their strength only second to a few high-ranking members within the academy.

The cultivation levels of direct disciples are at Heaven Level Perfection. Although it's just a small realm higher than that of the core disciples, this small realm is incredibly hard to surpass.

Otherwise, there wouldn't only be ten direct disciples in the entire Bitao Martial Academy.

Moreover, among these ten direct disciples, more than half would stop advancing at the Heaven Level Realm, and only a few with better talent and opportunity might step into the Desolate Level Realm to become high-ranking members of the academy.

Advancing to the Desolate Level Realm and becoming one of the high ranks is the ultimate goal for the vast majority of disciples in their Martial Dao path at the Bitao Martial Academy.

Although Zhou Tong was terrified by Tu Hu's strength, he knew that if he did not fully resist Tu Hu's attack, he would be grievously injured by this strike.

In this area close to the mountainous heartland, teeming with Spirit Beasts, sustaining serious injuries could be fatal.

Because once they encountered an attack from a Spirit Beast, while other team members dealt with it, who would care for a severely injured person?

Therefore, to save his life, Zhou Tong had no choice but to grit his teeth and fight back hard.

Zhou Tong's eyes bulged, and his hair stood on end, his combat strength instantly peaking.

He rapidly retreated, dodging Tu Hu's saber strike while his right arm swiftly stretched out, pulling a long sword from the ancient scabbard on his back.

Zhou Tong's strength ranked relatively low among the core disciples, so he usually wouldn't voluntarily challenge a disciple stronger than himself, and he disdained using his sword against weaker challengers, hence he rarely used this sword.

Once he drew his sword, it meant he had encountered a formidable opponent and was prepared to go all out.

Chapter 963: Backing Down

Zhou Tong's sword moved horizontally in his hand, blocking the fierce slash of Tu Hu's descending blade.

Clang—

The collision of the sword and the blade produced a sharp, ear-piercing metallic clang, sparks flying everywhere, the light dazzling.

The True Yuan from both Tu Hu and Zhou Tong's bodies burst outward during their sword and blade collision, meeting in the space in front of them and exploding with a dull "boom".

Immediately after, the shockwave transformed by the True Yuan dispersed in all directions. Several nearby Bitao Martial Academy disciples were affected, knocked to the ground by the force of the shockwave. Although they were not injured, they were in a sorry state, their faces pale from fright.

Although Zhou Tong had blocked Tu Hu's descending blade with his sword, the True Essence Force emanating from Tu Hu's blade made his body tremble as if electrified and the ground beneath his feet, impacted by the force of the True Essence, cracked in all directions like a spider web.

Zhou Tong felt a tightness in his chest, his internal energy churning tumultuously. If he hadn't suppressed it in time, blood would have already sprayed from his mouth.

With Tu Hu's first stroke being so puissant and domineering, could he withstand the upcoming attacks?

Zhou Tong took advantage of the momentum to retreat several yards, confronting Tu Hu across several large rocks, his expression grave and serious.

"Junior Brother Tu, there's just a misunderstanding between us. How about we stop here? Look around, many martial artist teams have already gathered. If we both end up injured, wouldn't that give them a chance to benefit?"

Unexpectedly, Zhou Tong suddenly conceded to Tu Hu.

Zhou Tong's concession was out of necessity.

Tu Hu's previous stroke had already demonstrated powerful combat strength, and Zhou Tong knew that if the fight continued, defeat was inevitable.

Rather than suffering a potentially severe and humiliating defeat, it was better to broker peace while the outcome was still undecided.

Though such an act of yielding was nothing short of humiliating for Zhou Tong, a core disciple, it still beat being severely injured by Tu Hu, which could even result in death in this deep mountainous area.

As long as he could save his life, there would be opportunities in the future to seek revenge.

Zhou Tong was certain that Tu Hu would agree to make peace.

Although Tu Hu was slightly stronger, as both were high-rank Heaven Level masters, a full-on duel would likely result in a pyrrhic victory even if Tu Hu emerged as the winner.

Zhou Tong was betting that Tu Hu would not want a bitter victory to settle their dispute.

Onlookers from several teams in the distance, seeing Zhou Tong conceding to Tu Hu, looked at Tu Hu with even more complex expressions.

They all knew that after this battle, Tu Hu's name would be renowned throughout the entire Bitao Martial Academy.

Some Bitao Martial Academy disciples who enjoyed a good show felt disappointed. They thought that with Zhou Tong initiating a concession to stop fighting, Tu Hu surely wouldn't want both sides to suffer losses and would likely agree to cease combat, thus depriving them of their entertainment.

Huang Miao and others shifted their gazes to Tu Hu, waiting for him to make his decision.

In fact, although Huang Miao and the others sided with Tu Hu, deep down, they didn't really want to come into conflict with Zhou Tong and his group.

If both sides could really stop fighting and shake hands, that would be best.

Fang Bai stood with arms folded, smiling as he watched Tu Hu.

Everyone else guessed that Tu Hu might end the fight with Zhou Tong, but only he knew that it was absolutely impossible.

Because he sensed that after Zhou Tong showed weakness, Tu Hu's Martial Artist Aura did not weaken but instead increased somewhat, which was definitely not a friendly response.

As expected, Zhou Tong's display of weakness did not lead to Tu Hu ceasing to fight. Tu Hu snorted coldly, his broadsword slanting as he launched another stronger attack at Zhou Tong.

"Tu Hu, have you lost your mind!"

Zhou Tong swung his sword to block Tu Hu's broadsword and staggered back several meters, shouting angrily.

"Senior Brother Zhou, if I were still the Tu Hu who was only at the middle stage of the Heaven Level, would you have let me go?"

Tu Hu's broadsword flashed like lightning as he continuously attacked. Light flickered and blades surged crossly. Without waiting for Zhou Tong to respond, he sneered and said, "You wouldn't! You would first severely injure me and then steal the Cultivation Resources our team worked so hard to gather before you would leave arrogantly!"

"But now, when you realize that my strength is greater than yours, you are scared, regretful, worried about being severely injured by me, and then dying in these remote mountains. So you took the initiative to soften up and want to stop the fight... You must have thought I would readily agree, right?"

"You're wrong! I won't agree! Two years ago, I was defeated by Senior Brother Liu, the weakest among the Core Disciples, and the humiliation I suffered was deep. Since then, I've been tirelessly cultivating, awaiting the day when I can avenge that disgrace! My original plan was to challenge Senior Brother Liu after this training session, but now you've come to me out of nowhere..."

"Initially, I didn't want to clash with you, but you were aggressive and wanting to snatch our Cultivation Resources. For me as the team leader, what face would I have left if our Cultivation Resources were taken by you?"

"You are a Core Disciple, and ranked eighth on the Core Disciples' Strength Ranking, which is your pride and also a reason for you to look down on and bully us from the Inner Court. Since we from the Inner Court are weaker, we can only endure your oppression in silence."

"But you forgot, you also rose from being an Inner Court disciple to where you are now. If it's possible for you to rise to a Core Disciple, why can't anyone else? Now let me, an Inner Court disciple, challenge you, a Core Disciple!"

"My original challenge was to face Senior Brother Liu, the weakest on your Core Disciples' Strength Ranking, who once defeated and heavily injured me. But today, you bullied us, so let me defeat you first!"

Tu Hu's broadsword swung continuously, each strike fiercer and quicker than the last, his voice growing increasingly louder, erupting in almost a roar by the end.

"Thinking you can defeat me? Dream on! I'm not Liu Xiong, Junior Brother Liu! I'm much stronger than Junior Brother Liu!"

Zhou Tong's eyes turned blood red as he screamed at the top of his lungs, exerting all his strength to desperately block Tu Hu's increasingly quick and fierce broadsword assaults.

His hair was disheveled, his clothes were slashed by the sword wind, there were several long cuts on his body, and blood dripped from the corner of his mouth.

At this point, it was clear to everyone that Tu Hu was becoming more vigorous as the battle went on, gaining the upper hand, while Zhou Tong was internally and externally wounded, pushed to his limits, and could be knocked down at any moment.

"I admit, you are stronger than Junior Brother Liu, but at least Junior Brother Liu had an unyielding proud spirit. If it were Junior Brother Liu just now, he wouldn't have softened even knowing my strength was greater than his! But you, you're nothing but a coward who bullies the weak and fears the strong!"

He roared loudly, his broadsword swinging fiercely, the blade carrying a bright flash of light and a powerful True Yuan, harshly chopping down on Zhou Tong's broadsword.

Chapter 964: The Shi Village Martial Artist in Bitao Martial Academy

"Clang!"

A crisp sound rang out as Zhou Tong's long sword shattered inch by inch, falling to the ground.

As the swords clashed, a vigorous and domineering True Essence Force surged out from Tu Hu's long blade, traveling through Zhou Tong's sword and rushing into Zhou Tong's body.

Zhou Tong's body was struck as if by a tremendous hammer, and his form staggered backward.

"A martial artist who bullies the weak and fears the strong, a coward by nature, no matter how strong, will eventually be defeated!"

As Zhou Tong staggered backward, Tu Hu's voice boomed like thunder, and his body charged forward like a shadow before leaping high up and kicking Zhou Tong in mid-air.

"Crack!"

"Ah..."

The sound of breaking bones accompanied by a piercing scream as Zhou Tong's body was sent flying into the air by Tu Hu's powerful kick, then crashed down, fiercely hitting the ground and raising a cloud of dust.

Lying on the ground, Zhou Tong was bleeding from his mouth and nose, had broken bones, and was severely injured; he immediately passed out.

Fortunately, as a martial artist, his body was tough; if it had been an ordinary person, they might not have been killed by Tu Hu's kick, but the fall from high would certainly have left them with no chance of survival.

Seeing Zhou Tong pass out, the scene fell silent. Those disciples from the Bitao Martial Academy who were watching around, were shocked and struggled to believe that this duel of equal strength could end in such a dramatic fashion.

Even though Tu Hu had shown a slightly higher cultivation level than Zhou Tong before the duel, Zhou Tong was after all a longstanding Core Disciple, and many from the Bitao Martial Academy believed that once the duel began, it would be fierce and prolonged, not ending in a short period of time.

Even if someone were to win at the end, it would come at a great cost.

However, the outcome shocked almost everyone.

In just a few tens of breaths, Zhou Tong was sent flying by Tu Hu's blade, then kicked into the sky and fell unconscious upon landing.

Throughout, Tu Hu completely dominated Zhou Tong, who, despite being a prominent Core Disciple, was beaten unconscious without a chance to strike back.

Though this duel lacked any thrilling moments, Tu Hu's easy defeat of Zhou Tong shocked many.

This battle would raise Tu Hu's reputation within the Bitao Martial Academy to a new level.

Aside from Fang Bai, everyone else's gaze towards Tu Hu was filled with awe and admiration.

"Well done, Senior Brother Tu!"

"Senior Brother Tu, powerful and domineering!"

"Defeating Zhou Tong means Senior Brother Tu can now advance to Core Disciple!"

"Congratulations, Senior Brother Tu!"

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After a moment of silence, the martial artists at the scene suddenly burst into enthusiastic applause and cheering.

Particularly the nine martial artists from the same team as Tu Hu, they were even more excited and thrilled.

Tu Hu's strong defeat of Zhou Tong signified that he now possessed the strength of a Core Disciple, and the overall strength of their team was greatly enhanced by his presence.

It was foreseeable that in this mountain training, if nothing went wrong, the team led by Tu Hu was set to achieve remarkable results and rank among the top.

As they thought about this, some of the onlooking disciples from Bitao Martial Academy couldn't help but feel envious.

Similarly, Huang Miao and her group were all beaming happily, basking in the glory as well.

"I didn't expect Senior Brother Tu's strength to be so formidable. We were just thinking about helping Senior Brother Tu earlier! We must have amused him with our offer!"

Huang Miao sighed as she spoke to Tu Hu.

Tu Hu sheathed his sword and calmed himself down before cupping his fists toward Huang Miao and the others, saying solemnly, "What are you talking about, Junior Sister Huang? Whether you helped or not, I, Tu Hu, appreciate your good intentions! If you ever need my help in the future, just say the word!"

"Then we thank you, Senior Brother Tu!"

With this promise from Tu Hu, Huang Miao felt greatly pleased.

Hou Ziping was also visibly excited, his face flushed with excitement.

Now that Tu Hu had secured his position as a Core Disciple of Bitao Martial Academy, for Huang Miao and Hou Ziping, befriending him and securing his promise was undoubtedly all benefit and no harm.

At the very least, in Bitao Martial Academy, they now had a powerful ally. Other disciples from the academy would have to think twice before crossing them.

However, siblings Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu were not as excited as Huang Miao and Hou Ziping.

The siblings admired Fang Bai, believing that Fang Bai's strength was not inferior to Tu Hu's. With Fang Bai watching over them, they feared no one and nothing.

"Junior Sister Huang, take some of these cultivation resources!"

According to the unwritten rules, since Zhou Tong was defeated by Tu Hu, the cultivation resources gathered by Zhou Tong's team now belonged to Tu Hu's team as spoils of war.

As the team leader, Tu Hu had the authority to distribute these spoils. Although his team members were somewhat reluctant, none of them dared to object when he decided to share some with Huang Miao and the others.

Huang Miao shook her head and said, "One should not accept rewards without merits. Senior Brother Tu, these resources belong to you; we will not take them."

Tu Hu tried to persuade her but, seeing Huang Miao's firm refusal, he gave up.

After chatting for a while, they parted ways, not bothering any longer with Zhou Tong, who had been severely injured and had passed out.

Before leaving, Fang Bai cast a thoughtful glance at the team led by Tu Hu, his expression slightly peculiar.

"Junior Brother Fang, what are you looking at?"

With her keen perception, Huang Miao noticed Fang Bai's unusual expression and could not help but ask.

Fang Bai pointed to a member walking at the rear of Tu Hu's team and frowned, saying, "Senior Sister Huang, do you recognize that person?"

Huang Miao looked at the team member and after thinking it over, she said, "That person is a disciple from the Inner Court; I find him somewhat familiar but can't remember his name."

"Brother Fang, do you remember Shi Village next to Liuhu Village?"

Liu Qingqing suddenly spoke in a low voice, "That person is called Shi Gang; he is a Martial Artist from Shi Village and has been in Bitao Martial Academy for many years."

Fang Bai "Ah", looked enlightened and then smiled lightly, saying, "When we met Senior Brother Tu, that Shi Gang kept staring at me, and there was a hint of hatred in his eyes. It turns out he is from Shi Village. No wonder..."

Seeing Huang Miao's puzzled look, Fang Bai explained with a smile, "There has been a long-standing grudge between our Liuhu Village and Shi Gang's Shi Village. Before entering Bitao Martial Academy, I had injured several Martial Artists from Shi Village; naturally, this news must have reached Shi Gang, hence his animosity towards me!"

Huang Miao nodded, unconcerned, and said, "Junior Brother Fang's strength is among the top in the Inner Court, while that Shi Gang hasn't even made it into the top hundred of the Inner Court disciples' combat strength ranking. If he dares to provoke Junior Brother Fang, it would be a disgrace to himself. I don't think he would be that foolish."

Chapter 965: Primeval Forest

Fang Bai glanced at Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu, thinking that he himself was not worried about Shi Gang seeking revenge, but Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu, the siblings naive to the ways of the world and pure-hearted, would be in trouble if Shi Gang, bearing a grudge, decided to target them.

Liu Qingqing was somewhat better off, though she only possessed a Heaven Level beginner realm, but being an Innate Spiritual Root and having been trained in the Martial Arts Techniques he had taught, she already had the capability to challenge those beyond her level. Although not able to cross an entire realm like himself, she could still defeat Shi Gang, a mid-level Heaven Level Martial Artist, without any problems.

But Liu Liehu's strength was a bit too weak, which made Fang Bai somewhat worried.

"Qingqing, Liehu, keep these Jade Pendants close to you."

While no one was paying attention, Fang Bai casually took out two Jade Pendants from his Spatial Ring and handed them to Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu.

Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu accepted the Jade Pendants, looking at each other puzzledly, not understanding why Fang Bai wanted them to wear them.

Both Jade Pendants, carved from low-grade Golden Essence Stone, were not delicately crafted and seemed nothing special at first glance.

Aside from Fang Bai, no one else at the scene knew the purpose of these two Jade Pendants.

In reality, these two Jade Pendants were Defense Spiritual Artifacts crafted by Fang Bai in the past. Each contained several strands of lethal intent. If the bearers faced external attacks, especially in life-threatening situations, these strands of lethal intent would be triggered, protecting the wearer while also strongly retaliating against the attacker.

With Fang Bai's current realm and cultivation level, the defensive artifacts he had crafted were naturally exceptionally powerful. Even Desolate Level Martial Artists would find it difficult to harm the wearer.

Fang Bai gave Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu the Jade Pendants as a precaution to protect them from any potential retaliation from Shi Gang.

"A few years ago, I was fortunate to meet a very powerful and mysterious Martial Artist who gave me these two Jade Pendants. According to that Martial Artist, these Pendants serve as strong protective devices. When worn close to the body, they can save your life at critical moments," Fang Bai explained to Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu.

Huang Miao, who was nearby, perked up and her eyes fell on the two Jade Pendants in the hands of Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu, a hint of curiosity in her expression. She asked Fang Bai, "Junior Brother Fang, are these Jade Pendants, by any chance, Defense Spiritual Artifacts?"

As soon as the words "Defense Spiritual Artifact" left her mouth, including Hou Ziping, all the disciples from Bitao Martial Academy present directed their gazes towards the Jade Pendants in Liu Qingqing's and Liu Liehu's hands. Some even began to breathe more rapidly, their hearts ablaze with desire.

In the True Martial Realm, Spiritual Artifacts are far more precious and rare than Essence Stones, Elixirs, or other Cultivation Resources for the vast majority of Martial Artists, as training an Artifact Refiner is far more challenging than training a Pharmacist, and the process of creating a Spiritual Artifact consumes more energy and takes longer compared to concocting Elixirs.

Elixirs can aid Martial Artists during cultivation, but Spiritual Artifacts can directly enhance a Martial Artist's combat capabilities, offering tangible benefits and greater attraction.

It is said that in some of the major cultivation resource trading venues within the True Martial Realm, one can exchange for Spiritual Artifacts, but the price is exceedingly high, beyond what ordinary Martial Artists can afford.

In the True Martial Realm, therefore, not many Martial Artists possess a Spiritual Artifact; usually, only significant disciples from large Sects do.

For an institution like the fourth-tier Bitao Martial Academy, it is said that only the headmaster, Ren Jingbo, possesses a low-grade Spiritual Artifact, which shows just how precious these artifacts are.

Thus, when Huang Miao inquired whether the two Jade Pendants were Defense Spiritual Artifacts, nearly all the disciples from Bitao Martial Academy present showed an intrigued expression, focusing on the two Jade Pendants.

"When that Martial Artist gave me the Jade Pendant that year, he didn't specify if it was a Spiritual Artifact. However, I've had it on my person for many years, and although I've encountered some dangers, it doesn't seem to have provided any protective effects..."

Fang Bai knew well the principle that 'an innocent man is liable for his treasures,' and he also understood that if he claimed both Jade Pendants were Defense Spiritual Artifacts, it could invite covetousness from some disciples of the Bitao Martial Academy, which might bring adverse effects to Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu. Therefore, he was noncommittal in response to Huang Miao's inquiry.

Hearing what Fang Bai had said, the Martial Artists present were somewhat disappointed, and then they thought about it, how could a Martial Artist casually give away something as precious as a Spiritual Artifact?

Maybe those two Jade Pendants were just ordinary objects, and what Fang Bai had just said might have been just a comfort to the sisters Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu.

Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu had been in Bitao Martial Academy for a while now, and after soaking in their new environment, they had learned many things they previously didn't know and had heard of Spiritual Artifacts, understanding what they meant to a Martial Artist.

When Huang Miao asked if the Jade Pendants Fang Bai gave them were Spiritual Artifacts, the hearts of the siblings Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu also lifted, looking towards Fang Bai with eager anticipation.

Upon hearing Fang Bai say the Jade Pendant might not have much protective effect, the sisters were somewhat disappointed, but they stayed silent, quietly fiddling with the Jade Pendants in their hands.

"Don't be disappointed, the Jade Pendants I gave you are Defense Spiritual Artifacts! Keep them close to your bodies, and no one in the entire Bitao Martial Academy will be able to harm you!"

Fang Bai's voice suddenly sounded in the ears of siblings Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu.

The siblings startled, then slowly lifted their heads, looking at Fang Bai again, who was nodding at them with a smile and even winked.

"I am using a special method of communication, only you two can hear it, no one else can! Do not show any excited or thrilled expressions, and definitely don't brag about it to others, to avoid attracting trouble. Remember! Remember!"

Fang Bai then added.

Words from Fang Bai were not doubted by Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu; they suppressed the excitement in their hearts, trying their best to keep their expressions neutral. They carefully hung their respective Jade Pendants around their necks and concealed them close to their bodies.

As Tu Hu's team gradually moved farther away, disappearing into the dense forest ahead, other groups that had been spectating also began to leave one by one.

"Let's go too!"

Huang Miao glanced into the depths of the Bitao Mountain Range and continued forward with Fang Bai and others.

Climbing over mountains of varying heights and crossing numerous unfathomably deep gorges, when Fang Bai's five-person team arrived in front of a vast primeval forest, they stopped in their tracks.

This primeval forest had existed for God knows how many years; every tree reached up thirty meters, with lush branches and leaves that shaded the skies. Standing outside the primeval forest, one could see small animals moving within.

If one's hearing was sharp, they could faintly hear the sounds of lions roaring, wolves howling, tigers roaring, and monkeys crying from deep inside the forest.

"By passing through this primeval forest, we'll reach the core area of the Bitao Mountain Range."

Huang Miao pointed at the primeval forest ahead, speaking gravely.

Chapter 966: Let's See Who Laughs Last!

"Even within this primitive forest, where spirit beasts are innumerable and extremely perilous, we must be cautious and vigilant after entering to prevent attacks from spirit beasts. In the past, disciples from the Martial Academy who entered the mountain for training--many teams attempted to cross this primitive forest, aiming for the core area of the Bitao Mountain Range to try their luck. However, many of them never came out."

Huang Miao's gaze swept eerily across the primitive forest ahead as she continued speaking.

Upon hearing this, Hou Ziping, Liu Qingqing, and Liu Liehu couldn't help but turn pale, but Fang Bai remained calm and said, "It's getting late now. Let's rest outside the forest for the night, have something to eat, and after we've fully recharged our spirits, we'll set off early tomorrow morning."

Huang Miao and the others knew that entering the primitive forest at night would be even more dangerous, and they all agreed with Fang Bai's suggestion.

Right away, the five of them started a fire on a hill outside the primitive forest, and roasted several Red Fire Chickens and Snow Jade Rabbits to eat.

The Red Fire Chickens and Snow Jade Rabbits were low-level spirit beasts whose meat was not only delicious but also contained faint traces of Essence Energy. After eating, Fang Bai and the others felt their strength had been replenished and their spirits rejuvenated.

The five of them each chose a spot, sat down cross-legged, started to circulate their cultivation techniques, and began to rest and recover.

After this, two more cultivation teams from the Bitao Martial Academy arrived at the edge of the forest and rested near Huang Miao's team.

It seemed that just like Huang Miao's team, they were also planning to enter the primitive forest the next day.

The teams that had the courage to come here were all very strong overall, and their team leaders were either Core Disciples or Direct Disciples.

Teams like Tu Hu's and Huang Miao's, with Inner Court disciples as the team leaders, were considered oddities among the many teams that entered the mountain for training this time.

Those two cultivation teams, upon seeing Huang Miao's group, were somewhat surprised, which was immediately followed by unrestrained mockery.

The ridicule was mostly about how the strongest members of Huang Miao's team were only Inner Court disciples and they only had five team members; with such strength, they were delusional to try their luck in the core area of Bitao Mountain Range—it was like courting death. Some even believed that Huang Miao's team wouldn't be able to cross the primitive forest, and might all perish within it.

Although Huang Miao's crew was far away from the two cultivation teams, as martial artists with acute senses, they could faintly hear the mocking comments of the other teams.

"Let them talk, we shouldn't take it to heart. We will see who gets the last laugh!"

Seeing that Huang Miao and the others were greatly infuriated, Fang Bai spoke indifferently.

"That leader of the cultivation team is called Ouyang Zhan, a Personal Transmission Disciple of our Martial Academy."

Pointing at the cultivation team resting on the hill to the left, Huang Miao spoke angrily, "That tall, dark-skinned man with a square face is Ouyang Zhan. He's the lowest ranked among the Personal Transmission Disciples, but he's the most arrogant and conceited. It was he who was mocking us non-stop just now."

Fang Bai's gaze swept over Ouyang Zhan and with a light smile, said, "Let him mock us. Once we've passed through the primitive forest, I bet he won't be laughing anymore."

A night passed swiftly, and at dawn, the other two cultivation teams entered the primitive forest one after the other.

"Let's go as well! Junior Brother Hou and I will clear the way at the front, Junior Brother Fang will cover our rear, and Junior Sister Liu and Junior Sister Qingqing will stay in the middle. Once we enter the primitive forest, let's not get too far from each other, and if we're attacked by spirit beasts, don't panic..."

As the team leader and someone with abundant experience from multiple expeditions into the mountains, Huang Miao repeatedly instructed Fang Bai and the others on what to pay attention to before they entered the primitive forest.

After speaking, a pair of Willow Leaf Twin Sabers had already appeared in her hands.

These Willow Leaf Twin Sabers were Huang Miao's personal weapons. Although their power was far from that of a Spiritual Artifact, they could slice through iron like mud and were extremely tough and sharp.

Huang Miao seldom used the Willow Leaf Twin Sabers, but she was aware that the ancient forest harbored many dangers. A slight mishap might lead to her demise, so she was incredibly cautious and careful. With the twin sabers in hand, she felt a bit more confident.

She took a deep breath, then raised her head and stepped into the ancient forest.

Hou Ziping gripped a spear in one hand and hurried a few steps to catch up with Huang Miao, walking by her side.

Liu Qingqing drew her long sword, and Liu Liehu grasped an iron rod, both closely following the two.

All four of them wielded their weapons as if facing a great enemy, yet Fang Bai followed behind them barehanded and unhurried, appearing quite at ease.

The group had walked a few hundred meters when Huang Miao turned her head and saw Fang Bai's easy-going demeanor, she couldn't help but feel both amused and annoyed. In a crisp voice she said, "Junior Brother Fang, we're here for cultivating, not for a leisurely stroll. Why do you look so lax? Where is your weapon? Spirit Beast skins are tough, and their defensive capabilities are strong—you can't handle them empty-handed!"

Fang Bai said, "My weapon? I didn't bring one!"

After finishing, he raised his hands and laughed, "But these hands of mine are even more formidable than any weapon. Should I encounter a Spirit Beast, I will pound them with my fists, slash them with my palms."

Huang Miao replied with a wry smile, "Junior Brother Fang, this is no laughing matter. Once we enter this ancient forest, we could encounter a Spirit Beast attack at any moment. While it may not be a life-or-death crisis, it's still fraught with danger. How can you manage without a weapon? Here, I'll lend you one of my Willow Leaf Sabers."

As she spoke, she tossed one of the Willow Leaf Sabers towards Fang Bai with a flick of her left hand.

"Senior Sister Huang, I appreciate your kindness. I'm not joking—ordinary weapons really are less useful than my own hands."

Fang Bai spoke and as the Willow Leaf Saber flew towards him, he flicked his finger and lightly tapped the blade, which caused the saber to reverse direction and fly back towards Huang Miao.

Catching the saber in her hand, Huang Miao glanced at Fang Bai and sighed, "Alright then, just be careful!"

Fang Bai smiled and nodded.

Inside Fang Bai's Spatial Ring, there were two Spiritual Artifacts, the Blood-Drinking Mad Blade and the Houyi Bow, and even the Five Elements Origin Qi Cauldron could be used as a Spiritual Artifact.

However, those artifacts were incredibly powerful, and using them in such a situation would be rather showy. Unless he encountered a very powerful Spirit Beast that could not be taken on with bare hands, Fang Bai had no intention of using them.

The group continued forward, circling around tree trunks as large as rooms and dozens of feet tall, remaining vigilant and not daring to increase their pace.

Meanwhile, they did encounter several low-level Spirit Beasts, but none of the five attempted to disturb them.

Before entering the ancient forest, Fang Bai's group had hidden the Spirit Beasts they had previously hunted at a secret location. If their expedition was successful, they planned to hunt a few more on their return trip, to take back along with those they had already caught.

Chapter 967: Nether River

Huang Miao's team's current objective was to traverse the extensive expanse of the primitive forest they were in and to reach the heart of the Bitao Mountain Range.

In the heart of the Bitao Mountain Range, where crisis and opportunity coexisted, venturing deeper was akin to a narrow escape from death. However, with a stroke of good fortune, one could possibly make further advancements on the Martial Dao path, soaring to great heights thereafter.

In the core area of the mountain range, there was a chance to hunt higher-class Spirit Beasts and to harvest higher-level Spiritual Medicine, or by a fortunate twist of fate, to stumble upon Cultivation Resources left by powerful beings from the past.

All of these were immensely tempting to the teams undergoing cultivation training in the mountains.

Not just Huang Miao's team, but other teams that had entered the primitive forest shared the same aspirations.

Half a day later, Huang Miao and four others had ventured over three hundred miles deep into the primitive forest.

To their relief, although they had encountered attacks from some Spirit Beasts along the way, these beasts were low-level ones with weak offensive capabilities, and they had not met any formidable mid-level Spirit Beasts.

Moreover, under Fang Bai's guidance, Huang Miao and the others discovered several three to four hundred-year-old Spiritual Medicines in an extremely hidden spot.

Without Fang Bai, Huang Miao and the rest would have missed these Spiritual Medicines completely.

Three to four hundred-year-old Spiritual Medicines, although not as impressive as mid-level Spiritual Medicines with over five hundred years of medicinal age, were still of great value. Merely by taking these few plants back, they could achieve leading results among the teams in this mountain-training expedition, and this had the four of them thrilled.

"Based on the records from previous mountain-training expeditions, returning to Bitao Martial Academy with these Spiritual Medicines, and adding to that the previously hidden medicines and Spirit Beasts,

would be enough to enter the top ten of all cultivating teams. With that, we could obtain a multitude of Essence Stones and Elixirs as rewards from the Martial Academy,"

Huang Miao said excitedly.

For Huang Miao, possessing more Essence Stones and Elixirs meant an opportunity for greater progress on the path of Martial Dao.

"It's just unfortunate we couldn't hunt any Spirit Beasts with longer lifespans; otherwise, our results from this expedition would have been even better,"

Said Huang Miao with a mix of excitement and slight regret.

However, the longer the lifespan of a Spirit Beast, the more formidable it was. Should they encounter one, a fierce battle would be inevitable, potentially leading to someone's demise, something Huang Miao did not wish to see.

Their team had been within the Bitao Mountain Range for several days. During spare moments together, they sparred, discussed Cultivation Techniques, and treated each other as friends. Nobody wanted anything untoward to happen.

Thus, while they did feel a sense of regret for not encountering any formidable Spirit Beasts, they felt more relieved.

Especially Hou Ziping, who was very content with the result of this adventuring expedition. According to his opinion, they should immediately call it quits and return to Bitao Martial Academy.

However, Fang Bai and Huang Miao were determined to press on in search of greater opportunities, with Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu regarding Fang Baima as their leader, closely following him. Hou Ziping, for fear of tarnishing his reputation as a coward, had no choice but to steel himself and continue forward with the rest.

As they progressed, Fang Bai released his Divine Sense, monitoring movements within a kilometer radius.

"In my past expeditions,

the furthest I've reached is here. Beyond this point, I'm not familiar with the terrain. If we continue forward, we'll have to play it by ear,"

As the five people arrived at a river that spanned across the pristine forest, Huang Miao looked at the slowly eastward flowing river, as smooth as a mirror, with a complex expression on her face.

The river was about a hundred meters wide, and the reflection of the blue sky, white clouds, and the dense, multicolored leaves from both banks made the water appear vibrant with colors, a sight too beautiful for words.

"What's special about this river?"

Fang Bai, noticing a hint of fear in Huang Miao's expression, as if the seemingly beautiful river frightened her, asked curiously.

Huang Miao pointed at the river in front of them and said solemnly, "This river is called the Nether River. It's known as 'Nether' because, since the establishment of the Bitao Martial Academy nearly ten thousand years ago, hundreds upon hundreds of disciples who entered the mountain for cultivation have fallen to their deaths within it..."

Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu had just admired the river's beauty and were quite excited. They even thought about going to the riverbank to kneel and touch the water, but upon hearing Huang Miao's words, they couldn't help but take a sharp intake of breath.

They never imagined that this smooth, picturesque river had swallowed the lives of so many Bitao Martial Academy disciples. If what was said was true, then this river deserved to be called the River of Death.

However, how could so many disciples of the Bitao Martial Academy fall within this river?

"There are powerful Spirit Beasts lurking at the bottom of the Nether River."

Fang Bai's gaze rested on the calm surface of the river and continued Huang Miao's words, "Disciples who go into the mountains for cultivation must cross the river to reach the other side. During the crossing, those Spirit Beasts lurking at the bottom can launch a sudden attack, and the weaker disciples could end up as prey for the beasts."

Earlier, Fang Bai had extended his Divine Sense into the riverbed and discovered that the river was several hundred meters deep, with various kinds of Spirit Beasts dwelling at the bottom. Among them, a few of the stronger beasts were already very close to being high-level Spirit Beasts.

With these Spirit Beasts lurking at the bottom, even for Inner Court disciples, successfully crossing the river would not be easy. No wonder so many Martial Academy disciples had perished in this river since the academy's founding.

Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu, who had been relatively close to the water, were startled when they heard that Spirit Beasts were hiding in the river. It was highly probable that these beasts would attack crossing disciples, and with a shudder in their hearts, they immediately moved further away from the water.

Huang Miao looked at Fang Bai with surprise and asked, "Junior Brother Fang, how did you know there are Spirit Beasts in the river? Did you hear it from someone?"

Fang Bai smiled and said, "I was born with a special ability that allows me to sense the presence of Spirit Beasts within a certain range."

Huang Miao's eyes lit up with joy, exclaiming, "If Junior Brother Fang has this skill, then we have a much better chance of crossing the river."

Hou Ziping, Liu Qingqing, and Liu Liehu were also heartened, and the tension in their nerves suddenly eased.

If Fang Bai could sense the presence of Spirit Beasts, then he could lead the way across the river, avoiding the sections where Spirit Beasts lurk, thus preventing their attacks.

"Junior Brother Fang, you are our lucky charm! Without you, we would have had to turn back upon reaching the bank of the Nether River during this mountain cultivation,"

Hou Ziping said with a smile.

Fang Bai smiled faintly, just about to speak, when he suddenly turned his head towards the left bank and whispered, "There are people over there!"

Huang Miao and the others were startled, then followed Fang Bai's gaze, and saw ten shadows of Bitao Martial Academy disciples emerging from the primeval forest several hundred meters to the left of the riverbank.

Clearly, this was another cultivation team on a mountain expedition.

Chapter 968: The First Personal Transmission Disciple

"It's Senior Brother Nangong!"

When Huang Miao saw the disciple from Bitao Martial Academy at the forefront of the Cultivation Team, she exclaimed involuntarily, her face showing a mix of reverence.

"Senior Sister Huang, who is Senior Brother Nangong?"

Seeing Huang Miao so excited, Liu Qingqing couldn't help but ask curiously.

Hou Ziping interjected eagerly, "Junior Sister Liu, Senior Brother Nangong's full name is Nangong Jian. He is the foremost among the ten Personal Transmission Disciples of our Bitao Martial Academy and the strongest among the thousands of disciples in the academy. Not only is he valued by the higher echelons of the academy, but he is also an example for many disciples."

His voice trembled slightly, clearly very excited as well.

No wonder, for Inner Court disciples like Huang Miao and Hou Ziping, although they were esteemed in the eyes of menial servants and External Courtyard disciples, they were nothing compared to the Personal Transmission Disciples.

Between Inner Court disciples and Personal Transmission Disciples, there were Core Disciples and a difference of two smaller realms. If an Inner Court disciple had the backing of a Personal Transmission Disciple, then they could walk sideways within the Inner Court.

Personal Transmission Disciples normally followed the four Elders to cultivate, and it was very difficult for Inner Court disciples to even see them, let alone someone like Senior Brother Nangong, who was the leader of the Personal Transmission Disciples. It was both shocking and thrilling for people like Huang Miao to encounter him here, and they were uncontrollably excited.

Liu Qingqing simply responded, "Oh," showing no particular emotion since, in her heart, neither Senior Brother Nangong nor the leader of the Personal Transmission Disciples could compare to Brother Fang.

Liu Liehu felt the same.

"Should we go over and greet them?"

Hou Ziping, his eyes filled with eager anticipation, rubbed his hands together and asked as he looked over at Ouyang Jian.

Hou Ziping was being very pragmatic—if they could make acquaintances with Nangong Jian, no disciples would dare to bully them in the future at Bitao Martial Academy.

The moment Huang Miao saw Nangong Jian, her mind heated up, initially wanting to greet him, but after calming down, she decided against it.

Although Nangong Jian was a high and mighty Personal Transmission Disciple, the other disciples of Bitao Martial Academy didn't think highly of him, saying he was too proud and had deep schemes. He didn't regard even Core Disciples, let alone Inner Court disciples like herself, with any significance.

If they went over to greet him enthusiastically and he responded with cold disdain, ignoring them, it would be very embarrassing.

Moreover, Huang Miao was also worried—they had previously gathered a few high-grade Spiritual Medicines, and if Nangong Jian and his group saw them, there was no guarantee they wouldn't forcibly take them for themselves.

"We are here on a mountain training expedition, and there's competitive tension among each team, so it's better not to rashly go over and greet them,"

Huang Miao whispered to Hou Ziping.

As soon as she finished speaking, her expression changed slightly, noticing that Ouyang Jian and his group were now walking along the riverbank towards them.

"Junior Brother Liu, hide those Spiritual Medicines. I'm afraid Senior Brother Nangong and his group are coming over to snatch them!"

Huang Miao urgently said to Liu Liehu.

Given Nangong Jian's proud nature, there was no way he would come over to greet them, so their intention for coming here was clear.

Liu Liehu was responsible for guarding the few precious Spiritual Medicines their team had just harvested. Hearing the approach, he immediately tensed up, stuffed the Spiritual Medicines into his clothes, and then stood behind Fang Bai, feeling that only behind Fang Bai was truly safe.

Fang Bai's eyes narrowed slightly, and his expression was indifferent as he watched Nangong Jian and others stride towards them. When his gaze fell on the female disciple behind Nangong Jian, a hint of chill flashed across his face.

That female disciple was none other than Gao Shuxian, with whom he had old grievances.

"Gao Shuxian, that woman, I didn't expect she would team up with Senior Brother Nangong! This is trouble now!"

Hou Ziping also saw Gao Shuxian, and his face turned pale instantly.

Hou Ziping and Gao Shuxian had numerous conflicts. Not long ago, Gao Shuxian had incited the cousins Yang Lin and Yang Wei to challenge him and Fang Bai, but they were defeated by him and Fang Bai. He had thought that Gao Shuxian would be deterred and would not trouble them again, yet it was not long before she had hooked up with Nangong Jian.

If Gao Shuxian were to incite Nangong Jian to strike back at him and Fang Bai, the consequences would be severe.

Nangong Jian's cultivation level was at Heaven Level Perfection, just one step away from stepping into the Desolate Level realm, a level that was not something their Inner Court disciples could contend with.

It's no exaggeration to say that even if their team of five joined forces, managing to withstand ten moves under Nangong Jian would be considered lucky.

Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu had joined the Bitao Martial Academy later and hadn't seen Nangong Jian, but they knew what it meant to be the first in the rankings of Personal Transmission Disciples.

Although the siblings trusted Fang Bai to protect them, seeing the look of imminent danger on Huang Miao and Hou Ziping's faces, they too were influenced and began to feel tense.

The pace of Nangong Jian and his group was very fast, and in a matter of a few moments, they had already approached within ten meters of Huang Miao and others. Simultaneously, waves of martial artists' oppressive might surged towards them, making them feel tremendous pressure.

The team led by Nangong Jian could be said to be the strongest in terms of overall strength among all the teams that entered the mountains this time, comprising not only Nangong Jian, a Personal Transmission Disciple, but also two Core Disciples and seven Inner Court Disciples.

In Huang Miao's view, even if Nangong Jian himself didn't make a move, just the other nine people could easily handle their team.

Seeing Nangong Jian's gaze continuously fixed on Liu Liehu, Huang Miao couldn't help but feel despair, knowing they had indeed discovered the Spiritual Medicines Liu Liehu had hidden in his clothes.

"Senior Brother Hou, Junior Brother Fang, Junior Brother Liu, Junior Sister Liu, if Senior Brother Nangong wants our Spiritual Medicines, I think we might as well just give them to him. What do you think?"

Huang Miao whispered to the four, Fang Bai included.

She thought, since the Spiritual Medicines had been discovered, it was now impossible to keep them hidden. Rather than having them forcibly taken, it seemed better to voluntarily hand them over to avoid injuries during their confrontation.

Furthermore, exchanging the Spiritual Medicines for personal safety would give them a chance to cross the Nether River, and perhaps they could find other opportunities in the core area of the Bitao Mountain Range.

"No! These Spiritual Medicines were hard-earned by us; how can we just hand them over? Brother Fang, don't you agree?"

Liu Liehu, seeing Nangong Jian and his people getting closer, was nervous, but he was unwilling to hand over the Spiritual Medicines.

Huang Miao sighed, "Junior Brother Liu, I understand how you feel, but when under someone else's roof, you have to bow your head."

Fang Bai turned to Liu Liehu with a smile and said, "Liehu, you're right, why should we hand over what we've worked so hard to obtain? Make sure the Spiritual Medicines are secure, and let's see who can take them away!"

Chapter 969: Shen Yulin

Huang Miao had not anticipated that Fang Bai would be even more steadfast than Liu Liehu. She was momentarily stunned, then a bitter smile appeared on her face.

"Junior Brother Fang, a true man knows when to bend and when to stand. Showing weakness at the right time can also be a means of wise self-preservation. The five of us are no match for Senior Brother Nangong and his group. If we persist in opposing them, they will gravely injure us! Moreover, this area is close to the heart of the Bitao Mountain Range, where the Spirit Beasts are more numerous and powerful. Should we be gravely injured and then attacked by a Spirit Beast, the consequences would be unimaginable!"

Huang Miao earnestly and softly tried to persuade him.

Huang Miao was not afraid of dying, but she felt it unwise to face severe consequences over a moment of impulsiveness.

Although the Spiritual Medicine was precious, it was not worth more than their lives. Besides, lost Spiritual Medicine could be found again, but a lost life meant the end of everything.

Hou Ziping deeply agreed with Huang Miao's words.

With his current strength, Hou Ziping was not afraid of any Direct Disciple of the Inner Court. However, he still harbored great apprehension towards the top Personal Transmission Disciple—he had a two-stage realm difference with Nangong Jian.

This gap endowed Nangong Jian with the power to completely overpower him.

Hou Ziping, thinking along the lines of Huang Miao, did not want to jeopardize everyone's lives for a few stalks of Spiritual Medicine.

Giving up the hard-earned Spiritual Medicine might feel shameful, but a gentleman's revenge could wait a decade. Who would say that one day he could not surpass Nangong Jian? Then, he could avenge today's disgrace without haste.

However, Hou Ziping did not attempt to persuade Fang Bai like Huang Miao had.

Although Hou Ziping had only interacted briefly with Fang Bai, he felt that Fang Bai was profoundly mysterious and elusive during that time.

Hou Ziping firmly believed that the capabilities Fang Bai had displayed up until now were not his true powers. He even thought that Fang Bai was much more mystifying than Tu Hu, who had recently defeated Core Disciple Zhou Tong.

Hou Ziping believed he understood Fang Bai to a certain extent and knew that Fang Bai was not someone who acted impulsively. On the contrary, he was very calm and would not have spoken those seemingly irrational words to Liu Liehu without certainty.

Hou Ziping stared at Fang Bai's inoffensive and handsome face, lost in thought, when suddenly he thought of a possibility and his eyes widened with excitement.

If Senior Brother Tu Tu Hu had recently shown his prowess by overturning the Core Disciple Zhou Tong, could it be possible that this Junior Brother Fang Bai had a chance against the premier Personal Transmission Disciple, Nangong Jian?

Fang Bai knew that Huang Miao was advising him with the best intentions. He smiled and said, "Senior Sister Huang, don't worry, we don't necessarily have to directly confront Senior Brother Nangong. Someone will step in for us..."

Caught off guard, Huang Miao was about to inquire further but suddenly felt a premonition and turned to look toward the eastern bank of the river.

This glance was urgent, and she couldn't help but exclaim, "Senior Sister Shen?"

From the primordial forest on the eastern bank of the river, another Cultivation Team emerged and quickly moved towards them.

The person in the front of this Cultivation Team was a woman in her early thirties from Bitao Martial Academy, wielding a short blade.

The woman's complexion was fair, she had a tall figure and an energetic presence. The Martial Artist Aura emanating from her was comparable to that of Nangong Jian.

Upon seeing the woman, Hou Ziping was also surprised and murmured, "What is Senior Sister Shen doing here..."

"Senior Sister Huang, who is this Senior Sister Shen?"

Liu Qingqing asked in a low voice.

Huang Miao said, "Senior Sister Shen's name is Shen Yulin. She is also one of the top ten Personal Transmission Disciples of Bitao Martial Academy, second only to Senior Brother Ouyang. However..."

She glanced at Shen Yulin and others who were rapidly approaching, then continued, "Here at Bitao Martial Academy, Senior Sister Shen's character and reputation are much better than those of Senior Brother Ouyang. Moreover, Senior Sister Shen and Senior Brother Ouyang have always been at odds..."

She stopped abruptly, her eyes thoughtful as she glanced at Fang Bai, remembering how Junior Brother Fang had just mentioned that "someone will stand up for us." Could he have been referring to Senior Sister Shen Yulin?

But how did Junior Brother Fang know that Senior Sister Shen Yulin would appear here? And how could he be so sure that she would stand up for them against Senior Brother Ouyang?

Huang Miao certainly didn't know that Fang Bai had already developed his Divine Sense, which allowed him to be aware of things in all directions and within a two-thousand-meter radius centered on him.

In other words, as long as Fang Bai extended his Divine Sense, he would be alert to every movement within a two-kilometer radius around him.

Recently, when the Cultivation Team headed by Shen Yulin entered the range of Fang Bai's Divine Sense, they happened to be discussing the grievances between Shen Yulin and Ouyang Jian, leading Fang Bai to realize the irreconcilable conflict between these two major Personal Transmission Disciples.

Later, as Shen Yulin and others neared the Nether River, they discovered Ouyang Jian and his group closing in on the team led by Huang Miao, clearly intent on causing harm to Huang Miao's team.

In Bitao Martial Academy, many disciples knew about the deep animosity between Ouyang Jian and Shen Yulin. Whatever Ouyang Jian despised and opposed, Shen Yulin was sure to favor and support.

While others feared Ouyang Jian, Shen Yulin was not afraid of him at all. Although she was slightly inferior to Ouyang Jian in a duel, their strength was so closely matched that Ouyang Jian would also pay a heavy price to severely injure her.

Ouyang Jian is a smart man; he would never engage in a battle that causes great damage to himself as well as to his enemy.

Thus, although Ouyang Jian despised Shen Yulin, he was unable to do anything against her.

Similarly, Shen Yulin greatly despised Ouyang Jian and loathed his character. Whenever she saw Ouyang Jian bullying disciples of Bitao Martial Academy, she would step forward to stop him.

Therefore, Shen Yulin was extremely popular at Bitao Martial Academy and, when setting out for mountain training, many disciples hoped to team up with her.

Eventually, Shen Yulin formed a ten-member team consisting of one Personal Transmission Disciple, four Core Disciples, and four Inner Court Disciples.

The overall strength of their team was in no way inferior to the team led by Ouyang Chuang. In fact, it was even slightly stronger.

Upon seeing Ouyang Jian's group pressing close to the team including Huang Miao, Shen Yulin's first reaction was that Ouyang Jian and his people intended to bully them.

Unlike Ouyang Jian's arrogant self-confidence, Shen Yulin was very approachable, could easily interact with most of the Personal Transmission Disciples and Core Disciples, and even befriended disciples from the Inner Court, External Courtyard, and even menial servants.

Such a Personal Transmission Disciple was inevitably much loved and welcomed by the disciples of Bitao Martial Academy.

Having a favorable impression of Huang Miao, the second-ranked disciple in combat power from the Inner Court, Shen Yulin felt that Huang Miao's personality somewhat resembled her own, and their growth trajectories were nearly identical. Perhaps in another ten or eight years, she could become what Shen Yulin is now.

Seeing that Ouyang Jian and his people were nearly upon them, Shen Yulin's eyes sparkled brilliantly, and her figure suddenly accelerated, reaching Huang Miao's side in an instant.

Chapter 970: I've sworn to protect these people!

After Ouyang Jian and his group appeared by the Nether River, they were overjoyed to find that Huang Miao's cultivation team had actually harvested several spiritual medicines close to mid-quality. Under Ouyang Jian's lead, they quickly closed in on Huang Miao and the others, preparing to snatch those spiritual medicines away.

In their view, the strongest member of Huang Miao's team was merely at a mid-tier Heaven Level; they believed that without Ouyang Jian lifting a finger, they could force the opposite party to hand over the spiritual medicines.

However, the appearance of Shen Yulin and her group caused a slight change in their facial expressions and added a measure of wariness to their hearts, thereby considerably slowing their pace.

"This despicable woman, showing up just at this time, it seems she's here to spoil my plan!"

Watching Shen Yulin standing beside Huang Miao, Ouyang Jian's eyes gleamed with a cold light, and his face turned ugly.

"Senior Sister Shen, I have some matters to discuss with Junior Sister Huang. Please leave us for now," Ouyang Jian said coldly, standing two zhang away from Huang Miao and Shen Yulin.

Although Ouyang Jian was arrogant and looked down on fellow disciples weaker than himself, he still had some impression of Huang Miao, who was ranked second in the Inner Court disciple power rankings, especially after being reminded by his Inner Court disciples, hence he had some understanding of Huang Miao.

Ouyang Jian and Shen Yulin had always been at odds and had even faced off directly several times; therefore, there was no need for pleasantries in their speech.

Shen Yulin glanced at Ouyang Jian with disdainful eyes and then asked Huang Miao with a smile, "Junior Sister Huang, do you know Senior Brother Ouyang?"

"I don't."

Huang Miao immediately shook her head, then grabbed Shen Yulin's arm and pleaded, "Senior Sister Shen, Senior Brother Ouyang wants to rob us of our cultivation resources. Please help us!"

She knew that Shen Yulin and Ouyang Jian were not on good terms. To keep the spiritual medicines her team had harvested, she could only hope for Shen Yulin's intervention.

Even if it meant giving half of the harvested spiritual medicines to Shen Yulin, Huang Miao felt it would be acceptable.

Shen Yulin, who had a warm-hearted nature and always stood up against injustice, furrowed her brows upon hearing this, then looked expressionlessly at Ouyang Jian and sneered, "Senior Brother Ouyang, did you hear that? What do you have to say now?"

She paused, then continued with a mocking tone, "You, as a personal transmission disciple, resort to bullying the weak. Harassing Inner Court disciples is utterly shameless! Shame on you, I'm embarrassed for you as a fellow personal transmission disciple!"

Ouyang Jian's face grew even uglier, and he said coldly, "Senior Sister Shen, I advise you not to meddle in others' business!"

"I just insist on meddling!"

Shen Yulin, not the least bit intimidated by Ouyang Jian's threats, raised her eyebrows and spoke crisply while stepping forward to protect Huang Miao and the others behind her.

"This Shen Yulin is quite interesting."

Watching Shen Yulin's figure, Fang Bai revealed a smile at the corner of his mouth, his impression of this woman grew somewhat favorable.

Ouyang Jian, provoked and angered by Shen Yulin, gritted his teeth and said, "Shen Yulin, I know you are strong, but it is still possible for me to defeat you! Do you truly intend to battle me for the sake of these few people of Junior Sister Huang?"

He spoke sharply, stepping forward, as a powerful oppressive aura surged toward Shen Yulin like a tidal wave. By calling out Shen Yulin's name directly, he was clearly ready to burn all bridges.

The pressure from Ouyang Jian, a Heaven Level Perfection powerhouse, instantly made it difficult for those behind Shen Yulin to withstand, prompting them to circulate their cultivation techniques as True Yuan enveloped their bodies, trying to counteract the oppressive force released by Ouyang Jian.

Shen Yulin snorted coldly, circulating her True Yuan, and released her Martial Artist Aura, instantly neutralizing the oppressive force from Ouyang Jian.

Huang Miao and the others felt as if a great burden had been lifted and, knowing that Shen Yulin could contend with Ouyang Jian, they couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief, their hearts that were suspended in anxiety finally falling back to rest.

"Senior Brother Ouyang, if you want to fight, then I will joyously engage in a battle with you! If you do not wish to fight, please leave! Junior Sister Huang and these people, I am determined to protect!"

Shen Yulin's eyes held a threatening glare, holding her broken blade horizontally, ready to battle with a strong and aggressive stance.

Ouyang Jian clenched his fists tightly, his clothes rustling in the wind generated by his powerful True Yuan, his fighting spirit reaching its peak, his right hand also resting on the hilt of his sword.

If he were to draw his sword from its scabbard, it would mean he was resolute in battling Shen Yulin.

The character for 'sword' was in Ouyang Jian's name, and the Martial Arts he practiced were related to the sword; among the thousands of disciples at Bitao Martial Academy, his swordsmanship was unparalleled. If it weren't for Fang Bai, he could well be considered the number one swordsman.

If he were to give his all in a battle with Shen Yulin, it would take hundreds of rounds to determine the winner, but if they fought to the end, he would still emerge victorious.

But Ouyang Jian did not wish for such a pyrrhic victory, for he was already at the edge of the Nether River, just needing to cross it to enter the core region of the Bitao Mountain Range to search for opportunities.

If he wasted all his energy on Shen Yulin, he might not even be able to cross the Nether River where Spirit Beasts lurked, which would be a loss far outweighing the gain.

Therefore, with a quick turn of thought, Ouyang Jian forcibly suppressed the rage in his chest, cast a hateful glance at Shen Yulin, and spoke coldly, "Junior Sister Shen, I will remember this debt, and seek settlement from you when another opportunity arises!"

"I will accompany you at any time!"

Shen Yulin looked disdainfully at Ouyang Jian.

Ouyang Jian snorted, his gaze shifting to Huang Miao, his voice ominous as he said, "Junior Sister Shen might be able to cover for you momentarily, but she can't protect you forever. We will see! It's easy to enter the Bitao Mountain Range, but getting out is difficult!"

His words were filled with threat, especially the last sentence, which openly revealed his intent to kill.

While the disciples of Bitao Martial Academy were forbidden from killing each other, the mountain training was fraught with dangers, and with the strength of Ouyang Jian's team, if they wanted to doom Huang Miao and her companions to death, there were many ways to do so without directly dealing the killing blow.

Facing Ouyang Jian's cold and murderous gaze, Huang Miao shivered involuntarily and couldn't bring herself to meet his eyes.

After leaving a threatening message, Ouyang Jian turned and walked away with his team, looking for the best spot to cross the Nether River.

Hou Ziping watched their retreating figures with a face full of worry, inwardly sighing in distress, thinking that being marked by Ouyang Jian meant their coming days would be tough. If Ouyang Jian was intent on targeting them, they might indeed not be able to leave the Bitao Mountain Range.

Huang Miao and Hou Ziping were both daunted by Ouyang Jian's parting words, their complexions changing, anxious and uneasy. In contrast, Fang Bai and his companions, Liu Qingqing and Liu Liehu, appeared completely calm, showing no signs of panic.

The composure shown by the trio of Fang Bai intrigued Shen Yulin.

"Junior Sister Huang, from now on, you five follow behind us. If Senior Brother Ouyang decides to target you in the future, come find me."

Shen Yulin took Huang Miao's hand, gently tapping the back of her hand, her voice warm as she spoke.