

Old Gods 561

Chapter 561: a Divine General

Since Old Bai Yanhui joined the Ran Sect, the defensive strength of Cloud Sea Cliff skyrocketed!

At the very least, this Spellcaster Believer gave everyone some peace of mind.

If Bai Yanhui announced there was nothing to worry about today, then Cloud Sea Cliff was unlikely to face any attacks from villains.

Nonetheless, Lu Ran still wanted to enhance the defense level further!

With a swift Evil Shadow Flash, he teleported to the cave near the beach at the base of Cloud Sea Cliff.

"Divine Power shapes the form, Source Energy builds the soul."

Lu Ran extended a hand forward, silently reciting the incantation, as a massive pitch-black slender dog gradually took shape.

After completing his mission during the Northwest expedition, Lu Ran had successfully nurtured the Evil Dog Sculpture to Sea Realm·First Rank.

Now, he could create an Evil Dog at River Realm·Fifth Rank.

"Roar..."

The moment the Evil Dog appeared, it entered hunting mode, letting out a low growl.

"Hiss..." Lu Ran drew in a sharp breath.

What a formidable River Realm Peak Demon Lord!

The Evil Dog at River Realm-Fifth Rank was 3.5 meters long and stood 2.1 meters tall at the shoulders.

Taller than Lu Ran himself!

This truly gave meaning to the phrase, "looking down on people."

At this moment, the Evil Dog bowed its massive head, its blood-red eyes locked onto Lu Ran, emitting waves of savage, bloodthirsty aura.

Lu Ran's temples throbbed incessantly in alarm!

This?

Lu Ran realized that the Evil Dog's inner self was struggling!

Because Lu Ran infused the Evil Dog with the concept of absolute loyalty during its creation, it didn't bare its fangs right away.

But the Evil Dog Clan's inherently feral nature and insatiable craving for human blood and flesh were impossible to suppress.

This led to an eerie scene!

The Evil Dog trembled violently, as its low intelligence fought against its own brutal instincts for control over its body.

"Holy crap!"

Lu Ran was completely dumbfounded.

He had thought that the intelligence of a River Realm·Fifth Rank slender dog would be higher and that it would be more obedient. But now it seemed...

Even when facing Lu Ran, the slender dog was this torn.

What would happen if it encountered other humans?

"Smack!" Lu Ran raised his hand and slapped the cylindrical dog snout hard.

This lord is your master!

What, you want to eat me?

"Roar!!" The bloodthirsty glow in the Evil Dog's eyes intensified.

Lu Ran: "..."

Normally, wouldn't a slap like that clear up a dog's gaze?

"Bark! Bark bark!"

The Evil Dog suddenly barked, its crimson eyes locked onto the mist-filled entrance of the cave.

The Demon Lord wasn't barking for nothing.

It directly activated Evil Technique·Evil Tooth!

"Stop!" Lu Ran was startled, raising his arms to encircle the slender cylindrical snout.

At the same time, four black mist threads had already emerged from his hands.

Evil Spear Emperor's Evil Technique·Evil Cloud Entanglement!

"Whimper!!" The Evil Dog growled angrily, wildly struggling.

It clearly attempted to Instant Teleport, but the snake-like black mist threads coiled around its body, seeping inside to block the flow of its energy completely.

"Ah!!" Lu Ran let out a sharp cry.

The piercing, shrill Sea Merfolk Song from the depths of the ocean rendered the dog's mind entirely blank.

The Evil Dog's spirit wavered, leaving it stunned in place.

"Shhh!" Lu Ran immediately lashed upward with the Eight Desolate Annihilation Blade, piercing the black dog's head from below.

The crisis was finally resolved.

"Phew..." Lu Ran exhaled deeply and withdrew his blade, as the massive Evil Dog's body collapsed.

Yan Shuangzi silently appeared, kneeling on one knee at Lu Ran's feet, and whispered, "Forgive me, Master."

"It's alright." Lu Ran sheathed his blade. "The Evil Dog is so perceptive; noticing you is only natural."

As he spoke, he sighed inwardly.

Lu Ran could create as many as 10 River Realm Peak Evil Dogs!

What an excellent patrol squad that would have been!

But alas, the Evil Dog Clan's deficient intelligence made it impossible to suppress their ferocious nature.

Considering Yan Shuangzi's highly unique identity...

She was the bonded inheritor of the Evil Dog Sculpture!

Even so, when the Evil Dog saw Yan Shuangzi, it still coveted her blood and tender flesh, launching an Evil Tooth attack as soon as it could.

"Forgive me; it was my reckless behavior..."

"No problem, Evil Shadow." Lu Ran spoke gently, his naturally hanging hand lightly patting her bamboo hat.

Yan Shuangzi bowed her head even further, saying, "Once I replace the Evil Dog Statue, Master will freely summon Evil Demons."

Lu Ran naturally understood what she meant.

By then, he wouldn't be summoning Evil Dogs but rather multiple Yan Shuangzis.

With Yan Shuangzi's intelligence and her loyalty to Lu Ran, they would make an army of Dead Soldiers!

"Alright." Lu Ran retrieved the Evil Dog's soul but didn't absorb its body with the Divine Power Pearl.

Since it was created, he might as well bring it back to the cliff later. For now, Feixian Hall's An Xian, still at River Realm Fifth Rank, needed to feed on it to sustain her life.

"By the way, how's your fusion with the Evil Dog Sculpture coming along?" Lu Ran asked.

"Quite well." Yan Shuangzi replied honestly. "I can clearly sense faster cultivation progress.

Currently, I've regained my previous strength and feel close to another breakthrough."

Whenever the subject of fusion came up, Deng Yuxiang would always blush a little. But Yan Shuangzi, standing before him, showed no trace of emotion.

Like a stone.

She seemed perfectly suited for being a Stone Sculpture?

Lu Ran was suddenly struck by an idea: "Are you nearing a cultivation bottleneck?"

"Yes, Master." Yan Shuangzi replied softly. "Retracing the path I once walked before rebirth has been quite smooth."

Lu Ran lowered his gaze toward the unusually talkative Yan Shuangzi.

So, you call joining Ran Sect "rebirth?"

"Such matters should always be mentioned in advance from now on." Lu Ran thought for a moment and commanded, "Later, toss the Evil Dog corpse to Feixian Hall and then head to the seclusion room to focus on your cultivation."

Yan Shuangzi hesitated for a moment before saying, "It will take some time before I can..."

Lu Ran interrupted her directly: "Gao Yunyan's breakthrough took a long time. Go now."

Yan Shuangzi hesitated briefly before responding, "Yes."

With a flash, Lu Ran appeared on the edge of the 800-meter-high Cloud Sea Cliff.

Wispy Fog Dragon Rolls connected heaven and cliff.

The cliff edge was shrouded in mist, Divine Power coursing throughout.

Lu Ran plopped down, basking in heavenly blessings, voraciously absorbing the energy of the heavens and the earth.

Amid this tranquility, he finally had time to ponder deeply.

Currently, Lu Ran had three Believers from Feixian Hall.

Back in Beifeng City, when the Divine-Beifeng tried to snatch Deng Yuxiang's life and soul, it seemed all too easy to achieve?

So, could he similarly control the life and death of the three Believers through their master-servant contracts?

"Hmm..." Lu Ran sank into deep thought.

How should he go about it?

Lu Ran connected with the Fake God-Jade Talisman in his mind, meticulously researching.

It seemed impossible to directly extract the souls of the Believers.

The Stone Sculpture and the three Believers were indeed linked by invisible threads of contract, but no matter what interaction there was between Lu Ran and the Stone Sculpture, it couldn't affect the disciples' souls.

Was this also a kind of law?

That souls cannot be extracted from living beings?

This principle could also be observed from Evil Techniques.

Whether it was the Evil Mirror Demon's Soul-hooking Mirror or the Soul-splitting Demon's Soul Prison, both could only capture human souls after death.

Thus, when the Divine-Beifeng wanted to collect Deng Yuxiang's soul back in Beifeng City, he had to kill her first?

So then, how could he use master-servant contracts to easily take the lives of Believers?

While cultivating, Lu Ran delved into this question deeply.

He wanted to master this technique!

If Lu Ran could determine a Believer's life or death with just a thought, he could recruit disciples more recklessly.

Days passed.

Cloud Sea Cliff remained impregnable!

Every morning and evening, Deng Yuxiang would receive warnings from Bai Yanhui and relay them to Lu Ran.

Both at sea and on land, there were few ignorant creatures causing trouble.

Over these several days, though, two Angry Sea Flame Flood Dragons flew over the sky.

Lu Ran gleefully welcomed them all!

Using the boiling blood of the flood dragons, he gave the Eight Desolate Blade a thorough cleansing.

By now, the reactions of the Eight Desolate Blade had grown intense.

Having previously cultivated Xia Guang and Silent Night, Lu Ran was certain the Eight Desolate Blade was only one step away from Becoming a God.

But that last step, the divine opportunity, was elusive.

Lu Ran's vision wasn't limited to "Sky, Sea, Land"; he also considered the directional aspect.

By now, he had "lit up" many regions on the Holy Spirit Mountain map.

He had traveled north to the Snow Forest and Night Charm Lake, west to Barbaric Ten Thousand Blade Mountain, and east across the ocean to Seven Star Island.

What remained was the south?

Would the deity-ascending opportunity for the Eight Desolate Blade lie in the south?

Who could say...

On September 7th, Lu Ran received good news!

Gao Yunyan emerged from seclusion!

The terrifying Fog Dragon Rolls connecting heaven and earth gradually dispersed, though mist still lingered.

Eight full days of blessings had allowed Jiang Ruyi to thoroughly prepare herself and successfully ride on Gao Yunyan's momentum, entering breakthrough mode.

She renewed her progress!

The insightful environmental clues confirmed this news to Lu Ran, filling him with giddy delight.

Little Ruyi, truly impressive~

It was a pity, though, that if Ruyi hadn't torn up her contract and had maintained a steady cultivation rhythm, she might have already advanced to Sea Realm!

Now she was still hovering in River Realm Fourth Rank...

Uh, well, perhaps it was best not to think that way.

A cultivator's Dao Heart is an essential aspect of the journey!

Ever since Jiang Ruyi had learned about the Divine's ugly truth, she had harbored intense disdain, most importantly coupled with her devout faith in Lu Ran.

Change was her true path!

Only then could her way forward be unobstructed!

Since the Sect Leader Lady was still advancing, Cloud Sea Cliff's vigilance naturally remained intact.

As soon as Gao Yunyan emerged, she headed straight for the cliff edge in the east and found Lu Ran immersed in cultivation.

Carrying the Divine Weapon·Yellow Sand Axe, her Divine Power surged fiercely, striding forward in great strides.

The earth seemed to tremble underfoot!

Those billowing hair strands and ferocious aura...

If accompanied by maniacal laughter, wouldn't she be a smaller version of the Barbaric Female Demon?

"Whew!!"

Yan God General swept over with an overwhelming Sea Realm pressure, crushing toward the young River Realm man sitting on the cliff edge.

Lu Ran's body tightened, his whole being on the verge of exploding!

But then there was a muffled "thud."

Gao Yunyan dropped to one knee, her eyes blazing with intensity, her voice sharp and resonant: "Sect Leader!"

"Ah!" Lu Ran jerked in shock.

Good heavens~

I thought you were going to kill me like a dog!

The cliff edge fell silent.

After a long while, Lu Ran shakily stood up, staring at the awe-inspiring Sea Realm figure still bowing respectfully before him.

Excellent!

What a mighty and fierce West Desolate Divine General!

With you, Ran Sect is one step closer to storming Sword Mountain Peak and crushing Sword Ridge Peak...

...

Chapter 562: The Second Time Being a God

September 9th, Cloud Sea Cliff, Seclusion Room No. 1.

In a pitch-black stone room, a woman in a white dress knelt on the floor, her long dark hair moving lightly with the hem of her skirt.

"Hoo!!"

Suddenly, a fierce wind burst from within Jiang Ruyi's body.

The Fiery Phoenix Patterned Gourd was startled!

It hid in its owner's embrace; if not held securely by her, it feared it would be thrown out and crash into the stone wall.

"Mm..."

Jiang Ruyi let out a low hum, thoroughly enjoying herself.

The divine power surging within her was like a mighty river, washing through her wide meridians.

River Realm·Fourth Rank!

Jiang Ruyi slowly opened her beautiful eyes, with a glimmer of brilliance flowing within them.

"Buzz~" The Little Chi Feng struggled gently.

Jiang Ruyi loosened her grip, and the Treasure Gourd floated up, hovering in front of her face.

The exquisite phoenix pattern shimmered, reflecting its owner's finely sculpted, fair complexion.

"Hehe~" Jiang Ruyi couldn't help but chuckle lightly.

The Fiery Phoenix Patterned Gourd swayed left and right, appearing cheerful and lively.

She bent her finger and tapped the Treasure Gourd lightly: "Have you eaten your fill?"

"Buzz~" The Little Chi Feng nodded in acknowledgment.

As if nodding.

Jiang Ruyi couldn't help but break into a tender smile: "Have you been obedient in following your master's orders and researched how to eat humans?"

The Fiery Phoenix Patterned Gourd froze midair.

Jiang Ruyi's smile faded.

Having just advanced, her divinity lingered, bestowing her with a solemn and sacred aura.

She opened her palm, her slender jade hand holding up the chubby Treasure Gourd: "Your master loves you very much and probably hasn't scolded you once in all this time, right?"

He's not forcing you to do anything, but you must put in some effort yourself, okay, Chi Feng?"

"Buzz~" The Little Chi Feng swayed back and forth as if granted a great pardon.

Jiang Ruyi said no more, using the golden phoenix pattern's light to glance around.

The exit of Cloud Sea Cliff Seclusion Room No. 1 was located in the northern mountains of Cloud Sea Residence.

At this moment, many people had gathered in front of the hidden exit.

Out of respect for the Sect Leader's wife, nearly everyone had arrived.

When Jiang Ruyi emerged, seeing so many people, she was slightly surprised but responded with a smile to the Ran Sect members' congratulations.

After a few polite exchanges, the crowd dispersed.

Only Si Xianxian clung on, unwilling to leave.

With no one else around, Sister Xian'er revealed her true nature, holding a crazy hammer in one hand and tightly embracing Jiang Fairy: "Ruyi, Ruyi, I missed you so much..."

Si Xianxian murmured, her face buried in Jiang Ruyi's neck, rubbing back and forth.

Jiang Ruyi: "..."

In total, they hadn't seen each other for just ten days.

Who would have thought, the once-temperamental, combative madwoman had turned into such a clingy person?

Even more so than when they were at Human World Da Xia's Luoxian Mountain.

"Hey!" A young man's voice came from behind, "What are you doing?"

Si Xianxian ignored Lu Ran, inhaling deeply, her head buried in Jiang Fairy's neck as if savoring.

Lu Ran: ???

No!

What am I then?

Besides, are you Mad Immortal, or Little Yuanxi...

Lu Ran was dumbfounded.

Being in Holy Spirit Mountain, Lu Ran didn't want to "overthink" many things, not solely due to Jiang Ruyi.

But also his sister and his mother.

Now, Lu Ran had more to consider.

His mother, although, was immensely powerful and didn't warrant much worry.

But his sister, Little Yuanxi...

Don't come!

Lu Ran had only one thought in his mind:

Absolutely! Absolutely do not come to Holy Spirit Mountain!

"Sister Xian'er?" Jiang Ruyi saw Lu Ran's unusual expression, thinking he was upset, so she gently pushed Si Xianxian.

Si Xianxian turned to Lu Ran, irritated: "You're so stingy! I'm on the verge of a breakthrough and need to go into seclusion.

Who knows how many days we'll be apart now, can't I at least have a hug?"

Lu Ran suppressed his swirling emotions and pretended to be fine: "Then hurry up; among the four Great Protectors, you're the weakest!"

Take Little Chi Feng with you... Oh, and during your breakthrough, don't drink directly from the mouth!"

Si Xianxian was already angry, and seeing Lu Ran's disdainful look, she immediately raised her eyebrows: "You think I'm dirty, don't you?"

I will drink directly, just will, just will!"

Lu Ran: "..."

"I will... uh." Si Xianxian suddenly shivered.

She turned to see Jiang Ruyi's half-smile expression.

Si Xianxian quickly forced a smile: "I won't, I won't, I was just teasing him."

Jiang Ruyi gave Si Xianxian a reproachful look, then picked up the Fiery Phoenix Patterned Gourd: "Don't forget what I told you just now."

"Buzz~"

The Fiery Phoenix Patterned Gourd trembled slightly.

"Here." Jiang Ruyi handed the Treasure Gourd to Si Xianxian, instructing, "Focus on your breakthrough, and once you succeed, come find me."

"Mm!" Si Xianxian nodded emphatically, holding the crazy hammer in one hand and grasping Little Chi Feng with the other, then turned and walked away.

Jiang Ruyi asked, puzzled: "Where are you going?"

The entrance was right there, wasn't it?

Unexpectedly, Si Xianxian said: "Esteemed Madam! This is the entrance to Seclusion Room No. 1, and except for the young master, only you can enter it."

Jiang Ruyi looked at Si Xianxian in exasperation and amusement, giving her a glare: "Go ahead."

Si Xianxian giggled, looking at Lu Ran with a playful look: "Master! Does a little maid like me have the privilege to enter?"

Lu Ran nearly rolled his eyes to the sky.

"Hahahahaha~" Si Xianxian couldn't help but laugh heartily and then turned and walked into the tunnel entrance.

Lu Ran snorted, watching Mad Immortal leave, then turned to Jiang Ruyi: "Do you want to retreat for a few days to consolidate your realm?"

Jiang Ruyi shook her head lightly: "Staying in the stone room is suffocating; let's return to Cloud Sea Residence."

"That works." Lu Ran gazed at Jiang Fairy, growing happier the longer he watched her, suddenly remembering something, "What were you discussing with the Fiery Phoenix Pattern just now?"

Jiang Ruyi did not reply, instead smiling brightly at Lu Ran: "I've returned to River Realm Fourth Rank; you must work hard."

Lu Ran: "..."

He had advanced to River Realm Fourth Rank on the third day of the eighth lunar month.

Today was only September 9th!

Reaching River Realm Peak would take a while.

Lu Ran quickly changed the subject: "By the way, during your retreat, I developed a method to control believers."

"Control?" Jiang Ruyi raised her eyebrows slightly.

"Life and death." Lu Ran nodded.

Two simple words enough to send chills down one's spine!

"Let's go test it out." Lu Ran stepped forward, holding her soft jade hand, habitually squeezing her palm.

Jiang Ruyi let herself be led forward by him.

In a daze, she felt like she was back in the high school classroom.

On that day, he first secretly held her finger, and seeing she did not object, he boldly took her entire hand.

That scene, Jiang Ruyi would never forget in her lifetime.

Nor would she forget the hallway he led her through.

"Ruyi?"

"Mm?" Jiang Ruyi snapped out of her reverie, feeling as if ages had passed.

As if...

He had led her from the school hallway into Holy Spirit Mountain.

The once weak young boy and girl had now become revered powers of the world.

They had become the Sect Master and Sect Master's Lady, occupying high and powerful positions.

"What are you thinking about, this deep in thought?"

Lu Ran arrived at a house on the western edge of the cliff, looking curiously at the woman beside him.

Jiang Ruyi looked at Lu Ran, smiling without a word.

"So mysterious." Lu Ran murmured.

Before they could enter the house, several people emerged from inside.

"Sect Master!"

"Madam." The three from Feixian Hall respectfully saluted and greeted.

When Gao Yunyan and Jiang Ruyi advanced, everyone on the cliff had been assigned tasks.

Only the three from Feixian Hall did not participate in the cliff-guarding operation.

It was Deng Yuxiang's intention for Feixian Hall to focus solely on revering God and praying daily.

"Now that the mist has dispersed, Feixian Hall can resume work." Lu Ran said.

"Yes!" Song Yu immediately replied, "Shall I then...?"

This address was quite precise; Song Yu had evidently already considered himself a believer.

"No rush, I have a hypothesis to verify, and the subject of this experiment may suffer some harm. Who will volunteer?" Lu Ran looked at the three of them.

"I'll do it!" Song Yu volunteered without hesitation.

"Hmm." Lu Ran nodded, connecting his mind to the Jade Talisman Stone Sculpture.

How does one, in the role of a god, control the life and death of believers through the contract?

After careful consideration, Lu Ran devised a plan.

Under his control, the Fake God·Jade Talisman Stone Sculpture released a terrifying energy which surged into Song Yu's body through the invisible contractual threads!

Lu Ran's method was not without precedence.

When he first became an Immortal Sheep Believer, President Yang had once dismissed him for being noisy and directly used energy to knock Lu Ran unconscious.

Now, Lu Ran was mimicking the Immortal Sheep Lord's techniques, step by step becoming a new god!

On how to become a god...

The Immortal Sheep Lord

seems to have already instructed Lu Ran.

"Uh." Song Yu let out a muffled groan, his entire body trembling.

The overwhelming energy pouring into his body far exceeded the safety limits, far from nourishing his flesh.

Instead, it was wantonly destroying!

Song Yu's face flushed, his blood and energy surged chaotically as if he might cough blood at any moment.

His body trembled uncontrollably, the violent divine power tearing through his meridians, as if to thoroughly pulverize this mortal form...

Lu Ran abruptly stopped!

"Hah... hah..." Song Yu panted heavily, cold sweat dripping down his face as he trembled and collapsed to the ground.

Zhang Zhenghu's face stiffened, and An Xian couldn't help but shiver.

The two didn't fully understand what had happened.

But the fact that Song Yu, this Vast River powerhouse, stood no chance against Lu Ran?!

"Pop~"

Lu Ran summoned a Resurrection Carp, which swam toward the fallen Song Yu.

It truly worked!

Lu Ran secretly nodded.

However, it consumed quite a bit of divine power.

As the Stone Sculpture's realm heightens, shouldn't it be easier to destroy believers' mortal bodies?

Furthermore, Song Yu, being River Realm-Second Rank, could contain much more divine power than someone from the River Realm.

If An Xian, from River Realm, had been the test subject, Lu Ran surmised it would have been easier to end her life?

An Xian, her voice trembling, couldn't help but say: "S-Sect Master! I-I have earnestly prayed day and night and never slacked off..."

"Silence." Jiang Ruyi frowned slightly.

An Xian immediately fell silent, not daring to speak.

However, Lu Ran, lost in thought, was still disturbed.

He came back to his senses, his tone gentle: "I said it was just to verify a hypothesis, not to punish you all."

Lu Ran stepped forward, helping Song Yu up, presenting him with another Resurrection Carp: "You suffered."

Song Yu was filled with fear, wanting to speak, but the words were stuck in his throat, feeling like he had just returned from the Ghost Gate!

Even though Lu Ran had retracted his divine powers, Song Yu's body was still in turmoil.

His meridians felt like they were about to burst!

Recovering might take several days!

"Pop~"

Lu Ran offered another Resurrection Carp, while also channeling Cage Fire to Song Yu.

With such a method of controlling believers' life and death, Lu Ran indeed could widely accept believers and receive large-scale devotions!

Additionally, this served as a reminder to Lu Ran.

If he could operate this way, then so could any of the gods!

If one day they truly returned to the human world, it would be imperative to find the Immortal Sheep Lord immediately and have it sever the master-servant contract for the Ran Sect members!

Perhaps, that would be a more secure approach.

Lu Ran needed to return to the human world first!

After properly communicating with the Immortal Sheep Lord, he would then send all his warriors back to the human world, directly to the Immortal Sheep God Sculpture!

Chapter 563: Feixian Hall

In late September, Evil Shadow and Mad Immortal both emerged from seclusion.

The cultivation realms of these two protectors had advanced to the River Realm Third Rank and Second Rank, respectively.

The Ran Sect was steadily developing.

Over the span of more than half a month, Feixian Hall was finally completed. Given its considerable size, it wasn't suitable to hide it deep in the mountains, so the hall was built within the mountain itself.

On the surface, a massive "skylight" was created to allow for ventilation and daylight to illuminate the interior.

The light fell upon two enormous stone statues.

Indeed, at the heart of the hall stood two towering "faceless stone sculptures" reaching seven meters in height.

Though the stone sculptures' faces weren't fully carved and only outlined, everyone knew whom Feixian Hall was honoring.

The Master of Ran Sect and the Sect Leader's Lady!

These two stone sculptures were crafted by Xiong Xiong, the Vice Hall Master of Demon Control Hall.

No one in Ran Sect had expected that Hall Master Xiong would be so skilled at sculpting. No wonder he's a Shanwei believer who works with stones.

In Xiong Xiong's own words, sculpting little objects was initially just a hobby to pass the time, but unexpectedly, it turned out to be immensely useful one day—a great honor indeed!

Xiong Xiong, together with Shi Yong and Shi Biao, labored for over half a month and delivered two masterpieces.

The statue of the Sect Leader's Lady featured flowing long skirts, capturing an ethereal aesthetic.

Meanwhile, the Master's stone sculpture appeared majestic and dignified—not the "Holy Spirit Mountain Chapter · Ran Shen Classic Skin" form, but instead garbed in a broad robe, standing proudly.

Ever since Jiang Ruyi emerged from seclusion more than half a month ago, Lu Ran had donned the white robe she had selected for him.

The design for the Sect Master's sculpture was also jointly confirmed and finalized by Jiang Ruyi and Xiong Xiong.

Lu Ran himself didn't have much of an opinion on the matter; in truth, he only wanted one sculpture in the hall—Jiang Ruyi's.

After all, Feixian Hall essentially worshipped Jiang Ruyi.

But Jiang Ruyi's words completely broadened Lu Ran's perspective.

She said, "Since it's the 'Feixian' Hall, then not only you, but the Ran Sect's four protectors, eight divine generals, and the rest of the ranks should all have sculptures here."

Her statement perfectly aligned with Lu Ran's ambitions.

To overthrow the rule of the God Demons and eradicate the calamities of the Human World, Lu Ran couldn't accomplish this alone.

Of course, he needed to train the Ran Sect members to ascend to immortality together.

This was what Lu Ran had been practicing all along—recruiting like-minded companions and meticulously nurturing the warriors of Ran Sect.

What Lu Ran didn't expect was that after the completion of Feixian Hall, Deng Yuxiang and the others became frequent visitors.

Big Nightmare seemed to have relocated her practice site to the hall.

She often knelt before Lu Ran's statue, staying there all day.

Luo Ying, the Divine General, would also visit often. Once, when Lu Ran went to see the old Mr. Bai Yanhui, he accidentally saw Luo Ying softly praying to the Sect Master's sculpture.

Praying for the healthy growth of children...

Lu Ran was utterly startled!

It was undeniable that Lu Ran indeed served as the spiritual anchor and pillar of his followers.

But for Luo Ying, a Divine General of the Sea Realm Fourth Rank, to pray and seek blessings...

Lu Ran nearly cried out loud!

Luo Ying, the Sea Realm Fourth Rank slayer! Are you kidding me?

It's supposed to be *me* begging for *your* blessings...

Evidently, the environment greatly influences people.

During such a uniquely chaotic era, the education and beliefs instilled in people since childhood were all about revering gods, praying to them, and seeking their protection.

Just like how people expected to marry and bear children by eighteen, or even earlier—a norm shaped by rules and societal perceptions.

It was as commonplace and functional as eating and drinking water.

However, after arriving at Holy Spirit Mountain, the surroundings completely changed.

People buried their bewilderment deep within their hearts.

And then, Lu Ran appeared!

He brought the capacity to rival, even overthrow, deities into their lives.

No doubt, over the past nine months, some had been silently praying to him.

Now with Feixian Hall established and the vast stone sculptures erected, it all felt natural for the believers—their perspectives and habits regained a sense of familiarity.

Some things simply unfolded naturally.

What truly caught Lu Ran off guard occurred late on the night of the third day of October.

Without warning, his mind buzzed with electricity!

In the God Demon Sculpture Garden, the Pseudo-God · Jade Talisman Stone Sculpture of Sea Realm Third Rank had unexpectedly leveled up!

Level! Up!

"Uh." In the small courtyard of Cloud Sea Residence, Lu Ran was sitting at a stone table, diligently cultivating when he suddenly let out a muffled groan.

He paused, then his mouth immediately formed an "O" shape.

This isn't possible!

This sculpture at Sea Realm Third Rank...

It... It just started vibrating?

"Lu Ran." A cool female voice suddenly called out from inside the house.

On the bed, Jiang Ruyi's body began to tremble lightly.

She opened her sleepy eyes, which now carried traces of surprise. Her delicate hand trembled as she raised it.

Lu Ran, hearing the call, instinctively started to step into the house, only to halt abruptly.

Because it wasn't just Jiang Ruyi inside; Si Xianxian was in there too!

This was the reason why Lu Ran had been banished from his home, forced to spend the night outdoors.

When Lu Ran left Luoxian Mountain, a certain little maid had been sleeping with the Lady and had grown entirely accustomed to it.

Now that Jiang Ruyi had joined him at Holy Spirit Mountain, Si Xianxian had begged and pleaded for days and finally won herself a night's stay.

Lu Ran could only pitifully cultivate in the courtyard...

It was truly unbearable~

Lu Ran immediately transmitted his voice: [Don't worry, the Pseudo-God Stone Sculpture is leveling up. Each time this happens, the fusion between the stone sculpture and humans is further strengthened and becomes more seamless.

This will greatly benefit you, increasing your talent limit and enhancing your cultivation aptitude.]

[Mm.] Jiang Ruyi softly replied.

Mad Immortal and Nightmare had already informed her of these phenomena.

On the bed, Si Xianxian, who had been sleeping curled up and clinging to Jiang Ruyi's arm, also woke up upon sensing the unusual situation.

Seeing Jiang Ruyi's condition, Si Xianxian's eyes immediately lit up: "Your stone sculpture leveled up?"

Jiang Ruyi nodded faintly and sat up: "I should head to the seclusion room..."

"What seclusion room!" Si Xianxian quickly hugged her, "You're not in good condition right now. What if bad people attack Cloud Sea Cliff?

Stay with me. Sister Xian'er will protect you!"

Jiang Ruyi: "..."

The Jiang Fairy inside the bedroom was speechless, while Lu Ran in the courtyard was filled with emotion.

Luo Tiantu and Lady Kong truly knew how to reap Holy Spirit Energy!

No matter how many people practiced or prayed in Feixian Hall daily, Lu Ran's Pseudo-God stone sculpture only absorbed the Power of Faith from Song Yu, Zhang Zhenghu, and An Xian.

The energy they provided was incredibly scarce!

Yet the trio's sincere devotion triggered the leveling process in the Sea Realm Third Rank sculpture!

This...?

Therefore, ever since Lu Ran captured the souls of Luo Tiantu and Lady Kong, the Jade Talisman sculpture, though fixed at Sea Realm Third Rank, must have been lacking only a sliver of energy to upgrade to Fourth Rank.

It could only be this!

And that was why the relatively weak Feixian Hall could bring such incredible surprises and fortune for Jiang Ruyi.

"Score one for us..." Lu Ran whispered softly.

In any case, it was far better for the stone sculpture to level up here at Cloud Sea Cliff than during a sudden expedition.

The vibrating Pseudo-God Sculpture had a significant impact on both Lu Ran and Jiang Ruyi's state.

Tomorrow, he would slaughter an Evil Dog for Feixian Hall and give the soldiers a feast!

A proper reward!

Lu Ran exhaled deeply, resting his head on his arms atop the stone table, letting his mind drift into emptiness.

As the stars and moon shifted in the sky, the sun rose red over the sea.

The Pseudo-God Sculpture finally ceased its expansion, clearing Lu Ran's mind entirely.

Jade Talisman Sculpture, Sea Realm Fourth Rank!

Wonderful!

"Ugh ah~" Lu Ran stretched violently, finally relaxing again, then slumped back over the stone table.

Speaking of which, being a believer and constantly strengthening the body came with an unexpected perk.

No numbness in the arms!

Back when Lu Ran was in school, if he napped at his desk for even a little while, his arm would go completely numb...

"Pfft... haha~"

Not long after, a chuckle suddenly interrupted him.

Lu Ran lifted his head, spotting a certain maid's mischievous face staring at him.

At this moment, Si Xianxian had regained the sharpness she had exhibited in the Human World, no longer the weepy mess she'd been when she first arrived in the Holy Spirit Mountain Realm.

She gracefully stepped forward with a playful smile: "Here I was worrying about how hard you'd worked guarding all night, but turns out, you were lazily sleeping instead?"

Lu Ran: ???

Rebellion!

This wicked maid was rebelling!

Si Xianxian sat across from him at the stone table, looking completely refreshed, clearly having had a good rest: "Ruyi promised I could sleep with her tonight, too."

"Huh?" Lu Ran slapped the table and stood up, "No way! Absolutely not!"

"Hahaha~" Si Xianxian burst into a fit of laughter, her body bending forward with mirth. She showed no sign of ladylike demeanor. "Look at how frightened you are!"

Lu Ran: "..."

"What's going on?" Jiang Ruyi walked out from the house.

She wore an oversized white robe, not only exuding an ethereal aura but also carrying a hint of relaxed nonchalance.

It was a sight to behold.

"Look." Si Xianxian pouted and gestured toward Lu Ran. *"The stingy man is mad."*

Jiang Ruyi smiled gently, her face bearing a hint of apology.

The saying "a crying child gets candy" rang true.

Jiang Ruyi only had one or two close friends and was willing to indulge Sister Xian'er.

In fact, she had long realized that Lu Ran, Sister Xian'er, and a few others helped her preserve one essential quality:

Being someone capable of feeling emotions.

"Si Xianxian!" Lu Ran gritted his teeth.

"Hehe~" Si Xianxian covered her mouth and chuckled.

Who told you to kick me like a stray dog on the street, stomp on me again and again?

Mad Immortal never forgets vengeance, morning to night!

Just wait; there's more to come~

Jiang Ruyi entered the courtyard, cutting off the pair's squabble, and took a seat at the stone table. "This leveling up of the stone sculptures has indeed benefited me greatly.

So, will I and Sister Xian'er both eventually turn into stone?"

Lu Ran ignored the smug maid, thought for a moment, then responded, "To be precise, it'd be pure energy bodies."

All Gods and Demons, those exalted entities above all, are energy bodies.

"Mm." Jiang Ruyi nodded lightly.

"Oh, by the way, I plan to head south and explore." Lu Ran suddenly said.

"South?" Si Xianxian asked curiously.

"I've been staying at home since returning at the end of August, and more than a month has passed." Lu Ran nodded and continued. "Before my next level-up, I want to explore the southern maps.

I'll return to Cloud Sea Cliff within a month to begin preparations for leveling up."

Jiang Ruyi inquired, "Isn't it better to cultivate here in the safety of the cliff?"

Lu Ran reached out, playing with his fiancée's slender, jade-like fingers. "Everything has settled within the cliff, and the timing feels right.

You also know the situation with the Eight Desolates Annihilation Blade—it can't be delayed for too long.

I want to take it south and test my luck."

Jiang Ruyi seemed to be in thought, her dark eyes looking straight at Lu Ran. "Will I be part of your southern expedition?"

Lu Ran grinned: "Of course, you will be!"

Si Xianxian, staring at their joined hands, immediately interjected, "I want to go too! I want to go too!"

"Hmph." Lu Ran snorted coldly.

Si Xianxian panicked instantly. "Master!"

Hearing the term "Master," Lu Ran felt a surge of exasperation. He wanted to stomp his foot and start yelling.

Here you were, sleeping comfortably in the master bedroom's big bed while I stood guard outside all night?

That "Master" you're calling me—doesn't your conscience ache?

...

Chapter 564: Immortal Realm of Hundred Islands

During the morning, the Ran Sect gathered in the Council Hall, and Lu Ran outlined the objectives for the upcoming mission.

This time heading south, Lu Ran planned to travel light and keep things simple.

After all, the goal was merely to explore the map and return within a month.

"General Luoshen." From the main seat, Lu Ran looked at his young mother, "You've accompanied me on so many journeys over the years. This time, take a break and stay home."

Upon hearing this, Xun Yifei felt a wave of relief.

As the Sect Master summoned his wife, Xun Yifei maintained a calm exterior, but inwardly, he was groaning in despair.

He was haunted by the memories of being dominated by his children—his son crying during the day, his daughter wailing at night, and both of them sobbing together while looking for their mother...

What a relief!

The Sect Master was offering him a lifeline.

Yet unexpectedly, Luo Ying spoke up: "Sect Master, I've been resting at home for over a month, I can accompany you on this mission."

Xun Yifei: "..."

Don't do this, Mama!

Papa can't take it anymore!

"No need." Lu Ran chuckled and looked at the Phoenix and Swallow Generals, "We should give the new Divine Generals a chance to shine."

Gao Yunyan immediately nodded.

Xue Fengchen also wanted to nod, but unfortunately, he was still at the Jiang Realm·Fifth Rank and not qualified to be called a "Divine General."

"Phew..." Hearing Lu Ran's words, Xun Yifei let out a huge sigh of relief.

His emotions were like a roller coaster~

As a Sea Realm powerhouse, Xun Yifei's emotions naturally influenced the surrounding atmosphere.

He had always hidden his feelings well, but perhaps due to truly relaxing, his emotions unintentionally leaked.

Lu Ran immediately turned his head, giving Xun the Divine General an ambiguous smile.

The other members in the Council Hall had mixed reactions, with most trying to maintain neutral expressions—after all, Xun the Divine General was no ordinary figure and was not someone to be jested with.

Luo Ying, however, turned her head, glaring at her husband.

Xun Yifei felt a bit awkward and promptly volunteered, "Sect Master, allow me to accompany you on this mission."

Lu Ran smiled and said, "No need. You and your spouse balance family and career. While I'm gone, focus on leading the sect and protecting Cloud Sea Cliff."

"Understood!"

"Understood," the couple responded promptly.

Lu Ran turned to Yu Changsheng: "Mr. Cong Long, accompany me this time."

Yu Changsheng: "..."

Luo Ying accompanies you everywhere, without fail.

But every mission, you always drag me along as well!

Lu Ran flashed a smile, "Having Mr. Cong Long by my side gives me peace of mind."

Yu Changsheng suddenly felt comforted, his face softened with a smile, and he nodded with satisfaction: "It's my honor."

Just then, Lu Ran caught sight of a piercing gaze sweeping across him.

Lu Ran's heart twitched!

No doubt about it—it had to be the glare of the Big Nightmare!

In front of outsiders, Deng Yuxiang always upheld the Sect Master's dignity, but that didn't stop her from casually shooting Lu Ran a meaningful look.

Beside the main chair, Jiang Ruyi suddenly spoke up: "Let the Nightmare Guardian accompany us south as well."

Deng Yuxiang turned to the Sect Master's wife and nodded respectfully: "Understood."

"Alright, that's settled!" Lu Ran announced, dismissing the meeting.

Si Xianxian pouted unhappily.

Earlier this morning, Lu and Jiang had vetoed Si Xianxian's suggestion. Though Sister Xian'er was only at Jiang Realm Second Rank, her explosive output was capable of even killing Sea Realm enemies—still, the duo hoped she would focus on her cultivation.

As the Ran Sect members left one by one, the Evil Shadow Guardian suddenly emerged, half-kneeling beside a chair, blocking Lu Ran's path.

The Evil Shadow remained silent,

but the air was thick with stubborn determination.

One Nightmare, one Evil Shadow—they truly made a perfect pair of best friends~

Lu Ran sighed helplessly, "Haven't you been following me all along anyway?"

Yan Shuangzi didn't argue, merely tilted her face upward to "glance" at Lu Ran before vanishing.

Lu Ran felt a bit awkward.

Only now did it hit him—during the last trip to the northwest desert, he hadn't brought Miss Yan Shuangzi along...

Jiang Ruyi's face carried a faint smile, clearly enjoying the scene.

She naturally hoped that every warrior following Lu Ran would share Yan Shuangzi's unwavering loyalty.

"What's got you so happy?" Lu Ran asked, puzzled.

"Let's go prepare." Jiang Ruyi reached out to adjust Lu Ran's collar, "This time, wear the white robe for the mission."

Lu Ran shrugged indifferently.

Jiang Ruyi seemed particularly fond of seeing Lu Ran donned in a flowing white robe.

Her arrival marked a turning point, bringing subtle yet significant transformations to Lu Ran.

The biggest change was her arrival with troops, enabling him to establish Feixian Hall and fully embark on recruiting believers.

A smaller change was the addition of a second Holy Spirit Mountain outfit for Lu Ran.

No longer the mysterious figure clad in a bamboo hat and bamboo clothes, the wandering vagabond...

He now embodied the grandeur, standing tall as the statue within Feixian Hall, draped in an elegant white robe.

Majestic, dignified, awe-inspiring.

...

As midday approached, Lu and Jiang—accompanied by the Nightmare Guardian, Mr. Cong Long, and the Evil Shadow Guardian, as well as the Phoenix and Swallow Generals—set off on their southern journey.

Four Rivers and Three Seas—such an elite squad seemed destined to fulfill this mission successfully.

Moreover, among the "Four Rivers" was Lu Ran, whose strength was unfathomable!

However, not long after setting off, Yu Changsheng called out, "Sect Master."

"Mr. Cong Long?" Lu Ran turned to him.

"If we continue south along the coastline, we may deviate from our purpose and fail to gather enough intelligence," Yu Changsheng pointed out.

"Hmm, you're right," Lu Ran nodded.

Most divine believers and Evil Demon factions were land-based creatures—hardly any willingly approached the perilous sea.

Following Yu Changsheng's advice, the squad gradually veered away from the coastline, journeying steeply through mountains toward the south-west.

Occasionally, Lu Ran would cast Evil Technique-Mirror Flower Moon to leap from one mountain peak to another.

By dusk the next day, the squad had traveled more than a thousand kilometers.

This was despite Lu Ran deliberately pacing the journey to prioritize exploration.

If he frequently used Evil Technique-Mirror Flower Moon, several thousand kilometers would be easy to cover!

Along the way, there were plenty of wandering demons and evildoers, but mostly individuals or small groups—not a stronghold of any particular Evil Demon faction.

Lu Ran could clearly sense that the farther south they ventured, the terrain became progressively lower, and rivers and lakes became increasingly abundant.

"Whoa?"

On a mountaintop, as Lu Ran stepped out from the mirrored portal, he was stunned by the scenery illuminated by the sunset!

Where on earth did I end up?

Is this still Holy Spirit Mountain?

Lu Ran gazed southward, noting a sudden shift in the terrain—a massive lake appeared before his eyes.

The lake was astonishingly vast, dotted with countless islands of varied shapes and sizes.

These islands were scattered like stars across the water.

The islands were lush with greenery, some connected by narrow paths that looked man-made, yet appeared as if carved by nature's uncanny artistry.

Ripples glistened on the lake's surface as the sunset bathed its clear waters in shimmering brilliance, creating an enchanting view.

"I never imagined there would be such an Immortal Realm hidden just over a thousand kilometers from our Cloud Sea Cliff." Lu Ran's gaze grew increasingly absorbed, filled with admiration.

Though he had interrogated countless criminals and gathered significant information since entering the mountains, no one had ever mentioned this place.

Unfortunately, the weather was clear today.

If it were a rainy and misty day, with the islands shrouded in a dreamy haze, how picturesque would that be?

"Sect Master, do not let the beauty of the scenery deceive you; this place is likely exceptionally dangerous," Yu Changsheng softly reminded him.

Lu Ran turned and smiled at the handsome Yu Changsheng, "The more beautiful something is, the more dangerous it tends to be, right?"

Yu Changsheng's expression turned slightly peculiar.

Ran Sect's team had no shortage of beauties.

Whether it was the icy Jiang Fairy or the radiant Big Nightmare, both were top-tier individuals in their fields.

But somehow, Yu Changsheng felt like the Sect Master might actually be talking about him...

"Mr. Changsheng is correct." Jiang Ruyi nodded slightly, "Such a treasure trove, if not occupied by the Evil Demon faction, is likely under the control of a Human Clan force."

"Let's go check it out!" Lu Ran ordered decisively, brimming with enthusiasm.

In the past, encountering such an Immortal Realm, Lu Ran might have turned around and left.

He wouldn't dare to approach.

But now, things were different.

Four Rivers and Three Seas—Lu Ran had the confidence to explore.

The Phoenix and Swallow Generals paved the way with axes, the Nightmare Guardian and Mr. Cong Long guarded the rear, while the Evil Shadow stayed on the fringes of the squad, collecting intelligence and remaining unseen.

Lu Ran and Jiang Ruyi walked leisurely through the thick forests toward the lakeshore.

"Sniff~"

Lu Ran flared his nostrils.

No sound, no smell, no life.

"That's strange—are there no people here?" Lu Ran crouched by the lake, observing the crystal-clear water and cupping a handful in his hands.

Could it be that the Evil Demons or Human Clan forces were hiding on islands far from the shore?

Lu Ran pondered while his mischievous side emerged.

He dipped his tongue into the lake water, confirming it was fresh water with a hint of sweetness.

Ah~

How delightful!

This forest, this lake, this wondrous cluster of islands—if no other forces are present, could Ran Sect perhaps utilize it... hmm?

Suddenly, Lu Ran's eyes sharpened!

On a remote island far from the shore, near the edge of the forest, he spotted something—was that a figure moving?

Only Lu Ran's exceptional eyesight allowed him to discern the individual.

"Rustle~"

On the island, a thicket of dense bushes subtly swayed.

A man dressed in grass clothing and grass shoes was retreating into the island depths under the signal of several others.

The man ran along a secluded path and entered a thick forest until he reached a modest, elegant structure:

"Island Master He! Island Master He!"

"What is it?" From behind the bamboo fence, came a young woman's voice.

"A group has appeared near the northern shore—they're observing the islands!"

As the man spoke, a young woman opened the bamboo gate.

She appeared to be about twenty-three or twenty-four, slender and graceful, dressed in an ancient-styled green gown, exuding understated elegance.

The woman resembled a lotus blooming amid the serene lake, captivatingly beautiful.

But at this moment, her delicate features were clouded with frost, her eyes harboring a trace of anger:

"Could it be people from Thunder Mountain again?"

...

Chapter 565: Demoness?

The man immediately shook his head and said, "The other side is dressed in a bamboo hat and bamboo clothes, carrying a variety of weapons. I saw sabers, swords, and axes, even a fan—but no halberds.

It shouldn't be those mangy dogs from Thunder Mountain!"

At these words, the Island Master surnamed He slightly relaxed her tense expression.

If it were that group of East Thunder disciples, a fierce battle would definitely be inevitable, along with heavy casualties.

The man, despite suppressing his growing unease and enduring the invisible pressure of the Island Master, spoke in a quivering voice: "Th-this squad consists of six people. I cannot rule out the possibility that there are others lurking in secret.

This small team must be formidable. They dare to approach the lakeside and even linger there for a long time, as if they're contemplating coming ashore.

Island Master, should we inform the nearby islands?"

Instead, the Island Master asked, "Since these six people are carrying different weapons, does their style and temperament also differ greatly?"

The man nodded immediately. "Yes! They each have unique styles. They're very likely from different sects."

The Island Master nodded lightly, but her brows were furrowed in growing seriousness.

Within this Holy Spirit Mountain Realm, disciples of all factions tended to band together for survival, and even disciples of the strong gods were no exception.

When a mixed group with few members appeared, there were generally three possibilities.

Either it consisted of weak god disciples clinging to life, banding together like tadpoles searching for their mother;

Or it could be a marauding figure of considerable strength, using their followers—each with specific roles—as slaves to collect Holy Spirit Energy.

The most terrifying of all is the third category: an elite squad with one overpowering leader and several highly capable members!

These squads are the ones you absolutely cannot provoke!

Such individuals don't rely on their sects but wander independently through the perilous Holy Spirit Mountain, killing and robbing, seizing Holy Spirit Energy.

These ruthless scoundrels are universally despised yet equally universally avoided.

After all, anyone bold enough to roam so freely undoubtedly possesses overwhelming strength!

"Let's go. Take me to see," the Island Master instructed softly, letting out a slight sigh in her heart.

Let's hope it's not the third kind of group.

The man in the coarse clothes led the way, as if knowing what the Island Master was thinking, and cautiously added, "Island Master He, this small squad seems peculiar. The leader appears particularly young."

"Oh?" The Island Master raised an eyebrow, intrigued.

The man hesitated but eventually shared his far-fetched assessment. "He looks about twenty or so."

The Island Master's brow arched slightly.

So young?

Anyone chosen by the gods to enter the Holy Spirit Mountain had to be extremely powerful, most of them from the ranks of the Vast River.

This naturally meant that human believers in this realm skewed older in age.

Someone like herself, who ascended to the Holy Spirit Mountain at the age of twenty-four, was already rare.

And now her subordinate firmly insisted that a young man, about twenty, had emerged.

And this young man was even the leader?

"Are you certain?"

"Absolutely, Island Master!" The man in the coarse clothes quickly affirmed, "Among the squad, only two young individuals—one man in white robes and one woman in a white gown—stood out.

The rest of those dressed in bamboo clothes clearly saw these two as their superiors!

The young man was strikingly valiant, and the girl resembled an immortal, almost comparable to you, Island Master..."

The Island Master remained silent.

If these were two strong god disciples enslaving their fellow humans, the danger level of this squad would naturally plummet.

But it was perplexing—how could two strong god disciples so young possibly ascend the mountain... Da Xia's Heavenly Prides?

The Island Master's heart stirred.

This pair of young man and woman might very well be figures from the Heavenly Pride rankings!

As her thoughts raced, the Island Master quickened her pace, swiftly arriving at the island's northern side.

"Island Master!"

"Island Master He." In a dense thicket of trees and shrubs, several men and women lowered their voices and respectfully greeted her.

The Island Master moved with the grace of a lotus, drifting calmly forward.

Two subordinates gently parted the branches, allowing the Island Master to observe. A male among them whispered, "They're still there..."

Before the sentence was completed, everyone instinctively shifted their gazes to the Island Master.

To their surprise, the ever-composed Island Master's beautiful eyes narrowed slightly, her mood appearing somewhat unsettled.

Indeed, upon seeing the white-robed youth in the distance, the Island Master felt a faint ripple of excitement in her heart.

A Heavenly Pride?

More than that!

This was the preeminent genius of Da Xia!

"Lu..." She murmured the name under her breath, her gaze flickering to the young woman in the white gown standing beside him.

Jiang.

So, it's the two of you.

"Ha." The Island Master let out a soft, bemused laugh.

In the vast expanse of Da Xia, it truly was difficult to find another Heavenly Pride under the age of twenty.

The Island Master had initially thought her subordinates were mistaken—after all, even among Da Xia's Heavenly Prides, the average age was usually around twenty-three or twenty-four.

But now it seemed...

"Island Master, do you know them?" a man asked quietly, his tone carrying a mix of hopefulness and curiosity.

This mysterious group clearly wasn't one to trifle with!

If the Island Master happened to share a history with them in the Human World, a confrontation might be averted, reducing the risk of casualties.

The Island Master's gaze lingered on the white-robed youth, her voice filled with half nostalgia, half answer:

"Who in the world does not recognize him..."

"Huh?"

"What?" The listeners exchanged puzzled glances, their expressions marked by disbelief.

Wasn't that evaluation a tad... exaggerated?

With a calm demeanor, the Island Master explained faintly, "Anyone who entered the Holy Spirit Mountain after the year 19 couldn't possibly not know about him."

The others immediately realized!

In the Mist Rain Lake, where Thousand Boat Island lay, disciples of numerous sects occupied the surrounding islands.

Among them were those who had entered the Holy Spirit Mountain within the past year or two, bringing with them various accounts.

The most sensational of these tales centered around Da Xia's nationwide effort to present the world with a grand spectacle—"Heavenly Pride!"

Some claimed that this was Da Xia's attempt at creating gods, providing spiritual sustenance and an anchor of hope for its people.

But to those in the Holy Spirit Mountain Realm, there was an alternative perspective.

The question lingered in their hearts: could this be Da Xia's defiance against the gods? Could the lowly and despised Human Clan be striving to overturn the existing order?

After all, as time passed, this group of profoundly influential and supremely talented individuals would inevitably step foot into the Holy Spirit Mountain...

When that time came, would the rules of the Holy Spirit Mountain Realm experience even a tiny shift?

"Island Master, should we offer some hospitality to these Heavenly Prides?" a young woman tentatively asked.

The question was calculated.

On one hand, it sought confirmation from the Island Master: could the Heavenly Prides, officially backed by Da Xia, truly be trusted? On the other, it indirectly sought clarification of the visitors' identities.

The Island Master pondered, her hands clasped behind her back, her delicate fingers turning pale as she pondered deeply.

Lu Ran... could he be trusted?

Had his heart already been tainted by this vile mountain?

Those wearing bamboo clothes—were they his teammates or merely his slaves?

Quietly, the Island Master recalled her first encounter with Lu Ran.

Her schoolmate's methods were cruel, his temperament domineering!

He was the complete opposite of typical disciples from the Immortal Sheep Sect.

Yet, he bore the title of Heavenly Pride, a heroic figure pushed forth by Da Xia! If he could lend some assistance to Thousand Boat Island to counter the scoundrels from Thunder Mountain...

"Hmm?" Suddenly, the Island Master's eyes turned sharp.

In her line of sight, the white-robed youth stood by the lake, gazing distantly in their direction.

Though they hid amongst the dense shrubs, concealed by flourishing leaves, the Island Master was certain that Lu Ran had already locked onto their position.

Well then, no need to consider anymore.

"Go, notify the six other Bi He Islands. Inform them that we have an esteemed guest." The Island Master gave her orders.

"Yes!"

"Understood." Several disciples quickly dispersed.

The Island Master, meanwhile, took her time, gracefully smoothing her long gown.

At the same time, on the northern side of Mist Rain Lake—

Jiang Ruyi approached Lu Ran and asked, "There's someone over there?"

Lu Ran nodded. "Yes, and their eyes are beautiful."

Jiang Ruyi: ???

"Ah, no!" Lu Ran quickly caught himself and clarified nervously, "Not as beautiful as yours."

Jiang Ruyi glanced at Lu Ran with an unimpressed look. Before she could respond, a woman in a green gown suddenly flew out from the island.

She stepped on a lotus leaf, slowly gliding through the air.

Her jet-black hair flowed behind her, and her simple yet elegant long gown fluttered gently, exuding an aura of calm refinement.

Just as Lu Ran had mentioned, the woman indeed possessed a pair of stunning eyes, clear as a mountain spring.

As the woman drew closer, both Lu Ran and Jiang Ruyi began to feel a faint sense of pressure!

It wasn't related to combat strength, nor was it a sign of fear—it was the raw, undeniable divide of strength in realms that spoke for itself.

The vast Yangyang Sea was enough to make those within the River Realm feel a heavy sense of oppression!

"A Believer of Bi He."

Lu Ran's gaze swept over the verdant lotus leaf beneath her feet.

Glistening dewdrops adorned its surface, complementing the woman's delicate figure.

Under the golden hues of the setting sun, it was hard to discern whether the glistening drops or the woman's radiant complexion were more captivating... cough, cough.

Lu Ran quickly averted his gaze.

Bi He Demoness!

You can't distract my Dao Heart!

My Jiang Fairy is the most beautiful of all~

That said, the Third-class God Bi He was undeniably fearsome and all-encompassing!

The Bi He Sect excelled in defense and control while also possessing the capacity for healing.

Before the River Realm, they mainly played support roles.

After reaching the River Realm... well, for the most part, they were still supporting others.

Yet, their River Realm ultimate skill was catastrophically destructive and not easily unleashed.

The River Realm Divine Technique, *Ten Thousand Pure Lotuses,* could summon countless blossoms to bloom, rapidly expanding outward and unleashing endless petals and lotus leaves to annihilate all life!

Its very existence seemed to harbor an intent to cleanse the universe!

Exactly how terrifying was this sect?

One need only consider their nemesis: the Evil Demon *Tangled Silk Shadow!*

People often said: "Rather face the King Yan's Palace than brush against the Tangled Silk Threads."

This phrase stemmed from a human perspective, but from the perspective of the Evil Demons, one should also avoid encountering Bi He's *Lotus Silk Connection!

The Bi He Sect could control you to the point of death!

The question remained: With such overwhelming power, why was the deity Bi He categorized as a Third-class God?

Surely the title of "Tangled Silk Shadow's nemesis" alone was worthy of elevating her status to the second rank?

The reason she remained in the third rank likely had to do with her temperament.

Her followers, like their god, tended to be elegant and indifferent, showing little interest in vying for supremacy.

Huff~

The woman hovered gracefully down onto the lake's surface, placed her hands together in a gesture of respect, and greeted with a polite smile:

"Junior Lu, greetings."

"Ah??" Lu Ran was utterly flabbergasted by the peculiar manner of address.

Who are you to call me "Junior"?

Wait... were you also from Rain Alley High?

Chapter 566: Mist and Rain Qianzhou

"Are you also from Rain Alley High School?" Lu Ran asked in confusion.

Did he just encounter a fellow local?

"Lu, you and I are university alumni," Island Master He explained with a smile.

Lu Ran grinned awkwardly. "Who are you trying to fool? When did I ever attend university... Oh, wait! I'm a university student."

Midway through speaking, Lu Ran suddenly remembered that he was the overqualified national top scorer from the college entrance exam who later "settled for" Wulie River University.

The Eight Desolates Annihilation Blade was something he acquired from Wulie River University.

Awkward!

Lu Ran scratched his head, inadvertently revealing the demeanor of a 19-year-old boy.

In truth, Lu Ran couldn't really be blamed for this.

Though he did get admitted to Wulie River University, he never actually attended a single class, so any sense of belonging was out of the question.

From his entrance test to this day, he'd only stepped foot inside the university gate once.

He fought one fight, then gave himself an indefinite vacation...

"Haha~" Island Master He watched the slightly awkward Lu Ran with amusement. This "refreshingly pure university student" demeanor made him seem somewhat endearing.

At the very least, it was more reassuring than his usual somber expression.

Island Master He glanced at the younger students, her smile warm and placid. "Last year's school opening ceremony, I happened to witness Lu venting his rage over a girl."

Lu Ran: "..."

Jiang Ruyi also remembered what happened in the past, but she seemed far from embarrassed. Instead, her smile was calm and gentle. "May I know the senior sister's surname?"

"No need for formalities. My surname is He—He Yingcai." Island Master He put her hands together and bowed slightly.

He Yingcai was undoubtedly a Great Power of the Sea Realm!

Yet when interacting with Lu Ran and Jiang Ruyi, her demeanor remained humble and gracious, leaving a highly favorable impression.

Jiang Ruyi also put her hands together in return. "For Senior Sister He to have reached the Sea Realm at such a young age, it's truly admirable."

He Yingcai modestly smiled and shook her head gently.

In Thousand Boat Archipelago, He Yingcai indeed held a lofty status.

But when compared to Lu Ran and Jiang Ruyi?

The talents He Yingcai prided herself on really paled in comparison.

Lu Ran asked, "So, is this Lake District the headquarters of the Bi He Sect?"

He Yingcai turned slightly, gazing out at the distant archipelago. "It's not just my Bi He Sect—it also includes the Sky Phoenix Sect, Chenghua Sect, and Sword Lotus Sect."

"Oh?" Lu Ran was visibly surprised.

Second-class God·Sky Phoenix!

Third-class God·Bi He!

Third-class God·Chenghua!

Fourth-class God·Sword Lotus!

So many Divine Sect factions gathered together—do they really not fight each other?

The Sky Phoenix Sect is an auxiliary faction, excelling in defense, control, and healing.

Both the Chenghua Sect and the Bi He Sect are versatile, adept in offense and defense.

Believers of such sects are extremely rare in the small Rain Alley City.

During Lu Ran's years guarding Rain Alley City, he'd only ever encountered a Chenghua believer once.

It was on the fifteenth night of the month, coincidentally during an invasion by the Evil Spear Emperor Clan, so the memory stuck with him.

He even recalled seizing a beautiful oil-paper umbrella from a Chenghua disciple and using it as a makeshift boat to glide through the rain-soaked night sky.

Borrowing its aid, he defeated a king.

As for the Fourth-class God·Sword Lotus, Lu Ran was quite familiar—his teammate Tian Tian was a Sword Lotus believer.

To think these four sects would all gather in one place?

Hmm... Makes sense, he guessed.

The lake was vast enough to feel like a sea, dotted with countless islands. A single sect's disciples alone would struggle to dominate the area.

"This lake is called Mist Rain Lake," He Yingcai elaborated. "Its many islands are collectively referred to as the Thousand Boat Archipelago.

According to legend, over a decade ago, under the leadership of the Sky Phoenix Sect, disciples from the four sects joined forces here to establish the Thousand Boat Alliance."

He Yingcai paused for a moment before continuing. "To this day, the Bi He Sect steadfastly guards the northern region, holding seven islands collectively called the Bi He Seven Isles.

Presently, I am the master of one of these islands."

"Goodness~" Lu Ran couldn't help but exclaim in astonishment. "So within your Bi He Sect alone, there are six other island masters in the Sea Realm like you?"

He Yingcai smiled and nodded.

Regardless of Lu Ran's intentions in the Holy Spirit Mountain, revealing some cards up front could avoid unnecessary trouble.

She truly wished to avoid crossing swords with someone like Lu Ran.

Lu Ran continued, "And the other three sects? Do they also each hold seven islands, with over seven Sea Realm members in their ranks?"

He Yingcai seemed eager to share all she knew. "The Chenghua Sect guards the southwestern seven islands, the Sword Lotus Sect guards the southeastern ones, and the Sky Phoenix Sect occupies the three central islands.

All island masters are Sea Realm Great Powers.

Because of the four sects' united front, the Thousand Boat Alliance has remained a powerhouse here."

"Seven multiplied by three... twenty-one... twenty-four." Lu Ran muttered to himself, inwardly overwhelmed.

On this Thousand Boat Archipelago, there were at least twenty-four Sea Realm Great Powers!

At least!

To put it in perspective, even a mighty Divine Sect like West Desolation or North Wind had only about twenty Sea Realm Great Powers in their strongholds.

But this Thousand Boat Alliance...

The four sects combining forces was unquestionably a wise strategy. Together, they formed a top-tier alliance capable of dominating the Immortal Realm.

If they were to split apart and compete individually, all four sects would inevitably be reduced to mid-tier organizations.

Jiang Ruyi sighed. "To unite four factions as one, the Alliance Leader of Thousand Boat Alliance must be extraordinary."

He Yingcai nodded approvingly. "Alliance Leader Yun Qianzhou is a disciple of the Sky Phoenix Sect. As a junior sister yourself, you understand that the Sky Phoenix Sect is renowned for their benevolence.

Alliance Leader Yun possesses not only immense power but also a kind and virtuous heart, earning immense respect within the alliance."

Jiang Ruyi nodded to herself quietly.

Indeed, only someone from the Sky Phoenix Sect could unite the Bi He, Chenghua, and Sword Lotus Sects.

Lu Ran was filled with mixed emotions. "It seems, Senior Sister He, with such a mighty tree to lean on, you can rest easy."

He Yingcai, however, shook her head with a wry smile.

"Why's that?" Lu Ran noticed her reaction and asked, puzzled, "Isn't the Thousand Boat Alliance united internally?"

He Yingcai responded, "The Thousand Boat Alliance is relatively stable. It's just... fierce enemies surround us."

"Huh?" Lu Ran was even more taken aback. "Even a behemoth like the Thousand Boat Alliance has someone daring to provoke it?"

He Yingcai let out a soft sigh. "Not long ago, a group from Thunder Mountain came here to 'borrow' people."

Her lips curled into a cold smile as she added, "They claimed it was borrowing, but if we really lent them our people, they'd likely never return—reduced to slaves for life."

"Thunder Mountain..." Lu Ran furrowed his brows, recalling the two Eastern Thunder believers serving as bodyguards during the previous Tiantu Mountain conquest.

"From the mountain's name alone, you can guess it's the base of the Dongting Sect," He Yingcai remarked.

"But your Thousand Boat Alliance has enough Sea Realm powers—twenty or thirty, at least! How could they bully you like this?"

He Yingcai spoke softly, "Thunder Mountain is no trifling opponent. The fact I became an island master is because during the last battle, the former island master was killed."

Lu Ran: ???

A Sea Realm Great Power, slain in battle?

And with the top-tier healers of the Sky Phoenix Sect present? How was that possible?!

He Yingcai nodded lightly. "Thunder Mountain is extremely domineering, and the Eastern Thunder Divine Technique is overwhelmingly potent—very difficult to counter."

Lu Ran reviewed the list of divine techniques employed by the Dongting Sect, reluctantly admitting that this group of "Flash-imitation combatants" was indeed formidable!

Their disciples weren't just fast and explosively powerful—they were also well-rounded, with defense and crowd control capabilities!

"Enough about this," He Yingcai said, turning her attention back to Lu Ran, her usual gentle smile returning. "Junior Brother, when did you enter the mountain? From the looks of it, you're doing quite well?"

As she spoke, He Yingcai's eyes scanned the group of straw-cloaked figures nearby.

Since the Sect Leader and Island Master had started conversing, the Ran Sect members had maintained vigilance over their surroundings, showing only their backs or profiles to He Yingcai.

Deng Yuxiang, Yu Changsheng, Gao Yunyan...

The auras faintly emanating from the trio clearly marked them as Sea Realm Great Powers!

Meanwhile, both Lu Ran and Jiang Ruyi appeared to still be in the River Realm.

Holy Spirit Mountain Realm, after all, was purely survival of the fittest, with strength reigning supreme.

That Lu Ran could inspire such high-level individuals to loyally follow him and willingly serve as subordinates greatly impressed He Yingcai.

Lu Ran smiled casually, gesturing toward his group. "I entered the mountain in late January. I also established a small group, called the Ran Sect.

These are my like-minded companions."

As Lu Ran made introductions, Yu Changsheng turned his head, offering a polite smile and nod.

He Yingcai's gaze lingered for a moment.

This man... was unreasonably handsome.

Of course, as a Sea Realm Great Power herself, He Yingcai maintained her composure.

She allowed her gaze to rest on Yu Changsheng for a couple more seconds before moving on to observe others. She suddenly chuckled. "Seems there's hiding going on here."

Hiding what?

Heavens' chosen ones, naturally!

Xue Fengchen turned slightly, holding his Mountain Opening Axe, and bowed toward the Sea Realm Island Master.

He Yingcai marveled, "Junior Brother Lu indeed has impressive capabilities. In just over half a year, you've assembled such a team.

I imagine what I see today is merely the tip of the Ran Sect's strength, no?"

"No, no, not really." Lu Ran waved it off with a sheepish grin.

On Cloud Sea Cliff, after all, he still had two more Sea Realm aces—both mid- to high-level, too!

He Yingcai hesitated slightly before voicing another question. "And what brings Junior Brother Lu and your group to this region?"

Lu Ran replied, "Senior Sister, you've misunderstood. I'm not here on purpose—just wandering and happened upon this area."

He Yingcai tilted her head slightly: ?

Wandering?

Wandered in?

Can we stop speaking nonsense?

"Huff~"

Lu Ran nodded in confirmation. "My aim is just to head south for some sightseeing, to explore the Holy Spirit Mountain map and broaden my horizons."

He Yingcai stared at Lu Ran in silence.

If not for these words coming directly from him, she'd want to command this lowly River Realm boy to kneel, compose himself, and rephrase properly.

"Senior Sister doesn't believe me, huh?" Lu Ran laughed, pointing toward Yu Changsheng. "Mr. Conglong over there, I found him fishing up in a high mountain lake on the northern edge of Snow Forest."

Yu Changsheng: ???

Lu Ran then pointed to two towering disciples from West Desolation. "The Phoenix and Swallow Generals were people I tracked down in the Northwest Desert, amidst Ten Thousand Blade Mountain."

Finally, he gestured toward Deng Yuxiang. "As for the Nightmare Guardian..."

Deng Yuxiang finally turned her head, glancing sidelong at Lu Ran with a raised brow.

Lu Ran hesitated before awkwardly blurting, "Er, she came pre-installed."

Deng Yuxiang: "..."

Jiang Ruyi couldn't contain her laughter, watching Lu Ran's smug demeanor.

Still such a pretender, huh?

Just like in high school—never one to give up on his old tricks.

He Yingcai, for her part, was utterly dumbfounded!

Most people within Holy Spirit Mountain lived in constant struggle, desperately seeking refuge under a powerful faction—and, if lucky, staying there for life.

Those unable to find protection spent their days in perpetual flight, fearing for their lives.

Meanwhile, Lu Ran...

He seemed to be on a leisurely stroll?

First the northern Snow Forest, then the western desert plains—now, here in the south?

Are we even in the same Holy Spirit Mountain?

He Yingcai gazed at Lu Ran, utterly speechless for a long while.

Lu Ran then remarked, "This southern trip isn't just about mapping the area. The Ran Sect is also on the lookout for fellow kindred spirits.

Meeting Senior Sister He here is truly a delightful surprise.

However, given your status as an island master, I doubt you'd be interested in my humble little sect."

Lu Ran couldn't hide his envy for this esteemed Sea Realm Island Master.

That said, any potential collaboration would need thorough vetting first—even if He Yingcai showed interest.

After all, someone entrenched in high rank with connections to the Thousand Boat Alliance wouldn't easily walk away from it all.

"Heh."

He Yingcai steadied her scattered thoughts, offering a faint smile.

She gazed at Lu Ran with an insistent yet playful glint in her eyes.

After all,

nothing in life was ever truly absolute.

...

Chapter 567: Fishing boat singing at dusk

"Lu, it's getting late. How about we move to Qinghe Island for a chat?" He Yincai spoke softly, then added, "Let me fulfill my duty as the host."

As everyone conversed, the sunset had already fallen behind the distant mountains.

The sky grew dim—it was indeed time to find a place to rest.

Yet faced with the sudden invitation, Lu Ran did not agree immediately.

He was keen on gathering more information.

The Thousand Boat Archipelago was home to numerous sects, with no shortage of people—perhaps he could learn of Senior Cheng or Qin Yanzhi's whereabouts?

That said, entering the depths of an organized force rashly could easily lead to being surrounded and killed!

After all, the weapons he carried were not few!

In the realm of Sacred Spirit Mountain, divine weapons and magic artifacts were priceless treasures, enough to make anyone envious.

Ultimately, Lu Ran was not well-acquainted with He Yincai. Although... hmm, she was genuinely kind.

And quite sincere.

He Yincai noticed Lu Ran's hesitation and chuckled lightly, "Lu, you've traveled far and wide over the past half-year; it seems you've endured quite a bit."

Lu Ran didn't respond, neither confirming nor denying.

He Yincai turned toward the island and said, "Then let me have someone send over tea and snacks; I'll host you right here."

This time, Lu Ran couldn't help but laugh.

It seemed his courage had fallen short.

He Yincai was bold enough to meet alone and unarmed!

How could he, leading Ran Sect's many warriors, not set foot on Qinghe Island?

Moreover, he was already within the Thousand Boat Alliance's territory—whether he conversed here or visited the island, it hardly made a difference.

Lu Ran turned to Jiang Ruyi and proposed, "Should we go up the island to take a look?"

Jiang Ruyi lightly nodded, "Alright."

She had her own assessment of everything He Yincai had said.

From beginning to end, He Yincai was straightforward and honest, which left Jiang Ruyi quite impressed by this senior.

"Please!" He Yincai raised her elegant hand; the lotus leaf beneath her feet rapidly expanded.

This technique was the Bi He Divine Technique: Heaven-reaching Lotus Leaf!

At the sea grade level, the lotus leaf could expand up to 100 meters in diameter—a stunning spectacle!

However, at this moment, He Yincai merely expanded the leaf to a 10-meter size, sufficient to carry everyone.

The uniquely curved lotus leaf resembled a jade-green disk, adorned with crystal droplets. It ferried the group across the clear lake waters.

Feeling curious, Lu Ran half-knelt and furtively touched the lotus leaf.

It was surprisingly tender~

Interestingly, the dew on the lotus leaf originated alongside the leaf itself.

Though formed from divine power and unable to hydrate humans, it didn't detract from the temptation to taste it.

Who knew if this "jade plate pearl" might be as sweet as Smoke Rain Lake's waters?

Lu Ran restrained the urge several times but ultimately refrained.

Hmm... it lacked the demeanor of an expert!

Passing by a few oddly shaped small islands, Lu Ran and the others arrived at Qinghe Island, He Yincai's domain.

"Qinghe Island," Lu Ran muttered to himself, studying his surroundings.

The island was shaded with dense greenery, and the air carried a refreshing fragrance, calming to the senses.

"Island Master!"

"Island Master He!" Several respectful voices echoed.

He Yincai inquired, "Have all the messages been sent to the islands?"

A middle-aged woman reported, "Most of the major island masters are in seclusion.

The Dry Lotus Island Master sent over some Smoke Rain Tea.

The Golden Lotus Island Master gifted two boxes of Flower Fruit Cake.

The Wind Lotus Island Master invited a musician of the celestial ensemble for you.

...

The Grey Lotus Island Master personally visited and is waiting for you in the Council Hall."

"Understood," He Yincai nodded and instructed, "The esteemed guests are already here; make preparations quickly."

"Yes!" The group accepted the orders and left promptly.

He Yincai turned back to the others and gestured, "Come, this way."

Yet at that moment, Lu Ran was utterly dumbfounded!

What the hell is this? Drinks? Snacks? And even a band?

No!

Am I still on Sacred Spirit Mountain?

"Lu, this way, please!" He Yincai gestured forward.

Looking at Qinghe Island's master, Lu Ran asked, "Do you all live such luxurious lives?"

He Yincai laughed and shook her head, "It's just some amusement amidst the hardship."

Lu Ran continued walking and asked, "And you even have a band?"

He Yincai explained, "The Thousand Boat Alliance is primarily composed of Tianluan, Bi He, Chenghua, and Sword Lotus sects. Yet some external believers seek refuge within the alliance."

The Yun Thousand Boat Hierarch is benevolent and has taken in a portion of external disciples."

Lu Ran's thoughts stirred.

So, what He Qifeng intended to do, someone was already doing?

Yet the term "a portion" was intriguing.

Could it mean the Thousand Boat Alliance only accepted a small number of external disciples to maintain the dominance of its four main sects and ensure balance in factions and resource distribution?

If that were so, the alliance's nature differed fundamentally from the Forbidden City.

Lu Ran pondered and curiously asked, "How many people belong to the Bi He Sect?"

He Yincai replied, "Bi He encompasses seven islands, each housing 15–20 disciples.

On Qinghe Island, we have 18 Bi He disciples."

"That's quite the number," Lu Ran remarked casually.

"The Sacred Spirit Mountain realm is vast; it's likely other regions also harbor Bi He disciples, possibly even the sect's main base," He Yincai sighed softly, "Unfortunately, I may never cross paths with it in this lifetime."

Before finishing her thought, He Yincai glanced at Lu Ran, "Lu, you've traveled extensively across Sacred Spirit Mountain—have you ever encountered Bi He Sect's base of operations?"

Lu Ran answered truthfully, "Haven't seen it."

Sacred Spirit Mountain was excessively vast; despite having journeyed north to Snow Forest, west to desolation, and east across the ocean, Lu Ran's ventures merely traced "lines" across its map.

They were far from exploring entire regions.

Just this southward trip spanned over a thousand kilometers—ultimately, he traversed but a path, inevitably missing numerous areas.

Among them might exist factions he hadn't encountered.

The group continued their conversation as they approached a sizable wooden structure situated deep within the verdant forest.

This was Qinghe Island's Council Hall.

Under the dimming sky, someone had already lit a bonfire outside the hall, its doors wide open, revealing an old man seated within.

He appeared to be in his sixties, dressed in gray attire, with short, graying hair, leaning on a cane.

"Qinghe Island Master," The old man smiled amicably, supporting himself with his cane as he stood.

"Grey Lotus Island Master, I didn't expect you to visit in person! Forgive me for not greeting you sooner!" He Yincai immediately folded her hands respectfully.

"I heard Qinghe Island Master had esteemed guests arrive, so this old man thought he'd join the commotion." Grey Lotus Island Master cast a glance at the group accompanying He Yincai.

He Yincai introduced them promptly, "These two are my fellow university alumni, now the Master of Ran Sect and his Lady."

Grey Lotus Island Master leaned on his cane, carefully observing the young duo, internally impressed:

"What fine youngsters."

"Greetings, Grey Lotus Island Master," Lu Ran inwardly marveled—such overwhelming pressure!

This old man must be a high-ranked Sea Realm cultivator, perhaps even its peak?

The Grey Lotus Island Master's gaze shifted past the group of raincoat-clad followers, lingering briefly on figures like Cong Long, Nightmare, and Yan Divine General. His amazement deepened:

"Master Lu truly is young and capable—remarkable indeed..."

"Senior flatters me," Lu Ran started humbly, only to notice the old man's eyes suddenly flick upward.

Unnoticed by all, the jade pendant concealed within the Grey Lotus Island Master's robe quivered faintly.

The old man slowly turned, ultimately looking toward the vacant space beyond the Council Hall.

His gaze seemed to penetrate the structure, discerning something outside as he muttered, "There's another one still hiding."

"Hmm?" He Yincai shot a glance toward Lu Ran.

"Ah, yes!" Lu Ran feigned realization, "Indeed, there's one more."

He Yincai's expression carried mild reproach; after conversing for so long, her tone had grown subtly familiar:

"Lu, that's awfully sly of you!"

"I genuinely forgot!" Lu Ran apologized with a sheepish smile, "She's elusive—I rarely get to see her."

Realizing Lu Ran had an additional hidden guard who hadn't been detected, He Yincai's curiosity about Ran Sect's strength deepened.

And her interest in Lu Ran grew.

Yet she did not insist on revealing the guard, showing great tolerance, and instead invited, "Come, let's start the banquet."

Lu Ran, too, was intrigued by this dinner gathering.

Outside the Council Hall, the bonfire blazed high, flames dancing, embers crackling.

Several square wooden tables and chairs surrounded the fire, adorned with tea and snacks.

The evening breeze rustled the forest leaves with a "shh-shh" sound.

The pleasantly surreal ambiance left Lu Ran feeling almost mystified!

Under He Yincai's invitation, Lu Ran and Jiang Ruyi joined Grey Lotus Island Master in taking a seat.

He Yincai herself poured tea for them, then picked up her teacup, finishing its contents in one gulp as she teased Lu Ran:

"Rest assured—it's not poisoned."

Lu Ran: "..."

The fragrant aroma of Smoke Rain Tea trickled into his nose, fully misleading him!

But as the clear tea entered his mouth, Lu Ran experienced only sheer bitterness.

Good heavens~

So bitter?

No wonder it's Sacred Spirit Mountain's specialty!

Is this tea meant to help one reminisce about the struggles of mountain life...

"Here, have this to offset the bitterness."

He Yincai gracefully picked up a Flower Fruit Cake, divided it into pieces, and handed some to Lu and Jiang.

She watched Lu Ran with a smile, popping a small piece into her mouth, making Lu feel slightly embarrassed. He promptly ate a piece himself.

This intriguing confection was likely crafted using some sort of grass leaves and flower petals.

Its scent was pleasant—but upon tasting it... oh?

Delicious?

Lu Ran blinked and immediately understood.

It wasn't that the cake was exceptionally sweet—

It was the tea that was too bitter...

"Lu, tell me about your adventures through Sacred Spirit Mountain," He Yincai's eyes sparkled with interest, fixated on Lu.

Grey Lotus Island Master sat quietly, equally curious about the exceedingly young sect leader's background.

Who would have guessed Lu Ran would utter, "This is like a child without a mother—there's a long story to tell."

Everyone: "..."

Of course, Lu Ran was willing to share his tales.

Having observed carefully, he noticed He Yincai's interest in Ran Sect!

This was undoubtedly a golden opportunity to increase her fascination—to make a Sea Realm Island Master yearn for more!

Bi He Sect followers—a staunch foe of Tangled Silk Shadow—who wouldn't want that?

Lu Ran silently composed his words.

"Ahhh~"

A gentle breeze carried melodic flute music through the air.

Lu Ran turned his head in surprise, looking past the dancing flames to spot a man in white holding a jade flute, playing with closed eyes.

The lilting notes were beautiful indeed.

It left Lu Ran and his band of Ran Sect warriors dumbstruck!

"Fishermen's Evening Song"?!

This tune... was downright mesmerizing!

A daze overtook Lu Ran, evoking memories of Human World Da Xia, of that dilapidated apartment building.

Even of his childhood.

Those times spent with his father, watching "Evening News," followed by the weather forecast.

"Senior sister."

"Hmm?"

"Don't you think this tune is sort of cheating?"

"Yun Thousand Boat Hierarch says Sacred Spirit Mountain is a place that devours the human heart and extinguishes humanity." He Yincai picked up the teapot and poured Lu Ran another cup of tea.

She spoke softly, "The hierarch advises us to drink tea, eat snacks, and remind ourselves that we are human.

This tune also serves to remind Thousand Boat Alliance members that we originate from the same civilization, as siblings born of Da Xia."

Hearing this, Lu Ran and Jiang Ruyi exchanged a glance.

This Yun Thousand Boat Hierarch...

Might have to meet them someday?

Such strong principles and thoughtful considerations, along with unwavering resolve as a follower of Second-Class God Tianluan...

Surely, another potential ally to join Ran Sect in overthrowing gods and demons?

Lu Ran licked his lips, envisioning a grand plan involving the alliance hierarch—a dream of epic proportions.

Nonetheless, patience would be key!

He shifted his gaze subtly, landing on He Yincai once more.

Surely, she too maintained her sense of identity with the human clan, her humanity intact.

I want it all.

Can I have them all in my camp...

Chapter 568: in Heaven, Human World

This night, Lu Ran spoke of many things.

The thrilling journey that lasted for nine months was truly captivating, leaving He Yingcai on edge as she listened.

During the conversation, Lu Ran also inquired about Cheng Xin and Qin Yanzhi. Both Island Masters had not heard of them but agreed to ask around within the Thousand Boat Alliance.

Within the Thousand Boat Alliance, every sect had over a hundred believers, with even the Fourth-class God-Sword Lotus boasting over two hundred.

There was a chance someone might have heard something relevant.

Lu Ran also casually asked about Alliance Leader Yun Qianzhou of the Thousand Boat Alliance.

He Yingcai explained: Alliance Leader Yun is a Sea Realm-Fifth Rank Great Power!

It's said that he has been stuck at this realm for over a decade, but half a year ago, Yun Qianzhou seemed to have gained some enlightenment and has been in closed-door cultivation ever since.

For the past six months, Yun Qianzhou has completely shut himself off from the outside world, focusing solely on breaking through to the Heavenly Realm.

Perhaps it is precisely because of this that the people of Thunder Mountain have dared to act so presumptuously, constantly harassing and provoking the Thousand Boat Alliance.

It reeks of a step-by-step encroachment strategy!

The recent great battle was the most intense conflict between the two factions in recent years!

The Sword Lotus Sect, having been relentlessly pressured by the people from Thunder Mountain, finally couldn't bear it any longer and fought back.

Subsequently, the other three major sects within the Thousand Boat Alliance rallied in response, and a massive battle erupted more than ten kilometers southwest of Mist Rain Lake.

Both sides suffered significant losses!

On the Thousand Boat Alliance's side, two Sea Realm Island Masters from the Bi He and Sword Lotus sects were killed, while Thunder Mountain also lost a Sea Realm elder.

In the end, the battle concluded with Thunder Mountain's forces making spiteful threats before retreating in anger.

Tragically, the Thousand Boat Alliance could only watch as they left. Once the East Thunder disciples are determined to withdraw, it's incredibly challenging to stop them...

He Yingcai spoke at length, but one word from her account was keenly caught by Lu Ran.

After she finished speaking and silence settled in, Lu Ran finally spoke:

"Heavenly Realm?"

"The realm above the Sea Realm is called the Heavenly Realm."

"Who named it? Is it widely recognized?" Lu Ran continued to ask.

"This realm's name was coined by Alliance Leader Yun," He Yingcai glanced at the grey-robed elder beside her, "As for its specific origins..."

Grey Lotus Island Master spoke in a deep voice, "According to Alliance Leader Yun, he once had a comrade, a believer of Sword One.

This disciple of Sword One broke through the shackles of the Sea Realm and reached an even higher level of power.

Later, she soared into the sky and disappeared into the Cloud Sea, never to be seen again."

The Grey Lotus Island Master paused for a moment before continuing, "The 'Heavenly Realm' mentioned by Alliance Leader Yun likely stems from this.

With the Cloud Sea as the boundary, only by reaching the Heavenly Realm can one break through the invisible prisons of this world and survive to leave the Holy Spirit Mountain."

"Indeed," He Yingcai chimed in, "Alliance Leader Yun also referred to the world above the Cloud Sea as the 'Heavenly Realm.'"

"Impressive," Lu Ran couldn't help but marvel silently in his heart.

Divine-Sword One truly deserves to be the foremost among the Da Xia Gods, the ultimate number one under heaven!

The believers under their name match perfectly with the god's ethos, their strength leaving people speechless in awe.

However, ascending to the heavens isn't the only way.

Lu Ran mused quietly to himself.

His own River Realm·Fifth Rank Evil Spear Emperor stealthily climbed up along the Ten Thousand Blade Mountain, breaking through to the heavens...

Of course, that Evil Spear Emperor also vanished without a trace.

In fact, after that, Lu Ran summoned several other Evil Spear Emperors to investigate the Ten Thousand Blade Mountain, but they all met the same fate — none returned.

According to the theory that only those in the Heavenly Realm can withstand the invisible energy barrages and survive to ascend...

The world above the Cloud Sea must be terrifyingly strong!

With mere River Realm Evil Demons, even if they sneaked up there, they would stand no chance of survival.

Jiang Ruyi looked to the grey-robed elder and asked, "What was the name of that Sword One believer predecessor?"

The Grey Lotus Island Master shook his head, "I'm not sure. All of this occurred before Alliance Leader Yun founded the Thousand Boat Alliance.

Alliance Leader Yun is unwilling to share much about the past, only briefly mentioning it."

When he finished speaking, the Grey Lotus Island Master sighed deeply, lifting his gaze to the heavens: "Alliance Leader Yun told us..."

Lu Ran did not rush him, attentively listening.

"The heavens may just be the Human World."

Upon hearing this, Lu Ran and Jiang Ruyi exchanged a glance.

The Grey Lotus Island Master stared at the starry sky. Tonight, there was no Cloud Sea veiling the heavens:

"At the very least, the heavens are closer to the Human World."

When these words fell, the lively bonfire banquet fell into a deep silence, with everyone remaining taciturn.

Only the melodious sound of a flute drifted through the tranquil night, carrying its beautiful tune into the vast darkness.

After a long while, the Grey Lotus Island Master retracted his gaze and turned to Lu Ran: "Master Lu, both you and your lady possess extraordinary talent.

One day, you will surely break free from the shackles and go see the Heavenly Realm."

"Island Master Grey Lotus already a High Rank Sea Realm practitioner? Or perhaps at the Sea Realm Peak?" Lu Ran lifted his tea cup and gestured toward the grey-robed elder, "I wish you success in stepping into the Heavenly Realm soon."

"Heh," the Grey Lotus Island Master let out a chuckle, his face lined with deep wrinkles that betrayed his age.

The grey-robed elder was indeed smiling, but an undertone of sorrow lingered beneath it.

As one who stands among the Yangyang Sea's finest, even potentially only a step away from the Heavenly Realm, he appeared...

resigned. He seemed to have long lost hope, doubting that he would ever achieve another breakthrough or survive the Holy Spirit Mountain.

The resolve of the heart erodes day by day.

Hope, after countless passing years, transforms gradually into despair.

For the Grey Lotus Island Master, simply maintaining his Mental Realm and stabilizing his cultivation might already be his limit.

"Thank you for your kind words, young friend." The grey-robed elder drained his cup of Smoke Rain Tea in one go.

Lu Ran too emptied his cup, having become much more accustomed to the tea's bitterness.

The flute's melodies floated through the air, while those seated at the table sat in silence for a long time.

At a nearby table, Yu Changsheng suddenly rose to his feet.

Lu Ran followed his gaze and saw Yu Changsheng holding a folding fan, bowing and cupping his hands toward him.

He asked curiously, "Mr. Conglong?"

Yu Changsheng had been thoroughly influenced by Deng Yuxiang.

In front of others, he truly brought great honor to their sect's leader.

With Lu Ran's tacit approval, Yu Changsheng took a step forward, standing slightly behind Lu Ran: "Just now, I've heard of the current situation of the Thousand Boat Alliance."

Though Yu Changsheng appeared as Lu Ran's subordinate, he was in fact a mighty Sea Realm·Fourth Rank expert!

The two Island Masters showed him due respect.

The Grey Lotus Island Master inquired, "What insights does this gentleman have?"

He Yingcai instructed a nearby attendant, "Go fetch a chair for the gentleman."

Yu Changsheng said, "Recently, Thunder Mountain has repeatedly targeted the Thousand Boat Alliance. I'm afraid it's not only because your alliance leader is in seclusion and the Thousand Boat Alliance currently lacks strong leadership.

More importantly, they may be worried that Alliance Leader Yun will truly make a breakthrough."

The Grey Lotus Island Master nodded quietly.

This analysis aligned with what the Thousand Boat Alliance had already deduced.

The Holy Spirit Mountain Realm was rife with trepidation.

Even if a Heavenly Realm expert doesn't seek to expand or conquer, their mere presence is enough to instill unease among others.

Yu Changsheng accepted the chair and sat down, then asked, "May I ask, during the last great battle, did Alliance Leader Yun appear?"

He Yingcai poured a cup of tea and handed it over, openly examining him: "He didn't appear; the alliance leader has been in seclusion all along."

Before this, Lu Ran had recounted his own story, thrilling He Yingcai with just nine months' worth of life-and-death experiences.

At this moment, Yu Changsheng achieved the same effect with nothing but his face.

"Hmm." Yu Changsheng turned his gaze to Lu Ran.

Lu Ran understood the look in his eyes and nodded slightly.

Yu Changsheng lightly shook the paper fan, contemplating aloud, "If Alliance Leader Yun had not sequestered himself so overtly, or if the news hadn't leaked out, everything could have been manageable.

Now, it seems Thunder Mountain's repeated provocations under the guise of 'borrowing people' are mere tests."

The flickering firelight rendered Yu Changsheng's obsidian eyes ever-changing, shifting between light and shadow.

He Yingcai looked at that impeccably handsome face: "What do you mean, sir..."

Yu Changsheng folded the fan and spoke in a steady tone: "The scale of the last battle was immense, with both sides suffering heavy losses.

Yet, Alliance Leader Yun still did not appear. I suspect Thunder Mountain has already gotten the answer they were probing for.

Next, Thunder Mountain is likely to launch a full-blown assault on the Thousand Boat Alliance."

The Grey Lotus Island Master's face darkened.

Yu Changsheng continued, "Both Thunder Mountain and the Thousand Boat Alliance lost Sea Realm Great Powers, and the enmity runs deep, making reconciliation nearly impossible.

Thunder Mountain will not allow the appearance of a Heavenly Realm expert from the Thousand Boat Alliance. They're very likely to strike preemptively."

The casual words from Yu Changsheng weighed heavily on everyone present.

He Yingcai gazed at Yu Changsheng, a bitter smile appearing on her face: "Your insight is impressive, sir. The alliance has discussed this as well, but we are powerless to change the situation."

Yu Changsheng stayed silent, keeping the rest of his thoughts to himself.

Jiang Ruyi's cold, clear voice suddenly broke the quiet: "I once thought you, He Island Master, were straightforward and upright. Now it seems your invitation to us holds other intentions."

He Yingcai's expression carried a trace of regret: "My original intent was merely to reminisce. It's true I had a small ulterior motive, hoping to ask if my junior could lend us a hand.

If you two are unwilling to wade into these muddy waters, I won't force you.

Stay and rest well tonight, and tomorrow morning I'll see you off the island."

Lu Ran had remained silent all the while, his mind racing with thoughts!

This was an opportunity to strengthen relations with the Thousand Boat Alliance, and even a chance to form a bond with the potential Heavenly Realm Great Power-Yun Qianzhou!

At the same time, it was also an opportunity to eliminate a threat.

The conduct of Thunder Mountain was plain to see. Some people's nature is deeply ingrained, inherently malevolent, and steeped in sin.

Cleansing them would be the wisest solution!

He Qifeng, with her Forbidden City and her backing from Wuji Peak, was tirelessly working toward improving the survival environment in the Holy Spirit Mountain Realm.

If future entrants to the mountain could be directly influenced by this positive atmosphere, this realm could potentially undergo true change.

Otherwise, disciples like the Phoenix and Swallow Generals from East Thunder would inevitably fall prey to dependence on their sects after entering the mountain. They'd then sink into the mire, unable to escape corruption — a truly sorrowful fate.

The Thousand Boat Alliance had no shortage of Sea Realm Great Powers and was reasonably strong!

They were certainly capable of putting up a fight!

From a realistic standpoint, if they could seize this opportunity to inflict a heavy blow on Thunder Mountain — or even completely destroy it...

"Hoo~" Lu Ran picked up his tea cup, blowing gently on it.

Then, in this mission, could he cultivate the Fake God-East Thunder statue to an unprecedented level?

Could it even reach the Heavenly Realm?!

"Tired, junior?" He Yingcai observed the unusually silent Lu Ran, sighing inwardly.

However, she maintained her graceful demeanor outwardly, with a slight smile: "Let's end tonight's banquet here. Shall I take you to your rest?"

Lu Ran suddenly spoke: "Senior, you're not planning to try persuading me further?"

"Oh?" He Yingcai's bright eyes widened slightly as she looked at Lu Ran.

The Grey Lotus Island Master also suppressed his excitement, turning his attention to Lu Ran.

Although Master Lu was only at the River Realm, his team was impressively robust, boasting three Sea Realm Great Powers from different sects!

The Grey Lotus Island Master had every reason to believe that the Ran Sect harbored additional Great Powers within its ranks!

If He Yingcai truly had the leverage to bring Master Lu on as reinforcements, it would undoubtedly strengthen the Thousand Boat Alliance's survival chances immensely!

"Junior... would you be willing to assist the Thousand Boat Alliance?" He Yingcai's voice softened as a sliver of anticipation crept into her tone.

Lu Ran's face lit up with a slight smile: "I have a friend whose surname is also He..."

...

Chapter 569: gouging flesh

Earlier, when Lu Ran recounted his personal experiences, he had mentioned He Qifeng, though he hadn't elaborated.

Now, after Lu Ran gave detailed introductions, the two Island Masters were utterly astonished!

He Yingcai sighed and said, "Such ambition, such courage! Truly deserving of the title of Da Xia's genius!"

She naturally knew who He Qifeng was.

That person? Not just a genius?

But a once-in-forty-years unparalleled talent!

Why say this?

Because, all things considered, the descent of God Demons has only lasted forty years.

The First-class God·Martial Monk had always only accepted male disciples, yet made an exception once to accept a female disciple.

Enough to show just how explosive He Qifeng's talent was!

If not for Lu Ran, this monstrous prodigy, He Qifeng would have been Da Xia's first genius!

Of course, for the other participating students, wasn't He Qifeng also seen as a "monster"?

"Thunder Mountain's foundation has rotted thoroughly, so it must be cleaned out." Lu Ran held his tea cup, looking at the clear tea inside.

Casual words, yet his tone carried earth-shattering implications!

The Grey Lotus Island Master felt her heart tremble slightly, watching as Lu Ran downed the tea in one gulp.

This boy...

Truly domineering to the extreme!

So young, yet with such courage.

The winds of Holy Spirit Mountain were indeed on the cusp of change.

He Yingcai picked up the teapot and poured tea for Lu Ran thoughtfully. "Since Junior Brother Lu has already formed a deep alliance with City Lord He Qifeng, then, you must share similar visions?"

Lu Ran remained silent.

At the neighboring table, Deng Yuxiang's lips curved lightly, while the Phoenix and Swallow Generals exchanged bright-eyed glances.

The vision held by their Sect Master? Far grander than that of the City Lord of the Forbidden City!

"Junior Brother Lu?" He Yingcai called softly.

Lu Ran did not answer, his eyes instead on the tea and pastries on the table, ears attuned to beautiful flute music.

These seemingly mundane elements concealed Yun Qianzhou's philosophy of leadership.

The former served to remind everyone they were human, while the latter cautioned alliance members that they were as close as brothers.

Presumably, He Qifeng would be very willing to build ties with Yun Qianzhou!

If the Thousand Boat Alliance's support could be secured, He Qifeng's career would surely soar.

In this battle, He Qifeng would very likely come to aid.

Lu Ran was also well aware of his considerable influence; as long as he requested, He Qifeng would likely extend a hand.

But Lu Ran did not wish to owe favors.

On the contrary, he wanted to help He Qifeng realize his grand ambitions!

What is owed to me, repay it with your identity as the "Ran Sect's Divine General."

In the future, the citizens of the Divine General's city would all count as my believers...

"I left her one Divine Weapon specifically for swift communication." Lu Ran looked at the two Island Masters, "I can contact her right now."

The two Island Masters exchanged glances, barely containing their excitement.

Could the Thousand Boat Alliance be rescued?

They had originally intended to ask the Ran Sect for help—more skilled hands, more chances of victory.

Unexpectedly...

The Master of Ran Sect wielded influence that reached beyond the clouds, able to summon forces from the First-class God's sect at Wuji Peak?

He Yingcai spoke softly, "Much obliged, Junior Brother."

Grey Lotus Island Master leaned on her staff and stood upright, bowing deeply. "If Master Lu can help our Thousand Boat Alliance through this calamity, this mere drop of kindness will be repaid in torrents!"

Lu Ran: "Can you speak on behalf of the Thousand Boat Alliance?"

He Yingcai quickly replied, "Senior Pang Yuan is the leader of our Seven Lotus Islands, and can fully represent the Bi He Sect."

It was only now that Lu Ran learned Grey Lotus Island Master's real name.

Pang Yuan spoke gravely, "Master Lu, I'll now inform the leaders of all sects and convene a meeting."

Lu Ran immediately stopped him, "Hold on, let me contact Qifeng first."

"Please." Pang Yuan nodded.

Lu Ran closed his eyes and mentally reached out to the Divine Weapon-Silent Night Blade.

[Hmm?] Silent Night sounded surprised.

Lu Ran replied apologetically: [Sorry to bother you, Silent Night. Could you ask He Qifeng for me if she wants to seize an opportunity I'm offering her?]

Moments later, Silent Night transmitted thoughts back: [She asks if you've returned from the Northwest.]

Lu Ran: [Yes, ask her whether she wants this opportunity.]

Silent Night: [She asks why you haven't come to the Forbidden City to report directly to her.]

Lu Ran: "..."

I'm not her subordinate; report for what?

The Silent Night Blade continued relaying messages, enabling exchanges between the City Lord and Master of Ran Sect.

Upon hearing that Lu Ran was already in the southeast of Holy Spirit Mountain Continent, He Qifeng nearly fumed with anger!

"Weren't you supposed to be exploring the Northwest?"

"How did you end up in the southeast?"

"It really is different when one's powerful!"

"The vast heavens and earth, free for your wandering, huh?"

"No wonder someone couldn't care less about my Magical Artifact·Wind Barrier Treasure Pearl!"

After this wave of remarks, Lu Ran was left utterly flustered.

The broad-minded and ambitious City Lord He Qifeng, acting like a little girl...

Lu Ran was also puzzled—how had He Qifeng managed to convince Silent Night to relay each word verbatim?

Truly absurd!

After much effort, Lu Ran finally finished discussing business.

As expected, He Qifeng was quite intrigued by a "neutral yet orderly" camp like the Thousand Boat Alliance!

Upon hearing that Thunder Mountain intended to strike at the Thousand Boat Alliance, He Qifeng paused briefly before agreeing to aid.

They chatted for a long time before Lu Ran slowly opened his eyes.

Under the scrutinizing gaze of everyone present, Lu Ran nodded and said, "He Qifeng will come to assess the situation."

"Wonderful!" Pang Yuan nodded immediately.

Lu Ran then turned to Jiang Ruyi and said softly, "She asked me to go pick her up."

Jiang Ruyi pondered briefly and nodded lightly.

She considered suggesting that since the Silent Night Blade was with He Qifeng, she could follow the weapon's guidance to find Lu Ran.

But then it occurred to her that this was, after all, Lu Ran who had extended the invitation.

Going to receive her would also be an expression of goodwill.

Grey Lotus Island Master Pang Yuan expressed gratitude: "Thank you, Master Lu, for assisting us! I'll dispatch extra manpower to escort you as you go meet City Lord He."

Holy Spirit Mountain is riddled with dangers!

For most, the individual must tightly adhere to an organization; how could one simply roam freely through the mountains?

But Lu Ran? He immediately decided to go pick someone up—this journey would surely be fraught with peril, possibly even death!

What kind of leader is this?

So, this is Da Xia's carefully selected genius?

Lu Ran, He Qifeng...

That night, Grey Lotus Island Master, hearing their names for the first time, had his perception thoroughly shaken.

"No need, I have my own team." Lu Ran shook his head in refusal, then stood up saying, "I'll rest here tonight and set out tomorrow morning."

"Understood." He Yingcai saw Lu Ran rise and instantly said, "Shall I show you to your quarters?"

"Yes." Lu Ran nodded slightly.

While he was well aware of the urgency, a journey's time is finite!

If Lu Ran so wished, he could reach the Forbidden City in a single night.

The problem was, what about the return journey?

Eventually, he'd need to lead Big Wind Hall back to Mist Rain Lake!

If he reached He Qifeng's side overnight but took seven to eight days to return, how would that look?

That wouldn't do...

Accompanied by the two Island Masters, Lu Ran and Jiang Ruyi ventured into the forest, settling inside a secluded courtyard.

Nearby were two wooden cabins, sufficient to house Ran Sect's soldiers.

The Island Masters, being tactful, departed promptly after arranging everything.

As the disciples of Bi He Sect departed, Ran Sect's group gathered in the courtyard's main hall for a small meeting.

"Mr. Cong Long, this time when I go to fetch her, you won't need to accompany." Lu Ran looked at Yu Changsheng.

"You have other arrangements for me, Sect Master?" asked Yu Changsheng.

"Mr. Cong Long's calculations are unparalleled," Lu Ran laughed. "During my time at Wuji Peak, please help investigate the Thousand Boat Alliance thoroughly.

Meet with the Island Masters and get an understanding of the specifics here.

I'll leave the Dawn Blade with you so we can communicate anytime."

Yu Changsheng accepted the assignment immediately.

While he didn't suspect the two Island Masters of deceiving Ran Sect, getting deeper insight was naturally necessary.

In fact, Yu Changsheng was delighted that Lu Ran was wading into murky waters!

At the campfire banquet earlier, he had stood from his neighboring table and analyzed the situation for everyone with the deliberate goal of pulling Lu Ran into this.

If Lu Ran had chosen to play it safe, Yu Changsheng would have privately worked hard to persuade him.

The battle between the Thousand Boat Alliance and Thunder Mountain could be considered a war!

A life-and-death war!

Once fighting breaks out, both sides would suffer heavy casualties.

Sky Phoenix, Chenghua, Bi He, Sword Lotus, Dong Ting...

How many dead souls would be contributed by the various factions?

How much divine energy could their Sect Master absorb from them?

Yu Changsheng knew, Lu Ran was no ruthless overlord; some things couldn't be said outright.

Thus, at the banquet, he had carefully prepared arguments, deliberating how best to persuade him gently.

Yet, Lu Ran agreed on the spot, sparing Yu Changsheng from expending effort.

"Mr. Cong Long, equipped with the Dawn Blade, Cold Moon Sword, and Misty Rain Fan, should be more than sufficient." Lu Ran smiled as he looked at Yu Changsheng. "Having protectors for you would only be a burden.

The Dragon Carp Sect is most skilled at running away."

Yu Changsheng: "..."

The logic, flawless.

But why does it sound so unpleasant?

Indeed, the Dragon Carp Sect holds the Life-Saving Divine Skill·Survival Carp.

The Sea Grade Divine Technique·Survival Carp is enough for Yu Changsheng to leave behind a life-saving small Dragon Carp thousands of kilometers away.

A Dragon Carp believer can instantly adjust locations, rupturing the Survival Carp to replace it.

In essence, it acts as a teleportation skill.

Although its essence is more of a survival technique, compared to true teleportation, it consumes a staggering amount of Divine Power!

Back when Yu Changsheng assisted Lu Ran against the Sword One believer, he relied on this method to escape into highland lakes.

"Everyone, go rest. Tomorrow, accompany me on this outing." Lu Ran looked at the others.

"Yes!"

"Understood." The group rose and left, leaving the secluded courtyard to the Sect Master and his Lady.

The two entered the bedroom, where Jiang Ruyi thoughtfully suggested, "The situation here is urgent. Thunder Mountain could invade at any moment.

If we're heading out to meet her, have He Qifeng follow the Silent Night Blade's guidance and move toward us as well."

"Hmm, that sounds good." Lu Ran licked his lips.

Jiang Ruyi observed this subtle gesture and softly asked, "You seem... rather eager?"

"When I was annihilating Tiantu Mountain, I captured two Dong Ting disciples. They mentioned that Thunder Mountain enslaved many weak god believers."

As he spoke, Lu Ran reached out and encircled Jiang Fairy's graceful waist. "If by seizing this opportunity, we can uproot Thunder Mountain entirely, not only could we save lives but also benefit those entering the mountain in the future."

Jiang Ruyi silently nodded.

Lu Ran buried his head in her neck, breathing in lightly, trying to recall the scent of jasmine.

Her petite and fair ear lobes bore a faint pink hue.

Delicate, alluring.

"We're still outside." Jiang Ruyi whispered softly in reminder.

Yet Lu Ran gently kissed the adorable ear lobe, his heart stirring!

Indeed, he felt eager, craving for a bold move!

A festering wound must be wholly cleansed before fresh, bleeding flesh can regenerate.

If Ran Sect and their allies could eliminate Thunder Mountain this time, then next...

Ran Sect could storm through Sword Ridge Peak!

Lu Ran naturally kept his promise: to bring along the Evil Shadow Guardian and settle scores with the North Wind Sect's vile group!

"Lu, Lu Ran..."

"Hmm?"

"We're still outside... This isn't Cloud Sea Cliff." Jiang Ruyi's voice grew quieter and softer.

"Understood." Lu Ran lifted his fiancée's charming face, pressing a heavy kiss on those slender lips.

Chapter 570: unrelated people?

In the early morning, the clouds churned in the sky.

Lu Ran and his companions, seeing off by He Yingcai, embarked on their journey to the Forbidden City.

He specifically contacted the Silent Night Blade and heard that He Qifeng had rushed back to Wuji Peak overnight, waiting to see the Peak Master, which made Lu Ran somewhat worried.

After all, they have to face Thunder Mountain!

Who knows if the Tufeng Master of Wuji Peak will allow it.

"Uh." Lu Ran held his forehead with some distress and instinctively rubbed his temples.

He hadn't rested well the night before.

Don't get the wrong idea, Lu Ran didn't do anything bad last night, he was just startled by a sudden noise before sleeping.

High in the sky, the gods and demons were fighting again.

The earth-shaking noise was irregular and sudden, lasting several hours, which truly tormented Lu Ran.

[Sect Leader!]

[Hmm?] Lu Ran frowned, [What's wrong, Evil Shadow?]

Yan Shuangzi: [Something's happening here, someone seems to be fighting, I'm at your left front!]

[Ah?] Lu Ran immediately turned his head to look, but the lush forest obscured everything, and he couldn't hear anything when he listened intently.

"What's wrong?" Jiang Ruyi's concerned voice came from beside him.

"Evil Shadow said someone is fighting over there." Lu Ran said as he activated the Pupil of the Dead World.

His pupils then slightly shrank.

Lu Ran didn't hold much hope, but he saw a dead soul slowly ascending in the distant sky.

This woman was already in a phantom soul state, but she still maintained her habits from life, covering her eyes with her hands as if she were weeping.

"Everyone, there is a battle to the south." Lu Ran immediately spoke, indicating to everyone to change their direction.

Jiang Ruyi frowned slightly.

Since departing, Lu Ran hadn't yet activated the Evil Technique·Mirror Flower Moon, and they were no more than twenty kilometers away from Mist Rain Lake.

Nearby the headquarters of the Thousand Boat Alliance, there shouldn't be any Evil Demons lurking.

If there is indeed a battle...

Is it a conflict among the Human Clan?

Jiang Ruyi's heart tightened, could it be the Thunder Mountain army pressing forward?

[There are sounds of electricity and battle roars... uh.] Yan Shuangzi's transmission paused momentarily, then quickly continued, [Sect Leader, there are East Thunder believers here.]

[Protect yourself, stay away from the combat zone!] Lu Ran's face was grim as he quickly led the group forward.

Yan Shuangzi was different from Lu Ran, she only had the Evil Dog Evil Skill.

While the Divine Technique·Thunderclap of the Dongting Sect is practically a natural nemesis to the Evil Dog Clan!

A powerful Evil Dog, even upon hearing the sound of natural thunder, could easily freeze on the spot.

The Thunderclap of the East Thunder believers, however, carries a stunning effect!

Yan Shuangzi wisely obeyed the order, no longer attempting to approach the combat zone, while the sounds of crying and the swooshing of weapons cutting through the air reached her ears.

"Thunder Mountain!!!"

An over fifty-year-old man in a red robe, eyes slightly red, cradled a woman whose chest had been pierced.

She died with her eyes open, staring wide in emptiness, with a look of terror on her face.

"All of you kneel down and surrender!" A woman holding a Sky-piercing Halberd, her phoenix eyes glaring, pointed the halberd at the gathered Sword Lotus believers, "I will spare your lives!"

Eighteen Sword Lotus disciples formed a circle, holding shields shaped like lotus petals.

Lotus flowers, centering on the group, stretched and bloomed in all directions.

Sword Lotus Divine Skill·Lotus Bone Bud!

If anyone stepped on the lotus flowers, they'd be instantly trapped by the closing petals.

The Sword Lotus disciples tried to alter the battlefield environment and restrict the enemy's movements.

Yet they encountered the Dongting Sect!

The speed of these believers was just too fast, it was really hard for the Lotus Bone Bud to catch Dongting disciples.

However, though the effect was meager, it's all the Sword Lotus believers could do...

At this time, at the center of the circle formed by the eighteen Sword Lotus believers, was the kneeling red-robed man clutching a corpse.

"Ah!!"

His eyes turned blood-red as he roared with grief and anger.

Waves of terrifying pressure unique to Sea Realm powerhouses shook the surrounding Sword Lotus disciples so they trembled with fear.

"Island Master Pei, I'll say it again!" the woman wielding the halberd spoke with phoenix eyes like knives, "Kneel down and surrender, and I'll spare your life."

Accompanying the woman's voice, full of authority, waves of pressure surged forward like ocean waves.

The Sword Lotus disciples, already nervous, were really tempted to give up resistance.

Battles between Sea Realm Great Powers weren't something these River Realm folks could participate in.

Not to mention a Sea Realm Great Power, even against those ten River Realm-East Thunder believers, the Sword Lotus disciples stood little chance.

Even with Sword Lotus having more people!

The Dongting Sect,

Was so strong it made the Sword Lotus disciples despair.

"Fang Lingfeng!" Island Master Pei stared at the woman, "Are you declaring war on our Thousand Boat Alliance?!"

"Whom is Island Master Pei trying to scare?" Fang Lingfeng snorted, "Or has Island Master Pei grown old and confused, forgotten we've long since been at war?"

When you slaughtered our Elder Liu earlier, weren't you the first to strike?"

The more she spoke, the more imposing Fang Lingfeng became.

"You! Shameless!! It was you who first..." Island Master Pei gritted his teeth.

But before he could finish, he was interrupted.

"Indeed." Fang Lingfeng raised an eyebrow, phoenix eyes filled with mockery, "If Island Master Pei weren't so senile, you wouldn't dare come out to collect Holy Spirit Energy.

We've been waiting for you here, yet you dared to lead people out; your loyalty to Lord Sword Lotus is truly commendable?"

Island Master Pei: "Fang Lingfeng..."

Fang Lingfeng said coldly: "Old fool, trying to stall for time? I'll count to three!

If you don't surrender, I'll send you to meet your Lord Sword Lotus!"

"One!" Fang Lingfeng didn't give him a chance to speak further.

As she counted, she held the gleaming cold Sky-piercing Halberd and strode forward.

With each step, the killing intent in her eyes grew stronger, energy surging violently, blowing her long shoulder-length hair away.

Like a god of slaughter!

Ten Dongting disciples surrounded the battle group, standing relatively far.

Only Fang Lingfeng walked alone toward the Sword Lotus disciples!

And this one person caused the eighteen Sword Lotus disciples to tremble, nearly losing the courage to resist.

"Two!" Fang Lingfeng shouted fiercely, currents of electricity swirling and crackling beneath her feet.

Such is the arrogance of the Dongting Sect!

"Gulp."

"Uh." The sounds of swallowing and fearful groans echoed consecutively.

The faces of the Sword Lotus believers turned pale, and their legs grew weaker.

Sometimes, death isn't the most terrifying thing.

The fear, powerlessness, and despair in the face of death are far more unraveling.

"Thump!"

A Sword Lotus disciple knelt, eyes wide staring at the ground, cold sweat streaming down her face.

"Stand up!" Island Master Pei snapped back to reality, cursing angrily, "Get the hell up!!"

Thump!

Island Master Pei's angry shout didn't improve the situation; another female Sword Lotus disciple knelt, bowing her head.

Her face was pale, eyes full of fear as she mumbled:

"No chance... we'll die, really die..."

People think of the Sword Lotus Sect and usually describe it as gentle on the outside, hard on the inside.

However, under absolute martial intimidation, the Sword Lotus disciples' hard hearts were crushed by Fang Lingfeng's advancing steps.

"Heh." Fang Lingfeng suddenly sneered, looking at the despicable ants mockingly.

She didn't count to "three".

This sneer made several Sword Lotus disciples completely give up resistance, trembling as they knelt.

"You..." Island Master Pei couldn't finish, his heart quivering heavily.

He hastily turned northward, a boundless hope rising in his heart.

Because a female voice was calling from afar, "Hey!"

"Who?" Fang Lingfeng, in the throes of delight at toying with and humiliating her enemies, was suddenly interrupted, her face darkening.

This place wasn't far from the Thousand Boat Alliance.

Perhaps another squad had set out, also looking for Holy Spirit Energy?

Well... that doesn't matter!

Be it Bi He, Chenghua, Sword Lotus, or Heavenly Simurgh believers, even if their numbers were several times that of hers, so what?

Our Dongting Sect can take on three with one, so what?

"Who are you?"

"Stop right there!" From the north side of the battle group, two Dongting disciples shouted.

"Shut up." The female voice came again, laden with endless pressure.

"Ah?"

"Uh..." This time, it was the turn of the two Dongting disciples to be filled with fear.

A woman, wearing a bamboo hat and a large raincoat, walked step by step carrying a Mountain Opening Axe.

In a trance, the Dongting disciples seemed to see their Hall Master Fang Lingfeng.

This raincoat-wearing woman also had a pair of phoenix eyes.

The pair of slightly squinting phoenix eyes swept past the two small fries, locking onto Fang Lingfeng's eyes.

Fang Lingfeng's eyes narrowed!

Divine·Dongting and Divine·West Desolation are both second-class gods and belonged to the "Four Military Heroes" series.

The disciples of the Dongting Sect are mostly proud and arrogant.

Disciples of the West Desolation Sect are mostly tyrannical and domineering.

One inclined to arrogance, the other to ruthlessness, but undoubtedly, both are of the high-handed type!

Today, the disciples of the two military heroes were confronting each other.

"Thunder Mountain acts, unrelated people leave quickly!" Fang Lingfeng said deeply.

It must be said, the Sea Realm·Dongting disciples are truly cocky!

Even when facing such strong figures, Fang Lingfeng's words of dismissal carried a haughty order.

Gao Yunyan's feet kicked up the yellow sand, looking at the man in the bright red robe: "Who are you people?"

Island Master Pei hastily said: "Thousand Boat Alliance! Our Thousand Boat Alliance is nearby, begging the Daoist to save us..."

Fang Lingfeng interrupted fiercely: "Unrelated people, leave quickly! Or don't blame Thunder Mountain for being un..."

"Ah!!"

A sudden scream startled Fang Lingfeng.

She quickly turned her head to look.

In the southern forest, another tall figure wearing a green raincoat and bamboo hat, emerged from behind a large tree.

She held a broken blade, piercing through the chest of a Dongting believer, with uneven blood drops still falling from the tip of the blade.

Everyone: !!!

This person... when did they get here?

How did they appear from behind the tree?

"Thunk!"

The corpse was tossed off the broken blade onto the ground.

The woman pinched the brim of her bamboo hat with her slender fingers, slightly lifting it to reveal a sharp pair of eyes.

This woman's gaze was not on par with Fang Lingfeng's.

But more penetrating!

Deng Yuxiang's lips curled slightly, looking at the shocked and furious Fang Lingfeng: "Now, are we related?"

...