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Chapter 1: Small Town Youth

Ling Town.

Early morning. Young Qin Lie blankly got out of bed as the sky had just begun to brighten. After a simple freshening up, he walked directly toward Ling Dining Hall.

The rough linen attired Qin Lie had a slim figure and could be considered delicate. However, his eyes were vacant, without any trace of vigor, causing others to feel as though he had lost his soul.

Along the way, many of Ling Town's young martial practitioners had also woke up early. Upon seeing young Qin Lie, many of them smiled kindly.

“Good morning Qin Lie!”

Seeing Qin Lie enter, Ling Feng grinned brightly, calling out to him as he waved.

Unfortunately, it seemed as though Qin Lie was not able to hear other people's voices; his expression was still as blank as before. He passed by Ling Feng without ceasing his footsteps, and continued onward.

“Big Brother Feng, why do you bother talking to a fool? You obviously know that he can't respond, yet you always greet him everyday in the morning.” A bright yellow attired, well endowed sixteen year old Ling Ying casually commented as she looked at Qin Lie with contempt. She looked rather dainty, and her soft chest that provoked fanciful thoughts stood tall.

After hearing what Ling Ying had said, the expressions of the surrounding youths from Ling Family all went cold, as they grew annoyed.

Ling Ying hmped. Her pretty face was full of disdain as she lifted her full chest, turning a blind eye to everyone's gazes.

Most of those youths were at the fourth or fifth level of Refinement, and were simply regarded as unimportant to her, who had already reached the sixth level of Refinement.

The only one in her eyes was Ling Feng, who had reached the seventh level of Refinement.

Ling Feng slightly frowned, "Little Ying, you haven't been at Ling Town for that long, which means you have never received any of Qin Lie's grandfather's benefaction, so I won't blame you for having your own views about Qin Lie. However, we children of Ling Family have all been helped out by Grandpa Qin Shan when he was still healthy. Even though Grandpa Qin Shan passed away two years ago, we still remember all the care he showed us in our hearts. On behalf of all of us, I hope you can show Qin Lie the proper respect."

Ling Yin was momentarily stunned, "His grandpa's really strong?"

"Grandpa Qin Shan was an Artificer!" Ling Feng softly yelled.

Ling Ying said in deep reverence, "Common, Profound, Earth, Heaven, Divine, with each level again differentiated into seven ranks. What level of an Artificer was he? Has he forged any spirit artifacts for the Ling Family?"

"No." Ling Feng shook his head, "Grandpa Qin Shan only knew how to repair spirit artifacts below Common Grade Five."

"Aiyoh, scared me to death. And I wondered how awesome he was, he's only at that level?" Ling Ying patted her well-endowed chest, evidently making an exaggerated smile.

"To us, that is already really awesome." Ling Feng's expression did not waver as he continued in an undercast tone of voice: "Five years ago, when Grandpa Qin Shan came to Ling Town with Qin Lie, he sought our Patriarch and had a discussion about the cost of helping us repair our Common spirit artifacts. He asked for the right to extract ores from all those various mines in Herb Mountain, and for us to allow him and Qin Lie to live in Ling Town."

"Three years later, Grandpa Qin Shan took Qin Lie back and forth from Ling Town to Herb Mountain's mines. In that period of time, Grandpa Qin Shan was in charge of repairing every spirit artifact lower than Common Grade Five. As long as its level did not pass Common Grade Five, he was able to completely restore it to its original shape, no matter how severely damaged the spirit artifact, without any trace of it ever having weakened!"

"Poof!"

Firelight ignited on top of Ling Feng's wrist, and the scarlet bracelet on his wrist suddenly lit up with many colors!

Soon after, that scarlet bracelet miraculously transformed into a glowing hammer. The hammer was only half his arm long, and its entire body was dark red. Clumps of fiery clouds were branded on the spherical part of the hammer like tattoos, and exuded blasts of burning waves of heat.

“My Firecloud Hammer is a Common Grade Two spirit artifact and is my lifeblood. Five years ago in Glacial Mountain Range, an Ice Soul Python blasted a mouthful of cold energy into my body. My Firecloud Hammer helped me withstand the cold energy and had luckily saved me, but it was severely damaged. If not for Grandpa Qin Shan helping me repair my Firecloud Hammer, it’d probably be scrapped a long time ago.”

“There are many of our Ling clansmen whose spirit artifacts had also been severely damaged, but thanks to Grandpa Qin Shan, those damaged spirit artifacts were able to be repaired. Otherwise, our clan would’ve encountered incomparable losses.” Ling Feng lamented as he looked at Qin Lie’s figure from afar.

“But he’s already died from an illness two years ago.” Ling Ying said in astonishment.

“Our Ling Family knows gratitude! Qin Lie is just too pitiful. He was already like this when he came to Ling Town with his grandfather five years ago. When Grandpa Qin Shan was here, there were some who took good care of him, but following Grandpa Qin Shan’s death, in these two years... Sigh.” Ling Feng changed topics, then couldn’t help but sigh.

“Then isn’t Second Miss more pitiful? I heard... that the Patriarch had promised Qin Shan, that Second Miss and Qin Lie would get engaged on Second Miss’ birthday fifteen birthday next month? Since you are a native Ling Town person, can you tell me if such a thing happened?” Ling Ying suddenly lowered her voice and came closer to Ling Feng. She whispered: “Why would the Patriarch agree to Second Miss and Qin Lie’s engagement? Isn’t this just like pushing Second Miss into a pit of fire?”

“Not sure.” Ling Feng was also unclear about that.

To him, even if the Patriarch had made such an agreement with Qin Shan, after Qin Shan’s death, that agreement shouldn’t count anymore.

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Ling Dining Hall.

Three four-sided wooden tables were put together to form a huge, long rectangular table. Steamed buns, porridge, and various side dishes were arranged upon the tabletop. Ling Family’s Patriarch Ling Chengye sat upright in the head seat. Beside him on each side was his sister-in-law, Du Jiaolan and Third Brother Ling Chengzhi. Next to Du Jiaolan were her two sons, Du Heng and Du Fei. As for the girls beside Ling Chengzhi, they were his eldest brother’s daughters, Ling Yushi and Ling Xuanxuan.

Ling Family had three brothers. The eldest was Ling Chengye, second Ling Chenghui, and the third was Ling Chengzhi. Ten years ago, when Ling Chenghui broke through into the Natal Opening Realm, he underwent a fiendish rebound and died by bodily

explosion. His wife Du Jiaolan brought her similarly surnamed two sons, Du Heng and Du Fei, to live in Ling Family, and used Ling Family's resources to continue cultivating.

Boundless oceans existed within this world named Spirit Realm, and upon these oceans were many continents. On these continents, all sorts of people and races unceasingly refine themselves with the spirit energy prevalent everywhere, eternally pursuing the world's ultimate mysteries.

Here, strong practitioners stood tall like high mountains and peaks, possessed world-shocking apocalyptic spirit artifacts, and some strict martial forces with status covered every remote corner of this world like spiderwebs!

Here, not only did martial practitioners and spirit artifacts have distinct divisions of levels, even clans, sects, and merchant guilds formed intercrossing networks of complex factions. They also had strict social strata.

Spirit Realm's cultivation of the martial way was divided into ten realms: Refinement, Natal Opening, Manifestation, Netherpassage, Fulfillment, Fragmentation, Nirvana, Imperishable, Void, and Genesis. The basic Refinement Realm was composed of nine levels, while the latter realms were subdivided into small levels of early, mid, and late stages.

Similarly, mystical spirit artifacts and strong artificers also had a distinct division of levels. They were: Common, Profound, Earth, Heaven, and Divine, with each level also possessing seven ranks.

What was even more peculiar was that even those clans and sectoral forces had their own divisions of levels. They were divided into five ranks: Limestone, Black Iron, Copper, Silver, and Gold, and were restricted in layers like a pyramid.

The lowest Limestone rank powers were Spirit Realm's most basic forces, and their numbers were so many, they were uncountable like specks of sand within a desert. They had no choice but to attach themselves to larger powers, rely on them to survive and cultivate, and allow their dignity to get trampled on.

As for those Gold rank forces at the apex of the pyramid, they were all the most glorious peak existences. Not only did they have access to the strongest martial practitioners in the world, they had the most mystical of spirit artifacts, the widest ore vein territories, the most mysterious of forbidden secret realms, and they even commanded many Silver, Copper, Black Iron, and Limestone ranked forces!

Any order they passed down were capable of changing the color of the world, dye mountains and river into the red of blood, and annihilate millions and millions of living creatures!

And Ling Family, was merely a small clan power that wasn't even of the Limestone rank. Ling Family and its surrounding small families all attached themselves to Limestone City's Limestone ranked force, Nebula Pavilion. They had to send enough offerings to Nebula Pavilion every year in order to obtain Nebula Pavilion's protection, and live in Ling Town.

"Tap, tap!"

The sound of footsteps that came from afar approached. Not long after, Qin Lie's figure punctually appeared. He mechanically sat in the seat opposite Ling Chengye with a blank expression on his face, then lifted his rice bowl and began to eat.

Over the past five years, Qin Lie always arrived right on time for early morning breakfast. Even though Qin Lie was a fool in the eyes of everyone in Ling Town, his habit of being on time for meals had never changed. For the first three years, it was always Qin Shan who had brought him over. After Qin Shan's death, Qin Lie came alone, and still maintained this custom.

After eating breakfast everyday, Qin Lie would enter the Herb Mountain behind Ling Town and go into those mines within the mountain. Only until it turned dark would he return to Ling Town before supper. After having the evening meal with the Ling Family, he would return to his residence to rest.

Day after day, year after year, this was how he lived, without any ripple or change in his lifestyle.

It had been five years, yet no one knew what exactly he and his grandfather were doing to spend so much time in Herb Mountain's mines. Even Patriarch Ling Chengye had always been puzzled.

"Hey!" Du Fei suddenly couldn't help but sneer. He slanted his eyes and glanced at Qin Lie, then taunted mockingly: "My future Brother-in-law's table manners aren't bad. It's fine even if he gets engaged to Xuanxuan next month. Just pretend that you're raising an oddly cute obedient dog."

After he finished speaking, Du Fei laughed weirdly while looking in Ling Xuanxuan's direction.

Ling Xuanxuan's delicate body that was wrapped in fiery red leather armor was already beginning to show the first signs of appeal. She had an extremely small elegant face, spirited intelligent eyes, yet her barely fifteen year old self's reputation was widespread.

"Bang!"

Ling Xuanxuan's halfway exposed jade white hand heavily slammed on the table. The rice bowl in front of her violently leaped up due to the impact, and the unfinished

porridge splashed toward Du Jiaolan's family of three who were sitting on the opposing side. Even though the three's reaction speed was extremely fast, they were still splashed into a miserable state by the porridge.

"I'm not going to get engaged to him even if I die!"

Without waiting for Du Jiaolan to get angry, Ling Xuanxuan quickly got up. Not even caring about her father Ling Chengye's unsightly expression, she charged out of the room like a ball of flame.

After encountering the wooden door, she swung her little hand and an orange colored flame suddenly shot out, splitting the wide wooden door apart. Before the ten or so pieces of broken wood had time to fall on the ground, Ling Xuanxuan's exquisite figure had already disappeared.

Just as Ling Chengye was prepared to angrily admonish her, he was suddenly stunned in place. He looked at the broken down pieces of wood, then his eyes slightly lit up, as he revealed a thoughtful expression.

"Big Brother! When did Xuanxuan step into the seventh level of Refinement? The emission of spirit energy, this is clearly an indicator of the seventh level of Refinement!" Ling Chengzhi said with uncontained excitement. His entire face was filled with pleasant surprise, "To have stepped into the seventh level of Refinement at fifteen, Xuanxuan's natural talent is even more shocking than Yushi! At her current rate, she will surely be able to step into the Natal Opening Realm before the age of twenty... In the future, she will definitely be able to receive Nebula Pavilion's good graces!"

Ling Chengye restrained his inner excitement, coughed lightly, and asked Ling Yushi, "When did Xuanxuan break through?"

Ling Yushi, who donned a long green dress had her dark, long hair spread over her shoulders, the expression on her delicate face was as graceful as an orchid flower. Her skin that was as white as jade and her figure that seemed tall and slender even when sitting down, caused the gaze of Du Heng, who was sitting on the side to heat up, as his gaze wouldn't even move away from her body for even an inch.

"She just broke through seven days ago. At first, she wanted to immediately rush over and tell daddy this news, but..." Ling Yushi changed topics and sighed lightly: "But two days ago, she unexpectedly heard about daddy already having promised Grandpa Qin Shan that she will be engaged to Qin Lie on her birthday, so..."

Ling Yushi didn't continue, but Ling Chengye had already guessed the cause with a helpless expression.

"Whoosh!"

Right at this moment, Qin Lie, who acted as though no one else was present and was immersed in eating, suddenly stood up as though he had not heard anyone speaking or clashing. Just like how he had acted in the past, he left after eating his fill.

He headed directly toward the Herb Mountain behind Ling Town.

“Big Brother, I have a few words I want to discuss with you in private.” Ling Chengzhi also suddenly got up and shot his elder brother a meaningful look. After Qin Lie had left, he also left the dining hall.

Ling Chengye followed behind him with a pensive look on his face.

On the rugged uneven mountain path, Ling Chengye and Ling Chengzhi maintained a steady distance from Qin Lie while also walking in the direction of Herb Mountain. The two’s gazes swiftly landed on Qin Lie’s body, as they chatted in a low voice.

“It’s been five years. Since the time Qin Shan had brought Qin Lie over, this grandfather-grandson pair were always in the mines during the day. Big Brother, aren’t you curious about what they were doing in the mines? What they discovered?”

“Of course I’m curious. But I had an agreement with Qin Shan to not charge into the mines without reason. Besides, our Ling Family have already cleared Herb Mountain’s mines for many years, and never found any valuable spirit stones. Else, why would I promise the mines to that grandfather-grandson pair?”

“And what exactly is going on with Xuanxuan and Qin Lie’s engagement? Big Brother, I know you would never sacrifice Xuanxuan’s lifelong happiness, so why?”

“Before Qin Shan passed away, he adamantly wanted me to agree to this matter. On behalf of all the help he gave us these few years, I made the promise with gritted teeth. But it isn’t like how you think it is. He probably wished that Qin Lie would be able to continue being looked after by our Ling Family after he passed away.”

“What do you mean?”

“It is merely an engagement. Qin Lie and Xuanxuan are both fifteen years old. He requested for us to take care of Qin Lie until he turns seventeen. Once Qin Lie turns seventeen, any one of us could break off the engagement. The reason why this engagement exists is because he wanted Qin Lie to have the status of a son-in-law, so that our Ling Family members won’t mess around with him, that’s all.”

“Don’t worry. Xuanxuan has already broken through into the seventh level of Refinement. She will definitely enter Nebula Pavilion in the future. I obviously will not allow Qin Lie to influence her future prospects. When the time comes, I will immediately break off the engagement!”

“So that’s how it is.” Ling Chengzhi nodded. He muttered: “Big Brother, I have something that I’m not sure whether I should say, sigh...”

“If you have something to say, just say it!” Ling Family’s Patriarch shouted with a frown.

“Based on what you have said, the engagement is merely for appearance’s sake. If that’s the case, Xuanxuan doesn’t really have to get engaged to Qin Lie. Isn’t also possible for him to get engaged to Yushi instead? Even though Yushi is two years older than Qin Lie, there should be no harm in that, right?” Ling Chengzhi probed.

Ling Family’s Patriarch’s complexion suddenly darkened.

“Big Brother, since Sister-in-law had passed away much too early, I know that you love Yushi and Xuanxuan both equally. I am also the same.” Ling Chengzhi considered his phrasing, and said sincerely: “However, even an engagement could influence a girl’s reputation. Xuanxuan is only fifteen, but she actually reached the seventh level of Refinement! Even in normal times, you and I could see her talent for cultivation and her comprehension of spirit arts far surpass Yushi’s. Xuanxuan’s future... absolutely cannot be bound. She will become our Ling Family’s true hope!”

When the conversation reached here, Ling Chengzhi’s expression became respectful, “In the future, Xuanxuan will enter an even higher world of martial practitioners, reach a level that we can’t even hope to attain! Under this kind of situation, there is a chance that she could marry into a powerful force whose power we can’t even imagine! However, if she has a past engagement, then she’ll have a stain. This will affect her future prospects...”

“Third Brother, you are becoming more and more pragmatic.” Ling Family’s Patriarch shook his head and sighed, “Allow me some time to think about this. Sigh. With Yushi’s gentle temperament, I know that she will definitely agree to this if I ask her to bear this burden, but I just can’t do this to her...”

“For the clan’s future, and also for Xuanxuan’s future, I ask Big Brother to seriously consider this.” Ling Chengzhi said with persuasion.

Ling Family’s Patriarch remained silent for a long time. After a long while, he finally spoke: “Let’s not talk about this for now. You’ve always been in charge of Herb Mountain and I’ve never asked you about it much. Why are you insisting on taking me to Herb Mountain today?”

“You’ll understand when we get there. I have a faint feeling that this matter may have something to do with Qin Lie.”

Chapter 2: Herb Mountain

Ling Family's Herb Mountain was an expanded branch of the Arctic Mountain Range, and was classified as the outermost region of the Arctic Mountain Range.

Compared to those huge, extremely tall ice mountains, Herb Mountain was extremely unremarkable; its spirit energy was also not considered rich.

Ling Town was exactly at the edge of the Arctic Mountain Range, beneath Herb Mountain.

Even though Herb Mountain's spirit energy didn't stand out, the mountain wasn't quite as cold since it was far enough from the center of the Arctic Mountain Range, thus making it suitable for growing spirit plants.

The spirit plants on Herb Mountain were precisely the main source of income for the Ling Family. The annual offerings Ling Family made to Nebula Pavilion were also mostly spirit plants from Herb Mountain. In these couple of years, Ling Chengzhi was in charge of the planting and picking of spirit plants. Du Jiaolan tried to get a share of the Herb Mountain pie several times, but every one of her plans were destroyed by the Ling Family brothers.

Like chunks of tofu, there were blocks and blocks of medicinal gardens on Herb Mountain. Planted within the medicinal gardens were mostly spirit plants and herbs below Common Grade Three. Even though they weren't worth much, there were still lots of them.

The Common Grade Three spirit plants among them included the Jade Hand Flower, Cold Containing Grass, and the Serpent Crown Flower, and they were the most important spirit plants grown in the medicinal gardens. These three spirit plants were basic ingredients in refining Spirit Recovering Pills, which Nebula Pavilion greatly demanded every year.

At this moment, Ling Chengye and Ling Chengzhi stood in front of a Jade Hand Flower medicinal garden.

When in full bloom, it looked like a young girl spreading open her palm. Its five slender leaves were like five slim fingers, which was why it was called the Jade Hand Flower. The period between planting and picking the Jade Hand Flower was only around half a year, and it wasn't really affected by changes in the weather. This made it one of the easiest spirit plants to cultivate.

However, in this current Jade Hand Flower medicinal garden, each and every Jade Hand Flower had yet to bloom; instead, each and every one of them were wilted, causing Ling Chengye's expression to turn extremely ugly.

“Is it only the Jade Hand Flowers that are like this?” Ling Chengye asked with some hope.

Ling Chengzhi smiled wryly, “The Jade Hand Flowers can be considered good. The Cold Containing Grass and the Serpent Crown Flower medicinal gardens are even more unsightly, they’re even more intensely dried up. I’m afraid that it will be hard for us to gather this year’s payment of medicinal herbs to Nebula Pavilion...”

Ling Chengye’s expression changed, he shouted in an overcast tone of voice: “How exactly did this happen? Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?!”

“I don’t know how this happened.” Pain spread across Ling Chengzhi’s face as his heart also filled with confusion, “Since Qin Shan died two years ago, the garden’s medicinal herbs yielded less and less crops every season. Though each return was bringing in less and less, it was still enough to supply Nebula Pavilion. This is also my fault, I was too busy trying to break through that I didn’t seriously pay attention to it.”

“Once I was aware of this dire situation, I believed that I could still control this. I spent most of my time cultivating and conditioning the spirit herbs, hoping that I could reverse this situation. However, what I didn’t expect was that since three months ago, the medicinal herbs gradually looked more and more wilted by the day. Before I had time to react, large expanses of medicinal herbs inside the medicinal garden had already withered...”

Ling Chengzhi hung his head in dismay, appearing as though he wanted to hit something and cry, but he didn’t dare to avoid his responsibilities.

Ling Chengye’s face collapsed. He was silent for a good while, then suddenly said: “What does the drying up of the herbs in the medicinal garden have to do with Qin Lie? He’s usually deep inside Herb Mountain’s mines, and ought to never have come to the gardens before. He’s able to affect these herbs? Old Three, why do you suspect Qin Lie?”

To him, Qin Lie was only a fool. For a person without a soul, it was absolutely impossible that he could influence Herb Mountain’s yield.

“Since their grandfather-grandson pair entered Herb Mountain’s mines five years ago, I’ve been secretly observing them. Over the past five years, there were very few changes in Herb Mountain, but there was an extremely strange phenomenon...” Ling Chengzhi creased his brows as he pondered while speaking.

“What kind of strange phenomenon?” Ling Chengye was stunned.

“Every time it thunderstormed, the lightning above Herb Mountain’s skies would be extremely condensed. Each lightning strike would hit Herb Mountain’s summit, and that lightning would sometimes come here, even causing me to watch in fear. However,

before their grandfather-grandson pair came, no matter how vile the weather, there wouldn't be that much lightning assembled above Herb Mountain's skies, nor the phenomenon of lightning directly striking down here!" Ling Chengzhi said with certainty.

"This lightning... has something to do with their grandfather-grandson pair?" Ling Chengye shook his head, feeling as though his younger brother's speculation didn't have much of a foundation.

"Big Brother, let me finish." Ling Chengzhi's expression gradually turned solemn, "After Qin Shan passed away, this phenomenon became even more apparent! In these past two years, every time there was a thunderstorm, there was even more lightning gathered above Herb Mountain, and it struck Herb Mountain more frequently! Sometimes, I could faintly feel those powerful lightning strikes skirt into the mountain's cavity..."

Upon hearing this, Ling Chengye finally faced up, and solemnly said: "Continue!"

"I have been guarding Herb Mountain all these years, and every time lightning struck, I was always mindful of the mine caves. I've seen Qin Lie walk out from those caves several times with his hair and skin a bit burnt black. I can say with total certainty that it was definitely caused by a lightning strike!" Ling Chengzhi shouted softly, "Due to all the abnormalities in Herb Mountain these past years, I am within reason to suspect that this has something to do with Qin Lie! Big Brother, the medicinal herbs would not wither without cause. I believe that something must have changed within Herb Mountain's interior to have lead to the withering of the medicinal herbs!"

Ling Chengye deeply frowned. After a long period of silence, he suddenly said: "I promised Qin Shan that I would not enter the mines without reason."

"Big Brother, if this matter really has something to do with Qin Lie, if you don't figure this out, I'm afraid that it would be difficult to save those medicinal herbs in the garden. Herb Mountain concerns our Ling Family's growth. If we keep going on like this, our Ling Family would not be able to gather enough spirit plants as payment, then Nebula Pavilion..." Ling Chengzhi said with immense worry.

Ling Chengye went silent again. After a long while, he took a deep breath. He took out a ghastly demon mask, silently put it on, changed into a long white robe, and then said shouted lowly: "I will secretly go investigate the mines. You are forbidden to tell anyone about this matter!"

"Rest assured Big Brother, I know what to do."

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Like a white specter, Ling Chengye cautiously went to a cave in a remote corner of Herb Mountain. With his hands grabbing onto a hanging vine, he stepped off the boulder, and

his silhouette silently floated down like willow leaves, quickly arriving in one of the tunnel entrances of a mountain cave.

Since he had already decided to do this, Ling Chengye no longer hesitated. He directly charged into the mouth of the cave, heading into its depths at high speed.

There were many caves of different sizes at the back of Herb Mountain, and they were all formed by Ling Family members who excavated from different angles. Each and every mountain cave pathway were even all linked together, so as long as one entered one of the caves, it was extremely easy to find a path that lead into the mountain's belly.

However, not long after Ling Chengye entered the cavern, he suddenly received a huge shock which left him stiff in place.

In his memories, there were at most twenty tunnels inside Herb Mountain. Even though he hadn't come in here for quite a long while, his memories about the mines were still very clear.

Because when he was young, he was also one of the excavators, so he was extremely familiar with this place.

But right now, he felt as though he had come to the wrong place, because the tunnels in this mountain cavity was ten times more than that!

The complexity of those tunnels in front of him intersected and connected like spiderwebs. Ling Chengye was startled at this abnormality, not feeling any familiarity with this place.

"Heavens! How did they do this?" Ling Chengye sucked in a cold breath.

He still remembered back then when several scores of Ling Family members came together. They used three years of time, and merely excavated a dozen or so stone tunnels.

Yet this grandfather-grandson pair had actually excavated several hundred stone tunnels in five years of time. This caused Ling Chengye to not dare believe his own eyes.

Several hundred stone tunnels interweaved and connected with the original stone tunnels in a maze-like complexity, similar to the varying strangeness of muscles in the human body.

Ling Chengye forced himself to calm down. He began traveling back and forth through several hundred intersecting stone tunnels, attempting to enter the deepest part of the mountain, seeking Qin Lie's figure.

An hour later, Ling Family's Patriarch's consciousness unexpectedly became muddled, and in muddled state, he directly appeared in the cavern entrance.

When he regained his senses, his expression became incomparably odd. Not believing what had happened, he once again delved into the mines, resuming his search once more...

In seven consecutive tries, he kept returning to the first tunnel entrance. Ling Chengye gradually began to tire, and his complexion paled somewhat. After checking the color of the sky, he went back up Herb Mountain along the original road in a somewhat distressed manner.

"Big Brother, your complexion does not look well, what happened? Did something happen in there?" Ling Chengzhi nervously asked him when he took down the mask.

With a wave of his hand, Ling Family's Patriarch signaled for him to not ask questions for the time being. He sat upright without saying a word, then took a Spirit Recovering Pill for his muscle pain and regulated his breathing.

Ling Chengzhi wanted to say something, but stopped and just dazedly stared at him with a belly full of stunned confusion.

The sky gradually darkened. After a period of recovery, Ling Family's Patriarch's vigor recovered somewhat. He opened his eyes, and lightly shouted, answering Ling Chengzhi's previous question: "Don't ask yet! Now should be around the time Qin Lie exits the caves to return back to Ling Town. I want make my move against him on the road back and see what exactly is going with him!"

After he finished speaking, Ling Family's Patriarch wore the ghastly demon mask without waiting for Ling Chengzhi's input. With a grave expression, he headed toward the mountain path between Herb Mountain and Ling Town to hide.

Chapter 3: Probing

"Sigh, little sis, come on, I had even told you specifically to talk about your engagement with Qin Lie after breakfast. Yet you just didn't want to listen. Second Aunt's entire family was still at the table, you know, so how can it be comfortable for dad to talk about things like that?"

On the mountain path between Ling Town and Herb Mountain, Ling Yushi, who was dressed in emerald green, wrinkled her brows. Her elegant and refined face was filled with rebuke as she softly chided the girl beside her.

The fiery-red leather-armored Ling Xuanxuan was like an ignited gunpowder barrel. She vented her feelings on the rock in front of her as she kicked, shattering it into pieces which flew all over. As her straightened jade leg swung back into place, it brought along

a fierce gale. She snorted, "If it weren't for that Du Fei bastard provoking me, why would I suddenly burst out? Second Aunt? That cheap slut's not our aunt!"

"Lower your voice, you can't recklessly speak such drivel!!" Ling Yushi hurriedly berated.

"Drivel? You guys thought I didn't know?" Ling Xuanxuan narrowed her eyes. She laughed coldly, with a face full of resentment, "That cheap slut married our Second Uncle and stayed at our Ling Town for a mere seven months, yet she gave birth to Du Heng. Two years later, she went back to Nebula Pavilion, and not long after, she gave birth to that bastard Du Fei. Those two surnamed Du are clearly bastards of that elder cousin of hers at Nebula Pavilion, Du Haitian!"

"Who did you hear this from?" Ling Yushi became nervous.

"I heard this from the martial practitioners in our clan who were discussing it in private. You, Daddy, and Third Uncle have always been keeping this from me because you thought I couldn't restrain my anger and would cause trouble, right?" Ling Xuanxuan's eyes suddenly turned red as they flooded with uncontrollable tears. She fiercely wiped once, then fumed with gritted teeth, "Second Uncle definitely didn't die because of some stupid bodily explosion from a fiendish rebound! He was angered to death by that cheap slut's entire family! Second Uncle loved me the most when I was young, so I will one day avenge Second Uncle!"

"Sigh, so even the martial practitioners in the clan already know about this matter. Looks like a great change shall soon come to our Ling Family." Ling Yushi was also sad as she faintly sighed. She patted Ling Xuanxuan's shoulder, then said sincerely, "Du Haitian's position in Nebula Pavilion is not low, and he is also at a very high realm. It has been said that he is about to break through into the later stages of the Natal Opening Realm. At the moment, our Ling Family cannot afford to offend him..."

"I know that you and Daddy have always been enduring it; I will also endure it too. Once I break into the Natal Opening Realm and also enter Nebula Pavilion, I'll make him pay this debt!" Ling Xuanxuan said heavily.

"It's good that you can think this way. As long as we sisters work hard, we'll have a place in Nebula Pavilion in the future. Second Uncle's blood debt will definitely be paid!" Ling Yushi nodded as she proceeded to walk in Herb Mountain's direction, yet she was somewhat pained in her heart.

Even though both she and Ling Xuanxuan were at the seventh level of Refinement, she... was already seventeen years old this year. If she wanted to obtain Nebula Pavilion's favor, she had to enter the Natal Opening Realm by the age of twenty.

Going from the seventh level of Refinement directly into the Natal Opening Realm in a period of three years, how could that be easy?

Ling Yushi's eyes were filled with bitterness to the brim, as she also sighed lightly in her heart. Forcing herself to sound cheery, she said: "Dad and Third Uncle are both at Herb Mountain. Talking about this in the dining hall today was not appropriate, so big sis will come with you to find Dad, ask about this matter, and see what exactly is going on with that marriage agreement between you and Qin Lie."

"In any case, I refuse to be engaged to that fool!" Once Qin Lie was brought up, Ling Xuanxuan's little face hardened, "I don't even know what Daddy was thinking. That guy can't even talk and doesn't even have a soul. I'll get bored even if I stay with him for a short period of time, there's no way I can endure that!"

"I know, I know. Big sis obviously isn't willing to see you be together with him either. Don't worry, big sis will definitely stand by your side." Ling Yushi softly laughed and consoled.

The two sisters were like two beautiful mountain demonic foxes as they softly chatted whilst walking in the direction of Herb Mountain.

After walking for a while, just when they were about to go up the mountain, the sisters' footsteps quickly stopped, as they both looked at Qin Lie, who had exited Herb Mountain's caves.

The sky gradually darkened, and Qin Lie left the mountain cave like usual.

They were separated by some distance, but he was currently walking toward them, with that usual blank, wooden look on his face. His gaze still had no focus, as though he simply hadn't seen the two sisters coming over at all.

"Everyday in these five years were all the same, he always runs around in Herb Mountain's mines, is this fool related to rats?"

Ling Xuanxuan usually turned a blind eye and pretended he was air, so she never had any adverse reactions toward him. However, when she saw Qin Lie today, she steamed with anger, so she naturally couldn't be friendly.

"Why are you angry at him? He doesn't know anything. Sigh, he's just too pitiful. Now that his grandfather's dead, he's been passing the rest of his days alone. Our Ling Family only gives him the morning and evening meals, we don't even pay attention to anything else..."

As she looked at Qin Lie from afar, Ling Yushi sympathized with a gentle shake of her head.

"I, I know that this doesn't have anything to do with him. It, it's just that I can't help but be angry when I see him..." Ling Xuanxuan was at a loss for words. A young fifteen year old girl wasn't really this malicious at heart, but she just couldn't accept the facts.

At this moment, a white figure suddenly came over from the forests to the side!

Ling Family's Patriarch, who wore the ghastly demon mask, suddenly saw that his two daughters were also there, but due to the huge shock he discovered in the mines, he still resolved to test Qin Lie.

Like the embodiment of an evil spirit, Ling Chengye ruthlessly shot towards Qin Lie, who still walked onward with a blank expression, amidst Ling Yushi and Ling Xuanxuan's surprised cries.

Seeing the white clothed figure charge over, Qin Lie's expression was still vacant. Even as Ling Chengye swooshed in with his palm towards his chest, he still maintained his mechanical walking pace.

He didn't stop, his expression didn't change, and he didn't even try to block or counter it.

"Bang!"

Ling Chengye's palm pressed onto Qin Lie's chest and Qin Lie's figure was suddenly blasted several steps back. Soon after, he stood up, and blankly looked at the Ling Chengye whom had blocked his path with a puzzled expression, as though he was curious as to why this person had struck him.

This trace of curiosity was only lasted an instant. After that, he started walking again, as though he had already forgotten Ling Chengye's previous attack, resuming his onward march.

"Who dares to behave so atrociously in our Ling Family's territory?"

"Masked villain, you won't escape!"

The two sisters suddenly jumped as their charming faces turned cold. They evenly advanced toward Ling Chengye as two currents of spirit energy that weren't weak stirred, causing even the wind to howl.

On the mountain path, Ling Chengye's back faced his two daughters who were not in the know as he stared at Qin Lie with an odd expression...

Even though the fifteen year old Qin Lie's body looked petite and undernourished, in his palm strike earlier, Qin Lie was merely knocked back a few steps, and didn't fall to the ground at all.

Even though there wasn't a single trace of spirit energy in that attack, Ling Chengye knew the power within that strike was enough to cause a martial practitioner at the third level of Refinement to fall, and not be able to stand up for a long while!

According to what he had sensed earlier, Qin Lie's body didn't have the distinct protection of a spirit energy barrier on his chest. This meant that there was no spirit energy in Qin Lie's body, which also meant that he couldn't be considered a true martial practitioner.

But Qin Lie had withstood the attack without even falling down!

This proved that beneath the idea of the weak looking Qin Lie having a frail body, was an unimaginable sturdy build!

Was it merely his flesh that was strong?

Ling Family's Patriarch harbored misgivings, but after a moment of hesitation, he suddenly struck yet again!

"Crack-crack-crack!"

The sound of bones cracking came from Ling Chengye's hand as it suddenly doubled in size!

A layer of thin green mist gradually rose from the hollow of his palm. Following the movement of his figure, that green mist also swayed indeterminately like a clump of burning green flame.

Green Flame Empower, Common Grade Five spirit art. This was a secret art Ling Chengye secretly cultivated and rarely used. Even his two daughters had never seen it before.

Middle stage Natal Opening Realm's Ling Chengye used spirit energy to combust a green flame in his palm and once again pressed toward Qin Lie's chest.

"Shameless villain!"

"You dare?!"

Ling Family's sisters cried in unison, but unfortunately, they were still quite a distance from Ling Chengye yell at him for now.

Ling Chengye did not hesitate at all. His twice enlarged palm that was covered in green mist was already within reach of Qin Lie's chest. He stared fixedly at Qin Lie, wanting to see an unusual change.

"Boom!"

A current of turbulent spirit energy that was mixed within the green mist entered Qin Lie's chest. In that instant, streaks of thin, cold, electric light sped through Qin Lie's vacant eyes which seemed to never change.

At nearly the same time, the rumbling of thunder sounded in Ling Chengye's mind, catching him off guard.

It was also at this time that the Ling Family sisters finally arrived, with the intent to aggressively put him in his place.

Before Ling Chengye had time to carefully ponder whether the sudden burst of thunder in his mind and the cold electric glint in Qin Lie's eyes was just him seeing things, he saw his two daughters about to attack him, and could only grudgingly give up and retreat.

Like a wisp of white smoke, he swiftly flickered a few times and then disappeared within the mountain forest.

"Don't chase!" Ling Yushi's eyes glistened, as her tender shout stopped Ling Xuanxuan's movements. She said with a grave look on her pretty face, "Judging by how lightning fast and ghostly this person retreated, he's definitely not in the Refinement Realm! He's not someone we're able to handle by ourselves."

She crouched down and looked at Qin Lie, who fell on the floor with a dark green handprint at the place where his clothes were blasted open at the chest. She said faintly with knitted brows, "That person is very scary. But how strange, why would he attack a fool? Could it be a previous enemy of Grandpa Qin Shan?"

As she spoke, she stretched out her jade white hand and used her lustrous fingers to lightly touch the place Qin Lie had been injured in. Then, the doubtful expression on her graceful face grew heavier, "That person obviously didn't use all his strength, barely any spirit energy entered Qin Lie's chest, and they've already begun to gradually dissipate. How odd, if he really wanted to kill Qin Lie, it shouldn't be like this..."

Previously, Ling Chengye had his back faced to the two sisters when he attacked Qin Lie. The sisters were still some distance away at that time, so they didn't see any abnormalities from Qin Lie; they didn't see Qin Lie's eyes, nor did they hear the explosion of thunder in Ling Chengye's mind.

"Yushi, Xuanxuan, go carry Qin Lie back. If you have something to say, wait until I'm back with your father to say it!" Ling Chengzhi shouted as he suddenly appeared on Herb Mountain.

"Third Uncle, we..." Ling Xuanxuan began to shout.

"I know, a white-clothed person attacked Qin Lie. We also saw it. Your father is already chasing him. Go bring Qin Lie back first, lest another incident occurs again." Ling Chengzhi said, playing the cover up.

Once Ling Yushi heard him say that, she didn't think about it any further. Seeing that Qin Lie had fainted dead away, she couldn't think of any other ways to move him, so she had no other choice but to bend over and carry Qin Lie on her back, "Ugh, this guy's really heavy!"

The legs of the elder sister whose figure was slender and beautiful suddenly shook just as she carried Qin Lie on her back, her bright eyes revealing an expression of astonishment.

"Big sis, what nonsense are you saying? This fool is so skinny, how can he make you feel burdened?" Ling Xuanxuan curled her lips, and only thought that her elder sister was joking around.

Ling Yushi didn't explain. She turned her head to look toward the youth who was lying on her shoulders. After seeing the face which, contrary to expectations, seemed extraordinarily handsome after the eyes were tightly shut, she stared blankly for a long time.

How strange, after this guy closes his eyes, he actually would appear to be so good-looking...

"Daddy had once said, only martial practitioners who have tempered their bodies to an extremely powerful extent, those kind of people who trained their skin, flesh, muscles, veins, connective tissues, bones, and organs to great heights, could be several times heavier than ordinary people even when weak and thin." Seeing that she did not answer, Ling Xuanxuan continued speaking on her own with disdain: "Him? Tsk! There aren't even any fluctuations of spirit energy inside him. Even if he is a little heavy, it would be the undigested food he ate, or maybe he is carrying some kind of heavy object on him."

Ling Yushi, who was staring blankly and had not thought deeply about it at first, suddenly came around to realization after hearing her say these things. As she looked at the youth on her shoulder, an amazed, ambiguous expression slowly surfaced in her crystal clear eyes.

Chapter 4: Thoughtless Tranquility

On Herb Mountain.

After the Ling Family's Patriarch took off his mask, he described in detail what he saw in the mountain caves, as well as what he discovered from when he actively probed Qin Lie two times.

“Big Brother, are you sure you’re not mistaken? Ten times the stone tunnels? How can that be?” Ling Chengzhi shook his head in disbelief, then said, “Just with that grandfather-grandson pair? Even if they excavated day and night, it’s still impossible for them to dig that many stone tunnels!”

“If, if Qin Shan was an extremely strong martial practitioner whose true strength was around the Fragmentation Realm, would you believe it?” Ling Family’s Patriarch asked solemnly.

“Ah!” Ling Chengzhi suddenly cried out in shock as he felt his lips becoming dry. His eyes bulged, and he asked in a hoarse voice, “Big Brother, h-how could he attain such a high realm? If he truly was a person at that level, why did he come to our Ling Town?”

“Apart from this, I can’t think of any other possibility.” Ling Chengye’s voice also trembled, “Only an expert who has attained that kind of extraordinary realm would be able to open so many stone tunnels in such a short period of time! In fact, I’d already suspected Qin Shan since long ago... Many juniors in the clan believe that repairing spirit artifacts is much easier than refining spirit artifacts, but you should know that someone who is able to successfully restore spirit artifacts that other people have refined definitely has to be at a much higher level than the Artificer who made it!”

“You’re saying?” Ling Chengzhi was secretly shocked.

“Qin Shan was in no way simple! Perhaps, even his death, was a cover up...”

The Ling Family Patriarch’s train of thought gradually cleared, “Now that I think about it, Qin Shan’s death by illness had many doubtful points. His illness was unknown, and he wouldn’t even allow us to send for someone to treat it. Moreover, the time it took for him to die was too short, and before he died, he continuously told us that we had to bury him in the water. When we threw him in the river, we naturally could not continue investigating...”

“Are you suspecting that he faked his death?” Ling Chengzhi exclaimed.

“That is a possibility.” Ling Family’s Patriarch nodded, “The grandfather wasn’t simple, and the grandson is also weird. I can’t ascertain all this yet, but Qin Lie’s weak looking body is actually extremely sturdy! I feel that the builds of the two brothers Du Heng and Du Fei might not even be stronger than his!”

“How can that be? How can Du Fei at the fifth level of the Refinement Realm, and Du Heng at the the eighth level not be better than him?” Ling Chengzhi asked in astonishment.

“Seems like we have to pay more attention to Qin Lie in the future. It is very likely that your guess may be right. The withering of Herb Mountain’s plants and herbs may truly

have something to do with Qin Lie,” Ling Family’s Patriarch said with a complex expression.

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“Sis, where do you think that white-clothed man’s from? Why would he attack a fool? That guy’s seriously despicable!”

“Who knows? I hope Daddy and Third Uncle are able to catch him. Our Ling Family is in quite a remote location, so great martial practitioners rarely come over. It really is strange.” Wearing an odd expression, Ling Yushi wrinkled her brows as her hands held the legs of Qin Lie, who was on her back.

Ling Yushi, whose figure was tall, gentle and beautiful, was two years older than Qin Lie. She was also a bit taller than him currently, while also at seventh level of the Refinement Realm. Theoretically, carrying a skinny Qin Lie on her back ought to have been extremely easy. But only she knew that she was actually somewhat burdened...

This deepened her suspicions even more, yet she didn’t talk about it. Instead, she casually teased her little sister beside her, “You actually didn’t let me down, huh. When that white-clothed man attacked Qin Lie, you immediately went and pursued him with me. Heh heh, and I’d even thought that you would watch on without lifting a finger and hoped that man in white would kill Qin Lie. That way, your worries would be settled right away.”

“Jeez. I’m not happy with what Daddy did, but I know that it doesn’t have anything to do with this fool. This fool is pretty pitiful too; I’m not that evil, you know,” Ling Xuanxuan stated.

The two sisters chatted in melodious voices as they came closer to Ling Town. Ling Xuanxuan did not pay any attention to Qin Lie since the very beginning, and Ling Yushi didn’t turn around since her first glance. She only minded the conversation she was having with her little sister and the rugged mountain path underfoot.

The two girls didn’t know that the Qin Lie they neglected had already opened his eyes some time ago. Those two eyes were bright, like cold stars, and crystal clear, no longer having any hint of their previous emptiness!

Since two years ago, this was the first time Qin Lie had awakened from deep cultivation!

The last time was when Qin Shan had awakened him before he left, and this time, he was roused by Ling Chengzhi’s attack.

As he heard the two sisters’ gentle chatter and smelled Ling Yushi’s orchid fragrance from her neck, Qin Lie’s eyes gradually lost its spirit. Upon sensing his body’s condition, he closed his eyes once more.

When he closed them, scenes flew through in his mind, as memories of the last two years flowed in like the tide...

He had always been interdependent with Grandpa Qin Shan, and only remembered memories from after he was ten. His memories from before he was ten was sealed in the Soul Suppressing Orb between his brows. According to Qin Shan, even he could not open those memories. Qin Lie had no other choice but to rely on himself to slowly open them.

Qin Shan had told him that when he found him, his memories had already been sealed.

Regarding his identity, background, parents, and the link, Qin Shan never spoke about them. He only said that the things sealed within his mind would slowly be unraveled by himself in the future.

Five years ago, Qin Shan brought him to Ling Town and taught him “Heavenly Thunder Eradication”, and used the special location of Ling Town’s Herb Mountain to help him cultivate “Heavenly Thunder Eradication”.

Apart from sealing ten years of his memories, the Soul Suppressing Orb that was implanted between his brows had tons of clever uses. The orb allowed him to be in the optimal cultivation state —— Thoughtless Tranquility!

The so-called Thoughtless Tranquility allowed a person to enter a special state when cultivating. It was rumored that the spirit of martial practitioners that entered the Thoughtless Tranquility state would separate from their physical body. Then, within a special space, they could even look at their corporeal body.

When they left that body that was controlled by the mind, they would be able to perfectly enact the martial arts they had cultivated before using the mind, which is also the so-called consciousness of martial practitioners, and view it from afar.

In that mysterious state, cultivating took half the work to gain twice the results; this was the cultivation state every martial practitioner yearned for!

The Thoughtless Tranquility cultivation state also had a mythical ability —— it could greatly increase a martial practitioner’s tolerance for pain!

“Heavenly Thunder Eradication” was an extremely overbearing, terrifying spirit art. It draws in the lightning from the Ninth Heavens to temper the corporeal body. When ordinary people cultivated “Heavenly Thunder Eradication”, they would often suffer the most unbearable, extreme pain that either shattered their souls or left them an idiot. Even practitioners with the greatest of perseverances would find it difficult to continue cultivating.

As long as one was human, it was almost impossible for one to endure the pain of lightning strikes for a long period of time. This was even more difficult to endure for martial practitioners that have just started cultivating.

“Heavenly Thunder Eradication” also had to be cultivated from the Refinement Realm, which was why seeking to cultivate “Heavenly Thunder Eradication” had always been just a beautiful fantasy...

Because the bodies of martial practitioners that have just started cultivating were weak, they were incapable of enduring the painful persecution of thunderbolts. Thus, no one had actually truly successfully cultivated “Heavenly Thunder Eradication”.

However, the miraculous cultivation state of Thoughtless Tranquility could allow a martial practitioner’s soul to break away from the body. This would greatly weaken one’s perception of pain.

Using Thoughtless Tranquility to cultivate such an overbearing art like “Heavenly Thunder Eradication” actually had a possibility of success!

And Qin Lie, because of the Soul Suppressing Orb’s special effects, had already cultivated “Heavenly Thunder Eradication” for a full five years.

During these five years, he had always been in that bizarre state, with his soul consciousness separated, while ordering his corporeal body to use his subconscious to follow his usual customs and painstakingly cultivate “Heavenly Thunder Eradication”.

Cultivating “Heavenly Thunder Eradication” used spirit energy to draw in thunder and lightning to cultivate the body, muscles, veins, and bones. The spirit energy he accumulated in these years all entered into the scattered thunder and lightning which filled his bones, muscles, and veins.

Even if he didn’t cultivate, due to his body getting electrocuted, the pain and injuries his body would suffer needed the nourishment of spirit energy.

This was why his spirit energy would disappear not long after every time he cultivated a bit of spirit energy.

Previously, when he had come out from the mines, the spirit energy in his body had long been depleted. This was the reason why Ling Chengye and his daughter couldn’t feel any spirit energy within him when they probed him.

Due to him being unable to preserve spirit energy for a long time, he didn’t even know which level of the Refinement Realm he was currently in. And it was because of his soul having floated away that his expression was vacant like a idiotic fool’s that he was ignored by everyone, even so much that he incurred their hatred.

In these five years, he had only woken up two times altogether.

The first time was two years ago, when Qin Shan woke him up, saying that he would leave for a trip, that it may be a long time before he comes back, and perhaps he may not ever be able to come back...

This was his second time waking up.

“Almost there, in just three more months, the foundations for Heaven Thunder Eradication will truly be laid. At that time, there will be no more need to keep cultivating stuck within the Herb Mountain mines. I am even faster than Grandpa anticipated, too bad that it’s already been two years since Grandpa left. Two years passed, I really wonder how Grandpa is doing right now...”

Laying on Ling Yushi’s soft and supple back with his eyes closed, Qin Lie thought in silence.

“My two younger sisters, why did you come back from the Herb Mountain’s direction? Huh, Yushi, why are you carrying Qin Lie?”

At Ling Town’s entrance, Du Heng siblings and a few martial practitioners Du Haitian set up at Ling Family leisurely stood. The moment Du Heng saw that the fool Qin Lie was actually lying atop Ling Yushi’s beautiful figure, his face that could sort of be regarded as handsome was suddenly brimmed with gloominess.

He knew extremely long ago that his true father was Du Haitian, and not the dead Ling Chenghui. Naturally, he also knew that he didn’t have a single bit of blood relation with the Ling Family’s sisters. As Ling Yushi, who was extraordinarily good looking since childhood, grew older, her figure became increasingly alluring, provoking more and more fanciful thoughts, causing him drool in secret and birth lustful intentions.

Once he saw Ling Yushi walking over carrying Qin Lie on his back, he felt unwell, as though he had eaten a fly, and wished that he could blast that fool into pieces.

“We went to search for some medicinal herbs at Herb Mountain, and saw someone attacking Qin Lie on the way. He received injuries, so we are taking him back first...” Without calling out ‘Elder Brother Du Heng’, Ling Yushi simply explained for a bit, then was about to pass Du Heng and company without any intention to throw in another word.

“How truly interesting, who would go assault a fool?” With his face overcast, Du Heng spoke loudly, “Seeing that you are strenuously carrying him, let me take this idiot back for you!”

As he finished speaking, without even waiting for Ling Yushi to respond, Du Heng's figure flashed, He came to Ling Yushi's side extremely quickly, and went on to pull Qin Lie without allowing any objection.

With his eyes closed, Qin Lie coldly snorted in his heart. When Du Heng took action, he even slightly exerted himself, and voluntarily leaned toward him.

“ARGHH!”

After Du Heng took Qin Lie on him, a miserable shriek sounded.

He didn't expect at all that Qin Lie would actually be so heavy. He felt as though a mountain had explosively pressed down on him. Caught off guard, Du Heng dropped down so hard that his head became muddled. His embroidered clothing was covered in dust, contouring an extremely sorry figure.

Du Fei and those martial practitioners Du Haitian set up here all knew about Du Heng's strategy. As they looked forward to see some mockery happen, each and every one of them that had been laughing suddenly stopped uttering a single sound at this moment.

“No need for your help,” Ling Yushi reacted very fast, and while Du Heng was staring blankly, she hurriedly carried Qin Lie back up again and threw a meaningful glance at Ling Xuanxuan, as the two sisters urgently crossed over the crowd and left.

“Big Brother, what kind of play are you enacting?” After some time, Du Fei asked while stunned.

Du Heng finally regained his senses, and as he looked at the slowly withdrawing Ling Yushi and the Qin Lie who was on her back, he suddenly shouted deeply, “That fool is ridiculously heavy, he must have some extremely heavy object on him! It's been five years, that fool has always been in the Herb Mountain mines, could it be that he made some discoveries? It must be so! Otherwise the Ling Family sisters wouldn't be so eager! The fool is perhaps carrying treasure on him!”

As these words were uttered, Du Fei and the surrounding martial practitioners became increasingly astonished.

Chapter 5: Soul Suppressing Orb

“Phew!”

Ling Yushi let out a heavy sigh as she tiredly placed Qin Lie on the bed; suspicions and doubts filled her youthful bright eyes.

This was the stone house which Qin Lie stayed in all year round. It had a total of three rooms, one of the empty rooms formerly belonged to Qin Shan, while the other was a bathing room.

In Ling Town, such stone houses were very common, and most martial practitioners of Ling Town live in similar homes.

This stone house that belonged to Qin Lie only had a stone table, two stone stools, and an additional wooden bed. Other than these, there wasn't any other furniture.

"Big sis, just what was going on with that Du Heng earlier? I heard that bastard has been running off to Icestone City recently. Could his body have been hollowed out by wine and women? How was he unable to even lift this idiot?" Ling Xuanxuan doubtfully asked.

After placing down Qin Lie, Ling Yushi first inspected carefully for a moment. In front of her eyes, the green-colored palm mark on Qin Lie's chest was gradually disappearing. She positioned her finger below his nose for a little while. Only after realizing that his breathing was uniform and strong, was Ling Yushi then able to calm down, and said. "He shouldn't have any major problems. The injuries on his chest should be fine in two days, let us return for now."

Ling Xuanxuan didn't even want to stay here for another second. The instant she heard Ling Yushi, she immediately stood up, and Ling Yushi followed right after. Right as she was about to leave the stone house, she once again turned her head around and deeply looked at Qin Lie, whose eyes were tightly closed.

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A long while later, Qin Lie suddenly sat up from the bed. After closing all the doors and windows tightly shut, he once again returned to the bed.

Within the dark room, Qin Lie's eyes brightly gleamed. Looking carefully, it looked as though one electrical current after another was coursing through his irises, appearing extremely strange and bizarre.

"Bzzt, bzzt!"

The sounds of electrical currents running, gradually came from within his body. At this moment, an frightening aura seemed to be leaking out from his body.

When this aura accumulated to its peak, a point of dim light flashed at the center of his forehead, and a pitch-black orb the size of a broad bean floated out from the middle of his forehead.

The ever pitch-black bead glowed with a dim light. At first glance, it looked as though he gained an additional eye at the center of his forehead.

Concentrating his spirit and willpower, Qin Lie roared out explosively in his heart. With a ferocious expression, he assaulted the seal within the orb.

“Boom!”

His mind consciousness poured into the seal, as though they were heavily striking an invisible barrier. His brain suddenly felt an incomparably piercing pain, and his mental strength loosened at that moment.

The aura which he had bitterly accumulated vanished right after. He tiredly leaned against the corner of the wall, and sighed. “It’s still impossible.”

Two years ago, when he was awakened by Qin Shan, he had tried to assault the memory seal within the Soul Suppressing Orb as well. In the end, he experienced the same failure as today.

After two years, he felt that his strength had greatly improved. He initially believed that there was hope in breaking the seal, but unfortunately, it didn’t go as he had wished, as he once again faced defeat.

Within the five years of “Heavenly Thunder Eradication” cultivation, he had long tempered a tenacious willpower, so he wasn’t overly depressed. Very quickly, he began to carefully pondered about the matters of today.

“Who exactly wanted to make a move against me? Grandpa’s enemy?”

Because ten years of his memories were sealed, added with the fact that Qin Shan had never spoken to him much about his identity and background, he was unable to come up with an answer.

“No matter who it is, it seems like I cannot continue maintaining the cultivation state of Thoughtless Tranquility for the time being. Otherwise, if that person were to once again make a move, there’s a huge possibility that he would deal a fatal blow.”

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“Is Qin Lie alright?” In the Ling Family Hall, the Patriarch of Ling Family questioned his two daughters. Ling Chengzhi was present at the side as well.

“Today, that white-clothed man did not land a killing blow. The spirit energy that was inserted into Qin Lie’s chest has already dispersed to a certain extent as well, so he should be able to recover in two days.” Ling Yushi replied, and then asked. “Daddy, did

you exchange blows with that white-clothed man? Were you able to identify his identity and background?”

Ling Chengye shook his head. “I did not catch up to him. His level of strength shouldn’t be inferior to mine. I find it strange as well, as I’m unclear of why he would make a move against Qin Lie.”

“Daddy, today, when I carried Qin Lie back, I realized... that he’s very very heavy.” Ling Yushi finally revealed the doubts in her heart.

“Very heavy? Much heavier than regular people?” Ling Chengye’s expression changed, evidently, he was taking this seriously.

“He’s heavier than regular people by five times, or more!” Ling Yushi exclaimed tenderly.

“He must have some sort of heavy object on his body.” Ling Xuanxuan curled her lips.

“He might really have some sort of heavy object on his body, but there are boundaries a man and woman shouldn’t step across, so it wasn’t good for me to carefully inspect his body. Of course, there’s also another possibility... But speaking of it will be too unthinkable, that even I don’t even dare to believe it’s actually so.” With clear eyes, Ling Yushi doubtfully shook her head.

The two brothers, Ling Chengye and Ling Chengzhi, made eye contact, and were both able to see the surprise in each other’s eyes. The two’s thoughts were both concentrated on the second possibility which Ling Yushi had said, and for a moment, they did not give a response.

“Daddy, even if I have to die, I won’t marry that fool! If you truly wish to insist upon it, I will run away from the house sooner or later, and will never ever return to the Ling Family!” At this moment, Ling Xuanxuan’s suppressed fury had finally exploded. Balling up her two fists, she glared at Ling Chengye like a little female tiger.

Waving his hands, Ling Chengye said. “Naturally, I will not truly have you marry Qin Lie. It’s just that our Ling Family has received a favor from Qin Shan, and we have even promised him that we will take care of Qin Lie until he is seventeen years old. Mn, you and Qin Lie will only be engaged, and going through the motions. After two years, we will remove the engagement, so there will not be any implications between the two of you.”

“So that’s the case. It’s just as I have said, how could daddy be so ruthless to sacrifice little sis’s lifetime of happiness.” Ling Yushi smiled as she heaved a sigh of relief. “You should be relieved now, right?”

“Being engaged doesn’t sound good to the ears either!” Ling Xuanxuan pouted with her little face, and snorted. “The moment we’re engaged, I will have to endure the gossips and rumors of everyone else, and I will even have to endure them for exactly two years. I won’t be able to endure it, and I won’t be able to concentrate on my cultivation! If, within the span of two years, my realm of strength still doesn’t make the slightest improvements, then you’d best not blame me for not being able to live up to your expectations!”

After saying these words, Ling Xuanxuan grumpily, and wilfully sprinted off.

When these words fell, the expressions of the brothers Ling Chengye and Ling Chengzhi changed at the same time, as these words had truly struck their weak points.

The two brothers had placed too much hopes on Ling Xuanxuan, both expecting that by relying on Ling Xuanxuan’s incredible cultivation talent, she could help flip Ling Family’s current standings, completing the ideal in their hearts.

Everything, was built on Ling Xuanxuan’s constant breakthroughs. If Ling Xuanxuan was still unable to enter the Natal Opening Realm before the age of twenty, then all their efforts would have been wasted.

The two brothers pulled long faces, and let out their sighs. Their expressions were filled with helplessness and anguish.

Ling Yushi watched everything unfold before her eyes. She silently struggled, as pain constantly poured out from her heart.

After a long, long while, suddenly, she faintly said. “How about allowing me to replace little sis in the engagement with Qin Lie then? My talent cannot be compared to little sis’s, and there shouldn’t be any hopes for me to step into the Natal Opening Realm before the age of twenty. Little sis... will become the hope of our family. As her elder sister, for the family, for little sis, I should take up a few more burdens.”

The two brothers never expected that Ling Yushi would actually take the initiative to shoulder this. Due to the unexpectedness, the two of them revealed sour looks. Their hearts similarly felt uncomfortable, as they did not know what they should say.

Ling Yushi forced out a smile. That smile caused the two brothers to become increasingly disheartened, so much so that they were unable to hide their shame. “Daddy, Third Uncle, there’s no need to be hesitant. After all, I’m a little older than little sis, and I’m able to see things more openly than her. I... can endure it. I know that you both have made many sacrifices for the family, and endured so much pain and bitterness. I’m no longer a child, and it’s about time I shoulder some responsibility.”

“Sigh, we have wronged you.” The corner of the Ling Family Patriarch’s eyes turned moist, as he sighed with his head lowered. “It’s all because this dad of yours is useless.”

“This is unrelated to daddy. I know that dad’s heart is feeling very uncomfortable as well. Daddy, please make the arrangements for everything.” With soft and tender voice, Ling Yushi said consolingly.

The two brothers regretfully sighed. At that moment in the hall, they set the date for Ling Yushi’s and Qin Lie’s engagement, and made a confirmation on this matter.

.....

In another hall in Ling Town.

A beautiful fur spread across the floor. In a room filled with extravagant and luxurious ornaments, Du Jiaolan’s hands held onto wine cup as she lazily leaned against the exquisite deck chair.

Although this woman’s schemes were ruthless and venomous, she had a mature and moving charm, an uncommon beauty. Otherwise, Du Haitian of Nebula Pavilion wouldn’t have been entranced to the point of protecting her with all his might.

“For that fool to be extremely heavy, he must have some sort of heavy object on his body. In these few years, that grandfather-grandson pair have been in the mines, and it’s unknown just what secrets they’re fiddling with. That old bastard Ling Chengye sternly forbade us from heading to the mines in Herb Mountain, so there’s a possibility that he had made some shady deals with that grandfather-grandson pair in the dark. Today, a crowd of old and young from the Ling Family had all gone up the Herb Mountain, and Ling Yushi had even carried Qin Lie back. Something must have happened!”

With a sunken face, in front of his mother, Du Heng explained his deduction with well-chiselled words. “Mother, in the mines of the Herb Mountain, there’s a possibility that some unique spirit stones have been harvested!”

Du Jiaolan’s expression slightly changed. After thinking for a moment, she said. “What you have said is logical, we have indeed ignored those mines. It’s about time we look into it. During the next short period of time, take note of that idiot. Find an opportunity to take a look in the mines, and find out what the hell the people of the Ling Family are doing.”

“This child understands.”

“Heheh. Ling Town will sooner or later become Du Town. If there are really spirit stones in Herb Mountain’s mines, then they should be our Du Family’s as well. We shouldn’t allow them to be sneakily harvested by the Ling Family.” Du Jiaolan pursed her lips, and joyfully said, as though it was a matter of course.

“Heh heh, the two daughters of that old thing, will sooner or later become toys for me and my little brother!” Du Heng grinned disgustingly.

.....

The second day.

Qin Lie got off the bed on time. He did not continue borrowing the Soul Suppressing Orb to enter the Thoughtless Tranquility cultivation state. Before he left the house, he pulled out a copper mirror, and slowly adjusted his expression by looking at the copper mirror.

After a short while, seeing that the him in the copper mirror had adjusted back into his usual empty and hollow pair of eyes, he then left the stone house.

At the precise time, he stepped into Ling Family’s dining hall. As Ling Chengye’s family of young and old saw him arrive on time, all of their eyes evidently revealed astonishment, as they began to size him up with their stares.

Not a single wave surged in his heart, as Qin Lie began to chow without saying a single word. There was hardly any difference from his usual behavior.

He simply wished to calmly lay a firm foundation for “Heavenly Thunder Eradication” in the Ling Family. When he no longer needed to rely on the mines in the Herb Mountain to guide the bolts of lightning to temper his body, there was a possibility that he would choose to leave the Ling Family, and head out to find Qin Shan.

Very quickly, he finished his meal. He stood up blankly, and once again headed in the direction of Herb Mountain.

Within the dining hall, the crowd of Ling Family’s old and young were evidently a little solemn. Du Jiaolan and her two sons began to unusually take note of Qin Jie on this day as well. Only after he left the dining hall, did the mother and two sons retracted their gazes from Qin Lie’s back.

“Big Brother, Nebula Pavilion relayed a message, wanting us to send a batch of herbs in the next few days.” Du Jiaolan elegantly wiped the stains off the corners of her mouth, and casually said.

The Ling Family Patriarch’s heart clenched. Frowning, he said. “There might be a need to delay a little. Recently, due to the alternating seasons of lightning and rain, there has been a slight influence to the harvesting of spirit herbs...”

“Heh heh. I will relay them in your words, hopefully, they will have some patience.” Du Jiaolan was astonished. In these few years, the Ling Family had never postponed their provision of spirit herbs to Nebula Pavilion. Ling Chengye’s ‘delay a little’ somewhat raised her suspicions. After pondering for a moment, with an ice-cold expression, she

said. "The Ling Family is attached to Nebula Pavilion, so if it's just delaying for a few days, there shouldn't be a problem. But if trouble occurs to the provision of spirit herbs, I'm afraid the matter won't be that easy to solve. I believe big brother knows this point at heart, right?"

"I know propriety! I don't need you to teach me!" Ling Chengye's mood wasn't good at that moment, as he snorted annoyingly.

"Then that's good. A widow like me isn't able to manage that many affairs within the family, so I simply wish to remind big brother, that you'd better not cause a crisis for the Ling Family! Big brother should understand as well. If we lose the protection of the Nebula Pavilion, Ling Town will not be able to continue peaceful days like this!" Du Jiaolan's expression was cold, as she said with a harsh tone.

"Enough!" Ling Chengyin coldly exclaimed, as he stood up and left the dining hall with an ugly expression.

The crowd of old and young in the Ling Family began to leave one after another as well.

"Some matters seemed to have really happened at the Herb Mountain. Heng'er, you and Du Qishan watch that place closely for the next couple of days. If you have the opportunity, head up the mountain or take a look at the mines in the mountains." Du Jiaolan's expression was dimly cold, as though she was a venomous snake which had hibernated for a long time, that was ready to pounce and bite people at any given moment.

.....

Qin Lie walked on the stone path that lead to the mountain where the mines were.

Due to the changing of seasons, the weather was irregular, which could lead to intense thunderstorms. Unknowingly, the sky had already turned dark, while the mountain breeze whistled.

"Boom, boom, boom!"

Within the roaring thunders, flashes of lightning could gradually be seen; like serpents traversing the skies they shook their tails.

Within the flashes of lightning and roaring thunders, Qin Lie's body trembled, as he simply felt joyful from his entire body and heart. That pair of hollow eyes began to sparkle like stars, and within his irises, it was as though they had been branded with electrical snakes and lightning dragons, becoming shockingly bright.

"As expected, this season is the most suitable for the cultivation of my Heavenly Thunder Eradication. My luck today is really good!"

After muttering to himself, Qin Lie headed towards Herb Mountain with big strides. His pace was evidently a lot faster than before.

If there was someone by his side at this moment, they would be able to see that there was a trend of lightning bolts gradually concentrating in the direction above his head, and that person would even be able to faintly hear the constant thunderous sounds coming from his body.

The sky was filled thunder and lightning flashes, as though they had some sort of close and strange connection with him, moving for his sake!

Chapter 6 - Attracting Lightning to Oneself

Herb Mountain cave.

To Ling Chengye, strange, complicated maze-like tunnels were fraught with mystery and danger. During yesterday's exploration, he did not get deep enough into the mountain's core and his efforts rendered him dizzy, almost hurting his psyche.

However, when Qin Lie entered, he was like a fish in water. He moved easily and effortlessly through the lines of stone tunnels, directly towards the deepest parts of the mountain.

While moving, his steps never faltered. It was evident that the cave's maze did not affect him at all.

Soon, he reached the belly of the mountain's core and the originally dark stone tunnels brightened.

This was a very large cave - as big as a football field. The stone wall above was over ten meters above the stone floor, and eight pillars each as thick as a man's waist stood tall in eight corners of the cave.

The eight pillars were conical, and their pointed tips were inserted into the crevices of the stone wall above, lending it the image of eight giant hands holding onto the cave itself. The sight was spectacularly grand in a cave.

The eight pillars had strand after strand of silver-colored metal wire the width of a thumb wound all around them, and these wires connected the pillars.

In the large wide cave, silver lines intersected in the middle of the octagon of pillars, like several giant spider webs interwoven together.

"BOOM! BZZZT!"

An astonishing electric current accompanied the thunder and popping. The current entered the roof of the crevice and down the eight wide pillars, then went through the wires wound around the pillars and into the huge net of wires in the middle of the pillars. Lightning appeared many times in the cave, lighting up its insides.

At the same time, in the skies outside Herb Mountain, lightning intertwined and thunder deafened the ears. It was as if lightning dragons were raging in the sky.

The dense lightning came crackling down, as though attracted by some mysterious force, pierced the upraised stone on the mountain peak, then passed in a flash.

“Come on! Hit me harder!”

In the middle of the wide cave, Qin Lie’s still somewhat immature face was full of excitement as he barged into the dense web of electricity and wires between the eight pillars.

“BZZZT!”

The current in the interwoven silver wires charged into his seemingly frail body like the cold gleam of a blade!

“HARGH!”

Countless fine lines of electricity shot into him. Qin Lie, who had disengaged Thoughtless Tranquility, felt like his soul was being pierced in ten thousand places by metal needles. He couldn’t help but emit shrill screams of agony.

Qin Lie’s body twitched in throes of pain. Madness surfaced in his eyes, like those of a desperate beast met with an unending world of pain.

Qin Lie bore pain that was impossible for normal people and gritted his teeth as he used the Heavenly Thunder Eradication Art. The disorderly lightning that had scattered after it entered his body seemed to suddenly be grabbed by an unseen hand, then sent through his tough muscles and veins, flowing quickly into his flesh and bones.

Even if ordinary practitioners were in the Natal Opening Realm, they would in all probability implode rapidly and perish if struck so by such a wild electrical current.

Threads of lightning sped around his muscles and veins at his direction and gradually moved toward his thoracic cavity and abdomen.

The lightning passed through his muscles, veins, bones and flesh, and all these parts felt so bruised that the pain made him teeter on the brink of unconsciousness. However, he was very aware in his pain that the lightning was also becoming his flesh and bone

bit by bit, making his body gradually adapt to a greater intensity of Heavenly Thunder Eradication refinement.

Over five years, and after nine days of lightning-strengthening, he gradually refined his muscles, veins, skin, flesh, limbs and bones, slowly turning the focus of his refinement to the more important internal organs.

In these past few years, his muscles, veins, flesh and limbs gradually adapted to lightning entering. If his internal organs were also tempered, he would have truly laid the foundation for Heavenly Thunder Eradication and his entire body would be completely adapted to withstand the heavenly lightning's bombardment in his refinement.

When that time comes, the cultivation of Heavenly Thunder Eradication would reach new heights and power!

The fine lines of lightning traveled along the muscles and veins of his limbs but did not enter his internal organs. Qin Lie's body convulsed instantly and coiled like a prawn that had received an electric shock. He let out scream after scream of hissing pain.

Rain poured down and the storm's rage intensified on Herb Mountain as lance after lance of lightning raced to the ground like lightning dragons, filling the cave with explosive booms.

The eight pillars flared suddenly, silver wires growing increasingly brighter and brighter with electricity. In the midst of the huge web, Qin Lie's whole body lay charred as he shook with howls of agony.

The mad roaring in the skies above slowly softened and died away as the storm lost its power. His electrocuted body, too, stopped writhing.

When the thunder and lightning passed, the rain fell harder and harder.

The heavens, having been appeased, stopped sending lightning into the cave and the pillars in the cave grew dull as the lines of silver ceased flashing.

After who knew how long, Qin Lie stirred his charred body. He lay motionless on the web of silver wires, quietly assessing the internal condition of his body.

He sunk his psyche into his body, and could almost see traces of electrical current in his chest, bouncing around his organs and flesh, continuing the refinement of his internal organs so that his body could gradually adapt to the ravages of lightning.

"If I do not enter the cultivation state of Thoughtless Tranquility, the torture I will have to endure is really beyond what normal people could imagine. It's a good thing I've cultivated for five years and shaped my body and soul for so long, because even if my

body can take the pain, my soul couldn't and everything will be for naught. I would've become a fool for real."

"I'm just lacking the refinement of my inner organs. If I keep at this rate, I will complete the most difficult foundation of the Heavenly Thunder Eradication Art in two or three months' time."

Qin Lie recovered some strength after a short rest and got down from the web of silver wires. His staggering steps brought him to the back of one of the stone pillars.

"Before he left two years ago, Grandpa told me to look at what he left me the next time I awoke..."

A square wooden box sat behind the stone pillar. It was not locked and Qin Lie opened it easily.

The wooden box contained a letter, beautifully drawn maps and a lifelike wooden figurine which looked surprisingly similar to his grandfather.

"Lie'er, Grandpa will try his best to come back for you before you turn seventeen. If I'm still not back by then, something must have happened to me. In that case, do not look for me. Cultivate well and live a good life."

"When the day comes that you reach a sufficiently high level and break the memory seal on the Soul Suppressing Orb, you will know what happened ten years ago."

"These maps are what Grandpa drew of things to note in the Arctic Mountain Range. There's details on spirit plant and spirit stone locations, as well as boundaries of spirit beast activity. I have labelled the locations of spirit beasts and spirit plant that will be useful to your cultivation. Once you awaken, go pick and hunt whenever you want."

"Over the years, Grandpa has made friends with some spirit beasts on my frequent walks in the Arctic Mountain Range. If you want to explore or cross the Arctic Mountain Range one day, remember to bring the figurine. Some of the spirit beasts recognize the figurine and will not bother you if you show it to them."

"I have specially marked out the territory of the spirit beasts which will recognize the figurine. Take note."

"The spirit plants and spirit herbs on Ling Family's Herb Mountain are not able to bear the destruction of the spillover lightning. When I was around, I directed the excess lightning elsewhere so that it would not affect the spirit herbs on Herb Mountain. I made some arrangements before leaving but I was in too much of a hurry and could not finish everything. When time passes, the lightning from your cultivation will harm the growth of the spirit grasses and I am afraid that this will catch the Ling Family's attention. You will have to keep a lookout for this."

“The Soul Suppressing Orb is a precious treasure. It is the only spirit artifact your parents left you. It is not just a simple item that seals your memories - it has many functions that even I am unable to completely reveal. That orb must be guarded well. Never let a second pair of eyes see it or great trouble shall descend upon you! Remember this!”

The letter was not terribly long and Qin Lie read it quickly. He pondered over its contents, then took out the maps and looked at them with rapt attention.

The topmost map was only thirty kilometers away from Herb Mountain. Locations of note on the map were circled and one of those was labelled Umbra Lightning Condor.

Spirit beasts were divided according to size and power. The weakest were Rank One spirit beasts, which were equivalent to martial practitioners of the Refinement Realm. Rank Ten spirit beasts were strongest and most terrifying. They were on the same level as the top practitioners of the Genesis Realm.

The Umbra Lightning Condor was just a Rank One beast, but tended to flock together. They had low defense, fighting smarts and travelled in groups. They were also fast. They shoot lightning, then wait for the enemy or prey to become paralyzed by the lightning before tearing into it with sharp claws and teeth.

Qin Shan marked the Umbra Lightning Condor precisely because this type of spirit beast's core contained lightning spirit energy. Of course, the lightning beast cores of these beasts were a far cry from pure lightning from the skies; it was not of help in Qin Lie's refinement of his body.

However, the Umbra Lightning Condor's beast core had other uses - after Qin Lie absorbed the lightning energy, he could easily transform it to spirit energy!

Spirit energy was the very core source of a martial practitioner's power and it was also a measure of a martial practitioner's strength and the rank of his realms.

Normally, the more refined a martial practitioner's spirit energy, the greater and more impressive his realm.

This was the reason why Qin Shan marked them - the Umbra Lightning Condors' beast cores could help Qin Lie quickly accumulate a load of spirit power.

“Umbra Lightning Condor...”

Qin Lie put the letter, maps and wooden figurine safely away and deliberated for a bit as he had pretty much awakened. Lightning-rich days would not continue day after day, so why not go to Arctic Mountain Range to try his luck and see if he could kill some Umbra Lightning Condors in order to accumulate some spirit energy, and to ascertain the realm of his true strength?

Heavy rain fell, unending, as Qin Lie left the caves of Herb Mountain and headed towards the Arctic Mountain Range by himself.

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Mountain's peak.

The brothers Ling Chengye and Ling Chengzhi stood in the rain and looked at the dying spirit plants, grasping at their umbrellas in sadness. They wanted to cry tears but none came.

When they discovered the changing skies and rumble of thunder and lightning, the brothers had hurried towards Herb Mountain. The two had arrived on Herb Mountain not long after Qin Lie entered deep within the mountain to cultivate.

Ling Chengye could honestly say that the concentration of thunderstorms and the flow of lightning was definitely closely connected to something in the mountain's core. This finally confirmed his younger brother's speculation.

After the lightning dispersed, the two brothers also noted that the spirit plants withered significantly faster, and came to a conclusion that there was a connection between the rate of withering and Qin Lie.

"Big brother, now is the season of thunderstorms as spring changes to summer. If this situation continues, the current crop of spirit plants and herbs are doomed to fail. The Nebula Pavilion, ah..." Ling Chengzhi shook his head and gave a bitter sigh.

"It doesn't matter if Qin Lie is a retard or was pretending to be retarded. I must have a proper talk with him this time!"

Ling Chengye came to one of the entrances to Herb Mountain's caves with a dour face, suppressing his indignation as he sat in silence, waiting for Qin Lie to exit.

Unfortunately, he had no idea that Qin Lie, who had kept to the same routine for five years, had broken his routine on this very day!

Qin Lie did not leave the caves before sunset. Not long before Ling Chengye arrived, Qin Lie had braved the torrential rains and left for the Arctic Mountain Range, alone.

Chapter 7: Solitary Ridge

Ling Town's Herb Mountain was just a small ridge located at the outermost edge of the Arctic Mountain Range.

By contrast, the entirety of the vast Arctic Mountain Range spanned more than a thousand kilometers. Most of the outer regions were not particularly cold; some of the

special valleys within even enjoyed spring year-round, very ideal for growing spirit plants and herbs.

However, the deeper one delved into the mountain range, the colder it became.

That cold owed itself to the enormous snow peaks and glaciers that were situated deeper into the range. They reached far above the clouds and stayed frozen year-round, continuously releasing extensive amounts of freezing air. This in turn caused the surrounding ridges to be exceedingly cold.

The cluster of glacial peaks towards the deepest region was deemed a Forbidden Zone. According to rumors, it contained an abundance of rare spirit plants and ice crystals, all of them priceless cultivation treasures of which most martial practitioners could only dream.

Since the days of old, a multitude of territorial guardians protected the habitats of rare spirit plants; even the cold glaciers and snow peaks were no different. Occupied by numerous fierce and high-ranking spirit beasts, this region was avoided by even the most valiant of martial practitioners. Those that did travel in the Arctic Mountain Range would purposefully avoid this particular region, as they truly feared provoking the mighty spirit beasts living at the peaks.

But that didn't mean the edges and outer regions of the Arctic Mountain Range lacked spirit plants or spirit beasts; just that by comparison, the quality of plants was severely lacking, and they were scattered everywhere. Not only did martial practitioners put in a tremendous amount of effort in hopes of locating the spirit plants and spirit beasts, it also depended significantly on their luck.

Unsurprisingly, the very same region was the center of many of the martial practitioners' activities. Martial practitioners from Nebula Pavilion and its subordinate clans, like the Ling Family, practically held their activities at this region yearly, far from the Arctic Mountain Range.

After a large rainfall, the mountain passages were wet and slippery, while the air was unusually fresh.

Qin Lie, who had left Herb Mountain, followed the path towards the deeper ridges, his face revealing a hint of excitement even when his feet were heavily stained with mud.

Throughout these years, he had spent virtually all this time cultivating Heavenly Thunder Eradication. Not once had he broken his own rules, utterly sealing himself in closed-door cultivation.

He was only fifteen years old after all. Having gone through the dull training year in and year out, he was unable to contain the immense joy that spread throughout his whole

body and swept all his fatigue away because at this moment, he had a chance to leap through the forests.

“I should arrive at Solitary Ridge soon, hopefully the Rank One Umbra Lightning Condors will not let me down...”

Eyeing the paths along the way, he made a mental comparison with the map he memorized before. Realizing that he would soon be nearing the Solitary Ridge that housed the Umbra Lightning Condors, he willed himself to restrain his excitement and started to focus on taking extra caution.

The Umbra Lightning Condors were only Rank One spirit beasts, possessing strength similar to that of a martial practitioner at the Refinement Realm. Condors of varying sizes would definitely have different levels of strength, but even the largest Umbra Lightning Condor would never reach the power of the Natal Opening Realm.

In Qin Lie’s eyes, even the biggest of their kind would never be a threat to him, because the Umbra Lightning Condors used the power of lightning as their trump card.

After painstakingly cultivating the Heavenly Thunder Eradication for many years, even daring to go so far as to expose his body to the power of the lightning from the Ninth Heaven, how could he possibly be scared of Rank One spirit beasts that used the power of lightning?

His wariness was only due to the fear of meeting other types of spirit beasts.

An hour later, a ridge that was full of ancient trees gradually came into view. The trees were all taller than ten meters and supported dense foliage that completely sealed off all sunlight, making the ridge appear ominous.

He had indeed arrived at Solitary Ridge.

“Flap flap flap!”

The sound of wings flapping furiously echoed from deep within the ridge, accompanied by the screams and curses of a few youths.

Qin Lie frowned, immediately becoming aware that there were martial practitioners fighting the Umbra Lightning Condors from deeper within the Solitary Ridge. Without a second thought, he accelerated rapidly and charged up the slope towards them.

Underneath several tall ancient trees, a group of seven young martial practitioners were standing back to back, holding several weapons like swords, sabres, bows, and hammers. in their grasps. Their clothes were tattered and torn, with several bloodstains around their arms and chests. They were facing skywards, engaging the Umbra Lightning Condors that were spiraling in the sky in a life and death battle.

There were both males and females among the seven martial practitioners, all of them at the Refinement Realm. Their ages were relatively young, and they were clad in expensive clothing. Their weapons all surged with spirit energies; evidently, spirit artifacts that were actually of quality. One look was all that was needed to tell that their backgrounds were truly not simple.

The leader was a muscular youth whose weapon was a crimson longblade. His black, lengthy hair was flying all over the place as he wielded his longblade in a dance, sending out dazzling arcs of crimson light, cutting a very imposing figure.

They were surrounded by more than thirty Umbra Lightning Condors. The condors were all longer than two meters with greyish-brown feathers and beaks as sharp as hooks. Their short tail feathers were shaped like wedges, and their claws as sharp as anchors. In each of their foreheads sat a blue prismatic crystal that glistened brightly, emitting blue lightning continuously.

The Umbra Lightning Condors circled around the sky in a rapid fashion, initially assaulting the martial practitioners below with lightning from the Beast Cores on their forehead. When the martial practitioners became numb from the electric shock, the condors would immediately pounce on them, attacking with their hook-like beaks and anchor-like claws that were capable of ripping prey apart, causing whosoever that was caught to scream miserably as their skin and flesh were torn from them.

Surrounding the seven martial practitioners already laid five of the condors. They looked like they were pierced by sharp weapons, while their feathers and blood were strewn all over. The bodies of the seven martial practitioners were covered with scars and scrapes too. It seemed that the battle had already been going for quite a while.

The teamwork from the seven were flawless; as long as one of them was stunned by the electric shocks, the other six would immediately protect him or her, frantically defending their partner despite facing the risk of severe injury.

As such, the Umbra Lightning Condors were unable to pick anyone off in a short duration despite their combined efforts, resulting in a long, drawn-out battle.

“Pooh!” Tu Ze spat a feather from his mouth, wielding his longblade with flickering rays of crimson and cursed, “Damn our rotten luck to come across this bunch of feathered beasts! Everyone better stick closer and take extra care to not get separated. If anyone hesitates to save their partners, I’ll personally skin you alive later!”

“Don’t worry, Big Brother Tu!”

“We will definitely save our partners first!”

The group of youths gritted their teeth and shouted in reply. Their breaths were stable and they were evidently battle-hardened; definitely not some fledglings that were out of their nests for the first time.

Behind one of the ancient trees, Qin Lie narrowed his eyes as he observed the fierce combat between the group of the seven youths and the condors. After a while, he understood that it wasn't looking optimistic for the youths.

Spirit beasts that lived together in herds like the Umbra Lightning Condors would take revenge for even the slightest of grievances. The moment one of their kind was killed, it became inevitable that they would pursue vengeance until their deaths!

With the existence of the five condor corpses, the battle reached the peak of hostility. The only possible outcomes were either the utter destruction of the seven youths or the complete erasure of the thirty-plus condors from existence!

The condors and youths appeared to be matched evenly in strength; if they continued fighting it could very well result in their mutual destruction, with at most, one or two surviving from either side.

“Ooouuu!”

The majestic, piercing cries of condors echoed out from even deeper within the ridge. Before long, more than a dozen Umbra Lightning Condors arrived with furious screeches, joining the others to attack the youths.

“Damn it!” Tu Ze's expression finally changed. “Looks like this rotten place is the nest of those feathered beasts! We can't afford to stay here any longer! We must hurry and find an opening to escape or else once more of the beasts start to gather, we'll be in serious trouble!”

“While defending, we can still somewhat manage to keep our formations. However, once we move to break out of here, how will it be possible to stave off the combined attacks of the condors?” asked a young girl valiantly in her delicate voice, as her almond eyes glistened. She looked to be at most eighteen, with a smoking-hot figure complemented by her tight, black, full-leather attire, carrying a quill of arrows on her back whilst wielding her long bow.

“Zhuo Qian! We have no other choices left! We will eventually lose this battle of attrition if we do not extricate ourselves from here now! God knows if there might be more of those beasts rushing towards here? The longer we delay, the more danger we're in!” Tu Ze hardened his face in a spur of determination and hollered, “Everyone prepare to break out together with me!”

“Understood!” The group, including Zhuo Qian, replied resoundingly, and prepared to break out Solitary Ridge with their lives on the line.

At this moment, upon seeing the bleak situation of the group of youths, Qin Lie abruptly came out from his cover behind the tree and made his way towards them without a word.

“Young brother, do not proceed any further! This place is exceedingly dangerous, make haste and leave this place as far as you can! The Umbra Lightning Condors only bear hatred to the seven of us, so leave while you still have a chance!” yelled Tu Ze, who was stunned when he suddenly discovered a stranger approaching just as he was about make his move.

Qin Lie paid his words no mind and simply revealed his teeth in a grin, maintaining his pace towards them.

“Are you a fool?”

“You trying to die?”

“Dimwit! What on earth are you doing?!”

As the crowd yelled out in shock, Zhuo Qian withdrew her beautiful slender legs, rolling her almond eyes in anger. “Where did this bastard come from? Must you insist on rushing to your death?!”

As the seven people cursed angrily from their incomprehension, Qin Lie had arrived at the side of one of the Umbra Lightning Condors that had died wretchedly. He extended his fingers to dig out its Beast Core, repeating the same actions to the rest of the corpses while ignoring the stupefied stares of Tu Ze, Zhuo Qian and company, swiftly retrieving the remaining four Beast Cores.

The seven people were struck dumb like wooden dolls. They thought that he was insane and they started looking at him like he was a madman.

Did his greed have no boundaries, such that he would throw his life away just to pick some Beast Cores?

Moreover, they were merely Rank One Beast Cores!

Plucking the cores of the fallen Umbra Lightning Condors in the faces of more than forty of their brethren only served to utterly ruffle their feathers and drive them hysterical...

Where did this idiot come from?

He’s dead for sure!

The group of seven martial practitioners revealed uneasy expressions as they were certain that Qin Lie was about to be diced into multiple parts and swallowed cleanly by the condors.

“Whoosh whoosh whoosh!”

Undoubtedly, every last one of the condors were absolutely enraged by his actions to the point of completely ignoring Tu Ze and company, hurling themselves at Qin Lie with frenzied screeches, hell-bent on dismembering him.

“Is he trying to buy time for us with his life? Such a cute fellow. He has my thanks. What are we waiting for? Why aren’t we escaping yet?!” Zhuo Qian asked sharply in her delicate voice.

Truly, only a woman’s vicious heart could stay calm in such a critical moment. Without moments to spare, Tu Ze and company stirred rapidly, snapping out of their daze as they promptly fled the Solitary Ridge, not even giving a second look to Qin Lie that was surrounded by gray condors as though he was engulfed by the clouds in the sky.

The seven of them were certain that his death was a definite matter, and that the condors would undoubtedly chase them when they finished dismembering Qin Lie. Therefore, they did not even so much as glance backwards, wholeheartedly focused on putting as much distance as they could between them and the condors, to gain even the slightest bit of hope at survival.

Amidst the figures of condors, concentrated blue lightning flashed down like a net, and the sizzling sound of the electric current struck terror into anyone who could hear it.

Qin Lie faced it alone.

Chapter 8: Testing the Waters

Bolts of blue lightning struck down from the sky, turning Qin Lie's expression cold. Immediately puffing his chest out, he fully channeled Heavenly Thunder Eradication.

“Bzzt, bzzt, bzzt!”

Countless bright, blue flares of electric currents simultaneously burrowed into Qin Lie. Surges of rapidly flowing lightning energy instantly started wrecking havoc within his muscles and veins.

Qin Lie’s eyes suddenly lit up as he cackled in excitement.

The initial invading electric currents came violently and tyrannically. However, after channeling Heavenly Thunder Eradication, they were tamed in an instant, completely absorbing themselves into his skeleton.

A wonderful feeling emanated from every single pore of his body. Qin Lie's body overflowed with energy, his mind rejuvenated.

Fatal to any other normal person, the electric currents acted as high grade tonic spirit herbs to him. Not only did they fail to paralyze him, they rather left him feeling deeply refreshed and energized.

“Just what I wanted!”

Instead of the dread that he should have felt under the onslaught of the Umbra Lightning Condors, Qin Lie felt rather thrilled. When the nearest condor came within reach, his hand shot out like whip to grab it.

The condor's steely claws lashed out at him, but he caught them in each of his hands. With a shout, Qin Lie's muscles bulged and he tore the zealous condor in two, its blood and guts splattering everywhere.

One strike, one kill. He couldn't be more ecstatic. Every single condor that left the safety of the sky to engage him in melee combat on the ground would find themselves grabbed by the talons and ripped in half by his deft hands.

Previously, when the Umbra Lightning Condors assaulted Tu Ze, Zhuo Qian and the rest, the condors waited until their lightning hit before ambushing the group all at once.

Despite touting cultivation levels at the late stages of the Refinement Realm, Tu Ze and Zhuo Qian's bodies couldn't compare to that freak, Qin Lie. Their bodies turned numb, and their limbs fell limp the moment lightning struck them. In an instant, their combat power plummeted to almost nothing.

When battling the condors, they feared taking the brunt of the lightning attacks, to the point that when they went to rescue their incapacitated companions, they took extreme caution to avoid getting hit themselves. Thus, they gained no ground in the battle against the condors.

But Qin Lie took a completely different course of action to battle the condors!

He paid no heed to their barrage of lightning as it only served to benefit him, despite the danger it posed to Tu Ze and Zhuo Qian. It increased his combat power, stimulating his body and mind.

His body was already tough in the first place, so the fierce attacks by the Umbra Lightning Condors, with their sharp beaks and talons, failed to give Qin Lie any significant injuries.

Without a thought for protecting themselves, or their bodies' naturally inferior defense, these Rank One spirit beasts only focused on offense. They were doomed to be ripped apart the moment they were caught.

His manner of fighting was simple and direct. Cruel and violent, yet very effective!

In just a short span of time, over ten of the Umbra Lightning Condors laid at his feet after shrieking their last, miserable cry.

Any other spirit beasts would have accepted their defeat long ago, and gone running with their tail between their legs.

But not the Umbra Lightning Condors, they were all birdbrained! Although they felt something amiss as Qin Lie decimated their ranks like a natural-born predator, they couldn't stop their assault. They set themselves into a frenzy at the sight of their slain comrades and barreled towards him without a care for their own lives.

The outcome was decided long ago.

One by one, the condors fell at the feet of Qin Lie. The fight didn't hold an ounce of suspense.

Moments later, the gruesome one-sided slaughter ended. Qin Lie stood victorious atop the pile of condor corpses, smeared and stained with their blood and feathers.

Despite his overwhelming advantage, Qin Lie's body was still full of scratches. Luckily though, it was nothing his strong constitution couldn't handle.

He understood well that to any other low-ranked martial practitioner, the Umbra Lightning Condors would have been an absolute nightmare to face.

If Tu Ze's group of seven stayed to battle, it would not have been the condors that were decimated.

Not in a hurry to harvest the beast cores, Qin Lie closed his eyes and stood in place, trying to ascertain his body's condition from within.

Current after current of electricity flowed through his veins. He willed them steadily towards his abdomen to gather at his Dantian. Then, a warm surge of joy sprouted from the bottom of his heart and he couldn't help but reveal a large grin.

At that instant, all the power of lightning that the Umbra Lightning Condors had attacked him with were mysteriously absorbed by him! Following the channeling of Heavenly Thunder Eradication, they were slowly converted into his own spirit force!

“As expected.”

At this, Qin Lie immediately felt that this trip was not a wasted one anymore. In fact, his smile became even brighter as he eyed the beast corpses around him.

.....

On the other side.

Tu Ze, Zhuo Qian and the rest were fleeing in a panic. Their hearts were heavy and they wore grave expressions. They had already made preparations to enter combat immediately if need be.

Even an average martial practitioner at the Natal Opening Realm would have to yield against the combined battle prowess of more than forty Umbra Lightning Condors. The young-looking Qin Lie was obviously there to feed those condors. Once he died, the condors would surely chase after them with haste.

Therefore, they didn't dare to relax a single bit for once the condors caught up with them, they would be embroiled in yet another harsh battle.

However, they didn't catch a single glimpse of the condors after their long anticipation. They started to grow suspicious.

“Stop!”

Mere steps away from completely leaving Solitary Ridge, Tu Ze finally felt that something was wrong. He signaled everyone to turn around while remaining in their defensive formation, and started to scrutinize the horizon behind them.

There was not even a shadow of a condor!

“This...”

Even the smoking hot Zhuo Qian, who remained impassive at the most critical of moments, was dumbfounded as she wiped the aromatic sweat off her neck, her beautiful eyes glistening.

“Previously, I had heard the piercing shrieks of the Umbra Lightning Condors. There was no doubt that a fight did take place...”. Even though Tu Ze’s appearance was crude, his thoughts were meticulous. Leaning against his long sabre, he stabilized his breathing, unwilling to waste even a single moment to recuperate his spirit force. He continued in a deep voice, “Since there isn’t a trace of the condors, there can only be one possibility—that kid is giving them serious trouble!”

“How is that possible?”, the chubby Kang Zhi exclaimed.

“The condors will definitely not chase after us without tearing that kid apart first. Since they have yet to make an appearance, it goes to show that the feathered bastards are having trouble killing him.” Tu Ze’s analysis was spot on. After pondering for a while, he gritted his teeth and shouted: “Let’s kill our way back!”

“Big brother Tu?”, Kang Zhi said bitterly while shaking his head, “It wasn’t easy for us to escape, why should we go back in? It isn’t our concern whether the boy lived or not, what matters is we survived. Why risks our lives again?”

“Agreed,” the remaining people said in assessment. Evidently, they had enough of the Umbra Lightning Condors that did not fear death. They were very reluctant to put themselves in danger again.

“Zhuo Qian, what do you think?” Tu Ze raised his head and asked.

Shrugging the shoulders of her provocative body, Zhuo Qian revealed an expression of interest and said, “I don’t mind. It’s just taking a look, isn’t it? Since the condors have yet to catch up with us, they naturally should have ran into serious trouble. I’m really curious to find out whether the crazy kid’s dead. We ought to thank him if he’s still alive.”

“Mn, regardless if he’s alive or not we should really thank that little brother. It would have been awfully difficult for the seven of us to make it out alive. The forty plus Umbra Lightning Condors were certainly something we weren’t able to handle...” Tu Ze said in a stern tone.

“Then what are we waiting for?” Zhuo Qian flung her marooned hair back, taking the initiative to rush back into Solitary Ridge, her figure robust like a female leopard. “Every bit of delay means every inch closer that little guy is to death. Since we have made our decision, we shouldn’t hesitate like a bunch of ladies!”

Agitated by her words, her previously cowardly comrades became ashamed, dashing after her with loud bellows.

Tu Ze rubbed his nose and stared at the bunch of guys that were acting like they were pumped up on steroids and cursed under his breath, “Damn, seems like only Zhuo Qian is able to handle you bastards during critical moments!”

Many women were more collected than men when faced with danger. Zhuo Qian was precisely such a woman.

Previously, when she witnessed the Umbra Lightning Condors furiously hurling themselves at Qin Lie after being aggravated, she was struck dumb and didn’t had a chance to react.

However, she realized soon after that it could be their only chance to escape. Thus, she urged her partners to abandon him with a scream, dashing out of Solitary Ridge with their lives.

At that moment, she was fully convinced that Qin Lie would not escape death's grasp. Even if the group of seven had pulled out all the stops to help him, he would not be saved. In fact, it would be very likely that the seven of them would have joined his fate.

Hence, she decisively acted to urge her partners to leave.

Given the circumstances, there was doubt that the choice she made was the smartest. There was no way she would have known that Qin Lie was the perfect counter against the Umbra Lightning Condors.

She only started to question herself when she realized that they were no longer being chased by the condors. The suspicion that Qin Lie might still be alive flickered in her heart.

Eager to make amendments, she was the first to turn back without hesitation, hastily making her way back into Solitary Ridge.

"I hope it's not too late..."

Zhuo Qian thought darkly as she neared the danger zone, grasping her bow tightly in her nervousness.

Cutting through the dense trees, Zhuo Qian arrived at a deeper region of Solitary Ridge and desperately looked towards the place where they had escaped from prior.

Zhuo Qian screamed suddenly.

Tu Ze and the rest were following closely behind. Hearing her scream, their faces changed and they scrambled towards her.

They joined her with loud exclams of their own...

They were greeted by the sight of Qin Lie in the middle of piles of Umbra Lightning Condor feathers and corpses. None of the corpses were whole; they were all torn into halves, evidently dying in a miserable fashion.

Qin Lie, who only received slight injuries, was squatting among them, harvesting the beast cores from their foreheads.

The group of seven stared in absolute astonishment. Their mouths were opened wide in their shock and their eyeballs were threatening to pop out of their sockets.

“Holy sheet, am I seeing things?” The chubby Kang Zhi said while rubbing his eyes, staring at Qin Lie as though he was a monster. “Those were more than forty Umbra Lightning Condors! They all died? And they died this miserably?!”

Qin Lie lifted his head and spotted the returning group of people. He said with a smile, “I have a spirit artifact on me which coincidentally made me immune to the lightning attacks. It definitely wasn't because I had a high cultivation level.”

“F*ck, you lil' brat, couldn't you have mentioned it earlier?” Tu Ze stepped forward with big smiles and gave Qin Lie a friendly punch.

“Seriously...”

Qin Lie groaned to himself. Believing that they wouldn't return, he had planned to harvest all the beast cores for himself after massacring the Umbra Lightning Condors.

—He was absolutely hoping to avoid any sorts of interaction with Tu Ze and his party...

“Well, I was afraid that my spirit artifact wouldn't work. I didn't wish to implicate you, which was why I didn't say anything...” explained Qin Lie.

Since this wasn't Ling Town, he didn't have to act, so his demeanor was natural.

Not a trace of dullness could be seen in Qin Lie's eyes. In fact, they were unusually active. Coupled with his pretty face, he was actually devilishly attractive.

“You're too green, kid. Your lie wasn't smooth enough. If you were indeed worried that your spirit artifact might fail you, would you really have dared to walk here into your death?” Zhuo Qian glanced at him and straightforwardly said, “Your first action when you arrived was to grab the beast cores. Just admit that you're greedy, there's no need to find other excuses. Seriously, you think we're the same as you? You thought we're going to fight over mere Rank One spirit beast cores with you?”

“Hahaha, we're from Nebula Pavilion. My name's Tu Ze, this sister here's called Zhuo Qian and that's Kang Zhi...” Tu Ze made simple introductions of his companions while laughing broadly. “We heard rumors that there were Stellar Iron in the proximity, hence we came to try our luck. Hehe, don't worry, we really do not care about those Rank One beast cores. Nobody's going to fight you for them...”

Qin Lie's heart trembled.

Rank One beast cores were definitely not luxurious goods. However, to the majority of all martial practitioners, the cores weren't cheap commodities either. At the very least, he knew that none of the Ling Family martial practitioners would be as uninterested as them.

Even though Tu Ze and the others hailed from Nebula Pavilion, they were still youths at the Refinement Realm. Their indifference towards the Rank One beast cores were enough evidence that the backgrounds of the group of seven were surely not simple.

Chapter 9: Assimilation

Solitary Ridge.

Qin Lie's haul was a total of forty-seven prismatic looking beast cores, plucked from the foreheads of the forty-seven Umbra Lightning Condors. Tu Ze's group of seven truly did not place those beast cores in their eyes. They just joked around with smiles as they watched him store the cores into a leather bag.

Dusk was approaching, yet none of them made to leave Solitary Ridge. They sat down in a circle at a dry clearing nearby.

If it was just Tu Ze's group of seven, they wouldn't have dared to stayed the night here. However, everything was different with the presence of Qin Lie. His ability to massacre flocks of Umbra Lightning Condors reassured them of their safety. They were not the slightest fearful of any potential attacks from more condors.

In fact, they were even hoping for the arrival of other condors so that they would be able to witness Qin Lie's methods up close, eager to see his mysterious spirit artifact in action.

They made a fire, set up some simple tents and seated themselves around the fire in a small circle. As for their food, they barbecued a dozen of wild hares and pheasants that were easily hunted. Cheer and laughter rang about as they indulged in hard liquor and merry making.

Far away from Ling Town and Herb Mountain, Qin Lie no longer restrained himself. He reverted back into the boisterous, passionate youth that he really was, hitting it off with Tu Ze's group of seven in no time.

Everyone gradually loosened up after a couple mouthfuls of liquor. Qin Lie properly introduced himself, saying that his name was "Ling Lie", and that he was from Ling Town. He further explained that he came to the Arctic Mountain Range to polish his martial cultivation.

Upon hearing he was from Ling Town, Tu Ze brimmed with warmth and said with a smile, "Haha, we are all allies!"

At this, the remaining six people finally discarded all sense of wariness against him.

The Arctic Mountain Range spanned five hundred kilometers and was occupied by various distribution of powers. Nebula Pavilion was just one of the low level forces in the

area. If Qin Lie was a martial practitioner from a rival force, it would definitely be inappropriate to interact so closely with him.

Different forces fought regularly over stuff like spirit ores, territories and cultivation hotspots. The skirmishes were bloody and they happened unceasingly year-round!

There were even some forces that became irreconcilable enemies because of that. If such enemies met, neither would rest until a side was annihilated. It was simply impossible for them to walk on the same road.

Even though this region had always been under the control of Nebula Pavilion, there was no guarantee that they wouldn't come across martial practitioners from foreign forces.

Therefore, when they were resting, Tu Ze's pressing concern was Qin Lie's identity. After knowing Qin Lie was from the Ling Family, he was completely relieved.

Nebula Pavilion was a martial force at the Limestone rank. Being a ranked force meant that even the weakest of them possessed a considerable level of foundation and strength.

The martial forces of Spirit Realm were graded in order of their strength. Starting from the lowest, the ranks were respectively Limestone, Black Iron, Copper, Silver, and Gold. Strict requirements were in place for each ranks, and the difference in strength between ranks were extremely significant.

The majority of martial practitioners belonging to forces at the Limestone rank were either at the Refinement or Natal Opening Realm. There were rarely any practitioners at the Manifestation Realm that would stay at such forces permanently.

Generally speaking, once a practitioner broke through to the Manifestation Realm, they would be recruited by Black Iron ranked forces, directly entering a whole new domain for martial practitioners.

As for Black Iron ranked forces, the majority of their martial practitioners were at the Manifestation and Netherpassage Realms. When practitioners broke through to the Fulfillment Realm, they would similarly choose to enter Copper ranked forces to gain access to more resources in a bid to raise their cultivation levels at an even faster pace.

It was no different for the Copper, Silver and the legendary Gold ranked forces. They each accommodated to different cultivation rankings of martial practitioners.

A large portion of martial practitioners in Copper ranked forces were at the Fulfillment and Fragmentation Realms. Similarly, Silver ranked forces' practitioners were mostly at the Nirvana and Imperishable Realms. As for the legendary Gold ranked forces, they

were viewed as the holy land of cultivation, consisting of top martial practitioner powerhouses at the Void and Genesis Realms.

Due to the distribution of power, most of the forces would usually choose to be backed by a higher ranked power, with dependents of a lower rank beneath them. This pyramid-like arrangement persisted throughout the rankings, keeping a balance between powers.

For example, while Nebula Pavilion relied on a higher ranked force, receiving both protection and restrains, it also had its own dependents... Ling Family and a few other minor forces were ruled by Nebula Pavilion, and they had to offer tributes yearly.

After they ate and drank their fill, the group of youths laid down lazily, stargazing through the dense forest canopy.

"It's been three months already. If we still aren't able to find the Stellar Iron, the only option left is to return." Tu Ze exhaled audibly, "Without the Stellar Iron, I can't produce the kind of spirit artifact I want, sigh..."

"We can only leave such matters to luck. Just because others had managed to come across some Stellar Iron in this region does not guarantee that we will be able find some too. Ultimately, Stellar Iron is a Common Grade Seven artifact material, which is considered to be rare. For all you know, all of them had been harvested by the very same person who had come across it first. Why would any of it be left for us?" Zhuo Qian gallantly took a long draught from her wineskin, and commented somewhat irritably.

The harsh liquor made her luscious face flushed in an attractive bright shade of red. Her pair of sparkling eyes were half-closed as she reveled in the intoxication, looking extremely seductive. Kang Zhi and a few youths flickered about unceasingly, trying to sneak as many glances of her as they could.

Possibly due to the alcohol, Zhuo Qian paid no attention to her bearings. Her exquisite piece of body armor that featured two large, round indents was slightly cracked from the front, revealing a small portion of her soft, milk-like breasts, driving the heartbeats of Kang Zhi and the rest spiraling out of control.

"Stellar Iron..." whispered Qin Lie as he too, took a draught of the liquor. Retrieving the information from his memories, he said, "After this Solitary Ridge, there's a valley forty kilometers ahead. In the middle of that valley is a lake, and at the bottom of the lake there might be some Stellar Iron."

"Who told you this?!" Tu Ze hurriedly stood up upon hearing this, appearing extremely excited. "Are you sure?"

“My grandpa was the one who told me this, so it shouldn’t be wrong. However, I have yet to go there myself, so there are no guarantees from me.” Qin Lie stated.

“This is definitely better than wandering about aimlessly!” Zhuo Qian’s face lit up in joy as she tossed her wineskin to Qin Lie and spoke in a carefree manner: “I’ll treat you to some liquor first. If we really manage to find some Stellar Iron, Big Brother Tu here will definitely not be stingy.”

“Of course!” Tu Ze patted Qin Lie’s shoulder heavily and said with a giant grin: “Lie boy here is our lucky star!”

“Drink, drink!” Kang Zhi and the rest cheered.

Qin Lie was startled as he held the wineskin in his hands. Catching the mischievous Zhuo Qian’s mocking glances, he gallantly chugged at the liquor. For a moment, he could even smell a trace of a fragrant aroma that did not belong to the alcohol. He felt a gentle ripple stirred in his heart, as distracting thoughts surfaced involuntarily.

Noticing Qin Lie’s expression, Zhuo Qian chuckled charmingly as she gestured unrestrainedly, “You’re quite interesting! Hah, when we find the Stellar Iron, big sister here will treat you to another drink!”

“Sure.” Qin Lie replied between mouthfuls of liquor.

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Tu Ze, Kang Zhi and the others fell soundly asleep, accompanied by their steady snoring through the otherwise silent night.

However, Qin Lie stayed beside the firepit. After some hesitation, he took out a piece of beast core and began to play with it.

A Rank One Umbra Lightning Condor’s beast core was shaped like a prism and as thick as a thumb. Observing it closely, he could spot strands of electric currents flowing about actively within the blue, translucent core.

Closing his eyes, Qin Lie silently channeled Heavenly Thunder Eradication, and a force of attraction started to emit from his palm!

“Bzzt, bzzt, bzzt!”

Thin strands of electric currents spurred rapidly into motion, flowing into the meridians within his palm.

A faint feeling of numbness started to spread from his palm. He could tell clearly that those thin strands of electric currents were following the muscles and veins of his body, flowing downwards from his arms. They gathered like streams at his dantian's spirit sea.

Qin Lie was excited and overjoyed and the corner of his mouth moved upwards to reveal a large grin.

The dantian's spirit sea was located at the abdomen of the human body and is the core in which martial practitioners store their spirit energy. Similarly, a beast core was the source of energy for spirit beasts.

Martial practitioners cultivate by absorbing nature spirit energy and slowly infusing them into their dantian's spirit sea. By unceasingly pushing the boundaries of the dantian's spirit sea, they would be able to improve their spirit energy capacity, allowing the practitioners to wield stronger spirit powers.

Throughout these years, Qin Lie had amassed quite a bit of spirit energy himself. Previously, when he had borrowed the power of lightning from the Ninth Heavens to temper himself, he had also widened his spirit sea considerably.

However, the spirit energy that he painstakingly accumulated was always exhausted in just a single training. His spirit sea was regularly dried up and he frequently had no spirit energy to use.

The thickness and purity of the spirit energy within the dantian's spirit sea was a good indicator of the cultivation level of a martial practitioner. The simplest way for Qin Lie to find out his level of cultivation would be to fill up his spirit sea to the brim with spirit energy first, and then measure it with a Realm Assessing Stone, which would provide him with a rough estimate for an answer.

The accumulation of one's own spirit energy was done by slowly gathering and refining the world's spirit energy. It wasn't meant to be accomplished overnight. However, there was always an exception to everything. Among the mysterious lands, there were some rare items that were able to greatly shorten the process needed to replenish the spirit energy within one's spirit sea.

Spirit stone, spirit crystals, spirit pills, spirit plants and suitable beast cores were able to speed up the accumulation of spirit energy, allowing martial practitioners to improve their cultivation rapidly.

Qin Lie focused his attention on the beast core in his hand, guiding the electric currents to flow through his muscles and veins into his body, allowing the energy to enter his dantian's spirit sea bit by bit. His dried up spirit sea gradually started to fill up...

"Crack!"

Having exhausted its energy, the beast core in his palm split open. Qin Lie jolted awake from the sound.

Contemplating inwardly, he realized that the power from one beast core would never allow his spirit sea to be filled in abundance.

A large portion of the power from the beast core was wasted during the refinement process. Only an approximate of ten to twenty percent of its original spirit energy would be induced into his spirit sea.

Tilting his head upwards to look at the sky, he realized that unknowingly, dawn was already ushering in.

“Absorbing the energy from beast core actually took such a long time, and it was merely just a Rank One beast core. From the looks of it, I probably don’t have any time left to continue cultivating...”

With a deep sigh, Qin Lie closed his eyes in a bid to rest.

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The next day, after a night of rest, everybody appeared to be lively and refreshed.

“Ling Lie, you’re looking good! I didn't expect you to recover so fast after killing so many Umbra Lightning Condors yesterday, not bad at all!” Kang Zhi exclaimed.

The rest of them immediately focused their attention on Qin Lie and discovered that his eyes were lively and his body radiated a bright glow of vigor.

Even the multiple shallow wounds he received from the condors had already started to scab. Others would find it difficult to believe he had fought a bloody battle just the day before.

“Really?” Qin Lie laughed. “It was probably due to the liquor and the comfortable sleep I had last night. All of you look energetic too.” He understood that it definitely was due to the partial replenishment of his spirit sea.

“Let's go to the valley that Ling Lie mentioned and hope that we can really find some Stellar Iron. We're almost out of time. Any further delays and our family back home will be seriously worried about us.” Tu Ze anxiously commented.

“Mn, if we can't find it this time, we have to start going back.” Zhuo Qian nodded her head as she combed her naturally curly long hair. Smiling brightly at Qin Lie, she said, “It all depends on whether your information is accurate.”

"I hope that it's accurate too." Frowning slightly, he added, "But that region isn't very peaceful. If our luck is bad, we might encounter something we shouldn't encounter and land ourselves in very big trouble."

Chapter 10: Sixth Level of Refinement!

"Encounter something we shouldn't encounter? What are you referring to?"

Along the way towards the lake in the valley, Kang Zhi turned his head to ask as his chubby face revealed a bitter smile, his worry evident.

"Ice Soul Pythons!" Qin Lie kned his eyebrows and said, "There are Ice Soul Pythons living in the vicinity of the lake. They will occasionally go to the lake to wash the mud off their bodies. If we unfortunately come across one of them, we'll be in serious trouble."

Ice Soul Pythons were Rank Two spirit beasts, with strength similar to martial practitioners at the Natal Opening Realm. Their combat prowess far outstripped the Umbra Lightning Condor. Martial practitioners at the Refinement Realm would find it very difficult to endure even a single breath of these serpents that were filled with frost energy.

Ling Family's Ling Feng, together with Ling Chengzhi and some others, came across an Ice Soul Python a few years ago and got sprayed with a full breath of frost energy. Luckily, he blocked most of it with his Firecloud Hammer, if not, the frost energy would have invaded his heart and killed him.

In the end, he survived at the cost of his spirit artifact, the Firecloud Hammer. If Qin Shan hadn't helped to repair the hammer for him, it would have been scrap metal by now.

From this, one could see that Ice Soul Pythons were not easy to deal with.

Qin Lie carried with him a sculpture of his grandfather. According to his grandfather, the sculpture would be useful within the territories of some specific spirit beasts.

However, the Ice Soul Pythons were not included in the list of spirit beasts mentioned by his grandfather. Thus, the sculpture was of no help to him now.

Upon hearing the presence of Ice Soul Pythons, the expressions of the party changed slightly as fear grew within their hearts.

Other than Tu Ze and Zhuo Qian, everyone revealed a face of reluctance. At this moment, Zhuo Qian addressed them coldly, "Ice Soul Pythons are stronger than Umbra Lightning Condors. However, this particular spirit beast does not live in groups. We will likely come across them at most one at a time. Which is more troublesome, a single

serpent, or over thirty Umbra Lightning Condors? We have seven of us, and if we count Ling Lie in, will we not win against a single Ice Soul Python? On top of that, it isn't guaranteed that we might even meet one. Look at your own fearful appearances, don't you people feel ashamed of yourself?"

After her speech, the group of people dryly laughed as they realized their behavior was truly lacking.

"Brother Lie, this matter is not your concern, you do not have to accompany us any further," Tu Ze said suddenly as he exhaled deeply and continued, "We're already grateful that you gave the valuable information to us. There's no reason to allow you to risk danger together with us. Mn, we can part here..."

"No, I'm coming along with you guys." Qin Lie replied as he shook his head, revealing a look of calmness on his youthful face. "You need me to give you directions. Besides, I'm also going there to look for something..."

Stellar Iron was a Common Grade Seven spirit material. Legend has it that it came from meteorites created from the explosion of stars. Melting the Stellar Iron and imbuing it into spirit artifacts would greatly increase the artifacts' toughness. The Stellar Iron was definitely considered to be a rare treasure.

However, the reason why his grandfather was affixed on that lake was not due to the Stellar Iron. It was because of the Ice Stalk Grass at the sides of the lake.

Ice Stalk Grass was a Common Grade Five spirit herb and also the main ingredient for refining the Hundred Vein Pill. The Hundred Vein Pill could be consumed to improve the tenacity of the muscles and veins within the body, and increase the speed at which spirit energy flowed along the meridians. This would allow martial practitioners to refine spirit stones and beast cores even faster.

Directly ingesting the Ice Stalk Grass could also give Qin Lie similar benefits, which would allow him to rapidly refine the lightning energy within the beast cores and quickly accumulate more spirit energy.

He was willing to travel together to the lake precisely because of the Ice Stalk Grass. It definitely had nothing to do about caring for Tu Ze, Zhuo Qian and the rest.

Besides, if he were to head towards the lake alone, he would be doomed the moment he came across an Ice Soul Python.

Without Tu Ze's group of seven, he certainly would not have attempted such a suicidal move at his level of cultivation. Therefore, when opportunity presented itself in the form of Tu Ze and the others, he definitely had to give it a try.

Tu Ze and company were moved by his act of “camaraderie”, and they started to look at him with friendlier eyes.

They chatted along the way and under his guidance, the party of eight reached the valley at noon.

The Arctic Mountain Range had numerous identical valleys like this. This particular valley they had arrived at didn't have a name. Perhaps due to its proximity to the glacier region, it was considerably colder than Solitary Ridge as freezing wind blew harshly from within the valley.

They tightened their clothes and proceeded to open up a path through the knee-high vegetation with their weapons, making their way deeper into the valley.

As expected, they found a lake right in the middle of the valley. The sides of the lake were abundant in dense clusters of aquatic plants, and above its surface were thin layers of swirling fog. Enshrouded by the light blanketing vapor, the inner portion of the valley presented a uniquely beautiful and misty scenery.

“The Stellar Iron is at the bottom of this lake?” Tu Ze excitedly looked at Qin Lie, while asking for a final confirmation.

Qin Lie nodded.

Tu Ze yelled out in joy and directly jumped into the lake without hesitation.

“Ah! The water's so damn cold!” Abruptly surfacing from the water with a drenched head, Tu Ze said as he heartily laughed out loud, “Come on in and wash yourselves! After travelling within the mountains for so long, we have yet to see a lake with such clean water. We'd better not miss this chance.”

Being hygienic was a woman's natural tendency. At this, even the usually casual Zhuo Qian could no longer hold herself in. With a charming smile, she gracefully dived into the lake.

The remaining six others were full of glee too. One by one, they rushed into the waters, hurriedly cleaning their bodies first before diving towards the bottom of the lake.

Qin Lie watched on for a while. After making sure they were busy searching for the Stellar Iron, he began to wade among the plants and stones at the side of the lake.

The length of a typical Ice Stalk Grass was only that of a human's forearm and half of it was usually rooted into the ground between pieces of rocks. Only a small portion of it would protrude above the water's surface and even then, it would usually grow in the midst of various common water grass and algae, making it extremely hard to find.

Had Qin Lie not known in advance that there was Ice Stalk Grass to be found here thanks to his grandfather's map, even if he frequently passed through here, it would be highly improbable for him to discover its existence without carefully digging about the aquatic plants.

However, since he was certain that there was Ice Stalk Grass around here, the result would definitely be different.

Qin Lie steadily circled the shores of the lake, maintaining his calm as he meticulously searched...

Within minutes, a single stalk of a plain-looking grass came into the corner of his vision. Qin Lie's face shone with delight as he immediately made his way towards it, carefully plucking it from among a dense patch of aquatic vegetation.

The entire stalk of Ice Stalk Grass was retrieved. It was less than half a meter long and 2 fingers wide.

The leaves were olive in color and cold to the hands, with numerous fine veins on its surface. The pattern of the veins looked very similar to the meridians of a human body, looking as though it contained mysteries within.

"Common Grade Five....."

Qin Lie muttered under his breath. After tightly securing one end of the Ice Stalk Grass, he stored it in a leather bag at his waist and continued his search.

"Hahaha! I found it, I found a bit of Stellar Iron, it's really here!"

Fatty Kang Zhi's exhilarated laughters rang out from a corner of the lake. He held up a small piece of a shiny, silver stone fragment the size of a small fingernail and continuously waved it back and forth, pinched between his fingers

The piece of stone fragment shone brightly under the reflection of the sunlight like a rare metal, as though it really was a meteorite that came from the stars.

Tu Ze, Zhuo Qian and others were still at the bottom of the lake when they heard his outburst of laughter. They broke through the surface of the lake to see Kang Zhi's smug face as he started to brag that he was "favored by the gods", a "child of nature" and other shameless claims.

They ignored Kang Zhi's infuriating choice of words as their passionate gazes convened on that small shiny fragment, then quickly broke out into loud cheers after which they resumed diving with renewed gusto.

Certain that the bottom of the lake indeed contained Stellar Iron, the group of seven started to act like they were injected with chicken blood. They searched furiously within the lake without pause, occasionally surfacing only when they absolutely had to catch their breath.

Qin Lie paid them no attention, solely focused on searching for more Ice Stalk Grass while conveniently on the lookout for unexpected dangers.

Five days passed in a blink of an eye.

In these five days, Qin Lie had harvested more than ten of those Ice Stalk Grass. Whenever night fell, he would refine the Umbra Lightning Condor beast cores after ingesting a stalk of the Ice Stalk Grass.

With the help of the Ice Stalk Grass, his speed of refining the cores were greatly increased. Within the span of five days, he refined more than twenty of those beast cores. The spiritual energy within his dantian's spirit sea started to slowly accumulate.

The feeling of having an abundance of spiritual energy, as though he possessed an incredible source of power within his body, greatly boosted his confidence.

Within these five days, Tu Ze's group of seven were also devoted to their goal of searching for Stellar Iron. It wasn't clear whether it was due to their unbelievably poor luck, but their total haul was relatively pitiful. There were only slightly more than ten small pieces of the Stellar Iron between them, far from meeting the required amount to refine Tu Ze's artifact.

In the middle of the night, after borrowing a Realm Assessing Stone from Tu Ze, he stealthily separated himself from the group to test his true cultivation rank.

The diamond-shaped Realm Assessing Stone was transparent like a crystal and sparkled faintly under the moonlight. It was specifically used to measure the cultivation rank of a martial practitioner.

Holding his breath, Qin Lie slowly gathered his spirit energy to the Realm Assessing Stone within his palm. A faint blue ray of light gradually appeared on the smoothest surface of the stone.

One ray of blue light represented one level of the Refinement Realm. Following the increased output of Qin Lie's spirit energy, the surface of the stone slowly emitted more rays of blue.

One ray, two rays, three, four, five, six rays!

Sixth level of Refinement!

“My spirit sea is still not fully filled yet. The number of rays should increase as I refine more of the beast cores. When my spiritual sea is truly filled to the brim with spirit energy, it might even reveal... that I have reached the seventh level of the Refinement Realm!”

Qin Lie breathed out slowly and cut off the infusion of Spirit Energy into the Realm Assessing Stone. His eyes started to glow faintly as he became filled with confidence and anticipation for the future.

On the sixth day, Tu Ze and the others resumed their search for more Stellar Iron while Qin Lie continued exploring the sides of the lake for more Ice Stalk Grass, just as they had previously done.

“Hiss! Hiss!”

Suddenly, the sound of a snake hissing echoed out from deep within the trees.

Qin Lie was searching within a large patch of seaweeds when his heart sank abruptly as he felt a heavy aura of chill closing in. Without hesitation, he fiercely lifted the largest boulder within reach and heavily tossed it into the lake, shouting out simultaneously, “There’s an Ice Soul Python!”

Whilst shouting, Qin Lie hurriedly moved to distance himself from the direction of the hissing, trying his best to avoid the scenario of coming face to face with the Ice Soul Python all alone.

Within the lake, Tu Ze and the others were alarmed by the sinking boulders and they raced towards the surface, sprinting towards Qin Lie when they spotted his beckoning hand.

The Ice Soul Python was an amphibious creature. Its combat prowess was exceedingly high on both land and in water. It was able to reveal its true strength even in the lake as it was unaffected by the water.

However, Tu Ze and the rest were unable to do the same.

If they tried to fight within the water, their strength would be greatly impacted; many of their strongest abilities would be heavily weakened.

Therefore, when they became aware that an Ice Soul Python was approaching, they decisively chose to make for land.

Knee-high vegetations were mangled as the group barged towards the trees; the sounds of twigs snapping, gravel scattering and the spirit beast’s hissing as it slithered blended together.

Shortly after, with a body nearing nine meters in length and as thick as a bucket, a python came into their view.

There were several cloud-like patterns on the smooth body of the Ice Soul Python and its head was shaped like a triangle. White frosty mist would be spewed out between its breaths, capable of freezing one to the bones.

It slithered at a surprisingly fast speed and its body was exceptionally nimble, as some sort of a sinister glow faintly shone within its inky, dark green pupils.

“It’s here!” Kang Zhi shouted.

“Let’s kill it then!”

Zhuo Qian adjusted her stance and her healthy calves bent in a lunge position. She swiftly nocked an arrow, drawing her longbow back to be as taut as possible, becoming the first one to be ready for the impending battle.