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Chapter 11: Shattered Ice Manor

“Swoosh!”

A silver arrow cut across the sky like a lightning bolt, quickly flying towards the Ice Soul Python.

When the arrowhead was about to pierce into the Ice Soul Python’s forehead, a silver light suddenly shone, and spirit energy was emitted outward. The deep-green eyes of the Ice Soul Python was dazzled by the radiant light, and it seemed to have temporarily lost its sight.

However, at this moment, it opened its mouth and spat out a mouthful of cold mist. The cold mist was mixed with shards of ice, landing straight on the arrowhead.

“Kling kling kling!”

As though it had been frozen, the fast-flying arrow actually emitted a heart-chilling sound, as it suddenly descended at flying speed.

“Slap!”

The Ice Soul Python swung its head to make a bash, and the arrow actually powerlessly fell aside. It did not cause any damage to it at all.

The lush-green little eyes of the enraged Ice Soul Python turned venomous and sinister. Spitting out its tongue, it blasted apart the surrounding bushes one after another as it madly pounced towards them.

“Watch out!” Zhuo Qian cried out. As she shot out another silver arrow, she roared. “Slaughter it with our combined strength!”

Tu Ze, Kang Zhi and everyone else made their moves one after another.

A crimson blade-beam, like a long, flying arc, exploded from the long saber in Tu Ze’s hands, smashing towards the oncoming Ice Soul Python.

Kang Zhi wailed out strangely, as sharp golden energy rampantly charged out from his long golden spear, brightly emitting streams of golden spear silhouettes that were aimed at the eyes of the Ice Soul Python.

The other four people had all gathered their concentration as well. Circulating their spirit energy and spirit arts, as wind blades, light waves, and fire balls struck towards its two flanks, coordinating with Tu Ze and the two others with their full strength.

Only Qin Lie stayed unmoving at his original position.

According to their several days of discussion, he knew that Tu Ze was currently at the ninth level of the Refinement Realm, and was only a step away from breaking through into the Natal Opening Realm. Zhuo Qian and Kang Zhi were both at the eighth level of the Refinement Realm; the proficiency of their skills were superb, and their battle experience was extremely bountiful as well.

The remaining four people were all at the seventh level of the Refinement Realm, and could also be considered as very outstanding juniors in the Nebula Pavilion.

One at the ninth level, two at the eighth level, and four at the seventh level. With this amount of strength working together to go against the Ice Soul Python, a Rank Two spirit beast, as long as they stay focused and wary, it was possible for them to kill it.

Not counting the previous battle with the Umbra Lightning Condor, this time could possibly be Qin Lie's very first battle in its truest sense. Hence, he wanted to first observe the battle tactics which Tu Ze and the rest had, before joining into the fray.

Tu Ze and Kang Zhi, wielding their long saber and long spear in their hands, restricted the Ice Soul Python with head-on confrontations. As for Zhuo Qian, she pulled away a far distance and shot arrows at unexpected moments. Adding the other four people pincering from the two sides, that Ice Soul Python was evidently finding it extremely difficult to cope.

It could only constantly spew out the cold mist which was mixed with scraps of ice shards, in order to barely resist under the seven people's siege.

The Ice Soul Python's strongest attack was the ice mist from its mouth. If a martial practitioner were to be struck by it, his entire body would immediately turn frozen stiff, instantly losing his battle strength. If his body were to be invaded by the cold poison, his life might even be at stake.

Tu Ze and the rest deeply knew how frightening the Ice Soul Python could be, and all of them were maintaining a sufficient distance away from it. The moment they saw that it was about to spit out the cold mist, they would instantly choose to avoid it. As they definitely would not clash head-on with the cold mist, they prevented the Ice Soul Python's strongest attack from being effective every single time.

Among them, Zhuo Qian and a few others would take these opportunate moments to attack. Being struck several times by arrowheads, wind blades, fireballs, and light waves, the surface of the Ice Soul Python's upper body began to gradually exhibit trails

of blood. From its winding movements, its figure was gradually losing its dexterity as well. Clearly, its speed was cumbered by its injuries.

Qin Lie attentively spectated from the side. Through the battle by Tu Ze and the rest, he learned several things.

It shouldn't be merely one or two days since Tu Ze and the other six began battling shoulder-to-shoulder. Their battle roles were clearly distinguished, and they were very familiar with their coordination. Furthermore, not only were they extremely united, their attacking methods were very intuitive as well.

With their Refinement Realm cultivation levels, under their collaborative effort, the seven of them completely wore out the Ice Soul Python with brute force. The injuries on the python's body continued to increase, and it gradually lost its ability to retaliate.

Anxiety was quickly lost in the battle. After the seven slowly and gradually wore it down, the Ice Soul Python's injuries were too severe, and its movements began to slow down. Finally, it lost the battle of attrition to the seven people.

"Haah. Such a waste of the python's skin. The skin of a Rank Two spirit beast carries a certain value after all."

With an aching heart, Kang Zhi stepped forward. Along with Tu Ze, he took out a small bottle, and the two of them poured out a type of liquid from the bottle onto the body of the Ice Soul Python in an even manner.

"Sssss!"

The corpse of the Ice Soul Python emitted a dense smoke, as its blood and meat began to melt at high speed, causing Qin Lie's heart to jolt from watching this scene.

Not long later, this nine-meter long Ice Soul Python had actually melted into a puddle of blood. What remained were the python's skin which was filled with many holes, the python's skeleton, the beast core, and two rows of sharp teeth.

Evidently, the parts which were not melted, were the materials from the Ice Soul Python that were truly worth a sum of money.

"Twerp, you're slacking, aren't you? We had such an intense battle, yet you were just watching from the sidelines?" Tu Ze smiled, and he did not have the slightest bit of intent to criticize him at all. "Could it be that you realized we were not in any danger, and were able to easily defeat the Ice Soul Python, hence you felt that there wasn't a need for you to step in?"

With the precedence of Qin Lie taking on more than forty Umbra Lightning Condors alone back then, none of the seven of them would feel that he was timid and afraid to

act. They simply took it as though he was watching from the sidelines because victory was already in their grasps, and hence, decided to slack off.

“I have too little experience, so I wish to study your battle methods. And, the seven of you are too well-coordinated, so I was afraid that my participation would negatively affect you people instead,” Qin Lie casually said.

“Haha, you’re too modest. With the ability to kill more than forty Umbra Lightning Condors, how could your battle experience possibly be little?” Tu Ze invited him over, and pointed to the materials on the ground. With a prideful tone, he said, “I said this before. If you’re truly able to find Stellar Iron, I will definitely thank you well. Among these python’s skin, skull, teeth, and beast core, you can pick out any of them!”

Zhuo Qian, Kang Zhi, and the rest were all smiling, as they did not mind Tu Ze’s decision at all.

Qin Lie lowered his head to take a look, before he shook his head and said with a smile, “It’s fine. There isn’t a spirit material that I need, so I won’t take them.”

“Swoosh! Swoosh swoosh! Swoosh swoosh swoosh!”

The sharp sounds of arrows piercing through the skies, suddenly came from the bushes. One arrow after another flew out, and their targets were clearly Tu Ze and his followers.

“Pwack!”

Chu Peng, who was next to Kang Zhi, was struck in the left shoulder by an arrow before he could even react. He staggered a few steps back from the arrow’s penetrative strength, and he screamed out from the intense pain.

Before Tu Ze and Zhuo Qian could even have the time to store the spirit materials from the Ice Soul Python, their eyes instantly reddened, as they greeted the battle with furious roars.

Qin Lie’s expression suddenly turned into fright. As he saw the arrows shooting through the sky, he immediately retreated and searched for a rock to hide.

Luckily, he had wandered around the lake for a few days and was rather familiar with the surroundings. He immediately found a pile of rocks and shouted for Tu Ze and his gang to come over.

Tu Ze and Zhuo Qian swung their swords to break the incoming arrows while shielding Chu Peng and the injured Han Feng. They swiftly ran in Qin Lie’s direction.

Then, a group of more than ten martial practitioners dressed in dark brown gradually appeared from the bushes.

Among the group, some of them wielded a longbow. Their gazes were sharp as they were continuously shooting their arrows despite their quick movement, with a look as though they had wanted to kill everyone present.

Behind the archers, a silver-haired youth that had a cold expression looked towards Tu Ze and his gang ominously.

The man was also dressed in a dark brown robe and there was a shattered ice design embroidered on the left side of his chest. It looked like it was a special symbol for some sort of force.

“Shattered Ice Manor! Yan Ziqian!”

Zhuo Qian, who was finally under the cover of some rocks, saw that some people had surfaced from the lake, and gritted her teeth so tightly that it was constantly producing a grinding sound. This caused her charming face to reveal an expression of monstrous rage.

“It’s indeed the scoundrels from Shattered Ice Manor!”

Tu Ze placed the injured Chu Peng, Han Feng and others down properly as his face darkened. He then wielded his long saber and looked like he was about to rush out to fight in desperation.

“Big Brother Tu, don’t be rash! Wait for them to come closer. We’re too far away at the moment, and are still in the effective radius of the archers!” Zhuo Qian frantically stopped him.

Tu Ze quickly calmed down. Breathing in deeply, he hid behind the pile of rocks and slowly calmed his breathing in preparation for the imminent bloody battle.

Hearing the name Shattered Ice Manor, Qin Lie knew that this battle was going to be unavoidable.

When he was in the state of Thoughtless Tranquility, he could still hear the conversations of the people around him. All these years while he was in the Ling Family’s Dining Hall, he heard more than once about the strength of this power.

Like Nebula Pavilion, Shattered Ice Manor was a Limestone rank power as well, and together with Nebula Pavilion, it was situated in Icestone City.

The entire Icestone City was under the control of the two powers, Nebula Pavilion and Shattered Ice Manor, and these two forces were under the control of the Black Iron

ranked force “Dark Asura Hall”. Therefore, logically speaking, Nebula Pavilion and Shattered Ice Manor should be under the restriction of “Dark Asura Hall” and should get along fine.

However, this was not the case.

For some unknown reason, these two powers acted like fire and water within Icestone City. Whether it was in the open or in the dark, they had never stopped fighting. When they were in Icestone City, the two forces would still hold back a little as they instructed their men to not be too overboard.

However, once they left Icestone City, whenever these two powers crossed path, a bloody battle was bound to ensue and many people died as a result.

Gradually, the two powers’ hatred became stronger and stronger. If it weren’t for “Dark Asura Hall’s” numerous warnings, the two parties would have probably begun a large-scale fight within Icestone City.

Shattered Ice Manor, which was similarly located within Icestone City, was quite near to the Arctic Mountain Range; hence, many martial practitioners often came to the Arctic Mountain Range for training. Every time the martial practitioners of Shattered Ice Manor and Nebula Pavilion crossed paths, it ended up in a bloodbath.

Even the small powers that were under Nebula Pavilion and Shattered Ice Manor would often be in fights due to their higher powers’ conflicts, and many people would die in the midst of those fights as well.

“Tu Ze, don’t hide there like a dead dog, hurry up and come out!” The silver-haired youth who was wearing a cold expression walked forward and coldly said in a sinister tone, “I’ve been chasing this Ice Soul Python for six days and have expanded quite a lot of energy. Now you want to take advantage of it. Have you asked the Ice Drake Sword in my hands?”

As he spoke, he drew out snow white longsword that was as beautiful as the autumn waters. It was two fingers thick and shimmered with a cold glow.

On the sword, there was a silvery line of ice, and as the sword was swung, the silvery line of ice seemed to twist like a serpent. Upon closer inspection, it looked as though a serpent dragon was sealed there.

Beside them, a youth from Shattered Ice Manor had gathered the skin, bones, teeth and core of the Ice Soul Python, handed them to him respectfully, and said, “Young Manor Lord, other than a few holes in the skin, the rest are undamaged.”

“Mn, looks like we have to thank them.” Yan Ziqian nodded and looked at him, hinting at him to properly put it away.

Tu Ze and his gang hid behind the pile of rocks. With their own eyes, they saw the people from Shattered Ice Manor collect their spoils of war while insulting them outloud in the process. This caused that to nearly explode with rage.

However, the bows of the martial practitioners from Shattered Ice Manor were still pointing towards them, which prevented them from acting rashly.

“Wait! Wait for them to come closer. Wait for the bows to lose their effectiveness!” Zhuo Qian said coldly.

Everyone gritted their teeth as they nodded in acknowledgement. They held their weapons tightly as they quietly anticipated the enemy’s approach.

During the thunderstorm season, the weather was unpredictable. Initially, the sun was still shining brightly, but now, it was gradually getting dark as thick black clouds started to gather. To them, this gave off a pressure similar to the people from Shattered Ice Manor, which was a feeling of unhappiness and annoyance.

“Brother Lie, act accordingly later. If you see that the situation is dire, you... escape when you get the chance. Don’t worry about us,” Tu Ze whispered.

Qin Lie looked at him in shock before revealing a smile as he replied, “The Ling Family and Nebula Pavilion are affiliated.”

Once he said that, all of them looked a bit moved. Tu Ze’s eyes shined as a sense of pride welled up within him. Before the big battle, he clenched his fist and thumped Qin Lie’s chest.

Nothing else needed to be said.

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Chapter 12: Thunderous Fury

Dark clouds loomed, the atmosphere was stifling as the gale wind howled.

Under Yan Ziqian’s signal, Shattered Ice Manor’s martial practitioners did not hurriedly swarm in, and instead dispersed orderly in a semi-circular fashion, drawing closer bit by bit to the boulder pile where everyone was hiding.

Zhou Qian’s charming face abruptly changed in expression, as she shouted: “Sheet!”

Figured out Yan Ziqian’s intentions, Tu Ze and others also went pale all of a sudden, as they thought “not good” to themselves.

With those archers aimed at them, if everyone tried to break through, they would become live targets. Yan Ziqian saw through their disadvantage, and did not rush straight over in a hurry, and instead dispersed, enclosing them in.

Such an act was intended to eliminate every single one of them at once!

Once the encirclement formed, to fight against higher numbers with seven people on top of having injured comrades, this battle would probably end in a miserable conclusion of total annihilation.

“Archers didn’t come close, and it’s too late to break through now. This battle... the odds are grim!” Tu Ze suddenly took in a deep breath, his expression ferocious, his eyes reddened like a trapped beast that was about to put up a desperate fight. He roared lowly: “We can’t get out of this now! Kill as many of them as possible at all costs, as long as we kill eight of them, it’ll be worth it!”

The eyes of Kang Zhi, Zhuo Qian, Chu Peng and the rest were dyed red the instant they heard this speech, and also decided to put up a desperate fight.

There were a total of seventeen or eighteen people from Shattered Ice Manor, more than double their numbers. That Yan Ziqian’s realm aura wasn’t the slightest bit inferior to Tu Ze, and the few martial practitioners beside him also had auras as profound as the abyss. From the malevolence and ferociousness in their eyes, one could tell that every single one of them had gone through the baptism of blood.

Tu Ze, Kang Zhi and everyone else had wrestled with the Ice Soul Python for a long time, much of their spirit energy was spent; furthermore, three were injured by sneak attacks...

Qin Lie’s brows tightly knitted as the brilliance of lightning faintly shot across his eyes. When Tu Ze and everyone else had already despaired, he was still trying his best to find a wisp of opportunity for triumph.

“Boooooom!”

Suddenly at this moment, a rumbling sound of thunder in the sky exploded within the depth of the thick black clouds.

An marvelous glint instantly bursted from Qin Lie’s eyes.

“In a little bit, all of you try to stay further away from me as much as possible. By all means, do not approach near me!”

Taking in a deep breath, an imposing atmosphere that made one shudder flooded out from Qin Lie’s body, as though a sharp sword that had been covered in dust for many years, was about to reveal its unparalleled cutting edge.

The group of seven had on an astounded expression.

“Leave none alive! Kill!”

Yan Ziqian’s callous shout also abruptly sounded at this moment. The martial practitioners of Shattered Ice Manor who had been holding their energy to spring into action loudly roared and assaulted from three directions.

Yan Ziqian who was at the ninth level of Refinement took the initiative, and rushed in first as the lead. The Ice Drake Sword in his hand shook, and a stroke of cold light violently shot out like a stretch of silk, as though a hornless dragon that had hibernated for far too long was pouncing over toward Tu Ze’s front.

“Been waiting for that!”

Tu Ze explosively roared. The crimson longblade in his hand beamed with light, as he rushed out with large strikes, taking the lead and wrestling together with Yan Ziqian.

Zhuo Qian had tossed her curved bow long ago, her right hand tightly clutching a dark red colored Dragon Bone Whip. Her jade arm shook, and whip mirages as far as one’s eyes could see wriggled like snakes, letting out ear-piercing whistles.

Kang Zhi and the injured Chu Peng, Han Feng and others, also revealed franticness on their faces, and rushed out without caring for their lives.

In the outer encirclement, the several archers of Shattered Ice Manor unceasingly adjusted the arrow’s aim, but because Yan Ziqian, Tu Ze and others had already fiercely fought into close quarters, they, who were in fear of accidentally injuring their own, did not dare to shoot their arrows for a long time.

One of the archers suddenly cried out quietly, and saw Qin Lie, who was behind the pile of boulders.

He coldly sneered, raised his bow, aimed at Qin Lie, and shouted: “There’s one left out alone!”

“Swoosh swoosh!”

Two unsuspecting arrows were instantly shot toward Qin Lie without mercy.

Channeling Heavenly Thunder Eradication, Qin Lie’s mind shook with a loud rumble. The hot blood in his body seemed to have ignited, and his limbs and skeleton seemed to be flooded by the incredible might of violent thunder.

“Rrrmm!”

The divine thunder of the Ninth Heaven appeared to have reached a resonance with him at this moment. Streaks of lightning wreck havoc in the skies like berserking dragons, slitheringly broke through heavy layers of clouds, and spiraled down as though it wished to sweep clean all sins of the mortal realm.

Following the thunder's fury, Qin Lie lowly roared, and disappeared in a flash like a blinding lightning ripping through the air.

"Where'd he go?"

The archer's vision temporarily went haywire from the lightning, and after he regained his senses, he discovered that Qin Lie's silhouette had already vanished. The two unsuspecting arrows that were shot out had also lost their traces.

"B-Behind you! Ahh, he's behind you!"

Another archer suddenly screamed involuntarily as though he saw a ghost in broad daylight; his face was filled with terror and anxiety.

He saw the suddenly appearing Qin Lie, whose body was filled with dense lightning arcs. Those lightning wrapped around his body like snakes, while pillars of thick thunderous lightning hovered above his head like gigantic dragons.

The current Qin Lie seemed to have become the embodiment of a child of the thunder god!

"First!"

Qin Lie explosively roared. His hands wrapped densely with lightning suddenly caught onto this person's neck, and constricted tightly with force!

"SNAP!"

The absolutely horrifying sound of a neck being crushed into pieces resounded sharply and clearly. The archer took his last breath on the spot!

Qin Lie who had killed someone for the first time, did not feel the slightest bit of fear, his hands did not shiver in the slightest. On that handsome little face, an excitement that made one's heart shudder had actually emerged, as his eyes suddenly revealed ferociousness and lunacy.

It was as if his true nature, the lunatic and violent trait that had been hidden for many years, was entirely aroused by today's battle.

"You are second!" He looked at the archer across from him, and suddenly grinned.

The archer who had screamed out to notify his companion only felt his spine chilling down by that smile, and birthed a feeling of despair, as though he was marked by a ferocious beast of ancient times.

“Zzzt Zzzt Zzzt!”

Streaks after streaks of lightning shot down from the rolling dark clouds, and they all struck down onto Qin Lie’s surroundings.

As though carrying the thunder and lightning that filled with skies with him, Qin Lie suddenly rushed toward this archer. Amidst the thunderous rolls, that archer’s eyes suddenly went blank.

He heard the genuine explosive sounds of thunder!

The deafening sound of thunder seemed to have exploded inside his mind, jolted him dumb and dazzled, unaware of where he was at.

“SNAP!”

With the same method, Qin Lie squeezed this person’s neck into pieces. Before the archer fell onto the ground, his neck was charred a charcoal black.

Consecutively killed two people. The fierce blood inside Qin Lie’s body ignited in its entirety. He didn’t join the battle between Tu Ze and Yan Ziqian, and instead assaulted and killed the outer Shattered Ice Manor archers.

Anywhere Qin Lie passed, thunder would roar. Streaks of thick and long lightning akin to gigantic chains, could zigzag and twist as though being lead on by him.

Momentarily, those archers of Shattered Ice Manor uttered dreary wails and howls. If he came close to them, they would be struck by thunderous lightning even without him taking any actions.

Zhu Qian suddenly cried out in astonishment. She held the Dragon Bone Whip in her hands, the leather armor in front of her chest split apart, as pearls of blood seeped out of her fair skin. Her healthy and fit left leg also had a long, narrow wound.

“Quick, look at Ling Lie’s side!” Zhuo Qian came to a realization. While deep within desperate straits, her charming eyes suddenly shone with a brilliant glint that attracted another’s heart, as she crazily shouted toward Tu Ze and others.

Tu Ze’s long hair was covered in frost, his teeth jittering. Permeated by Ice Drake Sword’s cold energy, his body slowly turned rigid.

Kang Zhi's abdominal region was penetrated through, as fresh blood surged out non stop. His chubby face twisted, as he uttered bloodcurdling shrieks again and again.

Chu Peng, Han Feng and others were moreso riddled with wounds, biting their teeth with a posture of mutual destruction, despairingly preparing to drag a few more down to hell with them.

Hearing Zhuo Qian's shouts, everyone looked at the place Qin Lie was in passing...

Only to see that most of those archers who made their spine run cold, was actually lying inside the shrubs with charred black bodies. Each one of their eyes bulged out, evidently having been killed.

The cause of these, Qin Lie, was like a deity who wielded the thunder of the Ninth Heaven. Blasts of thunder unceasingly bursted above his head, streaks of long and thick lightning roamed about beside him, like chains tethered up the sky.

The remaining three archers were forced to scuttle wildly by him. Continuously being struck by thunder and lightning, smoke arose from all of their bodies, the chance of being blasted dead by the heavenly thunder was possible any time.

After a slight astonishment upon suddenly seeing such a strange sight, Zhuo Qian and Tu Ze who were in a desperate state, had all of their spirit risen by a hundredfold, as though they once again obtained blessings of miraculous strength, and crazily fought together with Shattered Ice Manor's martial practitioners while madly shouting.

"Who's this guy?" Yan Ziqian's expression was stern, as he suddenly shouted coldly: "Two of you head there!"

Two martial practitioners who were besieging Tu Ze quickly moved away hearing what was said, and swept toward Qin Lie's direction.

The pressure on Tu Ze suddenly became lighter.

"Two's not enough! Send a few more over here!" Qin Lie uncannily grinned toward Yan Ziqian amidst the rolling thunder, then suddenly roared loudly: "Blast them! Keep blasting them!"

The downpouring rainstorm surged down, as the thunderous lightning of this valley's skies moved to answer his voice, distinctively gathering toward his position.

Everyone looked at the sky. They could clearly see the lightning arcs swimming around, gathering from the surroundings to above Qin Lie's head. Such a strange and terrifying scene caused them to feel their hearts turn cold and their guts to turn timid, birthing a dispiriting sense of an inability to defeat the enemy.

The two martial practitioners who left from Yan Ziqian's side, were struck by the thunderous lightning beside Qin Lie before they even neared him. Their steps both staggered, as though they were drunk, as thick smoke rose from their hair.

"Told you that it's far from enough!"

Qin Lie closed in while wildly laughing. Taking advantage of the two being out of their minds, he picked up a frost sword and stabbed out a few holes on the two's bodies before Yan Ziqian, Tu Ze, Zhuo Qian and other's faces.

One of them was precisely that person who plundered the spoils of war. As he fell down while screaming miserably, the leather bag on his waist loosened and fell, while the Ice Soul Python's beast core fell out.

Not taking an extra glance at the beast core, Qin Lie's eyes were fierce, as he walked toward Yan Ziqian and others in long strides with an extremely imposing manner.

In the wake of the numerous archers being killed, with two high rank martial practitioners instantly dying, in addition to that ferocious and imposing attitude of Qin Lie akin to that of the thunder god, every single one of Shattered Ice Manor's martial practitioners turned pale.

Under the boundless torrential rainstorm, they all hatched a sense of dread which told them that they were incapable of fighting Qin Lie. The moment they saw him walking closer, they unconsciously stepped backwards.

As for Tu Ze and others, they were uttering strange roars. They, who came back from death's door, even had their vigor returning.

"Retreat!"

Being forced without a better option, Yan Ziqian clenched his teeth, and ordered everyone to immediately disengage.

The martial practitioners of Shattered Ice Manor seemed to have all been waiting for these words of his. The moment his voice fell, they eagerly fled in all directions. Those figures shuffled between the shrubbery, and then vanished soon after.

Tu Ze and rest didn't dare to chase, and hurriedly gathered together, rushing toward Qin Lie with excited expressions.

"Don't come!" Qin Lie hurriedly shouted loudly, "The thunder and lightning in the sky can't be held back!"

The moment these words were spoken, Zhuo Qian and the others paled in shock, then stopped in their tracks one by one. All of them looked at him with a strange expression.

Qin Lie, who hurriedly stopped channeling Heavenly Thunder Eradication, instantly felt his entire body aching and powerless as he stopped his art; he also felt a sense of dizziness. Those dense current on his limbs and bones, caused him to jolt from stimulation, looking a sorry figure as well.

The moment Heavenly Thunder Eradication stopped, the thunder and lightning which gathered above his head, sure enough, dispersed magically.

“Ling Lie! As long as I, Tu Ze, am still breathing, you will be my good brother forever!”

“And I, Kang Zhi!”

“And me!”

The other few echoed in succession.

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Chapter 13: Windfall!

Qin Lie laid on the ground with his whole body numb and lightning still flowing in his muscles and veins.

His true realm was only at the sixth level of Refinement. If it wasn't for the power of thunder from the Ninth Heaven, it wouldn't have been possible for him to achieve such shocking results.

Just from the martial practitioners who came from Yan Ziqian's side, if any of them truly had the intent to kill him, it would've been difficult for him to win.

Once the vicious battle ended, the thunder scattered. Because he had used too much strength with his lightning strikes, his mind immediately weakened.

Tu Ze's group of seven came up to him and were clicking their tongues with surprise. The look in their eyes caused him to feel uneasy from the bottom of his heart.

“Brother Lie, what just happened?” Kang Zhi's chubby face was squished together, and he was laughing, abnormally flatteringly. “It seemed like you caused the thunder and lightning in the sky? How did you do it? This guy, you're normally as delicate as a girl, but once you started battling, it's as if you're a completely different person. Your murderous intent was so wrathful and vicious, even I was scared just from watching you. You really have your own way of doing things!”

“It was all thanks to the spirit artifact.” Qin Lie's face was weak, and he didn't care how curious they were. He simply took out a piece of the Umbra Lightning Condor's beast core, narrowed his eyes, and started regulating his breathing.

Tu Ze and the others, upon seeing him like this, stopped questioning him and all sat by his side, taking out some spirit pills to heal themselves.

After a while.

Qin Lie felt like his strength was gradually coming back. He heard Tu Ze and the others chattering and slowly opened his eyes.

“Just about time you woke up.” Tu Ze grinned, casually threw him a jade tablet, and said, “Mn, this jade tablet is for you. With this jade tablet, you can come to Nebula Pavilion anytime, and become a core member of Nebula Pavilion.”

He picked up the jade tablet. Seeing that there was a nebula cloud design on it, Qin Lie was a bit stunned, “This...”

He knew that becoming a part of the Limestone ranked force, a core Nebula Pavilion member, was something very difficult. The Ling Family and the children of other forces all desperately cultivated just to become one of the core members of Nebula Pavilion. They did that for the sake of breaking through into the Natal Opening Realm before they turned twenty, to get Nebula Pavilion’s favor.

The brothers Ling Chengzhi and Ling Chengye, had reached the Natal Opening Realm, but unfortunately they were limited by their age and couldn’t enter Nebula Pavilion. They could only exist as martial practitioners of vassal forces.

Of the large Ling Family, only Ling Xuanxuan had a chance at entering the Natal Opening Realm before twenty years of age to carry on and enter Nebula Pavilion for cultivation.

Tu Ze threw out the command token and made it clear that he could use it to become a core member at anytime. This greatly shocked Qin Lie.

“The command token is only one of the things.” Zhuo Qian smiled sweetly, threw him a wineskin, and continued on with a smile, “I told you that if you find the Stellar Iron, I’ll treat you to a drink...”

Before Qin Lie could say anything, she spoke again, “We’ve just finished calculating. You killed seven archers from Shattered Ice Manor alone, and those seven people were all at the fifth level of Refinement. Of the two that you killed after that, one was at the seventh level, and the other was at the eighth level. Mn, seven level fives counts as fifty contribution points, a level seven counts as eighty contribution points, and a level eight count as a hundred contribution points. Adding the Ice Soul Python materials that you retrieved, that all totals to three hundred fifty contribution points...”

Zhuo Qian’s voice paused, and her smile became even more brighter and wider. “You haven’t even entered Nebula Pavilion, and you’ve already won eight hundred and eighty

contribution points, hehe, with that many contribution points, as soon as you come over, you can exchange it for a lot of things.”

Tu Ze and the others were all smiling.

Qin Lie felt a bit confused and asked, “Contribution points? There’s contribution points for killing people?”

“Contribution points is a common thing that the core members of Nebula Pavilion use, it can be used to exchange cultivating items such as spirit arts, spirit skills, spirit artifacts, spirit pills, and more from the pavilion. There are many ways to receive contribution points. As long as you contribute to Nebula Pavilion, you can get a corresponding amount of contribution points. You can get contribution points from capturing and killing spirit beasts, turning in spirit materials, and helping the pavilion with gathering specific items. Killing an enemy of Nebula Pavilion naturally can also earn you contribution points...”

Tu Ze grinned with his mouth opened wide and explained to him in detail, “Shattered Ice Manor and Nebula Pavilion have always endlessly fought bloody battles. Because of Dark Asura Hall’s restrictions, killing martial practitioners from Shattered Ice Manor doesn’t officially earn you contribution points, but unofficially the pavilion will still give additional contribution points. Today you’ve killed nine people. We had already calculated for you, and we will report it for you, including the materials from the Ice Soul Python. Hehe, you haven’t even been to Nebula Pavilion, and you have already received a windfall.”

“You guys were the ones who killed the Ice Soul Python, so it shouldn’t it be your contribution points, not mine?” Qin Lie asked in surprise.

“We weren’t able to save it ourselves, and in the end, you were the one who got it back, so naturally it counts as yours. Mn, all seven of us have no objections. Say no more, we said it’s yours, so it’s yours!” replied Tu Ze as he waved his hand.

Qin Lie nodded his head and stopped being courteous. “Then thank you.”

“Haha! Good brother!” Tu Ze laughed loudly.

“There’s more!” Fatty Kang Zhi was smiling as he threw Qin Lie a leather bag. The leather bag was bloated, and it seemed like there were many things within.

“We thoroughly searched just now, and found some cultivating materials that might be somewhat useful to you from the nine people of Shattered Ice Manor that you killed. Hehe, they’re all just things like spirit pills and spirit stones. Mn, the weapons and spirit artifacts on them aren’t really of high quality; they’re also very large, and not convenient to carry. It might not suit you, so we didn’t tidy it up for you. But after we go back to the

pavilion, we'll still help you exchange it into corresponding contribution points," Kang Zhi explained.

Qin Lie weighed the leather bag in his hands, revealed a pleasantly surprised expression in his eyes, and thanked them once again.

The three days after that, everyone first healed their injuries near the lake. When Qin Lie felt that his spirit energy was more fully replenished, he lightly sparred with Chu Peng, who was at the seventh level of the Refinement Realm, without the help of the power of the lighting from the Ninth Heaven to learn from each other.

He, whose true level was at the sixth level of Refinement, didn't have an obvious disadvantage in his match against Chu Peng.

His level was slightly lower, but because his body was tough, along with the fact that he used lightning and thunder in his strikes, it limited Chu Peng a lot. Even though Chu Peng was an entire level above him, Chu Peng couldn't get any advantage over him.

"The spirit art you have cultivated is very strange. If you find a suitable spirit artifact to coordinate with it, your power will certainly become very terrifying." Watching the two of them battle, Tu Ze scratched his chin and said, "After we return, I'll head to the pavilion's Spirit Artifact Armory and try to find one for you. Hopefully, I can find a spirit artifact that can increase your battle strength."

Qin Lie smiled. Because Chu Peng was injured, he didn't use all of his power, so he felt that his body's strength could very possibly exceed Chu Peng's by a lot!

Of course, he didn't completely reveal it. Privately, he felt that if he used his full strength instead of the lightning, he should be able to compete against Kang Zhi, who was in eighth level of Refinement.

"It's impossible for Yan Ziqian to have brought too many people to the Arctic Mountain Range, and this time he suffered a loss. According to his cautious personality, without a complete certainty, he shouldn't come and risk himself again. Mn, let's stay for a couple more days and see if we can get some more Stellar Iron. Brother Lie, are you coming back to Nebula Pavilion with us?"

"No, I still have to go back to the Ling Family," Qin Lie rejected. Now was the time when lightning strikes occurred frequently. He still needed to rely on the special environment within Herb Mountain to continue to cultivate his Heavenly Thunder Eradication, so he apologized and said, "Big Brother Tu, since you have all pretty much recovered already, I'll leave first. Until next time."

Even though Tu Ze and Zhuo Qian tried their best to keep him with them, Qin Lie was determined to leave first, so the seven of them couldn't do anything but watch him leave regretfully.

After Qin Lie left, Tu Ze and the others still stayed by the lake and continued to work hard for the Stellar Iron.

Ling Town, at dusk.

“Almost half a month has passed and Qin Lie still hasn’t showed up. Looks like he really was in an accident,” Ling Chengzhi said with creased brows. He was in the town’s martial arts arena, sitting on the spectator’s seats and looking at the Ling Family youths below.

Beside him was Ling Family’s Patriarch Ling Chengye and Ling Yushi.

Ling Xuanxuan was wearing a fiery tassel short skirt, standing in the middle of the martial arts arena in a neat and relaxed manner and yelling at the Ling Family’s martial practitioners as though she was a military instructor. Her little face was filled with arrogance as the snow white skin of her beautiful arms and legs laid mostly exposed. Her skin was so bright and lustrous that it distracted many vigorous youths; they couldn’t focus no matter what.

In order to let her be at ease and concentrate on her cultivation, Ling Chengye had already personally promised her that she would no longer be bound to her engagement with Qin Lie.

Ling Xuanxuan had already relaxed, and with Qin Lie not showing up for half a month, she had already gradually forgotten that someone like that even existed in the Ling Family.

“Big Brother, in the past five years, Qin Lie had never taken any abnormal actions. This time, he didn’t return for half a month, maybe... he already died in the mines.” Ling Chengzhi’s mind slightly trembled. He lowered his voice and said, “In this half a month, there was no lightning striking down onto Herb Mountain. The badly withered medicinal herbs had clearly recovered a lot. Even though we still were not able to gather enough spirit herbs to turn into Nebula Pavilion this time, we shouldn’t be affected too much in the future.”

“Sigh, I promised Qin Shan to take care of him, but even I couldn’t enter the mine...” Ling Family’s Patriarch shook his head and sighed softly. He looked at Ling Yushi beside him and was actually relieved in his heart as he continued, “If he was really in an accident, then that would mean Yushi has dodged a bullet, and doesn’t have to be engaged to him anymore?”

“What if he appeared again?” Ling Yushi locked her eyebrows and inquired in a gentle voice.

She didn't know why, but she still had the feeling that Qin Lie wouldn't have succumbed to an accident that easily. She couldn't fathom the reason why she thought that way, but she felt like Qin Lie wasn't as simple as everyone else thought.

Only now, she still couldn't confirm for sure nor could she be certain whether Qin Lie was really strange or not.

"If he really appears, sigh, then that means you are unlucky. Daddy can only follow the promise I made with Qin Shan back then, and let you two be engaged earlier." Ling Family's Patriarch had a helpless expression on his face. "Sigh, it's not that I hope he would get into an accident, it's just, it's just that his reappearance would really trouble our Ling Family. Engagement is something troublesome, and the spirit herbs on Herb Mountain... are our Ling Family's roots."

"Mn, we still don't know how to deal with Nebula Pavilion. That b*tch of a woman has been pressing us often lately, even I am running out of patience!" Ling Chengzhi's face was dark. He took a deep breath and asked, "Big Brother, we...?"

"Stop talking! The time isn't right!" scolded the Ling Family's Patriarch as he cautiously looked around them. Seeing that the Du Family wasn't watching, he then said in a low voice, "I will soon personally bring some people up the Arctic Mountain Range. Hopefully, we can find some spirit plants and herbs to cover the loss from Herb Mountain and give Nebula Pavilion an explanation."

"Going to the Arctic Mountain Range again?" The expression on Ling Yushi's soft, beautiful face changed slightly as she said with a fearful heart, "Last time there was a lot of damage, and it sacrificed many members of our clan. With our Ling Family's strength, going deep into the Arctic Mountain Range is too risky, Father, you need to consider this carefully."

"We don't have a choice!" Ling Family's Patriarch shouted.

"The fool is back!"

"The fool is back in town!"

"Oh, he isn't dead yet?"

At this moment, many people were yelling from the town's entrance. When Ling Chengye and the others, who were on the spectator seats, heard those shouts, their expressions all turned strange as they were depressed in their hearts.

In the two brother's eyes, Qin Lie's return was essentially a leaking roof in the rain; it only brought the Ling Family new troubles.

Ling Yushi's tranquil face also revealed a slightly helpless and bitter expression as she sighed within her heart: So this is fate, huh?

Chapter 14: Living While Being Cared For

With a wooden expression, Qin Lie walked along the stone road towards the town's entrance.

He still seemed as ashen and bereaved as half a month ago, his eyes devoid of any expression and his clothes speckled with traces of mud. He was clearly exhausted and distressed.

Behind him, while wearing colorful clothes which accentuated her well-rounded figure and walking at a steady pace, was Ling Ying. Her bright eyes showed a great amount of doubt.

After Qin Lie left Herb Mountain half a month ago, the Ling Family Patriarch desperately wanted to meet him. Believing that Qin Lie was still in the mountain tunnels, he had arranged for people to wait for Qin Lie at the entrance to Herb Mountain's mine all day and night.

During the night, Ling Feng watched, and during the day, Ling Ying watched. The two took shifts watching, waiting for him to appear so they could immediately report it to the Patriarch.

Because of this, Du Heng, who was extremely curious towards what was inside of Herb Mountain, was constantly unable to find an opportunity to thoroughly explore it.

As for Ling Feng and Ling Ying, when they were ordered by Ling Chengye to wait outside the entrance of Herb Mountain's mine, they were also strictly prohibited from entering inside. Thus, even now, they didn't know what secrets were being protected.

This evening, Ling Ying had been watching the mine entrance as usual, almost bored to the point of falling asleep, when suddenly, she saw Qin Lie come out from the direction of the Arctic Mountain Range.

At the time, Ling Ying had almost been shocked to the point of shrieking.

She followed Qin Lie along the road, her suspicious eyes glued the swaying body of Qin Lie, but she still wasn't able to figure anything out. This caused her to become even more doubtful within the depths of her heart.

"This fool was actually not in the mine, but the Arctic Mountain Range for half a month. What for? Moreover, he went in by himself, just how did he survive?"

The more Ling Ying thought about it, the more she couldn't understand it. Surprise spread across her charming face. For the first time, she felt some curiosity towards Qin Lie.

Qin Lie was naturally conscious of Ling Ying's eyes gazing at him from behind, but he felt no anxiousness in his heart. Long before he was about to reach Herb Mountain, he had already appropriately hidden the two bags. He was afraid that if he carried too much on him, it would only cause him unnecessary trouble. Now that his body was free of the bags, he was no longer afraid of the Ling Family questioning him about the materials he was carrying.

Towards the people of the Ling Family, it could be said that he didn't have any affection, but at the same time, he didn't have any hatred towards them either. From his point of view, the relationship between the Ling Family and him and his grandpa stopped at just being business partners.

His grandpa had repaired spirit artifacts for the Ling Family, and in return, they were given the rights to use the insides of Herb Mountain, which they used to help him cultivate the "Heavenly Thunder Eradication" — It was nothing more than that.

Acting like he usually did, he entered the town, ignoring the glares and criticism of those around him as he walked directly to his stone house.

One after another, people remarked, "The fool has returned." However, it was all filtered out by Qin Lie who had long since become accustomed to it, and thus it didn't affect him.

Before long, he had returned to his three room stone house. The stone house had clearly been cleaned, as everything was extremely clean, but Qin Lie paid it no notice. Closing the door, he began to rest.

His return to town caused many people who were attentive towards him, such as Ling Chengye, his brother, and the Du Family, to feel inexplicably confused...

There were also people who were indifferent, such as Ling Xuanxuan. She was still yelling within the martial arts arena and didn't even bat an eye towards Qin Lie...

"Patriarch." Ling Ying stopped following Qin Lie, her clothes fluttering as she quickly arrived beside Ling Chengye. Her enchanting, small face full of uncertainty as she tenderly whispered, "He, he didn't come out from the mine, but... but from the direction of the Arctic Mountain Range! He wasn't in the mines at all for a full half a month's time!"

As soon as she finished speaking, the other three Ling Family members all showed expressions of shock. They were endlessly curious about Qin Lie's whereabouts this past half a month.

“Understood, don’t say a word of this to others.”

The Ling Family Patriarch pondered for a moment, then ordered Ling Ying to not speak of it and motioned for her to leave. Afterwards, he gave Ling Chengzhi a meaningful glance, and the two brothers, along with Ling Yushi, all rose, walking towards Qin Lie’s stone house.

The three very quickly arrived in front of the door to Qin Lie’s stone house. Ling Chengye knocked on the door. “Qin Lie, it’s Uncle Ling, please open your door for a moment.”

Within the house, Qin Lie opened his eyes, slightly frowning. Afterwards, he quickly adjusted his expression, resuming his usual blank expression before opening the door and letting the three people in.

Over these five years, there had occasionally been times where Ling Chengye had come over, but that had been when Qin Shan was still here, and it had always been to find Qin Shan to repair spirit artifacts.

After his grandfather had left, Ling Chengye hadn’t come once these last two years. This visit caused Qin Lie’s suspicion to quickly rise. He didn’t know what these three’s intentions were.

After the three Ling Family members entered, they saw Qin Lie sitting on a stone chair, staring blankly ahead at a cup atop the stone table. It was as if the cup was more interesting than the three of them...

Ling Chengye attentively glared at Qin Lie. After observing for a while, he suddenly said, “Qin Lie, I don’t know if you can hear me or not, nor do I know if you are truly always like that, but I just want to say... towards my Ling Family, the spirit plants and spirit herbs atop Herb Mountain are extremely important, and these last two years, the spirit plants have started withering off in large amounts. This has already begun affecting the foundations of the Ling Family.”

Crouching down, Ling Chengye deeply gazed into Qin Lie’s eyes, but was unable to find any abnormalities. Feeling helpless, he could only continue on, saying, “If, if you can hear this, if you have any methods, I hope the withering of the spirit plants atop Herb Mountain can stop. The Ling Family... we cannot afford such a heavy loss and we plead you to be careful about this matter.”

Qin Lie remained silent, continuing to look at the cup.

“There is one more thing.” Ling Chengye hesitated for a moment before he, increasingly helplessly, said, “I promised your grandfather that I would look after you until you were seventeen, and one of the methods is to engage you to one of my daughters. Based on what your grandfather and I agreed on, the engagement ceremony should be held soon.

I am only notifying you beforehand, it... is between you and Yushi. I will arrange it as soon as possible, the ceremony will be held during this period of time.”

Qin Lie remained like a block of wood with no change in his expression. Ling Yushi's face actually flushed, her expression embarrassed.

“However, I am telling you now, this engagement is only to protect you, and will only last two years time. After two years, no matter how, I will dissolve the engagement. I hope you will mentally prepare yourself.” Ling Chengye thought for a moment, then continued to add on, saying, “Your grandfather treated my Ling Family with grace. These few years, we have worked together happily, and we hope it will continue to be that way in the future. Yes, no matter what your true situation is, I will not delve into your affairs. For everyone to get along happily is enough.”

Finishing his speech, Ling Chengye stood up, motioning for his younger brother and his daughter to leave with him.

“Daddy, I would like to speak some words with him by myself. Please leave first,” gently said Ling Yushi, bowing her head.

Feeling guilty towards her, Ling Chengye sighed within the depths of his heart before simply nodding and walking away with his brother out of the stone house.

Within the room, everything settled down. Gradually, the atmosphere within the room became a little awkward as Qin Lie still remained expressionless and unresponsive. It was as if he didn't know there was a beautiful young girl within the room beside him.

Ling Yushi bit her lower lip as her cheeks flushed red, then suddenly rose and said, “You must have not washed in a long time, I'll help you fetch water.”

Finished speaking, she elegantly rose, rolling up the sleeves along her slender arms and exposing her snow white wrists. Looking somewhat embarrassed, she went into the washroom to fetch water.

Only once the wooden barrel was filled with water and the towels and other items were put away did she come back out again.

Through these consecutive actions, she managed to adjust herself and slowly calmed down.

A trace of self-pity and helplessness appeared upon her delicate and beautiful face. Resigned, she said, “My Ling Family owes Grandpa Qin Shan a favor. Through these two years, I will repay what is owed. Once we are truly engaged, I will often come and take care of you. Ah, I can only do some cleaning and stuff like helping you fetch water, I hope you can understand.”

While she spoke, Ling Yushi grabbed a rag that had been dipped in water, and, not caring about Qin Lie's reaction, began to skillfully clean the room.

Although Qin Lie's eyes were blank, his mind was cognizant. Through observing Ling Yushi's familiarity with the house, he very quickly realized that the person who had been cleaning his house for the last half a month was none other than this delicate and beautiful lady.

"Ah, you are also very pitiful. After Grandpa Qin Shan died, you were left by yourself, and your mind isn't very good..."

"Originally, my father was prepared to let you be engaged with my younger sister who is about the same age as you, but she is the only hope of the Ling Family and father was afraid that engaging her to you would affect her cultivation. Moreover, her future marriage is a big thing. Thus... it could only be that I replaced her.

"Ha, although I am the elder sister, I truly do not have as high of a talent for cultivating. I am already seventeen, and I'm afraid that there is no way for me to break through to the Natal Opening Realm before I am twenty. Nebula Pavilion is extremely picky when selecting core disciples, if you cannot break through to the Natal Opening Realm before twenty, you will never earn their approval during your life.

"My father and third uncle have wanted to enter the Nebula Pavilion for forever, but it just isn't their fate. Their lifelong dreams which cannot be fulfilled have been placed upon my younger sister.

"Ah, because of the withering of the medicinal herbs, we have once again caught the attention of the Du Family. Because of what they have recently stirred up, we have been annoyed to death. That woman, she's just bent on taking Herb Mountain for herself. This time, she's bearing down menacingly, and I don't know if we can stop her."

Perhaps it was because she was very soon going to be engaged with Qin Lie, or perhaps it was because she thought Qin Lie wouldn't understand what she was saying, but she didn't have too many walls around her heart. Thus, while she worked, she constantly spoke her mind and muttered incessantly to herself. This let Qin Lie gain a deeper understanding of the Ling Family's situation.

It also caused him to further understand Ling Yushi and his perception of her to undergo a certain degree of change...

After she finished, Ling Yushi didn't prolong her stay. As soon as she told Qin Lie that the water was ready and for him to remember to bathe early on, she quietly left the stone house.

Qin Lie listened for a while, and only after he was certain she had left did he walk into the washroom.

Seeing the large amount of water soaking into the ground by the water barrel and the pile of not so neatly folded towels, he shook his head, unable to stifle his laughter.

It was obvious to him that Ling Yushi must not have done these tasks very often, and coupled with the effects of her being flustered, it must have become this way.

Rubbing his nose, Qin Lie indifferently took off his clothes and entered the water barrel. Afterwards, his body was suddenly jolted, causing him to almost shriek.

It was actually cold water!

.....

The second morning, Qin Lie, eyes blank with a runny nose, entered the Ling Dining Hall.

Ling Yushi, with a guilty conscience, upon seeing Qin Lie walk in with his runny nose, quickly held in her desire to laugh and lowered her head, not daring to look him in the eye.

Because of the matter with the spirit plants, the Ling brothers and Du Jiaolan were beginning to go tit for tat. A dense, depressing tension filled the air, causing Qin Lie to feel as if a war might start between the two atop the table at any time.

After eating, he walked towards Herb Mountain's mines to continue his cultivation. Because he wasn't in the state of Thoughtless Tranquility, he had to carefully control the heavenly thunder's power. Otherwise, the spillover of electric current would kill more of the spirit plants and spirit herbs.

Ling Chengye's remark had ended up playing its role. Qin Lie didn't wish to destroy the Ling Family's roots, lest he attract endless trouble.

Now that Qin Lie had fully recovered, Ling Feng and Ling Ying no longer guarded the mine entrance. Thus, one night, Du Heng finally found his opportunity to enter the mine.

After a bit of dizzying exploration, Du Heng's psyche suddenly became startled. Like Ling Chengzhi, he was completely astonished by the mine's changes.

Just as Du Heng was within the mine, preparing his report on its situation to his mother, Ling Chengye was also making arrangements. He ordered Ling Xuanxuan and Ling Chengzhi to go on a temporary leave, making them take a trip to Icestone City.

This was because it was clear to him that once Ling Xuanxuan learned of her sister replacing her as Qin Lie's fiancée, she would definitely explode in anger, cause problems, and try to obstruct Qin Lie's engagement to Ling Yushi.

However, sending away Ling Xuanxuan was only one of the reasons why Ling Chengye wanted them to go to Icestone City. More importantly, he wanted them to say hello to Nebula Pavilion.

Ling Xuanxuan was an extraordinary talent, and Nebula Pavilion had already noticed her. Ling Chengye hoped that Nebula Pavilion would give her a little face and extend the grace period for the Ling Family to send herbs and plants.

.....

The last few days, Ling Yushi did as she promised, often visiting Qin Lie's stone house.

During the day, taking advantage of the time when Qin Lie wasn't there, she would take the clothes he took off and wash them. In the evening, when Qin Lie returned home, she would bring the dry clothes over, fetch water for his bath, and help him clean the house.

The kind of embarrassing errors like fetching cold water for the bath never occurred again. Of course, she never changed her habits, speaking what was on her mind every day to herself.

Qin Lie, after the initial awkwardness, also gradually adapted, slowly becoming accustomed to having someone care for him.

As soon as Ling Yushi fetched the water, he no longer waited till she left, directly heading to the washroom to bathe.

Every time he sat naked in the barrel bathing, he would eavesdrop on Ling Yushi complaining softly outside of the door that separated them. Sometimes, he would slightly raise his eyebrows, while other times, the corners of his mouth would reveal a strange smile.

"I'm leaving first, wash slowly." Ling Yushi's gentle voice emanated over. Just when Qin Lie thought she was about to leave, Ling Yushi, who was in front of the door, suddenly began to breathe disorderly. In a voice as low as a mosquito's buzz, she whispered, "Tomorrow, tomorrow will be the day that my father arranged..."

Only after she left for a very long time did Qin Lie finally react. He sat in the barrel blankly looking at the house's beams. He remained like that for a long while before he finally regained his senses.

Chapter 15: Engagement Ceremony

Dawn had yet to break, but Qin Lie had already quietly left for Herb Mountain. The two leather bags that he had brought back with him from the Arctic Mountain Range had long since been retrieved and placed within the cave where he cultivated.

One of the bags contained the Umbra Lightning Condor's beast cores and ten stalks of Ice Stalk Grass.

The other bag contained some spirit stones, spirit pills, and other bits and pieces of spirit materials, all of which had originally belonged to the practitioners from Shattered Ice Manor.

As of late, Qin Lie had been supplementing his cultivation with the Umbra Lightning Condor beast cores and Ice Stalk Grass. These two materials were extremely beneficial towards helping him gather spirit energy and let him clearly feel the building up of strength within his spirit sea.

As for the spirit stones, spirit pills, and the other various spirit materials, he didn't place them upon his heart. Firstly, it was due to the fact that he didn't know their true value. Secondly, the Ice Stalk Grass and Umbra Lightning Condor beast cores showed more effectiveness during his current cultivation.

"Engagement ceremony..."

Qin Lie picked out some of the prettier looking spirit pills and spirit stones and used an even smaller cloth bag to collect them. Then, he put the bag within the upper portion of his clothes.

When he had heard Ling Yushi bring up the engagement, his first thought had been to refuse it as he didn't want his relationship with the Ling Family to become entangled. Moreover, he didn't wish to harm Ling Yushi.

Later on, after pondering over it for a long time, he decided that this matter was something which had been arranged by his grandfather long ago, and thus his opposition towards the matter greatly declined.

Furthermore, the Ling Family Patriarch had clearly stated himself that this engagement wasn't real and was purely just a walk-through of the ceremony. After two years, it would be cut off.

A fake ceremony, from his point of view, was just a mere formality, and thus it was not something he cared about.

Also, during this most recent time period, Qin Lie had slowly grown accustomed to Ling Yushi often coming over and taking care of him.

After all, he was still only a fifteen year old boy. Having been by himself for so long, he greatly enjoyed the care of the beautiful, sister-like girl who helped him fetch water and clean his clothes.

If he was engaged to Ling Yushi, she would care for him for two years. Otherwise, he might no longer be able to continue enjoying this kind of treatment.

After a while of consideration, Qin Lie no longer opposed the matter and prepared himself to go through the motions.

Although he normally played a fool, Qin Lie, who had already awoken, still felt some guilt towards his engagement, and thus, he had come to Herb Mountain and fetch some things to store on his person in case where they were needed.

Generally, before an engagement ceremony, not only did the fiance's side have to prepare a betrothal gift and bring all of their family's elders, they also had to worship their ancestors.

As Qin Lie didn't have any relatives nor did he know about his ancestors, these steps were omitted.

After collecting some stones, he hurriedly returned to his stone house before the sky brightened. After putting in a slight bit of effort into grooming his hair, he sat quietly within the stone house, waiting for the Ling Family members to come and receive him.

.....

Ling Family Great Hall.

"Ah, First Miss is truly so pitiful. She's actually going to be engaged to that fool. Before, didn't they say it was going to be Second Miss?"

"Second Miss' talent is too good. She is destined to enter Nebula Pavilion in the future, and cannot be tainted. It's of no use. In the past, Grandpa Qin Shan helped our Ling Family, and the Patriarch had already agreed to his request. How could we break our word?"

"Why can't we? After all, Qin Shan has died, and just what does that fool know?"

"First miss is so pretty, but she's going to be cheapened for a fool. Ah, the heavens are so unfair!"

"Indeed."

Many of the Ling Family members were scattered across the great hall, quietly whispering to each other. They all felt that Qin Lie wasn't worthy of Ling Yushi and lamented her sacrifice.

After Ling Chengzhi and Ling Xuanxuan had begun their journey to Icestone City, the Ling Family Patriarch suddenly announced Qin Lie and Ling Yushi's engagement.

Afterwards, without even waiting for people to react, he hastily prepared for the ceremony to be settled by the end of today.

Ling Chengye didn't notify nor invite any of the surrounding forces that he was on good terms with and only announced it once within the town. It was clear that this event wasn't going to be a grandiose one.

At this moment, many of the Ling Family members who had been invited had all gathered within the great hall. One of the Ling Family's Elder, Ling Kangan was also among them.

He was the only clan elder to have been invited to come over.

The Ling Family had three clan elders; they were Ling Kangan, Ling Xiang, and Ling Bo. They were all Ling Family practitioners of the previous generation, the same one as Ling Chengye's father.

As the Ling Family was situated very close to the Arctic Mountain Range, a practitioner's development was faced with many challenges. Sometimes, they would need to enter the depths of the mountain range to hunt spirit beasts and look for spirit plants. Other times they would be confronted with a dispatch from Nebula Pavilion or be at war with another force. Thus, dying a natural death wasn't easy.

The previous generation's Patriarch, Ling Chengye's father, was killed during a battle against hostile forces.

Ling Kangan, Ling Xiang, and Ling Bo; these three clan elders had all either suffered severe wounds across their body, lost their cultivation, or were slowly backtracking along the realms. In general, they would be at home resting. Seldom would they be involved within the matters of the family.

Logically, Ling Yushi's engagement would be a great matter. Not only should Ling Chengzhi and Ling Xuanxuan have been there, but the three clan elders should have come out as well.

But, from the beginning, Ling Chengye didn't put this matter to heart and was already preparing for the future divorce. Thus, he didn't bother calling for the other two clan elders to come over and only called for Ling Kangan to come and simply show himself.

"Those surnamed Du haven't come, I guess Patriarch didn't invite them. Mn, this way it will be much more concise."

"Hmph! They aren't even people of our Ling Town, why would we bother inviting them?"

"Whenever I see that mother and her two children, a fire ignites within me!"

Many of the Ling Family's youth were situated at the corners. Bringing up Du Jiaolan and her children, their faces all immediately became indignant with a dense, cold glint in their eyes.

.....

One of the older women of the Ling Family brought Qin Lie towards the great hall. Along the way, she had no clue what to say, nor did she know if Qin Lie would understand what she said. She could only say, "In a while, all you need to do is stay with me. Let me arrange everything for you. The Patriarch, with his detailed mind, has already prepared everything for you. Yes, he has even prepared your bridal gift."

The old lady waved around the wooden box she was holding in front of Qin Lie.

Qin Lie was startled in his mind, but after pondering for a moment, he foolishly laughed and then took out the cloth bag, putting it on top of the wooden box in the old lady's hand. He indicated that it was his own bridal gift.

The old lady was clearly surprised for a moment. After looking strangely at Qin Lie for a while, she expertly felt around the cloth bag, secretly weighing it. Upon realizing that the contents of the cloth bag should be things like stones, her face became filled with self-depreciation.

She shook her head, not bothering to open the bag to check its contents. She thought to herself: And I had thought that he had become smart. It seems like fools are just fools, even stones that they pick up can become treasures...

Very quickly, amidst the sound of fireworks, the old lady brought Qin Lie to the front entrance of the great hall.

She offered up the wooden box in her hand, as well as Qin Lie's cloth bag. Afterwards, she nodded her head towards the wooden box, indicating to the person receiving the bridal gift that it was the one that had been prepared earlier. Afterwards, she nodded towards the cloth bag with a smile and shook her head, pulling Qin Lie inside.

With Qin Lie's arrival, the bustling within the great hall suddenly calmed down.

When the masses saw Qin Lie's wooden expression, all of their eyebrows unconsciously began to wrinkle up, tempted to shake their heads and sigh. Within their hearts, they all believed that he was not worthy of Ling Yushi.

With a glance, Qin Lie saw Ling Yushi.

She had clearly undergone a meticulous makeover.

She wore a bright red dress which stuck closely to her body, accentuating the appearance of her slender, graceful body, and her cheeks had been lightly colored bright red, causing her to look extraordinarily beautiful. Her fine crystal jewelry caused her to seem even more lovely.

Her skin was as white as jade, her appearance was extremely graceful. Her clear, bright eyes coupled with her aura of elegance made her seem as if she were a fairy from the lunar palace. She was so beautiful it caused everyone's psyche to sway and to be unable to restrain themselves.

However, the more movingly beautiful she looked, the more the masses felt pity for her.

As the masses observed the dignified, elegant Ling Yushi and then turned their eyes to wooden Qin Lie, they all felt increasingly uncomfortable. They all began to sigh, one by one, trying to lessen their discomfort.

Of course, not all of the people acted so kindly. Some of the Ling Family girls, such as the ones who didn't have good relationships with Ling Yushi or those who were jealous of her beauty, quietly whispered words which were unpleasant to the ear, their eyes revealing their how they desired to ridicule and laugh at Ling Yushi.

Observing his quiet, beautiful daughter beside him while listening to the public outcries within the great hall, Ling Chengye felt endless guilt within his heart.

Wishing for the ceremony to end faster, Ling Chengye hurriedly glared at the old lady, signaling for her to quickly finish the ceremonial walk so that they could wrap up the farce that he had drawn up.

The old lady took the hint, yelling loudly as she began to lead the tedious ceremony between Qin Lie and Ling Yushi.

Listening to the incessant mutterings of the masses and enduring the endless streams of stares, which contained pity, sympathy, and sarcasm, Ling Yushi could only pretend to be indifferent and occasionally smile towards the crowd.

... Only she knew the bitterness and sourness hidden within the depths of her heart.

"This is life, I cannot blame others. Father and the rest of them have all sacrificed so much for the family, this is the way it should be... The time has come for me to make my sacrifice for the family. Qin Lie, although he is... like that, a fool also has his good sides. He won't harm me, nor will he care about what I do. And when he closed his eyes, he was honestly good looking. If, if he wasn't a fool, if he was normal as could be, even if he were an ordinary person, it would still be easier to accept though..."

Ling Yushi secretly comforted herself, but upon thinking of what was to come, she couldn't help but resent and pity herself.

Every girl fantasized about their other half being someone who was handsome, who was able to protect and care for them. Ling Yushi, at only seventeen, was naturally no exception, and thus she had also had this fantasy.

But reality was just so cruel...

At this time, a hand suddenly grabbed her tight, causing Ling Yushi to suddenly tense up.

Then she heard the old lady's shouts, and she immediately understood that the ceremony had proceeded to this point, the point where she and Qin Lie were supposed to hold hands and walk down together. She also understood that Qin Lie's hand had probably only grabbed hers with the help of the old lady.

She, who had never had any physical contact with a male before, felt nervous in the depths of her heart, but she quickly realized Qin Lie's hand was extremely slender and soft. It seemed as if it was even more comfortable than grasping her sister's hand by a significant margin. This caused her to become shocked and to unconsciously look at Qin Lie beside her.

Suddenly, after becoming so close together, she vaguely discerned from within the darkness of depths of Qin Lie's wooden eyes what seemed to be a hidden, scattered radiance.

That radiance even inexplicably calmed her, allowing her disordered heart to gradually quiet down.

"That's strange..."

She secretly whispered to herself, unconsciously holding onto Qin Lie's hand, and gripped it even tighter. It actually caused her to feel even more comfortable.

"Big brother, what is the meaning of this?" At this time, Du Jiaolan's unique, harsh tone suddenly emanated in from outside.

Afterwards, the Du Jiaolan and her two sons walked in, along with the practitioners that Du Haitian and arranged for them and the other two Ling Family clan elders. The large group of them all entered the great hall.

Once all of the gazes were directed at her, Du Jiaolan coldly said with a sinister face, "My niece's engagement is such a great matter, yet elder brother didn't even inform me of it? Are you looking down on me, or do you not consider me one of the Ling Family's members?"

Without waiting for Ling Chengye's explanation, she suddenly pointed towards the two Ling Family elders that were sitting in wheelchairs behind her, acrimoniously saying,

“And then there are your two clan elders. In the past, they risked their lives for the Ling Family and became disabled as a result, yet you didn’t bother inviting them either. Ling Chengye! Just what is the meaning behind this?!”

“Chengye, what exactly is going on ?” asked the eldest clan elder, Ling Xiang, with a straight face. Pushed forward by one of the Du Family practitioners, he continued, “We two old fellows have worked hard for the Ling Family for our entire lives, but in the end, we don’t even have the status to participate in the engagement ceremony of the younger generation?”

“Your actions are completely looking down on us!” exclaimed the other clan elder, Ling Bo, forcefully slapping down on his wheelchair, his face filled with anger. He continued to scold, “Don’t forget, we three clan elders have the right to replace the Patriarch!”

As soon as his remark came out, not only did Ling Chengye’s expression change, so did the expressions of all of Ling Family members within the great hall. They all looked terrified.

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Chapter 16: Forced Abdication!

Trouble’s brewing!

The entire Ling Family became alarmed when they saw Ling Bo and Ling Xiang, the two rarely seen elders, by Du Jiaolan’s side. They realized that something big was about to happen.

The reason that Du Jiaolan had bided her time even after fully investigating the intricacies of the tunnels at Herb Mountain was solely for today!

She wanted to wait for an occasion where all of the Ling Family members had gathered together so that she could execute her plan of deposition in the presence of everyone!

Ling Chengye felt a sudden chill down his spine.

Ling Xiang and Ling Bo were both martial practitioners from the Ling Family’s previous generation that had made great contributions to the clan when they were younger. Due to some crippling injuries, they had chosen to live in seclusion and never bothered inquiring about the happenings of the clan.

As such, he gradually began to disregard the two elders. He didn’t expect that the two of them would actually side with Du Jiaolan without any prior notice.

“No wonder both the elders’ grandsons had a few extra spirit artifacts and a sudden surge in their cultivation. Seems like these two elders struck a deal behind the scenes for the sake of their grandsons’ futures.”

The comment from Ling Feng, who was honest and upright, completely dispelled any lingering doubts from the crowd.

This very moment, Du Jiaolan and her sons focused their hostile gazes, coldly fixating upon Ling Feng.

Ling Feng scoffed.

“Does it even concern you? Do not interrupt them!” Ling Ying pleaded under her breath as she tugged at his shirt in an attempt to stop him from being a busybody, lest they nurse a grievance against him.

“Dismissing the clan elders is not something you can do so easily.” Ling Kangan was an elder who had always supported Ling Chengye because he knew that the patriarch was the one who toiled the hardest for the family and had never harbored any sort of selfish motives. Hence, he loudly proclaimed, “Only when the patriarch has brought upon great danger to our clan through his errors or has abused his power for personal gain, shaming the family and impeding the clan’s success, can the elders even discuss about deposing him.”

Looking towards the other two elders, his expression grew cold and he said with a hmp, “The physical health of you two brothers has always been lacking, but it had never been a pressing concern. However, have your brains started to fail you as well? Have you really been unable to see the efforts that Chengye has put in for the family all these years?”

Ling Xiang and Ling Bo both felt guilty and did not dare to meet his eyes, instead subconsciously lowering their heads.

“In this case, I shall make it clear then!” Du Jiaolan laughed coldly, attracting everyone’s attention back to her.

From amidst the crowd, she walked up to Ling Chengye and faced him, radiating an aura not the least bit weaker than his and harshly stated, “The various spirit plants and herbs on our Herb Mountain have always been our Ling Family’s number one priority. We are required to pay a yearly tribute of spirit plants to Nebula Pavilion in exchange for their protection. As per your arrangement, this has always been brother-in-law’s responsibility. However, the spirit plants are all withered now. The people from Nebula Pavilion kept urging us to pay our tributes, yet our Ling Family has continuously delayed. Nebula Pavilion is gradually losing patience...”

With regards to the matter of Herb Mountain, the majority of the Ling Family was actually in the dark. After hearing Du Jiaolan's beratement, the expressions of the crowd changed slightly.

The Ling Family was a vassal of Nebula Pavilion. If they were to continue deferring their payment of spirit herbs for an extended period of time, not only would they no longer receive the protection of Nebula Pavilion, they might even be prosecuted for their offense, putting the entire Ling Family into a serious predicament.

Du Jiaolan's words silenced everyone as they started to contemplate the possible repercussions.

"And that, is but only the first issue!"

After planting doubt about Ling Chengye's capabilities in everyone's hearts, Du Jiaolan spoke again, "Big Brother, please make it clear, what exactly is up with the tunnels in Herb Mountain? Heng'er went to take a look a few nights ago, can anyone here guess what he saw?"

Ling Chengye's face fell in horror as she pressed on coldly, "There are now several hundred tunnels within Herb Mountain! The number of mining caves have greatly increased, which means that the mining had never even so much as even paused before! Hmph! Big Brother, you must have really invested a great amount of effort into the mining. But why is it that I have yet to see a single piece of ore in our Ling Family's warehouse?"

As the saying goes, 'a tossed stone raises a thousand ripples.' Her words further shook the Ling Family members.

"If there isn't anything valuable within Herb Mountain, why would there be such extensively tunnels? If precious ores were discovered, where did they go? Did big brother take it all for himself?" Du Jiaolan questioned as she continued donning her sarcastic smile. "It seems like when big brother gave the inner portion of Herb Mountain to Qin Family's grandfather grandson pair, it had actually been a well thought out plan! Furthermore, other Ling Family members were forbidden from entering on your orders. I'm sure that everyone can think for themselves and can figure out what it is that you want to conceal!"

"Chengye, shouldn't you give us an explanation regarding the inner portion of Herb Mountain?" Clan Elder Ling Xiang raised his head at this moment and chimed in to help Du Jiaolan in the interrogation as he too suspected that all the spirit stones from within the mountain had been misappropriated by Ling Chengye.

Even though the remaining members of the Ling Family had all looked up to Ling Chengye, now, they couldn't help but start to suspect him as all their gazes converged onto him.

"I only discovered the situation within Herb Mountain recently, and many tunnels had indeed been dug. I am still investigating this matter and have yet to come up with a conclusion." This sentence was as good as confessing to all of Du Jiaolan's accusations. Amidst the roaring commotion that followed, he continued, "Five years ago, after I allowed Qin Family's grandfather grandson pair to use the inner portion of the mine within the mountain, I have not set foot in there. I am just as unaware and perplexed about what happened as you are."

After his statement, he turned to look deeply at Qin Lie. The audience too turned, yet no one could guess what really happened even after staring at him.

"Who are you trying to fool?" Du Jiaolan's face turned even colder. "If you had no part in it, how is it possible for just the two of them to dig so many tunnels? Our Ling Family spent numerous decades just to dig a few dozen of those tunnels, yet you are saying that they outdid us so many times over in just five years? Moreover, Qin Shan passed away two years ago. Who would believe you?"

Ling Chengye looked at the surrounding clan members and discovered that many of them were shaking their heads in obvious disbelief.

"If Qin Shan's cultivation level had reached the Fragmentation Realm, he would indeed have the ability to do such a thing. Destroying Herb Mountain itself would be no mean feat to such a practitioner," Ling Chengye helplessly replied.

"Haha, what a total joke! Even if a martial practitioner at the Fragmentation Realm existed, why would he even hole himself among our Ling Family?" Du Jiaolan sarcastically spat out.

The surrounding people continued shaking their heads in further disbelief.

"Also, I don't understand the rationale behind the betrothment of Little Shi and Qin Lie. Have you grown muddled with age? Our clan's Little Shi is so pure and pretty like a flower. Of all the people to betroth her to, you chose this fool?" Smelling victory, Du Jiaolan pressed forward for the coup de grace. "Could it be that you and Qin Shan struck some shady deal that requires offering Yushi? What could this fool possibly give Little Shi? I am truly curious what sort of bridal gift he has prepared. Uncle Fu, open up the bridal gift for all of us to see!"

Du Jiaolan looked towards Ling Fu, who was in charge of receiving the bridal gifts, with her eyes full of mockery as she anticipated Ling Chengye's complete and utter humiliation.

Her intentions were vicious; she definitely did not plan all this in just the span of a few days. She first started with the matter of the spirit plants not being handled properly, which could bring trouble to the Ling Family. Then, she brought up the matter of the

mining caves within Herb Mountain, heavily implying that Ling Chengye was abusing his power to take the valuable ores from the mountain for himself.

And now, she credited the matter of Qin Lie and Ling Yushi's betrothment to Ling Chengye's indifference to his daughter's future, sacrificing her happiness to achieve some unknown motive.

She did all of this to utterly destroy Ling Chengye's reputation within the Ling Family. Be it from a logical or an emotional standpoint, she wanted every single Ling Family member to be displeased with this Patriarch and doubt him.

"I am immensely curious about the price which you sold little Yushi for. Uncle Fu, why haven't you opened the bridal gift for everyone to see?" scoffed Du Jiaolan.

Ling Fu held the bridal gift, his face full of awkwardness, as he was unsure what he should do.

"Ling Fu!" Clan Elder Ling Bo harshly called out. He hardened his face and instructed, "Open it up for everyone to see! Let everyone decide for themselves whether or not there are ulterior motives behind this arrangement!"

Everyone's sights were gathered upon that bridal gift. Defeated by the interrogating gazes of the Ling Family members, Ling Fu helplessly opened the wooden box to reveal several expensive pieces of jewelry made of gold and silver.

"Pfft, just some jewelry? That would perhaps be valuable in the eyes of a commoner, but they are worthless to martial practitioners like us!" Du Jiaolan ignored the dark expression on Ling Chengye's face as she glanced at the wooden box and continued, "I trust everyone can tell that these items are definitely not gifted by Qin Lie. It should be clear to everyone whether there are any ulterior motives behind this betrothment..."

"Isn't there still a cloth bag?" Ling Kangan looked hopefully towards the cloth bag that was originally on top of the wooden box and instructed, "Open that too."

"Ah, open it all then, and let us see what kind of treasures there are. If that fool can really take out something valuable to use as bridal gift, I will have nothing left to say!"

Du Jiaolan raised her head, feeling extremely smug when she saw Ling Chengye's hardened expression. She felt totally delighted, as though she had already utterly defeated Ling Chengye and was on the verge of becoming the next figure of authority for the Ling Family. That would result in the entire Ling Family following both her will and the will of everyone surnamed Du.

Ling Chengye realized he was completely unable to defend himself against Du Jiaolan's brutal attacks. Even the clansmen that used to trust him were now revealing looks of

rebuke. His sudden plunge into the abyss of despair left him unable to come up with a suitable way to rebut her despite working his brain furiously.

Ling Yushi bit her lower lips tightly as she saw her father's face contort in despair. Being suspected by the surrounding clan members while Du Jiaolan and company mocked him in delight... Her heart gradually fell as well.

Still holding Qin Lie's hand, she uncontrollably started to tighten her grip and remained oblivious even after her fingernails had already pierced into Qin Lie's palm.

At this moment, the helpless Ling Fu loosened the rope tying the cloth bag under the scrutiny of everyone and withdrew a stone. Lowering his head, he gloomily announced, "It's just some jade stones..."

A piece of clear and transparent prismatic stone was revealed. The stone radiated a faint glow of green as a refreshing wave of spirit energy rippled forth, evidently from within the stone.

Suddenly a person roared, "Spirit stone! At least a Common Grade Six spirit stone!"

"What?! How can it be possible? Have my eyes gone bad? How can it be a Common Grade Six spirit stone? Heavens!" screamed someone else.

The expressions of Du Jiaolan and company dimmed slightly. "It is actually a Common Grade Six spirit stone; Patriarch indeed knows how to spend. Surely there's no need to bring out your entire savings just for this one ritual?" she commented coldly.

Ling Chengye too was astonished as he all the more knew that his clan was poor. Whatever spirit stones the Ling Family had were usually obtained by trading extra spirit plants and herbs they harvested, and they were usually below the Common Grade Three.

All this while, those spirit stones had been given to Ling Xuanxuan to use for cultivating. As the amount was truly too little, it was just barely able to keep up with Xuanxuan's usage rate. Hence, even he was unwilling to use it for cultivation despite being the head of his family.

If he indeed possessed spirit stones at Common Grade Six, he would have handed it to Nebula Pavilion long ago to solve the issue of tributes. Why would he wait till now?

At this moment, Ling Yushi's dark pupils slightly shimmered, and her face glowed faintly as she glued her eyes to Ling Fu's hand.

Onto the Common Grade Six spirit stone!

"Is that it?"

“Aren’t there more? Continue taking it out!”

“Uncle Fu, please continue?”

Many of the Ling Family’s young generation involuntarily loudly urged him on, extremely curious about the remaining contents in the cloth bag.

And so, Ling Fu continued retrieving items from the bag...

“Another Common Grade Six spirit stone! Holy, one more! That’s already three!”

“What! A Vigor Recovering Pill! More than ten of those Vigor Recovering Pills!”

“A Hundred Vein Pill! Did I see it wrongly? That is actually a Common Grade Five Hundred Vein Pill! It’s a medicine that martial practitioners at both the Refinement and Natal Opening Realm can use to temper their muscles. Only Nebula Pavilion and Shattered Ice Manor would have this pill! One such pill is comparable to eight of those Common Grade Six spirit stones!”

“Good heavens! How could there be a Hundred Vein Pill?”

“What, what’s that? A Sea Opening Pill! A Common Grade Six Sea Opening Pill! The Sea Opening Pill used to open the spirit sea! If one had a Sea Opening Pill on hand while making a breakthrough from the Refinement Realm to the Natal Opening Realm, the chances of successfully breaking through would be greatly increased!”

“If those were given to my daughter as bridal gifts, even if he was dead, not to mention just merely a fool, I would have forced my daughter to marry him!”

Chapter 17: Settlement

In the Ling Family’s great hall.

A thick smell of medicine unique only to spirit pills wafted through the air as Ling Fu reached into the cloth bag and placed spirit pills, spirit stones, and many other items from within it on the top of the wooden box.

At this moment, the blood of all the Ling Family members began boiling in excitement. Many had flushed a crimson red as all gazes revealed immense shock. It wasn’t only shock in their expressions; desire and greed mixed in as well. They yearned for the cultivation materials on top of the wooden box.

“Th, these items definitely do not come from our Ling Family!” exclaimed Elder Ling Kangan with a trembling voice.

Without a shadow of a doubt in their hearts, those present were completely confident that the Ling Family was incapable of producing the cultivation materials that came out of the cloth bag.

Numerous chunks of Common Grade Six spirit stones, more than ten of those Vigor Recovering Pills, one Common Grade Five Hundred Vein Pill, and one common sixth ranked Sea Opening Pill... The items withdrawn from that unassuming cloth bag caused the Ling Family members utterly lose their composure.

The martial practitioners that Qin Lie killed were all close adjutants to Young Manor Lord Yan Ziqian; some of them were even born with a silver spoon in their mouths as their fathers held important positions within the manor. This was especially true for the last two martial practitioners at the seventh and eighth level of the Refinement Realm; their relatives surely belonged to the upper echelon of Shattered Ice Manor.

The cultivation materials that these people kept closely guarded on their bodies were rare treasures from Shattered Ice Manor. The Hundred Vein Pill and Sea Opening Pill that belonged to the last two practitioners were painstakingly obtained by their elders in hopes they could breakthrough to the Natal Opening Realm.

Naturally a large commotion would erupt if spirit pills, that were considered rare for even the Shattered Ice Manor, were to appear in the midst of the Ling Family which was but a minor force.

"The combination of those spirit stones and pills are probably enough to produce a Natal Opening Realm martial practitioner!" Under the searing gazes of the crowd, Ling Kangan took a deep breath and spoke agitatedly, "Chengye! Little Yushi doesn't have much natural talent, hence I had believed it would be highly difficult for her to breakthrough to the Natal Opening Realm before she turned twenty. However, now that there are these spirit stones and pills, it is definitely not the same anymore! Barring any accidents, she should be able to breakthrough to the Natal Opening Realm before she turns twenty if she uses these cultivation materials!"

Most of the Ling Family members were gossiping between themselves, and their eyes fluctuated between envy, jealousy, and praise whenever they looked at Yushi.

Ling Chengye's face was flushed red with excitement. He felt as though he had suddenly found paradise after having suffered in the deepest depths of hell. He kept nodding his head and was unable to find his tongue for a period of time.

Du Jiaolan and her Du family members were all wide-eyed as their gazes were still fixated on the spirit stones and pills, unable to accept the reality before their very eyes.

"Our Ling Family definitely cannot afford a bridal gift capable of producing a Natal Opening Realm martial practitioner; does anyone has anything else to add? Does anyone still believe that Chengye's actions were inappropriate?" loudly questioned Ling

Kangan. He scanned the crowd with bright, shining eyes and saw the Ling Family members lightly nodding their heads as though they no longer opposed the engagement.

“A fool is fine. Mn, an engagement ceremony in exchange for a massive amount of cultivation materials is definitely worth it.”

“I would agree if it were me. Isn't it just an engagement ceremony with a fool? Little sister Yushi, if you are unwilling, I will gladly take your place! As long as I receive those gifts that can aid my breakthrough to the Natal Opening Realm before I'm twenty, it's fine even if I immediately marry him, not to mention a mere engagement!” voiced someone loudly.

“Qin Lie is only fifteen, and you're almost nineteen. Do you not care what others think of you anymore? Big sister Yushi, I'm only sixteen. If you feel resentful about it, why not let me take your place?” delicately chirped someone younger.

Hearing the cheers of those young girls, Ling Yushi's beautiful eyes sparkled attractively. She turned her head over, seriously looking at Qin Lie who was by her side. Her previously gloomy expression had melted away and was replaced by a bright glow radiating from her face.

She understood that the spirit pills and stones with unclear origins from the cloth bag had not only harshly slapped the Du Family in their faces, it had also resolved two big problems for her father.

The generous bridal gifts were enough to dispel all doubts that the clan members had about her father, dissolving their distrust towards him. That was the first issue.

Secondly, those spirit stones could be used as a substitute for the spirit plants and herbs required to be tributed to Nebula Pavilion. Without the continued pressure from Nebula Pavilion, Du Jiaolan had no basis to question her father's ability as Patriarch.

“Drip!”

The sound of a drop of fresh blood hitting the ground attracted Ling Yushi's attention. Looking down, she noticed that the drop of fresh blood came from Qin Lie's hand that she had tightly gripped.

She too possessed a cultivation of the seventh level of the Refinement Realm. Additionally, she had been recently training in a spirit art that focused on sharp fingernails. Moreover, the palm was one of the most vulnerable piece of flesh on the human body...

Ling Yushi froze for an instant, quickly realizing that it was due to her overwhelming despair from before that she gripped Qin Lie's hands with too much force, to the point where even she was unaware that her fingernails had pierced his palm.

"Drip!"

Another drop of fresh blood fell. She raised her head to look at Qin Lie and found that his expression was still blank. Not once during the whole episode did he reveal any hint of pain, nor had he spoken a single word about it. He did not so much as even jerk his hand!

At this moment, she felt that Qin Lie's eyes, those same eyes that seemed to be perpetually dull, were now actually filled with a boundless might!

She felt a deep cut in her maiden heart at this and a figure stealthily burrowed into her heart, branding her...

"I believe... that these bridal gifts were already prepared when Senior Qin Shan and I agreed on the engagement that year. Senior Qin Shan had told me before that the reason he readily lowered himself to stay at our Ling Family's Herb Mountain was to treat Qin Lie." Ling Chengye quickly regained his calm after his loss of control. He was the patriarch after all.

Pointing at his own head, Ling Chengye implied that Qin Shan was treating Qin Lie's mind during their time in Herb Mountain's caves.

"Before Senior Qin Shan passed away, he had informed me that Qin Lie's mental problems would gradually improve and a complete recovery was definitely possible!" Ling Chengye's creativity kicked into overdrive as his lies gradually grew more fluent, "I didn't expect Senior Qin Shan to be so robust. It was only a while ago that I had entered the inner portion of Herb Mountain and was shocked by senior's masterpiece! I believe that senior's cultivation level was definitely unfathomable. Otherwise, there wouldn't be any other explanation for the numerous tunnels and strange formations!

"I won't hide it from anyone now, that was the first time I ventured into the inner portion of the mining caves, and I was shocked at the number of tunnels. I tried to delve deeper into the belly of the mountain, but I was befuddled by the strange formations. In the end, I could only return home in defeat."

Ling Chengye looked at the crowd as he weaved some truths into his lies, "As for whether spirit stones exist within the mountain, I personally believe that the answer to that is no. Should anyone think otherwise, they are free to take a look for themselves. The formations there do not injure, they only restrict people from proceeding further in. If something valuable is actually found within the mountain, then that would be a blessing for our entire Ling Family."

After the family members' suspicions were directed to Herb Mountain by shifting all responsibility onto the missing Qin Shan, resulting in everyone's suspicions shifting to the Herb Mountain, he spoke in a serious tone, "I have already arranged for Third Brother and Xuanxuan to inform Nebula Pavilion about this matter. That is the reason why they are not in attendance for this ceremony. Mn, there is no need for everyone to worry. I will properly handle everything and not bring any trouble to the Ling Family."

Following his explanation, the Ling Family members' doubts started to be dispelled. They turned their heads in unison to berate Du Jiaolan and mock the two elders Ling Xiang and Ling Bo, who had ignored Chengye's merits for material benefits. Some members of the family even went as far as saying that they were totally ridiculous and muddled with age.

The faces of Du Jiaolan and her sons paled as they heard the harsh comments from the crowd. She then knew that her meticulous plan to depose Chengye had failed miserably.

"Since Big Brother does not welcome us, we shall not stay any further to invite scorn!" Du Jiaolan steeled her face and took one cold glance at Qin Lie as she angrily led her Du Family members away.

"The plan to usurp the patriarch was actually spoiled by a fool, that damned person!" She was seething as she cursed in her heart after taking a final square look at Qin Lie.

Ling Xiang and Ling Bo were aware of their guilt and could not bear to stay any longer. They were pushed away in their wheelchairs by the Du Family.

"The ceremony continues!"

Ling Chengye looked deeply towards Qin Lie with eyes full of thought as he suddenly shouted.

Under the arrangement of an old woman and the complicated gazes of the crowd, the halted ceremony eventually continued. As the firecrackers rang out again, Qin Lie and Ling Yushi's engagement ceremony was finally concluded.

The crowd gradually thinned out.

When only the Ling Family's father and daughter pair, with a few other core members, were left, Qin Lie loosened his hand from Ling Yushi's grasp and made his way outside as per his usual routine without treating the wounds on his palm, all while ignoring the shouts of the Ling Family and the delicate calls of Yushi.

"Qin Lie! Regardless of what happened to you, or whether you can hear me, I must really thank you this time!" Ling Family's Patriarch raised his voice as he stepped out of the halls, chasing after Qin Lie's back figure as he solemnly expressed his gratitude.

Qin Lie's figure made towards Herb Mountain as usual without a single pause, rapidly disappearing from everyone's sight.

"Chengye, do you believe that this Qin Lie has been pretending to be a fool?" Elder Ling Kangan's heart shook as he blurted in surprise while shaking his head, "For over five whole years? Why? I don't quite believe it."

"Daddy, you're saying, saying that Qin Lie..." Ling Yushi was thoroughly agitated upon hearing that exchange. Continuing in her small voice, "He... He isn't really a fool?"

"I do not know either." Ling Chengye laughed bitterly. "He is becoming more and more unfathomable. Also, I just don't understand, where did he get those spirit pills and stones? It's weird, this is seriously weird..."

"Didn't Qin Shan leave those for him?" Ling Kangan was shocked.

Ling Chengye shook his head and said, "The previous speech was specifically for quelling our clan members. I practically had no interaction with Qin Shan at all, and I know nothing about him. However, it should be true that Qin Shan's is not a normal person. As for how high his cultivation level is, I am simply unable to even make an estimate..."

"If it weren't for the spirit pills and stones, we would really be unable to handle Du Jiaolan's coup. I really did not expect Ling Xiang and Ling Bo to be bought over by her. It was truly a close call this time." Ling Kangan was unceasingly worried even after the incident had finished. "Regardless, Qin Lie has helped us tremendously this time. He solved two of our biggest issues at once. Looks like Ling Yushi has to put up with him for two years or we would never be able to pay back this debt."

"It's nothing much..."

As she stared at the bloodstains on her right hand, recalling Qin Lie's complete lack of resistance as she dug her nails into his palm, waves of ripples spread through Ling Yushi's heart. She felt a dull ache in her heart for him as she no longer held any resentment.

"Shi'er, regardless of whether or not he really is a fool or just pretending to be one, please take good care of him for these two years as our Ling Family owes him at least that," Ling Chengye sighed.

"Mn." Ling Yushi nodded her head obediently as her beautiful eyes revealed a hint of joy, as though she was pleased to accept such an arrangement.

Chapter 18: "Ling Lie's" Face

"Crashhh!"

The tea kettle's lid dropped from Du Jiaolan's hand and shattered into little pieces. Her expression became as dark and profound as water as a sinister cold light emanated from her eyes.

"My elaborately drawn out plan has actually been destroyed by a fool. I will make him disappear."

Du Qishan, Du Heng, Du Fei, and several other Du Family members had similarly cold and dark expressions as they dispersed within the hall.

"Madam, how could that fool possess so many spirit stones and pills?" asked Du Qishan with a puzzled expression.

He was the same as Du Jiaolan, with a cultivation at the early stage of the Natal Opening Realm. He had been arranged to come by Du Haitian, his main task being to assist Du Jiaolan as she attempted to take control of the Ling Family. "The strange formations within Herb Mountain are extremely mysterious. Not even I can see through its profound secrets. If they were truly put up by Qin Shan, then Qin Shan... was really not so simple."

"Is that still a question? Those spirit stones and pills were most definitely left behind by Qin Shan. After all, he was still an Artificer. It isn't strange for one to have those materials." Du Jiaolan coldly snorted and continued, "No matter whether Qin Shan was simple or not, he died two years ago. It is impossible for a dead man to bring us trouble."

"I await Madam's next order," said Du Qishan respectfully.

"Contact Haitian as quickly as possible and tell him about the situation within Herb Mountain. Have him pull some strings within Nebula Pavilion and prevent Ling Chengzhi and Ling Xuanxuan from meeting the elders there. As long as they aren't able to meet the elders, we will still be able to control whether or not the matter regarding the tribute of medicinal plants comes up for the Ling Family. It will continue being something that we can use to blackmail Ling Chengye. We can just say that Nebula Pavilion requires some Jade Hand Flowers from Herb Mountain and accuse him of some unfavorable charges."

Du Jiaolan only gave him this one command. She then looked towards Du Heng and instructed, "Continue closely observing Herb Mountain and the surrounding area as you have recently been doing. Once Ling Chengye opens up Herb Mountain to the public, there will definitely be a lot of Ling Family members who will go in and explore it. Perhaps they will discover something. There are definitely eccentric things within the mountain. Otherwise the spirit plants wouldn't just wither away, and Qin Shan and grandson wouldn't hold onto it for dear life."

“No need to worry mother, I will carefully observe that side,” said Du Heng, nodding in assent.

Looking towards Du Fei, the youngest, Du Jiaolan frowned and instructed, “Pay attention to the fool. If he is ever by himself, notify me.”

Du Fei also nodded in response.

.....

Icestone City.

Nebula Pavilion was situated within the southern part of the city where towering buildings stood one after another. Amongst these buildings were many stone towers. Stationed atop every stone tower were cultivators wearing Nebula Pavilion’s uniform, each one looking down at the surrounding areas from far above.

“Please convey to Elder Han that Ling Chengzhi of the Ling Family requests an audience,” said Ling Chengzhi with a smile to the gate guards at the southern entrance of Nebula Pavilion.

Ling Xuanxuan wore an eye catching, short orange skirt and her snow white wrists were adorned with several silver bands. A cute smile also appeared on her lovely, innocent, and beautiful face.

Within the Ling Family, Ling Xuanxuan held an extremely high status as Second Miss and thus sometimes acted capriciously. However, she couldn’t act like that here.

On the way over, Ling Chengzhi had constantly reminded her to restrain her temper upon entering Icestone City, lest it brought upon them unnecessary troubles.

“We have already said that Elder Han isn’t here, please come again.” These gate guards had long since been instructed by Du Haitian’s people. At this moment, they emotionlessly said without a hint of emotion on their faces, “Furthermore, neither of you are the Ling Family’s Patriarch. Even if Elder Han was here, it isn’t definite that he would meet you.”

“How can you guys be like this? With great effort we made the trip over from the Ling Family. You guys didn’t even leave to ask, how do you know whether or not Elder Han is here?” cried Ling Xuanxuan, gnashing her teeth.

Even two of Nebula Pavilion’s guards dared to be so arrogant towards them. This meant that in their eyes the Ling Family was simply nothing worth noticing.

Ling Xuanxuan felt a great sense of humiliation as she too realized that vassal forces truly didn’t enjoy any kind of good treatment.

“We know he isn’t here, this is enough reason.” One of the guards blankly looked at her. Laughingly, he said, “Little sister, it is not that this big brother here doesn’t want to help you, it is that there is just truly no way for me to. Hm, what about staying within Icestone City for a while and waiting for Elder Han to return? I will notify you when he does. Hehe, however, my shift’s rotation is during the day, and I only have the nights free. I wonder if little sister has any free time during the night?”

The young, beautiful Ling Xuanxuan had clearly brought the two guards happiness. The two of them were speaking one after the other, smiling as they flirted with her, but they were resolute with their stance upon the matter of meeting with Elder Han.

Ling Chengzhi and Ling Xuanxuan stood in front of the gate and argued with the guards for a long period of time until their throats became hoarse, but they weren’t able to achieve anything.

Along the road many practitioners of Nebula Pavilion were entering and exiting the gate.

These people, upon hearing that the people at the gate were from some vassal force, acted indifferently, only glancing at Ling Xuanxuan’s beauty. However, some joined the guards in ridiculing the two of them before walking away, laughing.

——Not a single person held the Ling Family in their eyes.

“Even if you two stay here until dark, you two still wouldn’t be able to meet Elder Han. You might as well quickly return to the Ling Family and tell your patriarch to make his own trip here.” After a while, the two guards also became bored and their tones gradually became rude, “Stop blocking the gates! Otherwise, don’t blame me for being uncourteous!”

“Eh?! Young Master Zhi, are you going out to drink? You seem really energetic today! Haha, you will definitely be killer tonight!”

One of the guards, upon seeing a little fatty come out from within, immediately beamed with a flattering smile.

As he moved his body to the side, he waved at Ling Chengzhi and Ling Xuanxuan as if he were swatting flies, trying to get them to make way for the little fatty to pass through.

“Mn, hurry and make way. Young Master Zhi has an appointment to meet with people at Drunken Fragrance Garden. Don’t waste his time.”

Kang Zhi wore brocaded yellow clothes and posed with a fan in his hand, which he waved every once in awhile. Squinting his small eyes, he slowly walked over.

Upon seeing him come over the nearby practitioners of Nebula Pavilion who were entering and leaving immediately took the initiative to avoid him and let him pass.

“You two from the Ling Family, scram farther away, don’t you dare block Young Master Zhi’s way!” shouted a guard.

Ling Chengzhi and Ling Xuanxuan’s expressions became increasingly ugly. Upon hearing the guards yell, they didn’t dare reply and could only move their bodies.

They had stayed around for so long, but the two of them had yet to see the guards treat anyone with such an attitude. Thus, the two of them immediately knew that the young fatty wearing yellow clothes was definitely someone with an extraordinary background.

“Ling Family?” Kang Zhi, who had already pretentiously walked through the south gate, suddenly became stunned. Afterwards, he turned around and hesitantly looked over at Ling Chengzhi and Ling Xuanxuan asking, “Are you of the Ling Family within the southern parts of the Arctic Mountain Range? The ones that have an Herb Mountain... is that you all?”

Ling Chengzhi slightly lowered his head, feeling extremely strange within his heart. Smiling apologetically, he replied, “We are indeed from that Ling Family.”

“Slap!”

Kang Zhi suddenly walked over and casually slapped the face of the guard who had told Ling Chengzhi to scram, causing blood to fly out from the corner of his mouth and splatter across the ground.

Afterwards, he viciously kicked the other guard, causing the guard to clutch his stomach and crouch on the ground in pain with cold sweat appearing on the guard’s face.

The several practitioners who had been waiting to enter and leave suddenly froze, all of them stopping to observe.

Ling Chengzhi and Ling Xuanxuan also stayed. They didn’t know why the little fatty suddenly became furious, but upon seeing those emotionless guards being hit so mercilessly, the uncle and niece both felt extremely delighted.

“Let’s see if your mouths’ll be dirty again!” After hitting the two, a smile appeared on Kang Zhi’s chubby face. As if he had become another person, he said, “What did you come to Nebula Pavilion for?”

“We were looking for Elder Han to explain the issue with supplying spirit plants. The two of them said Elder Han wasn’t within Nebula Pavilion, and told us...” explained Ling Chengzhi.

After listening, Kang Zhi’s chubby face hardened as he turned back around towards the two guards and hit them again. As he hit them, the corners of his mouth drew back and

he scolded them, "Are you two tired of living? Uncle Han is clearly within the pavilion, are both your doggy eyes blind?"

The two guards didn't dare to dodge, shirking beside the door as they suffered Kang Zhi's trampling. Within their hearts, they cursed all eighteen generations of ancestors of Du Haitian's messenger.

"Han Yu!" Kang Zhi pointed towards someone within the pavilion and instructed them, "Bring them to meet your uncle."

"Sure, Young Master Zhi." A smiling youth walked up.

"I still have some matters to attend to, so I cannot accompany you," said Kang Zhi with a brilliant smile. Suddenly, he asked, "Is Ling Lie, that guy, still doing well?"

"Ling Lie?" Ling Chengzhi suddenly became dazed as he robotically nodded and replied, "Doing well, doing well."

"Haha, when you see him in the future, tell him to hurry over to Nebula Pavilion and that the brothers are all thinking about him." The little fatty smiled as he said this sentence, then waved and finally made his leave.

Han Yu brought the puzzled and confused Ling Chengzhi and Ling Xuanxuan into the depths of the pavilion. As for the two guards who had been scoffing at them earlier, they had been beaten black and blue and were now crouched in the corner of the gate, their heads timidly looking down.

"Excuse me, that Young Master Zhi... what kind of status does he have?" suddenly asked Ling Chengzhi.

"He is our Vice Pavilion Master's son," replied Han Yu with a bitter smile, as if he had once lost something to Kang Zhi. "For you two to have received the favor of Young Master Zhi is truly not easy, that guy's temper is incredibly strange. Uh, in a moment, when you guys meet my uncle, it would be best if you guys said this beforehand. As long as it isn't some incredibly difficult matter, my uncle will definitely help you solve it."

Ling Chengzhi and Ling Xuanxuan's expressions suddenly became shocked, and they could each see the shock within the other's eyes as well.

Nebula Pavilion consisted of a Pavilion Master, two Vice Pavilion Master, Elders, Hall Masters, and other positions. There was only one Pavilion Master and a total of two Vice Pavilion Masters. Thus, one could imagine just how much power a Vice Pavilion Master of Nebula Pavilion held. Kang Zhi, as the son of Vice Pavilion Master Kang Hui, naturally had the qualifications to act arrogant and domineering.

The Ling Family had been suppressed to the point of not being able to raise their heads by Du Haitian, was but an elder of Nebula Pavilion. Amongst the five elders, he was towards the back, and his status and ranking were extremely incomparable with that of Vice Pavilion Master Kang Hui. Although Kang Zhi didn't know that the guards had been directed by Du Haitian, even if he did know, he wouldn't have cared.

Before long, Han Yu led the two into a hall lined with bookshelves that had been filled to the brim.

Elder Han Qingrui, the elder specifically responsible for managing the tributes of vassal forces, was just about to leave when he saw them walk over. At first his face was full of annoyance, but upon hearing that it was the Ling Family, his attitude shockingly changed.

"What is the matter?" asked Han Qingrui with a smile as he personally brewed two cups of tea and signaled for Han Yu to leave.

Ling Chengzhi, with a face full of surprise, fearfully and apprehensively explained the matter, saying, "As of recent, Herb Mountain's spirit plants are no longer withering. As long as you can tolerate it for a few more days, we will definitely be able to fulfill our Ling Family's payment."

"And I had thought that it was some big matter." Han Qingrui waved his hand, indicating for the two to sit down and drink their tea. Afterwards, he laughed and said, "I will notify you right now, starting from this moment onwards, the Ling Family doesn't have to pay any spirit plants for the next two years!"

As soon as he said those words, the two were shocked to the point where they almost jumped out of their seats, the tea all spilling out of the cups they were holding. Ling Chengzhi hurriedly said, "Elder Han, please don't be like this. My Ling Family will definitely pay enough spirit plant, please rest assured!"

Han Qingrui was surprised for a moment, then immediately realized that they had misunderstood. Smiling, he explained, "Your Ling Family's Ling Lie has achieved great merits. His contributions have not only gained a great amount of contribution points for himself, but also for the Ling Family. Thus, you all don't have to pay spirit plants for the next two years. This was a rule that was set down in the early years of Nebula Pavilion. If any practitioner from a vassal force achieves great merit, then as a reward, the family they belong to will not have to pay tributes for two years."

"Elder Han! Elder Han!" shouted someone from outside.

Han Qingrui stood up and said with a smile, "I have other matters to attend to, and thus I will not say more. I have already added Ling Lie's name into the booklet for core members along with a total of one thousand two hundred contribution points. When the two of you return, tell him he can enter Nebula Pavilion at any time."

As Ling Chengzhi and Ling Xuanxuan were still dazed like wooden roosters, Han Qingrui continued, "Also, please thank him in my place. As of recent, my child has constantly spoke of him, saying that if it weren't for him, he might already have died at the hands of the people from Shattered Ice Manor."

Stopping, Han Qingrui smiled as he patted Ling Chengzhi on the shoulder. Leaving them to finish their tea break, he left first to see to his own matter.

"...Ling Lie. Within our Ling Family, there is only one person called Ling Lie, and isn't he an old man with one foot in the grave?" asked Ling Chengzhi dazedly as if he were dreaming. It was a kind of unbelievable feeling.

"Core member! One thousand two hundred contribution points! Did they get the wrong person?" Ling Xuanxuan's heart had been thrown into a mess as if she had become drunk. Her mind felt dizzy, unable to discern North, South, East, and West.

"I'm afraid... I'm afraid they did indeed get the wrong person," Ling Chengzhi said helplessly.

Chapter 19: Seclusion

Since Ling Chengye no longer forbade family members from entering Herb Mountain's caves, it suddenly became very lively.

Every day there were many people from the Ling Family who entered to investigate with confidence and hope, but the results were all the same; it was a fruitless pursuit.

Even people like Ling Chengye and Du Qishan, who had reached the Natal Opening Realm, weren't able to avoid getting lost in the mysterious formations; it was even more impossible for the rest of the people to successfully walk into the depths of the stone cave.

Following one failure after another, many people gradually changed their strategy and treated Qin Lie as the key to proceed.

From then on, there were many Ling Family members who waited for Qin Lie early in the morning with hopes of entering Herb Mountain with him, following in right behind Qin Lie in order to successfully enter its depths.

Unfortunately, every time they ventured into the stone cave, they would suddenly get lost and become unable to see Qin Lie's trail. There were obviously illusory formations and mist formations existing inside the stone cave, preventing the people who entered from seeing the people by their side.

After a few tries, people slowly started giving up. Even though they were still full of curiosity towards Qin Lie within their hearts, they slowly gave up after being unable to successfully tag along with him.

Ling Chengye, knowing well of Du Jiaolan's petty and small-minded personality, was afraid that she would attempt to eliminate Qin Lie, so he ordered Ling Feng and Ling Ying to accompany Qin Lie every day when entering and exiting Herb Mountain, preventing him from being assassinated on the way.

Ling Chengye's arrangement caused Du Jiaolan to not be able to find an opportunity. Her hatred towards the Ling Family members grew, and she saw Qin Lie as a thorn in her side.

After the engagement ceremony ended, Ling Yushi visited Qin Lie even more frequently. Sometimes she would bring food early in the morning so Qin Lie no longer had to go to the Ling Family's dining hall for his meals.

By evening, when Qin Lie returned, he often found that she was there before him.

The more Ling Yushi did the chores, such as preparing bathing water, folding sheets, cleaning, and tidying, the more she became skilled at them. She also kept her nagging habit, so Qin Lie knew every tiny thing about the Ling Town like the palm of his hand.

Sometimes, Ling Yushi would suddenly become silent and use both hands to support her crystal-clear chin. Her beautiful eyes gleamed while looking at him, seeming like she wanted to see through the secret he was hiding within the depths of his heart.

Whenever she did this, Qin Lie would suddenly become nervous, and he would cautiously keep his expression calm.

Ling Yushi would sometimes sigh softly from disappointment and sometimes shake her head and laugh uncontrollably which made Qin Lie unable to guess her inner thoughts.

Qin Lie's daily cultivation didn't change even though Herb Mountain became lively. He still continued assiduously and never slacked off.

Another day passed.

Deep within the vast cavern system of Herb Mountain, Qin Lie sat down while leaning against a stone pillar. He held his breath, focused his mind, and cultivated with the help of the Umbra Lightning Condor beast cores.

The floor around him was covered with gray, powdered fragments; they were slowly formed when beast cores exploded after having their energy completely absorbed.

Unconsciously, of the more than forty pieces of beast cores obtained from hunting in the Solitary Ridge, he only had a few remaining. Not only that, the few stalks of Ice Stalk Grass that he had gathered had already been exhausted.

After an uncertain number time, another beast core in his hands crumbled to dust. His expression was serious as he silently circulated his power.

A trace of spirit energy was transferred out of his dantian's spirit sea, slowly flowed through his muscles and veins, and trickled and gathered towards his left arm. The spirit energy in his muscles and veins immediately started to speed up and rushed towards his left hand's index finger like a violent, stormy wave!

"Bzzt bzzt bzzt!"

A strange electric flowing sound was coming from the pulp of his index finger. His finger was in extreme pain from the swelling of spirit energy, and it was bright red as if it had been burned by fire.

"Bang!"

The surging spirit energy seemed to have collided into an invisible barrier. It couldn't break through the pulp of his finger and suddenly rescinded back into his palm, causing his hand to suddenly go completely numb and lose all sensation.

"Still no good..."

Qin Lie slowly opened his eyes and waved his left hand. His handsome face was filled with traces of anxiety and helplessness.

Recently, his spirit energy within his dantian's spirit sea had become more plentiful with the help of the beast cores, so he prepared to charge into the seventh level of the Refinement Realm. Unfortunately, he tried breaking through a few times, but each attempt resulted in failure.

The Refinement Realm was divided into nine levels. The first six levels were comparatively easy to cultivate. It was mainly focusing on gathering spirit energy, opening up the spirit sea, and then continuously using spirit energy to nourish the flesh and slowly strengthen the muscles and veins, so it was easier to break through the first six levels.

During this period, when martial practitioners fight against others, they rely mainly on the toughness of their bodies. They couldn't use spirit skills and are not able to discharge their spirit energy to harm or kill others.

The reason for this was because martial practitioners at this level could not release their spirit energy through their body, so they were not able to "emit spirit energy."

With their spirit energy trapped inside their body, it means they won't have lethality and could not pour it into spirit artifacts that significantly increase a martial practitioner's combat ability.

Only after breaking through to the seventh level of the Refinement Realm would martial practitioners be able discharge the spirit energy in their bodies through every single part of their body in order to use it offensively, kill their enemies, or pour their spirit energy into spirit artifacts to unleash their frightening power.

Martial practitioners at this level could also refine their bones, marrows, and organs to make their bodies even tougher.

Because of this, the sixth and seventh level of the Refinement Realm were considered a watershed. Even though there was only a difference of one level, they were separated by a huge chasm.

When he fought with the martial practitioners from Shattered Ice Manor back then, it looked like he had lightning coiling all around his body, but that lightning was not really "spirit energy emission," it was lightning from the sky that landed on his body, guided by his spirit energy. That lightning was mostly from nature's power.

Without thunder and lightning striking down from the sky, he would not be able to achieve this step. In the future when he engages in combat, he would not be able to count on both thunder and lightning to be there every time, so he needed to break through to the seventh level of the Refinement Realm as soon as possible.

The seventh level of the Refinement Realm could also will spirit energy to pervade the bones, marrows, and organs, which could help him cultivate his Heavenly Thunder Eradication.

In many people's eyes, only those who have stepped into the seventh level of the Refinement Realm could be counted as true martial practitioners; those below the sixth level could only be referred to as martial artists.

The reason why Ling Ying admired Ling Feng was also because he broke through to the seventh level of the Refinement Realm. He was a true martial practitioner the Ling Family's young generation.

"I must cross this threshold as soon as possible!" Qin Lie rested for a little bit, just until the soreness and numbness from his left hand decreased. Then, he took out another Umbra Lightning Condor beast core. "There are only three left. I must hurry up and breakthrough. The rest of the spirit pills and stones that I brought back from the Arctic Mountain Range can only be used at the seventh level of the Refinement Realm."

He only gave part of the spirit pills and stones that he got from the martial practitioners of Shattered Ice Manor away as a betrothal gift. There were still some remaining in the mountain caves, which he had saved for himself.

“Zzzt Zzzt Zzzt!!”

After a while, a loud crisp sound came from his finger, as if it was going to break. However, the spirit energy that was pouring in seemed to be blocked by a hydrovalve. It couldn't charge out of the pulp of his finger to be released at all.

Inside the cave, Qin Lie charged and charged, tried and tried, but he failed every single time.

“This is not efficient enough, it's still no good. There has to be a better way.” Qin Lie narrowed his eyes, locked his eyebrows, and was deep in thought. Suddenly his heart and mind flinched, and he cried out in a low voice, “Soul Suppressing Orb! Thoughtless Tranquility!”

Without caring whether or not he would not be able to wake up for a long time, he took a deep breath, focused his mind and consciousness, and slowly felt a wisp of his soul floating out from his head, flying towards the Soul Suppressing Orb.

As time passed, he gathered even more of his soul consciousness and continuously aggregated all of it within the Soul Suppressing Orb.

The Soul Suppressing Orb hidden in the center of his forehead started shining remotely as if it was a pitch-black eyeball.

In the cave, the Soul Suppressing Orb was emitting a dim, flickering luster, and it seemed extremely mysterious and strange.

Slowly, the sensation of his soul leaving his body came once more, and it seemed like his soul was in a murky space within the Soul Suppressing Orb. He could see every movement of his body. He could even control his body to carry out some simple movements and have his body cultivate instinctively...

In that mysterious space, he actually could clearly see the spirit energy of the world in the cave converging towards his body, at a very high rate. He could even see the spirit energy that was thin like a light mist leisurely flowing into his body through his small pores.

The pores that he couldn't see regardless of how much he widened his eyes were magnified several times in this state; they were so clear that it was inconceivable!

In this strange and unpredictable Thoughtless Tranquility state, his soul was in the state of departure, but his understanding towards his own body was deep to an unimaginable extent!

In this state, it was as if he managed to resonate with heaven and earth, and could attract and gather even more spirit energy...

With his soul hidden inside the Soul Suppressing Orb, Qin Lie watched his body instinctively cultivate, and he also watched the spirit energy flowing within his muscles and veins speed up, charging towards the tip of his finger each time!

He found that as the time he cultivated in this state increased, the wall that was keeping him from stepping into the seventh level of the Refinement Realm seemed to become thinner and thinner.

His mind sharpened, slowly understanding that cultivating in the Thoughtless Tranquility state caused spirit energy to gather faster, and the speed that it flowed within his muscles and veins became even faster as well.

Cultivating like this through his instincts, his body could automatically adjust itself, adjust to its optimal state. It was so magical that he felt that his soul's existence was unnecessary.

It was so wondrous that it couldn't be described with words!

"RIIP!"

After an uncertain amount time, a streak of blue lightning suddenly shot out from the tip of his finger. The lightning beam flashed and disappeared instantly, then shattered a piece of the rock on the stone wall in front of him.

When his wavering soul saw that flash of lightning, he was elated. He then struggled with all his might, relying on the agitation and excitement within his heart to repeatedly attack the orb.

"BOOM!"

His head was suddenly jolted, and then the feeling of his soul returning suddenly flooded his mind.

Qin Lie woke up instantly.

Over the past five years, this was the first time he didn't need the help of external stimulation; he relied on his own willpower to escape from the state of Thoughtless Tranquility!

“Hehehe.” Qin Lie sat there with his mouth opened and couldn’t stop smiling idiotically.

With the help of the Thoughtless Tranquility state, not only did he successfully break through into the seventh level of the Refinement Realm, he also discovered more about the wondrous points of the Thoughtless Tranquility state. Furthermore, he now gained a newfound ability to escape from it. This increased his confidence significantly, as if he saw a grand, magnificent future.

“Rrrm! Rrrm!”

The rumbling sound of his stomach woke him from his excitement. Only then did he realize that his body was thin and shriveled; he was clueless as to how long he had been starving for.

Because it had been so long since he had last eaten, his steps were a bit unsteady. He held on to the stone wall and slowly walked out of the cave with a pale complexion.

At the entrance of the cave, Ling Yushi’s face was haggard. Her eyes were filled with unresolved worry. She looked into the distance, leaning on the wall while keeping watch for who knew how long.

Chapter 20: Who Is That Amazing Person?

It was sunset. Ling Yushi, garbed in a long, emerald skirt, was facing the cave mouth, her silhouette slender and exquisite. But her eyes appeared unfocused, and there was no radiance to be seen from her face either.

Qin Lie stopped in his tracks and stared indifferently at her beautiful silhouette. After a moment, he purposefully added weight to his footsteps.

Abruptly, Ling Yushi awoke from her dream-like trance and turned her head around, startled. The dimness in her eyes was instantly replaced by a bright glow.

"What took you so long? It has almost been four days; how did you hold out this long without food or water?" she cried out in a low voice as she rushed towards Qin Lie with a terribly worried look. "Quick, drink some water first. I've also brought some cooked meat; it should be enough to sate the hunger a bit."

Ling Yushi hurriedly handed over the waterskin she brought along with her.

At this point, Qin Lie was so hungry and thirsty that he could die, so he immediately accepted the water skin and guzzled down its contents for a short burst of time. Once he caught his breath, he then grabbed the cooked beef and began wolfing it down like a beast.

After a long while, Qin Lie finally satiated himself completely, and as he relaxed, he turned around and saw Ling Yushi still knitting her eyebrows in a worried frown.

"Really, if you're going to wall yourself in a cave for four days straight, you could've at least given me a warning so I could prepare enough food and water. You really scared me, you know? I thought you were going to starve to death..." Ling Yushi muttered under her breath as she gently wiped the crumbs of meat off his shirt. "Let's go home soon and get you a bath, okay? You're stinking quite a bit; god knows what you were doing inside."

Qin Lie's expression remained completely vacant. He allowed her to tidy up his clothing and wipe the dust off his face, and he felt a warm feeling flowing through his heart. After they left the cave, Qin Lie realized that it was already late evening and that there weren't any Ling family members to be seen around the cave entrance. It was a sign that that they were slowly giving up on the search.

"First Miss! We're over here!"

At the bottom of the hill, Ling Ying was waving her hands widely at Ling Yushi from beside a rock. Ling Feng stood beside her - the duo had been recently paired together to prevent any assassination attempts by the Du Family on Qin Lie's life.

The evening sky, aglow with crimson hues and burning fire-like lights, was so brilliant that even the mountains became painted in red.

The quartet trekked down the mountain path underneath the red glow.

Qin Lie looked as vacant as ever. Ling Ying was both cheerful and energetic, and she would sneak peeks at Qin Lie from time to time while chatting to Ling Yushi with a bright smile. Ling Feng simply smiled with a calm look on his face, listening but never interrupting the conversation with an opinion.

"First Miss, have you taken the Hundred Vein Pill and Sea Opening Pill? Are the effects as miraculous as they say?" Ling Ying suddenly inquired with great interest. She sneaked a glance at the youth beside her, as if wondering how Qin Lie even came across such valuable cultivation spirit pills.

Even Ling Feng's curiosity was piqued as he turned to look seriously at Ling Yushi, paying great attention to her every word.

As if it were the most natural thing in the world, Ling Yushi looked towards Qin Lie while betraying a hint of gratitude from her eyes. She then answered casually, "I've been making some preparations to take the Hundred Vein Pill as of late. As for the Sea Opening Pill... it's still a little too early to take it at the moment, so I plan to leave it until the ninth level of Refinement. My cultivation talent isn't as good as you guys', so without

the pills, it might be a little difficult for me to break into the Natal Opening Realm." She smiled lightly in self-derision.

"First Miss, you are too modest." Ling Feng straightened himself and said seriously, "In my opinion First Miss' cultivation talent is actually not weaker than Second Miss'. It's just that First Miss was burdened with the family's matters at an earlier time, thus you couldn't focus all your energy into cultivating itself. Moreover, it may be possible that the Patriarch favored Second Miss more in terms of cultivation resources, which is why First Miss and Second Miss are of the same realm."

"You don't need to console me; I know that my talent isn't as good as hers." Ling Yushi smiled and continued, "I can see that both your talents are pretty exceptional within the Ling Family. If the two of you can keep up the hard work, it may not be an impossible task to enter Nebula Pavilion in the future."

The moment Nebula Pavilion was mentioned, both Ling Ying and Ling Feng betrayed an obvious look of yearning from their eyes.

In their hearts, Nebula Pavilion was the holy cultivation site of their dreams, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that being able to practice cultivation in Nebula Pavilion was their ultimate dream.

Ling Yushi and the rest continued to chat on the way.

The quartet arrived back at Ling Town just when the day was about to turn dark. The moment they passed through the town entrance, they received word that Ling Chengzhi and Ling Xuanxuan had returned from their travels.

"The moment the Third Master returned, he immediately went off with the Patriarch to the east end of the town, where Ling Lie's house is. Ling Lie is already over seventy years old, and he has been bedridden for years. I do not know what business the Patriarch has at his house."

Ling Yushi, Ling Feng, and Ling Ying were all confused by the situation, but only Qin Lie felt a small bit of surprise as he recalled the reason why Ling Chengzhi and Ling Xuanxuan went to the Nebula Pavilion and connected the dots. He couldn't help but remember Tu Ze's little party and thought: They couldn't have run into Du Zhe and the others, could they?

"I'll go over and have a look. Ling Feng, Ling Ying, please send Qin Lie back to his house first." With doubts at the back of her mind, she left a parting instruction and hurriedly left for the town's east entrance.

When she arrived at Ling Lie's home, she saw Ling Chengye, Ling Chengzhi, and Ling Xuanxuan just walking out of the house. Ling Chengye and his brother appeared to be very disappointed as they shook their heads repeatedly.

The moment Ling Xuanxuan saw her coming towards them, her expression suddenly became wrought with agitation. In fact, she looked like she was about to cry.

"Daddy, what are you...?" Ling Yushi questioned in a sweet tone.

"We'll talk when we get back home." Ling Chengye waved his hands slightly.

A long while later, when the whole family was gathered in the living room, Ling Xuanxuan cried out with a pair of eyes that had long since been brimming with tears, "Big sis! Who told you to take my place and become engaged with that fool?"

"It was my own wish." Ling Yushi smiled lightly.

"And who in their right mind would willingly be engaged with him?!" Ling Xuanxuan had been holding herself back all this time, but she finally couldn't take it any longer and exploded in tears. "He's only a fool! Why would you wrong yourself so? Did daddy force you to do this?"

"Be quiet!" Ling Chengye yelled angrily. "You've been to Nebula Pavilion and seen with your own eyes how they treat us! Do you think we, the Ling Family mean anything in their eyes? At least your sister knows how to make sacrifices for the family, but what do you know about responsibility? It'll be enough if you would stop making more trouble for the family!"

Ling Xuanxuan had seldom seen him this mad before, so she was cowered immediately. As she recalled their encounters at Nebula Pavilion, she too bowed her head and wept silently.

"Either Nebula Pavilion was wrong, or this... 'Ling Lie' is someone else entirely!" Ling Chengzhi suddenly said.

"What's going on?" Ling Yushi asked him.

"Oh, your third uncle ran into something strange when they were at Nebula Pavilion..." The Ling Family Patriarch explained the whole thing from beginning to end before continuing, "Han Qingrui, or Elder Han of Nebula Pavilion, informed us that not only has our family been absolved of any tribute of spirit plants for the next two years, he even said that Ling Lie had done them a great service and was thus registered straight into Nebula Pavilion's core member list, in addition to being rewarded one thousand and two hundred contribution points! If it wasn't for this 'Ling Lie' person, your third uncle and your sister probably wouldn't even be able to get through the front door! Perhaps they may have been humiliated even further..."

Ling Yushi's pretty face turned into an expression full of shock as she cried out, "Ah! Not only was he ranked among the core members instantly, he even obtained this many

Nebula Pavilion contribution points? Since when did our family produce such an amazing person?"

"Ling Town only has one Ling Lie, and we just visited him. He's been bedridden for almost two years, and frankly, it's a miracle he's still alive. He told us that he hadn't left the town for ten years, so there's no way it could be him. But then again, there's no one else in the Ling Family who is called 'Ling Lie,' not even one with the character 'Lie' in their name..." muttered the Ling Family Patriarch as he frowned deeply and shook his head.

"Big brother, do you think it's possible that... Qin Lie is that person? His name does have a 'Lie' character in it, doesn't it?" Ling Chengzhi said suddenly.

"That fool is an odd one alright, but that 'oddness' has nothing to do with anything amazing at all! How can it possibly be him?" Ling Xuanxuan broke away from her crying and sneered with a face full of tears and disdain. "If someone like him can become a core member in Nebula Pavilion and obtain this many contribution points, then anyone in the Ling Family can join Nebula Pavilion whenever they feel like it! If he really were this capable, I would've agreed to the engagement long ago!"

Ever since she heard that Ling Yushi had gotten engaged with Qin Lie, she could no longer even listen to his name without feeling intense loathing and revulsion.

"Ling Lie, Qin Lie..."

The patriarch looked thoughtful for a moment before he waved lightly for Ling Xuanxuan to leave and argue somewhere else. After she left, only then did he lower his voice and say, "It might actually be possible. If you remember the engagement ceremony, his betrothal gifts smacked the Du household real good in the face. The more I think about it, the more I feel that Qin Lie isn't as simple as he seems. If we really have to make a guess, then he probably is the most suspicious."

"I also do not think that Qin Lie is an average person." Ling Chengzhi agreed and nodded. "There are only so many things a fool can do and so many coincidences. It's possible that he maybe hiding something; maybe his head really does go awry sometimes. If you tell me that he was foolish this entire time, however... I'm not sure I believe that anymore."

Ever since Qin Lie had awakened, there had been more and more abnormalities as of late, and Qin Lie's cover was also slipping little by little. The Ling brothers weren't stupid after all, and they were slowly but surely noticing a pattern and how there must be a mystery surrounding Qin Lie.

As Ling Yushi listened to the two of them converse, her beautiful eyes gleamed, the hint of a tiny smile escaping her lips. Suddenly she was feeling much better.

"Little Shi, keep an eye on him. If you find anything, tell us immediately!" Ling Chengzhi ordered.

"Ah!" The yell jolted Ling Yushi right out of her pretty dreams, and she quickly nodded her head and responded softly, "Yes, yes..."

"This girl. What were you thinking?" Ling Chengzhi frowned.

"Nothing, nothing. If there's nothing else, then I'll be on my way." Ling Yushi stuck her tongue out cutely before leaving the room with excited eyes. After she grabbed some food from the dining hall, she hurriedly made her way to Qin Lie's stone house.

Inside the stone house, Qin Lie had his eyes closed on the bed and was attempting to enter the state of Thoughtless Tranquility.

Perhaps because he had ascended to a higher level or because his mind consciousness was much greater than before, it was now significantly faster for him to enter the state of Thoughtless Tranquility. Even breaking free of it wasn't that hard of a task anymore.

The ability to enter or exit the wondrous cultivation state of Thoughtless Tranquility could dramatically increase the efficiency at which he practiced cultivation, and it gave near insurmountable benefits as he continued to break through the path of martial arts. That was why he valued this ability greatly.

Moreover, he also had a faint feeling that repeatedly entering and exiting the state of Thoughtless Tranquility could refine his soul and consciousness.

This discovery inspired him greatly!

After all, his mind consciousness was the key strength to unlocking the Soul Suppressing Orb's seal. Whether or not he could recover his memories from ten years ago entirely rested on the strength of his mind consciousness, and thus he wasn't bored. He was even gladdened as he attempted to get in and out of Thoughtless Tranquility again and again.

He successfully broke out of Thoughtless Tranquility again, just before Ling Yushi arrived. Listening to her springy footsteps, Qin Lie felt surprised and wondered what made Ling Yushi so happy.

The moment Ling Yushi entered, she immediately became fixated on his figure, an odd sparkle in those beautiful eyes of hers.

Qin Lie's heart immediately tightened at her reaction.

"Since we're already engaged, we no longer need to avoid certain things now, do we? Hmm, let me help you wash your back today."

Ling Yushi stared deeply at him with bright eyes and a little cunning smile, like a little fox devising something in the dark.

Qin Lie instantly froze.