

Chapter 331 - Chu Danqing

Don't tell me there's some kind of defensive formation here!

As Chu Danqing thought that, he walked along the small cobblestone path. A thick layer of snow covered it, with another layer of bamboo leaves on top. No one had cleaned it up.

The bamboo forest was primarily green, but there was also yellow too, standing tall and reaching towards the skies. It obviously turned into an array of colours in his eyes. There was light green, verdant green, light yellow, gamboge, pale yellow, and so on. The dazzling array of colours flattened out, turning into a delicate painting of realism.

He shook his head violently to shake away these thoughts. He had spent an entire decade learning painting deep within the mountains, such that it had almost driven him crazy. Sigh, the outside world is still better!

The senior sister from the school of Medicine diagonally across from him earlier was so pretty. His master often said that there were great beauties within paintings, and he also possessed the ability to make these beauties emerge from paintings, but living beauty was different from that of paintings. This was the aspect he differed from his master the most. His master said these were all just distractions, but he still preferred them more.

"It's you?" Li Qingshan saw Chu Danqing look around as he walked over.

"It's me. I've come to check out the future territory of our school of Painting!" Chu Danqing raised his chest. Chu Shidao had told him to come and investigate Li Qingshan—know yourself and know your enemy, and you will never be defeated. However, he was still unsure about how he would approach this.

"Do you drink?" Li Qingshan was not sitting before a table seriously and working on his masterpiece. Instead, he sat in the corridor, leaning against a wall. He held a jade cup in one hand with jars of alcohol around him.

Although he had already confirmed the direction that he wanted to write in, he still felt troubled when it came to actually writing. He paced around the room a few times before suddenly remembering how he had yet to drink the hundred jars of fine alcohol from Sun Fubai!

Wanting to emulate the story of how Li Bai could string together a hundred poems from just a peck of alcohol, he took it out and drank a few cups alone. Although it was all fine alcohol, it was lacking in flavour.

TL: Li Bai, or Li Taibai, is an ancient Chinese poet of great renown, known for his poems and his fondness of drinking. His poems are so great that they're still studied to this day, and younger children of Chinese descent are often forced to memorise them (I too suffered this fate ;-;)

Even Li Taibai had to raise his cup to toast to the moon and his shadow so that the three could "drink together." As such, it really was quite difficult for him to drink alone. Li Qingshan thought long and hard. Xiao An was currently making preparations for the assembly of dharma. Milliped was hibernating, while

Hua Chengzan was in secluded cultivation. Han Tiewi was probably too busy with the matters of the school of the Military too, unable to make any spare time to drink with him.

Just as he felt pained over the absence of a drinking buddy, he suddenly saw Chu Danqing, so he invited him.

Chu Danqing was stunned at first. He was unable to say everything he had thought of beforehand. He never really drank. Painters were not poets, so they could not spend all their time in a drunken stupor. Only with a clear mind could he paint with a clear vision and steady strokes.

Smelling the fragrance of the alcohol, he could not help but gulp.

A small, clear stream flowed out from the alcohol jar, entering two jade cups.

Chu Danqing, originally called Goudan'er. Twenty-one years of age. Due to his delicate babyface, he seemed very young.

Note: Goudan'er is an extremely unsophisticated name often given to children in the countryside. A literal translation would be dog balls or dog testicles. In ancient China, children were frequently given unsophisticated and vulgar names in hopes that they will live longer. They believed that the worse a child's name was, the harder they would be and the more likely they would survive to a greater age; this was due to the high infant mortality rate. This comes from local beliefs that when the judges of the dead come to collect souls (basically people die when their souls are collected), they don't think it's a name befitting of a human, so they skip the person.

As he begged on the streets in his youth, he was discovered by Chu Shidao in his hometown. He possessed a special bloodline known as the Jade Blood of Vermillion and Black, which was why he was called Danqing, and he took on his master's surname. When he was eleven, he was taken into the mountains to learn painting from his master. He had only emerged a month ago. He had come to investigate Li Qingshan.

Note: Danqing can mean vermilion and black, or it can mean Chinese painting, as vermilion and black are frequently used in Chinese painting. I've attached an example:

Over a dozen jars of alcohol in, before Li Qingshan had even said anything to him, he came clean with everything. He wrapped his arm around Li Qingshan's neck and spouted exactly what he was thinking.

"I want a woman!" Chu Danqing called out. His voice resounded through the bamboo forest, and he then proceeded to laugh idiotically.

Li Qingshan sighed and shook his head. Look at what all that smothering had done to such a good child!

"You're drunk."

"I'm not drunk. Drink, let's keep drinking!"

"You can't keep drinking."

"Why can't I keep drinking? I- I have money!" Chu Danqing rummaged through his hundred treasures pouch for quite a while, but sure enough, he did not find a single piece of silver. Without thinking any further, he pulled out a stack of paintings. "I'll pay with paintings!"

As a result, Li Qingshan received a pile of ready-made specimens that he could use to understand the abilities of painters.

“You!” There was a cry, and Han Qiongzhi arrived before the bamboo loft.

Hua Chengzan was gone, so as the secondary disciple of the school of Legalism, she had been piled high with work. However, when she heard how Li Qingshan would be battling someone, she still managed to make some time and come take a look. However, she was met with a delicate young man basically in Li Qingshan’s arms, even trying to feed Li Qingshan alcohol. She immediately felt like she had been struck by lightning. So it turned out he leaned in that direction. No wonder he could treat her so indifferently.

Then she thought about something Hua Chengzan had said to her before he had entered seclusion, “If I still don’t get myself together, someone might end up cutting me off.” Has little Hua fallen for his schemes too? This Li Qingshan is up to absolutely no good. Little Hua has only just entered seclusion, and he has already found someone new. Sigh, what am I thinking!?

“Don’t misunderstand! He likes women!” Li Qingshan could tell what Han Qiongzhi was thinking with a single glance, so he rectified in a hurry. However, never did he imagine that Han Qiongzhi’s thoughts had already reached such a complicated level in just a single moment.

After he said that, Chu Danqing saw three Han Qiongzhis too. He raised his cup. “Ah, three beauties. Come drink!”

“Like I said!” Li Qingshan shrugged.

“Where’d this drunkard come from? Huh? The tenth layer?”

Only after listening to Li Qingshan’s explanations did she learn that the person right before her was Li Qingshan’s future opponent. She really had no idea whether she should be happy for him or not. His opponent had come to investigate him, but from just a few jars of alcohol, he had said everything on his mind, even giving Li Qingshan a pile of paintings.

For example, great sir Li’s opponents had always been either a genius like Chu Tian or seven hundred valiant soldiers from the school of the Military. He had even faced an opponent like Altar Lord Black Lotus before and emerged unscathed. Now that he was supposed to fight someone like him, she really had no idea on what to say...

“Don’t underestimate him. The paintings from him can defeat regular tenth layer Qi Practitioners.” Drunkenness did turn people boastful, but Li Qingshan believed that these were not drunken boasts. The “Jade Blood of Vermillion and Black” definitely were not empty words.

In a single decade, he had gone from being a young beggar to a tenth layer Qi Practitioner. He was so talented that he was no less of a prodigy than Chu Tian. Painters could channel their painstaking efforts and spiritual energy into paintings, such that they could summon everything in the paintings when they needed to. They had a similar ability to novelists.

However, there was no need for them to gather the power of belief. As long as they had sufficient time, they could create an entire army. With how vast the world was, able people and outstanding talents really did appear one after another. None of them could be underestimated.

Han Qiongzhi studied Chu Danqing closely and struggled to see even a hint of a genius from this drunkard. Even Chu Tian had some pride and arrogance about him!

Li Qingshan picked up Chu Danqing, found an empty bedroom, and casually threw him onto the bed. Chu Danqing immediately began to snore away.

Li Qingshan said, "Still not satisfied."

As a result, Han Qiongzhi just crossed her legs casually and sat down before Li Qingshan. She accepted the new cup Li Qingshan had passed over and drank it all. She smacked her lips. "The Apricot Blossom brew of the Ten Miles store."

"You've been there before?" Just when Li Qingshan wanted to fill up her cup, she had already grabbed the jar for herself.

"Tsk. What alcohol haven't I tried in the Parlour of Clouds and Rain?"

This group of young masters and young ladies all fooled around in a location of prosperity in Clear River city, a place of indulgence, the Parlour of Clouds and Rain. They basically indulged in their senses however they could.

Li Qingshan glanced at her. "Actually, I like women too."

Han Qiongzhi was halfway through drinking, but suddenly, she was unable to drink anymore. These thoughts that rarely appeared in her head, like a man and women being alone, or men and women maintaining their distances from one another, suddenly emerged, and her face flushed slightly from drinking. She feigned anger. "If you want to drink, then drink. What're you saying so much for?"

Yet for some reason, she wanted him to continue, to see what other nonsense he could spout. She was a forgiving and tolerant person, so she would not rebuke him too much either.

Li Qingshan instead felt that Han Qiongzhi was very right. If he wanted to drink, then he was supposed to drink. What was he saying all of this for? Was he supposed to copy Chu Danqing and yell out that he wanted women too?

His gaze landed on the pile of paintings. Although he would still have to return them to him once he woke up, surely it would be fine if he used this opportunity to study them, right?

He picked up a smaller painting from the stack. It depicted a life-like oriole. Li Qingshan remembered the method of using the Cursive Sword Calligraphy, so he tried channeling true qi into it.

As if he had set off a profound mechanism, the oriole suddenly began to move. It flapped its wings and let out a clear cry, immediately breaking free from the painting. It flew around Li Qingshan a few times before vanishing into the bamboo forest.

"Um, it flew away." Li Qingshan stared at the blank piece of paper in his hands in a daze. Suddenly, he vanished, and a few seconds later, he returned to where he was before, holding a struggling oriole in his hand. He contemplated on how he was supposed to shove it back into the painting.

Han Qiongzhi's attention was drawn over by this strange sight too. She also used this opportunity to dismiss her random, awkward thoughts. She picked up a painting.

They had almost finished drinking, but Han Qiongzhi became more energetic the more she drank, giving Li Qingshan no opportunity to take advantage of her, which was a slight pity.

He had basically finished studying the paintings now. At the very least, he found out how to return the paintings to their previous state so that he could give them back to Chu Danqing. Suddenly, Li Qingshan raised his head and smiled strangely. "He's fled!"

Chu Danqing jerked awake. When he thought of his behaviour when he was drunk, he felt troubled and uneasy. He was tempted to throw himself at a wall.

He had not just never really drunk. Rather, this was the first time he had drunk in his entire life. During the days he had spent on the streets, he could only drool outside liquor stores, while in the mountains, his master never drank.

He regretted that his childhood had been brought up, which made him rather tempted to make up for everything he had missed out, only to humiliate himself so much. He regretted even more that he had forgotten about the vileness of human nature and the difficulties of life from just ten years in the mountains.

He heard Li Qingshan and Han Qiongzhi's voices at the front of the courtyard. He directly left through the window, taking off and fleeing from Cloudwisp island.

He did not even want his paintings back. Fortunately, he still had a hint of sobriety about him, so he had only taken out unimportant practice pieces. It would not matter even if he gave them to that wretched Li Qingshan. Otherwise, it really would be too late for regret.

Then these paintings are mine! Li Qingshan stowed the stack of paintings away. He had already come up with a plan. He knew what he was going to write.

In the world, no one was more naive than children. When adults read novels, perhaps they could become enthralled for a moment, but at the end of the day, they knew it was all just fictitious. However, children could believe that it was true, believing in the existence of these unbelievable things.

In the past, the monster that the founding ancestor of the school of Novels had seen specially targeted children too.

Li Qingshan obviously could not harm children, but he knew there was something called fairy tales among the various types of novels that existed. From those tiny believers, the power of belief that their pure minds could provide could probably rival that of ten adults.

Fairy tales were terse and powerful. It would be much easier to propagate them than most other novels.

However, the number of fairy tales that existed was also as boundless as an ocean, which made it rather difficult for Li Qingshan to choose. Western fairy tales would probably struggle to take off due to the conflicting culture and customs, so which eastern fairy tale was he supposed to tell? The King of Fats? It was simple and interesting, which was beneficial for propagation. It was powerful and practical too, like how he could destroy an entire mountain from a fart...

However, if he were supposed to summon a character like that in the eye of the public, lifting up his bare bottom to... Even with how thick-skinned Li Qingshan was, he felt his face heat up.

Only when he encountered Chu Danqing and saw his paintings did he think of an extremely famous character. He stood alongside the Black Cat Detective and the Calabash Brothers as the three great childhood role models, and his ability just happened to be the same as the school of Painting.

Chapter 332 - Fighting Paintings with Paintings

Han Qiongzhi saw how Li Qingshan had been taken away by his thoughts, so she smiled. She waved her hand around in front of him. "What are you thinking about?"

Li Qingshan said, "I'm thinking about how I'll face li'l bro Chu."

Han Qiongzhi furrowed her brows. "Do you really have an idea for that?"

"I might as well try it." Li Qingshan smiled. His bronze face radiated with confidence that beamed like the sun.

Han Qiongzhi's heart rippled as her cup halted in her hand.

"Senior sister Han, the commander's requested you to return."

Qian Rongzhi arrived near the bamboo loft and bowed. She seemed to ignore everything unfolding right before her.

"Thank you for your alcohol." Han Qiongzhi placed down the cup and left in a hurry, as if she was fleeing.

Li Qingshan watched as she left. His gaze landed on Qian Rongzhi, and his smile immediately vanished. His expression became as bleak as the winter sun.

"Qian Rongzhi, I just happened to be looking for you. Why don't you explain to me what happened in Ancient Wind city?"

Gu Yanying had restricted access to the information on what Qian Rongzhi had done as some form of protection for this "Nighthawk" who had performed a meritorious service. There were not a lot of people who knew the inside story. Li Qingshan had only managed to guess part of it because of his understanding of Qian Rongzhi.

Qian Rongzhi made her way over to the corridor and sat down. She picked up the cup that Han Qiongzhi had set down and began drinking by herself under Li Qingshan's gaze. Then, she started explaining everything that had happened.

After he heard the entire story, even Li Qingshan could not help but sigh in amazement. Although her cultivation had not progressed much during the months he had spent in secluded cultivation, she had not been idling around. She was gaining favour with people using her own methods.

"You wouldn't be in any danger, nor would Xiao An be in any danger. I don't have the right to warn you of anything either."

"Are you certain that there won't be any danger?"

"I'm not, but that's all because I'm too weak. From today onwards, I can no longer leave the academy anymore." Qian Rongzhi downed the alcohol cup after cup.

Li Qingshan understood now. Regardless of how heavily injured the White Lotus Mother was, killing her would still be as easy as crushing a bug. As the greatest traitor of the White Lotus cult, she would have to live her days carefully from here on out. She tried benefitting from her betrayal, but she would have to pay the cost for it in the end.

“Commander Gu has promised me that if I can reach Foundation Establishment, she’ll take me to the Ruyi commandery.”

Li Qingshan said, “So she’s already helped you arrange a path of retreat.”

“A path of retreat? If I can’t leave the academy, just how long will it take for me to reach Foundation Establishment? A decade? Two decades? Five decades? The most likely scenario is that I won’t even reach Foundation Establishment. Even if I barely manage it, will I be able to find any peace in the Ruyi commandery?” Qian Rongzhi smiled painfully. Gu Yanying had indeed given her an abundant reward, but she was not Xiao An. She was not Chu Tian. She was not even Li Qingshan. With her talent, the heavens had basically already taken pity on her with how she had managed to reach the sixth layer.

She hated Gu Yanying uncontrollably inside. She hated her for using her like a chess piece. She hated her for clearly seeing through her hatred, yet still brushing it aside. Even more, she hated the fact that she lacked the ability to even fight back.

Li Qingshan fell silent. The world probably no longer had a place where she could shelter herself now that she was targeted by a Golden Core cultivator. This vicious woman who had made her way to the academy together with him seemed to be living in glory, but she had instead embarked on a road to ruin.

Qian Rongzhi suddenly stood up. She took out a pile of things from her hundred treasures pouch. There were large amounts of pills and spiritual stones, even a Virtue Accumulation pill among them, as well as many mid and high grade spiritual artifacts. There was even a supreme grade spiritual artifact. The Virtue Accumulation pill and the supreme grade spiritual artifact had come from Gu Yanying. They were basically precious treasures to a Qi Practitioner.

Li Qingshan wondered whether Qian Rongzhi was drunk too, and that she was even more drunk than Chu Danqing.

“I’m going to go carry out a mission, so hold onto these items for me. If I don’t return, give them to Xiao An.”

“Right now?” Li Qingshan was surprised too. He had heard about how all powerful cultivators would dabble a little in divination. If she went out right now, she would basically be throwing herself into the arms of the enemy. She would probably be tortured to death by the White Lotus Mother.

“I don’t want to die, but I don’t want to live like this.” Qian Rongzhi smiled charmingly and bunched her hair together. She had just conquered fate, giving her the freedom to plan and scheme as she wished, but now, because of the White Lotus cult, she had lost the ability to pivot around. All her plans were filled with the possibility of failure. Compared to death, she found this situation much more unbearable.

Now, she wanted to gamble against fate once again, just so that she could live without depending on it.

At this exact moment, the sky twisted, and dense mist sealed the islands of the academy once more. After several days and nights of urgent repair, the Formation of Dragons and Snakes was operating once more, protecting the disciples of the academy.

Many disciples in the academy stopped what they were doing and emerged from the buildings, looking up.

They all discussed with one another quietly, "We're good now."

"I used to find it pretty restricting, but now, I feel like going without the formation is like going without clothes."

Countless uneasy souls settled down because of the return of the formation.

Qian Rongzhi smiled in a self-deprecating manner. She left Cloudwisp island and left the academy, setting off to face the ever-changing, unpredictable fate.

Li Qingshan stowed away the items she had passed him quietly. He neither prayed for her, nor did he curse her.

He glanced at the sky again before returning inside and beginning to write.

A scrunched up ball of paper fell onto the floor. Li Qingshan was troubled. Li Bai could string together a hundred poems after drinking, yet he, Li Qingshan, was not even able to write a fairy tale?

He had a flash of inspiration. Li Qingshan stood up. "This isn't how you write this story!"

He arrived at the Cloudwisp association. Sun Fubai and Liu Chuanfeng were currently editing his novel urgently, but it really was quite the workload. It was a novel of a million characters, and they would have to change the entire story if they wanted to edit it. Moreover, they had to ensure continuity too. Even if they went without sleep or rest, it was not something they could complete in a few days.

Sun Fubai said, "Qingshan, time is just too tight."

"All we can do is give it a try." Li Qingshan then said to Liu Chuanfeng, "Help me draw some things."

"I don't have the time!" Liu Chuanfeng called out.

"Then I'll go find another artist." Li Qingshan remembered how the Cloudwisp association had quite a few artists too, who were hired to specially produce accompanying illustrations for novels.

Li Qingshan chose some young painters who were skilled in meticulous, realistic painting techniques, before telling them what he was thinking and getting them to paint it.

Ever since Li Qingshan had visited last time, everyone in the association knew that this was one of the three owners of the association, so they never dared to brush him aside. They immediately began to paint with everything they had.

Li Qingshan meditated in the meantime. A while later, a painter passed over the work he had completed. "Boss, do you think this'll do?" The other painter began to speed up too.

Li Qingshan took a look. Sure enough, it was life-like and extraordinarily detailed. It depicted a boy of humble origins vividly, but Li Qingshan shook his head. "It won't do. You've drawn him too well!"

Drawing it well was instead bad. The two painters exchanged glances.

"This is for children, so make it simpler, and don't leave it black and white. I want full colour." Li Qingshan affirmed his thoughts. The only way to express the wonders of this story was through pictures. Back then, he had read a picture book too.

And, he had to ensure that the pictures depicted everything. Little children had very limited vocabulary. With some further thought, he realised that what he was doing right now was no longer a so-called novel. Instead, it was a picture book or cartoon.

However, novelists in the beginning were based on rumors and gossip. They were not bound by words. Regardless of the methods he took, all that mattered were people understanding it and believing in it. He wanted to use the methods of the school of Painting to defeat the school of Painting.

He remained in the Cloudwisp association until night time. Finally, he decided on the painting style. However, no matter how he tried to simplify it, the works from the two painters were still much more detailed than the picture book in his memories.

Afterwards, he immediately gathered all the painters skilled in meticulous, realistic painting techniques and got them to copy the style. The story was extremely simple, less than a hundred pages in total.

In the end, Li Qingshan added naively simple narration at the bottom of the illustrations, and it was complete as a picture book.

Li Qingshan weighed it in his hand. This original draft was critical for summoning the characters in the book, as well as his trump card for defeating Chu Danqing.

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Thirty kilometers away from Clear River city, in a small town.

Thump, thump, thump. Thump, thump, thump. A travelling pedlar swung a rattle-drum around with a carrying pole over his shoulders, walking along the small alleyway paved from stone.

A door opened within the alleyway, and a tiny head stuck out. "Pedlar uncle, is there candy?"

"There is. There's sesame candy, barley candy, and crunchy candy. There's each and every kind!" The pedlar cleared his throat and sang out a list of what he sold.

A group of children emerged like small monkeys, gathering around the pedlar. They all held a few copper coins.

"What's this?" A child spotted a stack of colourful picture books on top of the goods. There were four words on there, but he only recognised the word "horse" or "Ma".

The pedlar said, "Now you have some pretty sharp eyes. Take it."

The children each received a book and flipped through it. Perhaps they still did not understand the contents too well, but the beautiful pictures alone had managed to enrapture them. They immediately began to hesitate. To buy candy or to buy the book?

“How much is the book? I’ll buy it!” said a little fatty. He was in possession of much more copper coins than his little friends.

“I’ll buy it too!” said the eldest child there. He had learned how to read from a private tutor, so he understood what the words were saying. He had been drawn in by the story immediately. Even if he had to go without candy, he would still buy it.

The pedlar said, “It’s free. It’s a gift. One for each person. Don’t take anymore than that!”

The children cheered.

“Can I take one too?” asked a child nervously. Compared to his companions’ cotton clothes, he wore patchy clothes, which made him seem particularly small. He did not have a single copper coin at all. He had only come to see what was going on.

“Take it!” The pedlar casually shoved two pieces of candy into the child’s mouth. The money he would make from giving out these books would be even more than clearing all the stock on him. He too was extremely happy over how he could have a prosperous year.

The pedlar travelled away, and the children gathered together.

“How pretty.” “What is this picture showing?”

The eldest child copied his tutor by clearing his throat. “Come, I’ll read it for you!”

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Sun Shuping received a new draft from Sun Fubai. He planned on going back and familiarising himself with it first, thinking about how he would tell the story before teaching it to the other storytellers.

Although he felt like the novel had lost part of its charm after being edited, there were fortunately not any particularly major changes overall. As a matter of fact, if he could tell some of the turning points properly, it would be even more fascinating. Splitting open the Bright peak in a single stroke was much more interesting.

This youngest owner was not particularly old, but his writing ability was truly impressive. He was far better than that second owner, the Master of Wind and Moon.

Chapter 333 - Renowned Throughout the Land

Although time was rather tight, Sun Shuping still walked at an unhurried pace. He had a healthy glow about him, and he had switched his cloth robes for a fur coat. He was brimming with vigour, differing greatly from the impoverished old storyteller of the past.

His job right now was to train young storytellers for the Cloudwisp association. He made quite a pretty penny.

Although there was no longer any need for him to take the stage, he frequently could not help himself but to go up and tell a part, leading to rounds of applause. He did this to scratch his itch of demonstrating his ability, but it was also because the money he earned on stage would all be his. The Cloudwisp association would not touch it at all.

Sun Shuping often felt embarrassed because of this. He tried persuading his bosses to accept some silver taels in consideration of the long-term situation. He had already begun to treat the Cloudwisp association like half a home, so he obviously hoped the association could carry forward and prosper for a very long time so that humble actors and artists like him could hold their heads high.

Returning to his room, he discovered that his disciple, Li'l Rock, was lying on the ground, utterly absorbed by a picture book. He frowned. "Li'l Rock, why aren't you familiarising yourself with the material and preparing to go on stage? Why are you reading this instead?" Sun Shuping was originally against his disciple continuing along this line of profession, but after joining the Cloudwisp association, he changed his mind. He wanted to give him some proper training.

Li'l Rock raised his head. "Master, I want to tell this story!"

In the past, Sun Shuping had looked through the picture book Li Qingshan had released too. It was interesting, but it was just a story for children. There were basically no words, and it was too short, making it unsuitable for storytelling or singing out. As a result, he did not take it too seriously.

But now that Li'l Rock had mentioned it, turning a story into a smaller, brief performance was quite a good idea too. It was perfect for Li'l Rock to go on stage and get some practice.

Liu Chuanfeng and Sun Fubai knew about the picture book too. It was all thanks to Sun Fubai's connections that it could disseminate and propagate so rapidly. However, they also felt like it was just an insignificant picture book that did not suit the standard of the school of Novels, unable to contend against the school of Painting's Chu Danqing. Before they knew it, they had already forgotten about it, focusing most of their attention on editing Li Qingshan's novel instead.

Once a chapter was completed, they would immediately spread it throughout the land using the storytellers. It was extremely effective too. Even the Cloudwisp association gained great renown, which filled the two of them with confidence. Over two weeks had already passed by now.

Li Qingshan meditated in his room. He peered inside his body, and the twinkling power of belief gathered in his Divine Talisman of Great Creation, making it shine.

His novel and picture book rapidly spread through two different audiences. Through every single teahouse and restaurant, through every conversation between children, his impressive name was being spread around, turning into specks of belief and gathering in the sea of power of belief.

At the same time, he had never stopped practising the Ox Demon's Fist of Great Strength. He had already consumed almost half of the pills he had purchased with spiritual stones. In probably half a month's time, he would reach a whole new level.

As he watched the sky darken, Li Qingshan thought, It's about time she comes back. He waited for another hour, and only then did Xiao An appear outside, throwing herself into Li Qingshan's arms. Her tiny face was fuming.

“Who is it that has made our Xiao An so furious?” Li Qingshan caressed her long hair with a smile.

Recently, Xiao An had been extremely busy too. The eminent monks that the One Thought master had invited all converged here from various places, and Xiao An had to visit and greet every single one of them. Mentioning the buddhist dharma would be unavoidable every single time, throwing some sayings at her as a test.

If the eminent monk happened to bring a disciple or two with them, then it would be even more troublesome. They would insist on competing and seeing whose disciple was better. They just wanted to make it difficult for her.

With Xiao An’s understanding of buddhism, the One Thought master obviously achieved a complete victory, earning plenty of respect. He was overflowing with joy every single day, but Xiao An was particularly vexed. This had greatly diminished the time she spent with Li Qingshan.

Compared to bickering with these monks, she would much rather lean against his chest peacefully.

She shifted into a more comfortable posture. “The Path of White Bone and Great Beauty is completely right. All of these bald asses should be burnt to death! Today, the young nun brought by that old nun clearly couldn’t win against me, but she insisted that I had to undergo tonsure, or I’ll still be clinging onto my six sensory desires. I ended up losing.” She did not care about the outcome, but she did not want to waste time.

Li Qingshan burst out laughing. He pinched the tip of her nose. “Looks like your comprehension of the Path of White Bone and Great Beauty has deepened yet again.”

“Exactly.” Xiao An held his hand and studied the grooves carefully. Her large eyes blinked a few times before suddenly saying impulsively, “Let’s enter seclusion!”

Ever since last time, monotonous secluded cultivation had become her favourite thing to do. They would be alone, without any disturbances at all.

Li Qingshan said, “The assembly of dharma is about to formally begin. If we enter secluded cultivation right now, the One Thought master will want to tear out my throat. As for you, just listen along. Your comprehension of the Path of White Bone and Great Beauty will definitely deepen.”

All Xiao An did was feign a tantrum. Before him, she would always be a little more “normal”.

Li Qingshan said, “There’s only the two of us on the island right now, so let’s treat it as secluded cultivation. We’ll cultivate in seclusion for a few hours!”

Xiao An agreed. “Alright.”

The next morning, the fragrance of sandalwood curled away, and Xiao An had already left. Ever since the arrival of the first eminent monk, she was responsible for holding the morning chanting in Anāsraṃvā? temple. This should have been a great honour, but it caused her quite a lot of distress.

The One Thought master knew that this disciple of his was difficult to coax. He was afraid that she would stubbornly decide to go her own way with a single will and be mocked by others, so he promised a lot of pills to her. In order to earn some pills for Li Qingshan, all she could do was accept the responsibilities of the primary disciple seriously. As long as she could help him, she could tolerate momentary separation.

Holding onto the pills from her, Li Qingshan felt quite strange aside from his joy and delight. He shook his head and tossed this thought out of his mind.

He did not tell Xiao An about the items Qian Rongzhi had left behind. As her guardian, he did not want Xiao An to have any relation with that woman.

Of course, if Qian Rongzhi really did die outside, he could tell Xiao An about it. It was not like a dead person could influence Xiao An in any way.

However, he never received this news.

All he learnt from Han Qiongzhi was that after returning in one piece from a mission, Qian Rongzhi immediately took on a second mission. The location of the mission was even further away from Clear River city, where the headquarters of the Hawkwolf Guard stood. She basically seemed like she was trying to commit suicide.

However, Li Qingshan had a feeling that she would not die outside so easily. If she did not have some confidence in this, she would have never approached the matter in such a manner.

Whatever. Her fate had nothing to do with him.

Li Qingshan stood up and made his way into the depths of the bamboo forest and began training. Even Xiao An was working hard for him, so how could he still laze around?

He heard the bamboo leaves tremble in an unnatural manner. Li Qingshan suddenly looked back and threw a punch.

With a thump, it landed within a vice-grip like hand.

Li Qingshan said, "Tieyi, what brings you here?"

"I've come to pay back the debt!" Han Tieyi was slightly surprised. The force in the punch actually made his hand ache slightly.

"I almost forgot. You still owe me two punches." Li Qingshan lifted up his fist, and Han Tieyi retreated rapidly, vanishing into the bamboo forest.

"Come to the school of the Military's Main Martial Arts stadium. Don't forget, you have a debt to pay too."

"It's a pity that I only like collecting debts, and I hate paying debts!" Li Qingshan shot off like an arrow in pursuit.

Chapter 334 - The Military Formation of the Coiled Snake

The bamboo turned into messy, verdant shadows that receded around Li Qingshan.

The glistening Lake of Dragons and Snakes suddenly unfolded before him. All he saw was a series of splashes that extended quickly towards Great War island. Han Tieyi ran along at the end of the splashes like he was running across land.

Li Qingshan leapt up and stepped onto a cloud. He pursued on the cloud, leaving behind a long, cloudy trail behind him.

Huge platforms of various heights reached towards the sky. The Main Martial Arts stadium of the school of the Military was right before him.

Li Qingshan's eyes suddenly narrowed. The several hundred military disciples stood in neat formation in the stadium; they were like statues.

The military disciples that had shown up this time numbered one or two hundred less than last time at the very least. They had died to the White Lotus cult. Although every single one of them remained neutral in expression, grief lingered in the air.

Through this trial of life and death, their aura had become even more intense than last time. Aggrieved soldiers were unstoppable.

Han Tiewi passed through the formation before quickly turning around. His body continued to slide backwards due to the momentum as his legs dug out two faint trails on the ground. He raised his arm high into the air and pointed it straight at Li Qingshan like a long spear. "For redemption!"

"For redemption!" The voices thundered like an avalanche.

Li Qingshan leapt off the cloud and landed heavily on the ground in a half-crouching position. He straightened himself out and displayed his right hand like he was inviting them. "Come!"

This time, there were no spectators on the island. Apart from the military disciples, all other disciples were forbidden from entering the island. There were only two exceptions, Han Qiongzhi and Ru Xin.

Han Qiongzhi stood with the ten core disciples. She was brimming with interest and high morale. This time, Li Qingshan would definitely be defeated. He had yet to witness the true power of the school of the military. However, whenever she saw this man's fearless bearing when he took on everyone else alone, she would find him utterly charming.

Ru Xin stood to the other side of the stadium on a platform over a dozen meters tall with the entire battlefield in sight. Her red lips parted slightly. Imbued with true qi, her voice reached Li Qingshan's ears. "Be more heavy-handed."

Li Qingshan ignored her. This time, he would not be able to hold back even if he wanted to.

He moved his legs, rushing forwards gently and swiftly. Within a single second, he had turned into a black tiger, diving into the military formation. A few military disciples were directly sent flying.

Suddenly, he glanced back; it was like the scarlet eyes of a tiger meeting the glimmering eyes of a wolf.

"Fall into formation!" A furious roar rang out.

The military disciples surrounding Li Qingshan held back their desire to attack. All of them retreated, revealing twelve of the most powerful people, who advanced slowly. In terms of combined attacks, there was not a single school that could surpass the school of the Military.

“Now that’s more like the school of the Military.” Li Qingshan grinned. Compared to putting on an act and standing to the sides from weakest to strongest, it would be better if they just used their full strength!

However, the military disciples all found this to be an insulting mockery. The humiliation from their crushing defeat last time and their grief from losing their fellow officers immediately turned into flaming fury.

They struck out at the same time. Their true qi turned into sabres, spears, fire, and ice! Last time, the combined attacks they had not used even until the very end were unleashed immediately! Determination flashed through their minds, This time, we’ll knock you down with just a single strike!

Li Qingshan, on the other hand, was completely calm and composed. He paid attention to everything unfolding around him with his senses. Sure enough, there was not the slightest opening at all. If that was the case, then let’s make an opening!

Li Qingshan raised both arms as blue true qi that rippled like water wrapped around them. He was not targeting any of the military disciples. Instead, he slammed his hands against the ground violently.

Bang. The ground shook, and it sank to form a deep pit. A circular shockwave spread out in all directions.

Every single military disciple could not help but stagger slightly. Perfection was without openings, but once perfection was destroyed, countless openings would appear.

Back to Li Qingshan, he had already used the force from slamming the ground to leap into the air. The attacks passed by below his feet, just half a beat too slow.

Li Qingshan overlooked the battlefield. He pushed his hands backwards, and his body stabbed towards a large group of weaker military disciples like a straight spear.

The world of cultivators had always been a world that pursued strength. The strong was in control of everything, not bound to the weak. It would never be so easy that they could achieve victory through an encirclement.

Just when it was going to be a repeat of last time, Han Qiongzhi shook her head instead. Meanwhile, Ru Xin squatted down on the edge of the platform, completely contrasting against her image. With her red lips and white teeth, she smiled very happily. As it seemed, she would not be receiving as much money as last time. However, seeing him suffer defeat would still be worth it.

A huge snake opened its huge mouth and lunged towards Li Qingshan.

The snake head seemed real, but the neck was illusionary, and by the time it had reached the body, it had already faded away and merged into the surrounding five hundred military disciples. Before he knew it, they had already shifted into a strange, revolving formation.

This was the strongest trump card of the school of the Military, military formations! Through rigorous training, they merged everyone’s spirit and will together, forming a single attack with everyone’s strength.

The Coiled Snake formation was specially created for tearing apart powerful cultivators.

True qi surged out, and Li Qingshan turned around and threw a punch.

With a thump, Li Qingshan was sent flying, colliding into a platform. He slid down as his body ached with pain. Probably only Foundation Establishment cultivators could rival the tremendous true qi within the snake head.

“Hey, you fine?”

Li Qingshan raised his head and met Ru Xin’s cheerful gaze. He said loudly with a smile, “Interesting!” Defeating the military disciples the first time had been interesting. If he did the exact same thing this time, even he would find it boring. Only strong opponents were worth challenging.

Han Qiongzhi had originally been clenching her fist, worried. However, when she saw how he laughed and joked along with that strange woman from the school of Medicine, she immediately became furious. She waved her fist. “For redemption!”

Han Tieyi glanced at her and waved his hand. Advance!

Li Qingshan stood up by pushing off his knees. He saw the army advance slowly as the snake in the air flicked its tongue. He smiled and went up to receive it.

Boom. The snake head bit down, creating a great pit on the ground.

Li Qingshan was already prepared. He dodged it and used his extraordinary speed to circle around the army. He tried attacking them several times, but he felt rather uncertain about where he was supposed to target. The weakest military disciples were at the snake’s tail, hidden in the centre of the formation, while the body of the snake outside was like a steel wall, able to block everything.

However, their disadvantage was very clear—they moved just too slowly. Even out of the twelve stronger military disciples, only one or two of them could keep up with Li Qingshan, and they were afraid to approach him, afraid they would be defeated individually. They could only let him run around freely.

Han Tieyi shook his head slightly. This kid’s reactions were simply too fast! At the moment just prior, regular people would definitely consider dodging if they were faced with such a terrifying attack, but if they dodged, they would definitely be forced into the formation and be torn apart. On the other hand, he had done the exact opposite, taking it on without any hesitation.

He also had the power to take it on. If regular seventh layer Qi Practitioners took on the snake head, they would be heavily injured even if they managed to survive, yet he just brushed himself off and stood up again; it was like he was completely fine.

Li Qingshan constantly moved around, leading the entire military formation around. He smiled suddenly. Finally, he had found the critical point. He leapt up and dove into the military formation.

A while later, the five hundred disciples of the school of the Military all laid on the ground in the stadium, but as long as they were still conscious, they all cheered. Many of them even shed tears of emotion.

They had won. The monster-like Li Qingshan had finally fallen. The gloominess and humiliation that had weighed on their hearts seemed to be released in that moment.

When Li Qingshan dove into the Coiled Snake formation, he pulled the army apart very quickly, but he also entered a difficult battle immediately. He was secretly injured from the strike earlier too, so when he finally ran out of true qi, his body gave way, and he collapsed.

He laid on the ground with his arms and legs spread out, gazing at the clear sky. Suddenly, a figure blocked the sunlight. Han Tieyi extended his hand.

Li Qingshan grabbed the hand and stood up.

The military disciples looked at Li Qingshan. When their fury and humiliation subsided, they all felt admiration towards him. This man had taken on all of them alone after all. He was defeated, but he could still stand proudly.

“Do you want to learn the battle skills of the school of the Military?” Han Tieyi’s handsome face that appeared to be sculpted from ice seemed to warm up slightly too.

Li Qingshan smiled. “Of course, but I need to rest up first!” He called out, “Ru Xin!”

“Coming. Thank you for your patronage. Three thousand spiritual stones.” Ru Xin arrived on a green leaf as she chuckled to herself.

“I don’t have a single spiritual stone on me right now.” Li Qingshan was telling the truth. He had spent all of his spiritual stones on pills, and he obviously could not spend what Qian Rongzhi had given him.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Spiritual artifacts and talismans work too. I’ll pick them myself later. You can go to sleep!” Ru Xin waved her hand, and the green leaves scattered, lifting up all the severely injured military disciples.

How can I fall asleep in your presence?! Li Qingshan said to Han Qiongzhi to the side, “Senior sister Han, help me keep an eye out on her. Don’t let this woman steal my things.” Exhausted, he tilted his head back and fell asleep immediately, snoring away.

“Why me? Oi, don’t fall asleep!”

Han Qiongzhi could see that Li Qingshan was heavily injured. Originally, she wanted to check up on him, but she could not bring herself to do so in front of all these military disciples. Everyone seemed to have seen through her thoughts already. Just as she was wavering, she heard that and beamed for some reason inside.

Han Tieyi said, “Go!”

“I’ll go take care of the military disciples and help you bargain a little. She rips you off every single time.” Han Qiongzhi found her excuse. Neither the school of the Military or her Han family lacked this tiny amount of money for the treatment fees. Although Ru Xin was quite punishing with her mouth, she was fair with prices.

On Benevolence island, the military disciples who were waiting to be checked on by their first young miss did not even see her shadow.

Han Qiongzhi sat by the bed, leaning on her hand and staring straight at Li Qingshan. Never had a man touched her heart like this. Since young, Han Tiewi would often be riddled in injuries and bed bound from the old man's lessons, while all she would do was stand by the bed and laugh at him loudly.

"Knock, knock, knock. Have you stared enough?" Ru Xin knocked on the door and smiled.

"Since when did you..." Han Qiongzhi leapt up.

"I've stood here for two hours already. You didn't see me?" Ru Xin said in surprise.

"What! Of course I saw you! I was just about to ask you whether you've watched me for long enough..."

"I'm kidding. I've only just come, hahaha."

Han Qiongzhi was unable to put up with her gaze. Her face reddened and said, "Don't touch his things. I'm going to go check on others." before fleeing through the door.

Ru Xin arrived by Li Qingshan's bed and glanced at the hundred treasures pouch on his waist. She extended her hand over before suddenly clenching it into a fist half way through. She struck Li Qingshan's abdomen and smiled. "Wake up!"

Li Qingshan clutched his belly and sat up. "You're crazy!"

Ru Xin said, "Who told you to break the promise? I told you to be more heavy-handed."

"Victory and defeat are both frequent for the school of the Military. I've already done all that I can."

"You really can't call holding back doing everything you can." Ru Xin suddenly pressed against Li Qingshan's shoulder. Her gentle face was only inches away, wobbling slightly and reaching his face with her breath.

Chapter 335 - Ocean Wielding

"I didn't hold back." Li Qingshan casually pushed her aside. Ever since he realised he had misunderstood that day, he no longer thought of Ru Xin in any special way. This woman was just too twisted. She was constantly ready for mischief. He did not want to be toyed around with for nothing.

Ru Xin said, "You clearly could have won, but you lost. Isn't that holding back?"

Combining the effort of five hundred people was not an easy feat, requiring extremely great discipline. Maintaining the Coiled Snake formation took tremendous energy too.

As long as Li Qingshan dragged it out, the formation would collapse on itself before long, and he would be able to defeat them all in the same way as before. Defeating these military disciples who had lost many people and much might would probably be even easier than last time.

"Don't you feel that winning like that is very boring?" Li Qingshan laid back down. It was not like it was a battle to the death, so there was no need for him to rack his brain. The outcome was less important. What mattered was learning from it, training his body, and practising skills through it so that he could prepare for a certain day in the future.

"If there are spiritual stones up for grabs, it obviously isn't boring."

“Women just love to be petty. Have you ever heard of thinking for the long-term?”

“Wow, looking down on women.” Ru Xin squeezed Li Qingshan’s shoulder. “Your strength seems to have increased again.”

“One spiritual stone, two spiritual stones...”

“You-” Ru Xin was taken aback. Then, Li Qingshan grabbed her slender, white hand. “Now we’re on equal footing, so feel me however you want!” Although she was always so mischievous, he did feel that it was easier to get along with her.

“Keep dreaming!” Ru Xin smiled. Her face sank.

“Hahaha, Li Qingshan, to think that you would have a day like today. What are you doing? Ru Xin, tell me what’s going on?” Chu Tian rushed in like a whirlwind, pointing at Li Qingshan and laughing at him, but when he saw what they were doing, he immediately struggled to accept it.

“Li Qingshan, you- you- you-” Han Qiongzhi wanted to stop Chu Tian, but she just happened to see this too.

Even Ru Xin rolled her eyes. Just what have we done? You’re reacting like you’ve caught a cheating couple in bed.

.....

Li Qingshan returned to Great War island and found Han Tieyi.

Han Anjun was currently giving a talk to the military disciples, while Han Tieyi stood to one side. Seeing Li Qingshan, Han Anjun made a gesture towards him with his lips.

Han Tieyi walked over and said to Li Qingshan, “Come with me.”

Li Qingshan followed Han Tieyi and arrived before a metal gate. Han Tieyi took out his waist tablet and opened the gate, entering the darkness. Gates opened and closed one after another as they rapidly travelled deeper underground.

Li Qingshan had never thought that Great War island would be hiding something underground too. He became even more curious about just what battle skill Han Tieyi would teach him.

Finally, he arrived at the very bottom. A formation glowed as a great streak of light shot up. As it turned out, the school of the Military’s formation was located here. All he could say was this truly was the school of the Military. With how strict the security was, the school of Novels could never rival it with how theirs was just located within a bamboo forest. However, he did not imagine that this was a library either, with battle skills everywhere.

Han Tieyi stopped and turned around. He said, “Thank you!”

Ru Xin could tell, so he obviously could tell too. His original reason for calling Li Qingshan over was to give the military disciples a sense of danger and an opportunity for actual battle, but ever since the chaos from the White Lotus cult, they could not afford to lose again.

Losing once or twice could motivate them, but if they kept losing, it would only damage the army's morale. They were in desperate need of a victory so that they could rise up with force and spirit.

Li Qingshan said, "What's there to thank me for? I said I already did all that I could."

Defeating the military disciples did not offer any practical benefit to him. Instead, he would lose a great opportunity for actual battle. This battle had a much greater effect on his cultivation of the Ox Demon's Fist of Great Strength than training alone in the bamboo forest.

Han Tieyi said, "You can throw your second punch now."

Li Qingshan said, "If I want to hit you, I'll do it fairly. I'll never do it secretly like this. I don't like to hit a punching bag either, so feel free to fight back in the future."

"Then don't even think about touching my face again." In the darkness, Han Tieyi's lips seemed to curl up, but the change faded away very quickly.

Li Qingshan said, "Normally, I mean what I say. Let's cut to the chase. Where's the battle skill?"

Han Tieyi took out over a dozen jade slips from his hundred treasures pouch. "Here are all the battle skills suited for Gui Water true qi."

"Don't tell me you called me to such a secretive place just to say those few words earlier!"

"So what if I did?"

Li Qingshan had no idea on how to respond. He lowered his head and browsed through them.

By battle skills, they were referring to skills in battle that combined both qi and the body. It was similar to techniques, yet different from techniques. From a certain perspective, it was a higher form of martial arts.

Not only did the people of the jianghu cultivate inner force arduously, but they also practised martial arts arduously. Only then could they unleash their battle prowess.

Cultivators were no different, except true qi was profound and flexible, even greater than inner force. This was a critical skill for Li Qingshan, who specialised in close combat. In a battle that could change with every instant, if he could be a moment faster at a crucial moment, it would be the moment of life and death.

And, just like martial arts, battle skills were divided into various levels. The battle skills Han Tieyi had taken out were all rare, high level battle skills. Even the disciples of the school of the Military could not learn them unless they performed outstandingly.

Although it was said that the hundred schools communicated and exchanged ideologies with one another, they would still keep the items that formed the very core to themselves. Not to mention that the collection included battle skills the Han family had gathered itself, which would only be taught to members of the Han family. Without Han Anjun's permission, even Han Tieyi did not possess the authority to take them out. This was no longer just because Li Qingshan had provided training for the military disciples.

Back then in Ancient Wind city, Li Qingshan had made Han Qiongzhi leave first before personally carving out a path of retreat for her. Han Anjun had seen all of it. Although he never mentioned it, he had his own plans.

Li Qingshan could sense this too. His gaze suddenly locked onto a jade slip, and he let out a soft interjection of surprise.

The battle skill had an extremely grand name—Ocean Wielding. The introduction to the general information detailed. “The power of the converging rivers, with the vastness of the ocean, achieves the arts of the boundless.”

Five words immediately leapt out in Li Qingshan’s head, the Arts of the Boundless Ocean! And, this was not the first time Li Qingshan had heard this saying.

“You have quite the eyes. This is the strongest out of all the battle skills here, but it needs to be powered by a special cultivation method. Your true qi is pure, but it’ll still be rather difficult, so I’d advise you to choose another one!” In order to get Li Qingshan to make a correct decision, Han Tieyi spoke for once.

However, this only verified Li Qingshan’s thoughts. Ocean Wielding must have been a battle skill derived from the Arts of the Boundless Ocean. It was impossible for a sect to be built off a single cultivation method. With the collapse of the Ocean sect, their various cultivation methods and techniques became scattered throughout the world. Ocean Wielding had ended up in the hands of the Han family.

Li Qingshan asked in a hurry, “Do you know where I can find the cultivation method that powers this battle skill?”

Chapter 336 - Choosing the Future

However, Han Tieyi’s reply brought Li Qingshan disappointment. He did not know the whereabouts of this cultivation method either. Then he recommended the Bone-shattering Fist of Ice to Li Qingshan, which could convert Gui Water true qi into power of the extreme cold. It possessed great destructive power, and it could also clad the user in an armour of ice, offering both offensive and defensive capabilities.

Li Qingshan had already checked through all the jade slips. Gui Water true qi was not suited for destruction, so most of these battle skills focused on triumphing over force with gentleness. The Bone-shattering Fist of Ice could be considered as the strongest among them in terms of offensive power, but it was nothing compared to the Ocean Wielding’s sheer brutal force.

This battle skill from the Ocean sect had completely upheaved the saying that Gui Water true qi was not suited for attacks. With a single stroke, it could unleash tsunami-like waves that were never ending.

Li Qingshan considered it for a while. He opened his eyes. “I choose this one!”

As a result, he stored the Ocean Wielding jade slip away in his hundred treasures pouch. Li Qingshan was not planning on trying his luck with this. If he was unable to power this battle skill with true qi, then what about daemon qi?

His daemon qi was of the water element too, and its sheer brute force went without saying. He would have no issues in wielding this battle skill. The path of daemons was his true foundation, so he obviously made his decision after a moment of consideration.

And, it was not like it would be impossible for him to find the latter half of the Arts of the Boundless Ocean!

Han Tiewi did not try to convince him otherwise. He stowed the other jade slips away and brought Li Qingshan back to the surface.

Han Anjun had finished his talk with the military disciples. Suddenly, he pointed at Li Qingshan and said to them, "Before long, this person will become even stronger. By then, what are you going to do?"

"Defeat him!" said the military disciples with brimming vigour.

Li Qingshan smiled. Let's see who improves faster!

His Gui Water true qi was extremely refined and pure. Although it was still a little difficult to power Ocean Wielding, it was not impossible. As long as he could unleash even a tenth of its force, his battle prowess would increase drastically.

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The next morning, the red sun had emerged from the Lake of Dragons and Snakes when the sound of a bell rang through Anāsravā? temple.

The buddhist assembly of dharma that the One Thought master had prepared for so long had finally begun.

The entire island was shrouded in a thin milky-white mist; the faint smell of burning sandalwood incense permeated the air.

The sounds of the striking of wooden fish and chanting lingered above the island. The halls and pagoda all seemed more solemn than usual.

Note: I might have mentioned this before, but a wooden fish is a percussive instrument used in Buddhist ceremonies. It's frequently used to maintain the beat of the chanting.

A total of nine Foundation Establishment monks had arrived. All of them were dignified. Although this was a matter of the school of Buddhism, it was so important that a few school leaders led by Liu Zhangqing had come to receive them, who then stayed behind to listen along. There were a lot of disciples from other schools present too.

Paths of cultivation were similar. They did not study buddhism, but it would still benefit their cultivation if they could become wiser.

Li Qingshan listened along for a while and soon felt giddy. A swathe of large, shiny, bald heads filled his vision, going on about some allegories or dharma or whatever. He understood none of it.

He only saw Xiao An sitting in the hall in bluish-white robes with her black, seaweed-like hair running down her back. Sometimes, she was thinking, sometimes nodding, and sometimes refuting. She answered them with composure.

Li Qingshan stopped worrying. He silently backed out, returning to Cloudwisp island to focus on cultivation.

As they explained the dharma, Xiao An rarely spoke, but she would often leave the monks speechless when she did. They would need a moment of thought before they could answer her.

The Path of White Bone and Great Beauty was not just an ability or cultivation method. It also recorded a great buddhist monk's entire life of wisdom and knowledge. Xiao An needed to comprehend the essence within it. Every single question they asked was centred around this supernatural ability, and they would all hit the mark.

She made all the monks rethink everything with a clear mind. Often, they would have to give it some thought before they answered her. These monks were all highly educated in the buddhist dharma, so they could give her an answer most of the time after some thought. However, these answers would differ from monk to monk, which would lead to a new round of disputes.

The monks no longer looked at Xiao An in the same way anymore either. They directly began to suspect whether she was a Reincarnated Celestial too, possibly the reincarnation a great grandmaster at that. If it were not for her innate knowledge, how could a child ask such profound questions? For some questions, even they felt like they were not clever enough, unable to answer them.

Naturally, they could not answer all of Xiao An's questions, or they would not just be at Foundation Establishment. However, this process had allowed Xiao An to deepen her understanding of the Path of White Bone and Great Beauty yet again.

After comprehending all this, she could relax her control over her cultivation as a Qi Practitioner. On the third day of the dharma assembly, her cultivation reached the ninth layer; she was close to the final step now.

It had directly dumbfounded the eminent monks there. They had never seen a person practise qi as easily as drinking water. If this continued, reaching Foundation Establishment would be a piece of cake for her.

It lightened the One Thought master's burden slightly, but his original plan fell through. Now, it no longer seemed like the monks guiding Xiao An. Instead, it seemed like she was guiding the monks.

However, this led to another problem.

The monks who had all cast aside their worldly desires all started to grow greedy. They all felt like she had not actually taken the One Thought master on as her master as she was studying in the school of Buddhism. At most, it was like the relationship between a child and a teacher in a private institution. With Xiao An's talent, she completely deserved a formal master who could support her more.

The school of thought of Buddhism circled around the word "buddhism", but there were thousands of sects that fell under it. They constantly contended against one another. All of them wanted a disciple like this to continue their legacy and carry on their teachings.

It was too late for the One Thought master to feel regret. From the day the dharma assembly had begun, he did not allow Xiao An to take a single step away from him. At the same time, he secretly penned a letter.

Some people had already gotten to the bottom of Xiao An and Li Qingshan's relationship. They sent their disciples to Cloudwisp island to discuss matters with him. They all secretly offered him extremely abundant conditions for Xiao An to switch over and take them as a master instead.

Under the gathering darkness of night, Li Qingshan sent away another visitor. He turned around and passed through the silent, weaving corridors, returning to his room.

A woman was currently in his room, laying down under the light as she read. She seemed like she had recently washed, as her hair was still wet; it was much shorter compared to other women, shoulder-length and rather messy. A few strands on her fringe stood up stubbornly, which gave her a hint of adorable laziness.

Her thin, navy robes hugged her enchanting figure, as if it were wordlessly communicating that she was already a grown woman.

The woman's face reddened and closed the book like she did not care. She shot a glance at Li Qingshan. "What're you looking at?"

"Senior sister Han?" Only then was Li Qingshan bold enough to draw a conclusion. Today, Han Qiongzhi differed greatly from her usual appearance of an "older sister". She seemed more gentle as she read under the light.

"What's wrong?" Han Qiongzhi was afraid to make direct eye contact with Li Qingshan.

Li Qingshan smiled. "And I had thought the Han family had a second young miss. How come you have the time to come here today?"

Everyone had their own lives. Han Qiongzhi was no different. Now that Hua Chengzan had entered seclusion, his responsibilities as the primary disciple and Scarlet Wolf commander had fallen onto her shoulders. However, she would struggle to complete matters that took Hua Chengzan two hours to complete even if she had ten times as much time, so she faced a truly miserable predicament. Fortunately, she got along relatively well with everyone else, so she could still have some spare time to herself if she forcefully allocated work to others.

In the past, she would spend this time relaxing and having fun to her heart's content, but she felt rather uneasy recently. A certain figure would frequently cross her mind. Not only had she washed up today, but she had even put on a set of clothes she never wore for some odd reason and came to visit involuntarily. She wanted to see what Li Qingshan was up to.

However, she could not bring herself to ask him that. She avoided it completely. "What brought the monk here?"

Li Qingshan told her the reason, and Han Qiongzhi said, "The Lone Mountain temple is a mid-sized sect, so you can consider it. The Lone Mountain Patriarch is a powerful cultivator who's condensed a ?arīra. He's renowned even throughout the entire Ruyi commandery. I never thought a disciple of his would be participating in the dharma assembly this time. He does have the right to serve as Xiao An's master."

The Lone Mountain temple was not located within the Clear River prefecture. The Foundation Establishment monk who had come this time was the Lone Mountain Patriarch's direct disciple, and one of the conditions he offered was accepting Xiao An as a disciple on his master's behalf.

Li Qingshan said, "What's wrong with staying in the Academy of the Hundred Schools?"

Han Qiongzhi said, "With Xiao An's cultivation, reaching Foundation Establishment is only a matter of time, so how can she remain in the academy?"

Li Qingshan said, "Isn't there an academy in the Ruyi commandery too?"

"So you don't know. The academy in the commandery is just for show."

Han Qiongzhi gave him a detailed explanation. Only then did Li Qingshan learn that the Academy of the Hundred Schools in the Ruyi commandery was not a larger version of the one in the Clear River prefecture, with hundreds of Foundation Establishment cultivators learning together under the guidance of over a dozen Golden Core cultivators.

Every single Foundation Establishment cultivator was an elite that could reign over an entire region, so why would they still receive the treatment of Qi Practitioners? It was even less likely for Golden Core cultivators to be all cooped up. Instead, they all had their places.

The academies on the level of commanderies existed basically only in name. Their primary function was for management. They did not even possess the function to communicate between the schools.

After all, they could exchange items that covered the basics with one another, but at their level, all cultivation methods and arts would be secrets that would not be passed on so easily among all schools.

Let alone disciples from other schools, but even disciples from their own schools would have to accept a master to learn these cultivation methods or arts. This master-disciple relationship would no longer be as flimsy as the student-teacher relationship in the academy. Instead, it would turn into a traditional familial relationship.

Reaching that step, finding a good master became a critical matter to consider.

"Do I also have to find a master?" Li Qingshan thought. No wonder the monk from earlier had hinted that he could check out the Lone Mountain temple too.

Han Qiongzhi said, "Of course. Who doesn't want a master to guide them along? The only issue you'll face is insufficient talent and being too old, making it so that no one wants to accept you."

Li Qingshan was obviously no exception. It was possible to say that all those who could emerge as Foundation Establishment cultivators under this strange free-charging system of the Academy of the Hundred Thoughts were young talents. They would not be troubled over finding a master.

This was the academy's special method of inheritance. It was different from cultivation sects, yet somewhat similar at the same time.

Li Qingshan laid out his hands. "Then are there Golden Core cultivators for novelists?" Or should he say "Golden Talisman cultivators". The Divine Talisman of Great Creation that the school of Novels focused on would turn golden after the second heavenly tribulation.

Actually, apart from Foundation Establishment where cultivators would all be the same, they would all be given different names due to differing cultivation methods if they advanced any higher. For example, ?arīra for buddhism, golden talisman for the school of novels, and sword embryo for sword cultivators. They were called Golden Core cultivators due to the habits passed down through history.

Han Qiongzhi lowered her head. “Although you’re a disciple of the school of Novels, you don't have to find a master from the school of Novels. For example, I’m a disciple of legalism, but if I can establish a foundation, I’ll definitely take my father’s elder brother, my uncle, as my master.”

Han Qiongzhi’s uncle was naturally one of the three major pillars of the Ruyi commandery—great general Han Anguo!

Chapter 337 - Each Other’s Futures

Li Qingshan was surprised. Although he was a disciple of the school of Novels, his primary route was still the school of the Military’s simultaneous cultivation of qi and body. There was probably no better master for him within all of the Ruyi commandery than Han Anguo.

The effects of possessing a good master were as clear as day. For example, he might be able to obtain the second half of the Arts of the Boundless Ocean from a good master’s mere order. Cultivation could only be transformed into authority and influence over time after all.

From this perspective, Gu Yanying might have been even better. As the daughter of the Hawk God, she had a limitless future ahead of her, but Li Qingshan was not stupid enough to mention another woman in front of Han Qiongzhi.

And, no matter when, he would never be willing to lower his head before a woman. Others might have to grovel and compromise for a woman that they liked, but he insisted on holding his head up high for that woman to see.

While Han Qiongzhi’s words seemed nonchalant, she had her intentions. It seemed to hint that if he became the son-in-law of the Han family, he would basically be able to join the influential clan of the Han family and borrow their strength.

He could not help but admit that this was a little tempting! And, Li Qingshan was rather moved by this too. No matter what, when a woman considered for you, it was something worth being happy over.

“Thank you!”

“What’re you thanking me for? I’m just saying. I’m not going to introduce you to him. If you want to take this path, you’d better go plead with my father yourself!” Han Qiongzhi’s face became even redder under the lamp. I, Han Qiongzhi, still haven’t reached the point where I need to use my family to interest a man. Pah, why am I trying to interest him? What’s so impressive about him anyway?

Though, he did have a valiance of doing whatever he wanted that the people of the Han family lacked, and he was more determined and self-disciplined than those disciples of legalism. He did not take her stubbornness too seriously, and when it mattered, he had stood up for her, confronting death fearlessly...

For a moment, she was filled with mixed emotions, losing her usual casualness and nonchalant attitude. However, he remained quiet about all this, which made her tempted to grab him by the neck and get to the bottom of what he was thinking.

Li Qingshan was not a love sage of infatuation, but he still knew that a lone man and woman spending time together and talking to one another at night would not be that simple.

A beauty under the lamplight gave off quite the charm. He had never been someone who was overly cautious. If he was interested, he would do whatever he wanted to. He grabbed Han Qiongzhi's hands and said gently, "Senior sister Han!"

Han Qiongzhi shuddered, but she did not pull her hand back. She asked while trying to act like everything was fine, "What's up?"

Li Qingshan joked inside, I just think I'm getting a little ahead of myself when I haven't even reached the ninth layer yet.

Both of them had only treated what they said back then as a joke, but they had never thought there would be a moment when it would come true.

Han Qiongzhi bit her lip and shot a glance at him, but she felt extremely happy inside. She had never been particularly good at concealing her thoughts, so this delight was naturally given away by her expression.

Li Qingshan went even further now. He conveniently wrapped his arm around her waist, and their shadows projected onto the wall by the lamplight merged together.

Their postures were similar to when Li Qingshan had forcefully pulled her in and uttered those brave words in the Parlour of Clouds and Rain, but their mental state differed vastly now.

Just like last time, Han Qiongzhi broke free and called out, "If you have something to say, then say it! What're you touching me for!?" However, she was not irritated at all. She was just completely flushed.

"I- I'll be taking my leave first!" Han Qiongzhi rushed away in a hurry.

Li Qingshan laid on the bamboo floor with his hands cushioning his head. He smiled as he shook his head. "Interesting!" Perhaps before long, there would be someone to warm his blankets in this humble abode of his.

Snow fell outside the window. Looking at the pitch-black sky, he thought of the black ox again. He could never forget about his original benefactor. If it were not for the black ox's assistance, how could he reach such a distant world and make a beauty like her fall in love with him?

Before he knew it, another year had almost passed again. In a few days, he would be eighteen. He would go from being a boy to a real man.

The future was something he had to consider. Did choosing a master mean there would always be a moment when he would have to separate from Xiao An? After all, it was impossible for him to become a monk, but he did not want to get in the way of Xiao An's development either.

Oftentimes, the cause of separation was not overwhelming pressure or obstructions. Instead, it came with various different pursuits. He had his secret to hide and that half a dream that conflicted with the person before him. As a matter of fact, if his marriage fell apart, there might be the miserable fate of being hunted down by his brother-in-law, his father-in-law, and maybe even his future master awaiting him!

Every single thing, every single matter, was enough to bring a person to their wits end, which was why he had only thought about it slightly before deciding to not think about it. Everything would work out in the end. All he had to do was follow his heart and take large strides forward!

Was he supposed to say to Han Qiongzhi, “I think we should focus on studying, no, cultivation, right now, and we shouldn’t have these distractions!”? Unless there was something wrong with his head or he was impotent, he would never say something like that.

Deep into the night, the dharma assembly continued.

The monks knew no exhaustion. They were all serious as they spoke, and their gazes wandered around. They treated the others as their opponents. Right now, they were no longer just contending over the buddhist dharma, but a once-in-a-century genius too.

Without any doubts at all, they believed that Xiao An’s existence could determine the fate of an entire temple or even a sect.

Their discussion about the dharma continued, but it seemed rather half-hearted now.

At this moment, an old man appeared in front of the hall. His beard and hair were grey, draping down his head and face. His arms drooped down beside him, his eyes were dull, and his face was dazed. If it were not for his kasaya, no one would have imagined he was a monk too.

The One Thought master beamed. He lowered his head deeply. “Master!” His urgent message had not gone to waste. Despite being thousands of kilometers away, his master had rushed over so quickly.

The monks all cried out and bowed in a hurry. One Thought’s master? Wasn’t that the Annihilum Light Chan Master? It was rumored that he practised the Great Scripture of Annihilum arduously in the Chan Monastery of Deva-Nāga, and it had already been several decades since he left the temple. Why would he come here?

However, the old monk that the One Thought master called “master” turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to all of it; it was as if he was an imbecile. He directly arrived before Xiao An.

Xiao An raised her head. Their eyes met, and the old monk’s eyes suddenly erupted with resplendent light, completely drowning out the light that the lamps in the hall flickered with. They were like two shrunken suns.

The old monk said in an extremely hoarse voice, “Are you willing to go to the Chan Monastery of Deva-Nāga with me to cultivate?”

The monks immediately gave up on their thoughts. The Chan Monastery of Deva-Nāga was the greatest buddhist sect renowned throughout the Green province. As head monk of the Bodhi courtyard, who could contend against the Annihilum Light Chan Master? And, just who could turn down his invitation?

They had never expected the One Thought monk to make such a decisive move when he struck.

As a matter of fact, even the One Thought master himself had never expected that his master would leave the Chan Monastery of Deva-Nāga because of this. He had no other choice either. Originally, he planned on taking her to the Chan Monastery of Deva-Nāga to see his master after she had reached Foundation Establishment.

He also never expected that his master would not ask Xiao An anything or give her any tests, directly granting her the highest recognition and inviting her to the Chan Monastery of Deva-Nāga to cultivate.

The hall, or even the entire island, had fallen completely silent as they awaited her reply.

There were no doubts over her reply. The chan monastery would gain another supreme genius, and before long, the influence and power of the Chan Monastery of Deva-Nāga would become even more consolidated, even more unshakeable.

Chapter 338 - The Third Layer of the Ox Demon

“I refuse!” With a neutral expression, Xiao An replied with her clear but childish voice.

The entire hall seemed to fall even more silent.

Within the niche, the plump, smooth cheeks of the statue of buddha were dyed golden by the altar lamps, smiling in an unfathomable fashion. Its long, slender eyes seemed to take in all the religious believers, yet they also seemed to see nothing at all.

Everyone wondered if they had heard incorrectly. There happened to be a person who had turned down an irresistible invitation.

The One Thought master’s mouth even hung agape. Even his thoughts came to a screeching halt.

Back then, after he had successfully established a foundation, he emerged from the Academy of the Hundred Schools and turned down the invitations of several temples, travelling thousands of kilometers to the Chan Monastery of Deva-Nāga to find a master. He knelt outside the Bodhi hall for three days and three nights, and only then did the Annihilum Light Chan Master accept him into the Bodhi hall. He underwent another three years of testing before finally getting offered a position beneath him as a formal disciple.

He had never regretted this decision. Otherwise, he never would have been able to make it to higher realms of cultivation with his fortune and aptitude.

“Xiao An, you-”

The Annihilum Light Chan Master lifted his hand and silenced what the One Thought master was about to say next. He looked at Xiao An.

Xiao An remained calm, completely unperturbed.

The Annihilum Light Chan Master let out a sigh. “The path of cultivation is vast, and the buddhist dharma is boundless. Why must you stubbornly insist on going your own way with a single will?”

Xiao An bowed. "Thank you for bestowing me with my dharma name, master." If stubbornly going her own way with a single will was being reluctant to part with him, then she would much rather take this as her dharma name forever.

The Annihilum Light Chan Master smiled first. He took delight in her quick wit, but he subsequently sighed, lamenting over her stubbornness to cling onto what was holding her back. Afterwards, he neither affirmed or denied what she said, drifting away.

The remaining monks all looked at one another speechlessly. The One Thought master walked over with a mixed expression and bowed. "Junior sister One Will."

Xiao An returned the gesture, "Senior brother One Thought."

There was no ceremony, but to a chan sect that focused on reflecting on one's heart and achieving self-actualisation and buddhahood as a result, these mere gestures held no importance in the first place.

The buddha plucked a flower, Mahākāśyapa smiled, and thus both the master and the disciple achieved likemindedness.

Note: A reference to the Flower Sermon, which I believe is about the transmission of wisdom that transcends words.

In just a few words, their status to one another had already been determined.

The monks all stood up and bid farewell, declaring the end of the assembly of dharma.

The greatest prodigy of the academy in the past century also happened to be the first to determine her direction for the future, which was the holy land for buddhists across the fifteen thousand kilometers that was the Green province, the Chan Monastery of Deva-Nāga.

Xiao An saw off all the monks before requesting permission to be dismissed from her senior brother One Thought.

The One Thought master obviously knew where she wanted to go. He waved his hand helplessly. "Go!" Even their master no longer cared, agreeing to her dharma name of One Will through silence, so why would he still have power over her?

On Cloudwisp island, Li Qingshan fell silent for a moment after hearing how everything had unfolded. He rubbed Xiao An's head and smiled. "In the future, if you want to go and cultivate in the Chan Monastery of Deva-Nāga, I'll go become a monk with you. Though, all I can become is a monk who drinks, eats meat, and sleeps around."

Xiao An shook her head. "No, I'll stay with you. I don't want you to become a monk who drinks, eats meat, and sleeps around."

Li Qingshan said, "How about this? When the time comes, I'll pay a visit to the Chan Monastery of Deva-Nāga with you and ask for some benefits from that Annihilum Light Chan Master, and then I will leave by myself and go at it alone. I'll also go find a master to learn from. After that, I'll build a dwelling, and you can establish a temple right beside me. How's that? It'll be the best of two worlds!"

Xiao An answered, "Alright."

This was their future. There was nothing worth worrying over.

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It was already very late. The two of them laid on their backs, staring at the ceiling as they listened to the rustling of falling snow outside. They both felt like they were at great peace.

“Oh right, what do you think about that big sister Han?” Li Qingshan turned around, now lying on his side.

“Big sister Han?” Xiao An turned her head in surprise. Her large eyes shone in the darkness.

“You know, Han Qiongzhi.”

“She’s worth a hundred regular people,” Xiao An said indifferently.

“I don’t mean eating her. Forget it. You’re just a child. Even if I tell you, you won’t understand.” Li Qingshan fell silent, lying on his back once more.

Xiao An crawled onto his body. She stared at him long and hard.

“Alright, I’ll tell you.” Li Qingshan raised his hand and gave in. He told her about what had happened earlier in the night.

“You like her?” Xiao An blinked.

“A little.” Li Qingshan shrugged. Han Qiongzhi was obviously not a bad woman. Although he had yet to develop any particularly deep feelings for her, it would naturally happen as long as they spent time together. His parents from his past life and present life were all like this. It was not like this was some third-rate love story, where they would much rather die than live without one another.

“You want to marry her?” After she awakened a lot of her memories and read all those novels for Li Qingshan, Xiao An was no longer unfamiliar with matters like this. However, she never imagined something like this would happen with him, which left her extremely shocked.

“Not exactly, but there’s the possibility!” Li Qingshan rubbed his nose in embarrassment. He felt like a father who wanted to remarry after a divorce, asking for his little daughter’s permission. All of his usual boldness and nonchalance had evaporated.

He did not believe he was the same type as Hua Chengzan. He probably would never be able to understand that path of infatuation without regret. Perhaps he did think of this when he was young in his past life, but in this life, it had all been worn away by over a dozen years of hardships. All that remained were the most simple and straightforward things.

Xiao An suddenly became unhappy. She climbed down from Li Qingshan and turned away from him.

“Sigh, what’s wrong?”

“As long as you’re happy.” Xiao An thought that Li Qingshan would turn out like the people in the books, spending night and day together with that woman. He probably would not have the time to accompany her anymore, which only brought her greater pain.

Li Qingshan turned her around, but he discovered that the rims of her eyes had already reddened with tears trickling down. It was as if he had committed some heinous crime against both the heavens and humanity. He became rather flustered.

“I never said I would definitely marry her. If you don’t like it, then forget about it.”

The future was not so simple after all.

.....

Over a dozen days later, in a seclusion dwelling beneath Contention island.

A droplet of sweat rolled down his cheek, dripping from his chin and falling onto the damp ground.

Li Qingshan knelt on the ground naked. His long hair draped down, covering his face.

His muscles turned and twisted like dragons and snakes as if they bore the heavy burden of thousands of tonnes. Scarlet blood flowed under his skin, which gave off a colour similar to black iron. He spread his lips and revealed his long, sharp canines. Two lumps protruded from his forehead, as if a pair of horns were ready to burst out at any time.

Li Qingshan suddenly straightened himself out and let out a furious roar. He spread his arms as far out as possible, as if he was breaking free from invisible shackles.

Whoosh... His heavy breathing was filled with delight.

Whoosh... His movements kicked up a violent gust of wind that swept through the dwelling, ruffling Xiao An’s clothes and hair.

Li Qingshan stood up, and the colour of his skin gradually returned to normal. His writhing muscles subsided too, but he did seem a little “bulkier”, like a statue carved from marble.

Though this period of arduous cultivation, he almost finished off all the pills he had used spiritual stones to exchange for. Finally, he reached the third layer of the Ox Demon’s Fist of Great Strength.

Every single step forward would require even more tremendous resources. Back then, just eating meat, drinking alcohol, and training his body was enough to reach the first layer. Of course, his body would benefit more and more with each breakthrough.

In particular, his strength had almost increased by several times. Although it was suppressed by the spirit turtle’s daemon core, he could still feel the churning power surge through his body, almost bursting out of him.

He put on a set of clothes and said to Xiao An, “It’s about time for me to go check on the school of the Military again. I need to test what I’ve achieved from cultivating.”

“I’ll help you!” Xiao An took out the Guardian King’s pearl. It shone brightly and conjured an avatar. It was even more consolidated than before; it was as if a golden person, not a golden statue, was standing there

She had comprehended and summarised everything she had gained from the assembly of dharma recently. As she had spent her entire time by the One Thought master’s side, she had only ingested two

or three black lotus seeds back then, so using this opportunity, she could take it out and cultivate properly. She ingested another seven or eight seeds, which allowed her cultivation to progress drastically.

A golden banner waved in the air as the guardian king's avatar arrived before Li Qingshan in the blink of an eye. It lifted its huge vajra sword and swung down swiftly.

"That works too!" Li Qingshan caught the huge sword between his palms.

Apart from worrying that his daemon qi would leak out over this short period of time, there was no need for him to enter secluded cultivation at all. He had only done it to make her happy, basically making up for the hardships she had gone through from being trapped in the assembly of dharma recently.

He could tell that she was still rather unwilling to leave, so he decided to stay a little longer. He could use this time to practise the Ocean Wielding battle skill that he never got the opportunity to study.

Both of them cultivated, stopping to fight against one another every once in a while, leading to some giggles. Time passed slowly.

Originally, Li Qingshan planned on remaining here for another ten days, or half a month at most, but once he began practising this battle skill, he could not help but become absorbed by it. The ingenious skills of utilising qi and the body together stunned him. It left him entranced.

It was quite strange now that he mentioned it. His ability to understand various cultivation methods had always been quite mediocre, but he felt a little like a genius when it came to battle skills.

Xiao An had benefited quite a lot too. She ingested the black lotus seeds in the seed pod one by one, turning them into flames and merging them into her bones. She managed to refine another Skull Prayer Bead.

In the blink of an eye, another month passed by. The door to the dwelling opened slowly.

Li Qingshan emerged and stretched his body before looking down.

This time, the dwelling they had chosen was not on the lowest level. That one had been occupied by Hua Chengzan. So much time had already passed since he entered seclusion, so who knew how he was going with cultivation.

"Let's go!" Li Qingshan scooped up Xiao An and took a step towards the empty space above him.

This time, a cloud did not condense below him. Instead, blue light appeared under his feet like a wave. As if he had stepped on a spring, he rushed into the air.

Ocean Wielding—The Wave Treading Form.

By moulding water and using its flexibility, he could achieve speeds several times faster than riding a cloud while being much more nimble. He felt like he could walk through the air.

Emerging from underground, he saw the brilliant blue sky and the dazzling sunlight. The snow had all melted away as the brightly-coloured spring scenery unfolded before him.

Li Qingshan took another step backwards, shooting off to Cloudwisp island in the distance with a swish.

During this period, the power of belief within his Divine Talisman of Great Creation had reached an unprecedented peak. Although he had not witnessed it in person, the propagation of the novel and the picture book was clearly quite impressive. And, as expected, that thin picture book of his had surpassed the novel. He could easily conjure the characters in there.

However, this still was not enough. He needed to become even stronger. Only then would he have a chance. It was time for him to head out and gather some publicity with the paintings in his possession so that he could turn fiction into reality.

Chapter 339 - Decision

Li Qingshan's figure attracted quite a lot of attention as he whistled through the air.

A group of disciples of the school of Agriculture were currently tending to their crops in the fields. They raised their heads and pointed at the sky.

"Look, what's that?"

'Seems like Li Qingshan!'

The agriculture disciple all marveled at him. Indescribable envy filled their eyes. Before they knew it, Li Qingshan had already become a prominent figure of the academy. All the people that he normally got along with or did not get along with were all renowned figures too.

Recently, there were even rumors that the leader of the school of the Military, Han Anjun, was interested in taking him in as a son-in-law, betrothing the second senior sister of the school of Legalism to him. In just one short year, he had gone from being a disciple of the most humiliating school of Novels to this step. He basically seemed like a figure of legends to cultivators who originated from a similar background to him.

"Hey, Li Qingshan. Doesn't he come from the same village as you?"

Li Long stood within a watery paddy with bare feet as he neatly arranged the tender rice seedlings. This was not Longevity island, but an island specially allocated to new disciples by the school of Agriculture for farming. He had obtained a plot of land too.

He raised his head and watched the faint blue trajectory vanish into the horizon. He could still remember how his master had once said that Li Qingshan would become an impressive figure in the future. But probably even his master had never imagined he would reach this step!

He lowered his head and smiled. "Exactly. He's the great hero of our Crouching Ox village."

During the testing last spring, his wood affinity was evaluated to be low yi. He passed the test for the school of Agriculture and became a disciple there.

Back then, village head Li had sent him off to the Iron Fist school to learn martial arts exactly because he did not want his son to tend to the fields, but he probably never expected he would still return to the fields in the end. The school of Agriculture really was appropriate for a backgroundless disciple of average talent like him.

The plants he grew were crops with a spiritual aspect. They could replace pills and gradually improve his constitution. He could eat whatever he grew, or he could exchange them with his seniors and juniors. If there was a surplus, he could even sell them for spiritual stones.

Compared to the other schools, a life in the school of Agriculture was monotonous and repetitive. They would weed the fields and use true qi to nurture the seedlings in a constant cycle. Many people found it boring, so they would frequently call a few friends and go have some fun in the Clear River city. The young master of the Iron Fist school had invited Li Long to come along several times too.

However, Li Long had turned down all his invitations. He still had to pay back his debt of a hundred spiritual stones to Li Qingshan, and he had to pay for the school fees next year. Additionally, he had to work hard on cultivation to avoid the compounding fees. He could not afford to sit back and relax.

Gradually, the young master of the Iron Fist school stopped visiting him. Apart from attending classes, he would spend every moment from dawn to dusk in the fields, covered in dirt. He would fall asleep the moment his head hit the pillow, almost suffocating from the heavy pressure.

He remembered a year of severe drought when he was young. With his father, he would travel almost ten kilometers along a mountain path for water. When they poured the water they brought back into the fields, it would evaporate in an instant. It had truly been a despairing sight. After a single day, his hands had become covered in blisters.

His grandfather sighed that farming was contending over fate against the heavens. Yes, contending over fate against the heavens. This was not just a special characteristic of cultivators!

Perhaps it was because all his ancestors were farmers, so the blood of a farmer flowed through his veins too. Through this primitive labour, he gradually experienced unprecedented joy. As he watched the seedlings thrive and grow with each passing day as he nurtured them with true qi, they seemed to be nurturing him too.

Before he knew it, his cultivation had broken through the natural barrier for regular Qi Practitioners from the jianghu. He surpassed protector Yan and reached the third layer.

On that day, he laid down in the fields and cried out in joy. As his tears fell onto the fields, he thought back to when the severe drought had ended back then. As heavy rain fell from the sky, he had rolled around happily in the puddles. This kind of joy was well beyond anything sleeping with a woman in the Parlour of Clouds and Rain could offer.

From that day onwards, he made up his mind. Even if the school of Music was holding free, public concerts, he would not be attending them. As Li Qingshan challenged the military disciples, he did not go and watch either. Only today did he suddenly realise that he was no longer envious of Li Qingshan.

An agriculture disciple said, "The test is coming up. I heard he knows the Spiritual Rain technique. Why don't you get him to water your fields?"

The school of Agriculture also had their way of competing against one another, which was seeing who had tended to their crops better. The victors would receive some rewards.

Li Long brushed off the dirt from his hands and smiled. "I'll go ask him and see if he has the time." In the past year, he had not even visited Li Qingshan once. He had found himself to be slightly inferior, and he

did not want Li Qingshan to think that he was trying to get on his good side. Now that he no longer felt any envy, he obviously had no sense of inferiority either. And, he could finally return some of his kindness from back then.

When he saw this fellow villager again, Li Qingshan almost struggled to recognise him. His face was tanned, his hands were coarse, and he radiated with a rustic aura. He no longer bore any resemblance to the high-spirited talent of Crouching Ox village of the past anymore. His gentle and mild eyes revealed an aura that differed vastly from before.

When Li Long saw Li Qingshan again, he felt something similar. He was mature and confident, strutting around proudly. His name, Qingshan, had once been mocked for many years in the village, but Li Long could now understand what the name entailed.

Li Long took out a sack of spiritual rice. "I planted it myself. Try it! I'm still lacking a little in terms of spiritual stones, so if you're not in a hurry, just another year should be enough."

"There's no hurry. It doesn't matter even if I have to wait for another three or five years. It's not like you can run away." Li Qingshan opened the sack of rice and took a look. Every single shiny grain of rice was the size of a peanut, radiating with a faintly scented spiritual qi. He praised, "Nice rice. I think this rice is enough to make up for fifty spiritual stones. If you can bring me another three sacks, we'll be in the clear."

"Maybe next year. I still need to keep some for myself, whether it's to eat or to sell!" Li Long nodded gratefully, not because of the spiritual stones, but because of the respect. He glanced past the bamboo forest that covered most of the island. "It really is quite a pity with this land and those bamboo shoots."

The land allocated to each agriculture disciple would still be limited after all. The school of Novels definitely had the lowest population density in the academy right now.

As one of the main islands, Cloudwisp island was a first-class spiritual ground, obviously much better than the island where Li Long planted the rice. If he could plant here, there would be quite the harvest as long as he tended to them slightly, even without putting in much effort. And, the bamboo shoots that burst out from the ground were filled with spiritual qi as well.

Li Qingshan came to an even deeper understanding that Cloudwisp island really was a treasured place. He could not just let others take it away. "If you want to, then feel free to clear part of the land and plant on it. You can pick these bamboo shoots as you wish too. I don't have the time to tend to them anyway."

Although the spiritual bamboo shoots could replace pills, their effects were limited, so they were not particularly worth it to him. He would be much better off learning alchemy from Ru Xin.

Li Long began to slightly regret that he had not visited Cloudwisp island sooner, but he refused to take advantage of Li Qingshan's generosity. In the end, they reached the agreement that half of all the crops Li Long planted and half of the bamboo shoots he harvested would go to Li Qingshan.

Not only could he help a fellow villager, but he would also receive many free things, so Li Qingshan happily agreed to it. Even if he did not eat these items himself, they were still quite a good choice to feed Milliped with so that he could recover.

Speaking of which, it was about time this guy woke up from hibernation!

Right as he thought that, he felt the bug pouch on his waist twitch. He happily agreed to Li Long's request to water the fields.

"I still have some other matters to tend to, so you should go back first! I'll be there in a second!"

After Li Long had left, Li Qingshan released Milliped and fed him the entire sack of spiritual rice. "There's no hurry. There'll be bamboo shoots to eat later too, so just bear with me a little more. I'll take you back underground very soon."

After satisfying Milliped and sending him back into the bug pouch, he went to Li Long and helped him out by using the Spiritual Rain technique a few times. He waited until Xiao An had come back from dealing with the school of Buddhism. After that, the two of them passed through the Formation of Dragons and Snakes, leaving the academy.

They went to Clear River city first. Li Qingshan wanted to travel around and use Chu Danqing's paintings this time so that he could complete a few missions along the way. Earning some merit would obviously be for the best.

The black-clothed envoy in charge of the missions tended to his needs immediately. He took out the missions log and allowed Li Qingshan to browse through it.

Li Qingshan looked through it and chose missions carefully. Coincidentally, he saw a notice at the end of a mission that it was currently being undertaken. The person responsible for it was Qian Rongzhi. He asked, "Has Qian Rongzhi returned?"

"Ma'am Qian has returned twice before immediately taking on a new mission and leaving."

All three missions had taken her to extremely remote regions far away from the prefectural city.

Li Qingshan thought, Not only is this woman vicious to others, but she basically treats herself no differently. She's basically trying to commit suicide.

After choosing his missions, Li Qingshan was just about to leave when the envoy in black suddenly said, "Sir Li, ma'am Han is currently upstairs."

Nothing spread faster in the world than gossip. The two directly involved in the matter were clueless, but it had already led to quite the hubbub within the Hawkwolf Guard. The Han family looking for a son-in-law was no small news.

Li Qingshan said, "Senior sister Han is here too? Then I need to pay her a visit."

"Sir Li, do be careful. Ma'am Han has been in a very bad mood lately."

Li Qingshan knew that it probably had something to do with him. He felt rather ashamed about this, so there was even more reason for him to go and explain himself.

The joyous spring sunlight poured into the room.

Han Qiongzhi currently furrowed her brows as she sat in Hua Chengzan's original spot, dealing with official business. Her shoulder-length hair had been dyed a golden brown, but her face was as bleak as

winter. Suddenly, she heard a knock on the door, and she said coldly without even looking up, "Come in."

Li Qingshan made Xiao An wait outside as he entered through the door alone. "Senior sister Han!"

As soon as Han Qiongzhi saw Li Qingshan, anger began to bubble in her. Ever since that night, she thought their relationship had undergone some development. She was just waiting for him to come find her. However, no matter how she waited, no one came. After a slight investigation, she learnt that he had gone into secluded cultivation again, but he did not even give her a notice beforehand.

Her face immediately became frosty as she yelled, "Get out!"

Li Qingshan sighed gently and backed out again.

"Come back!" Han Qiongzhi leapt to her feet. She never thought he would not even be willing to explain himself.

Li Qingshan said, "What else is there?"

"You- you drive me crazy!" Han Qiongzhi bit her lip as she felt both furious and irritated. She could still recall everything that had happened that night vividly. Never had she cast aside her pride to get close to a man, yet she was brushed aside without the slightest acknowledgement like this.

Li Qingshan was unwilling to see her like this. This was the first woman to like him in his current life, and she seemed much more realistic and adorable compared to Gu Yanying, who was currently beyond reach.

If it were possible, he did not want to let down her feelings either, but since fate opposed them, there was no need for him to trouble himself over this. All he could do was apologise. "Let's go, Xiao An!"

Within the long corridor, Li Qingshan walked away with his brows furrowed. Xiao An followed behind him closely. Suddenly, she raised her hand and grabbed him by the sleeve.

Chapter 340 - Setting up a Date

Li Qingshan looked back. "What's wrong?"

Xiao An turned around and looked towards the door that was still open. She said, "If you marry her, can we still be together like before?"

Li Qingshan was surprised. He smiled. "If you don't like it, then forget about it." Although he was extremely reluctant to accept this, it was easier for him to end this relationship before he had developed any proper feelings. It would be troublesome once he caught feelings. This was for her sake too!

"Just marry her!" Xiao An released his sleeve and suppressed the strange feeling in her heart. This was what he had always wanted, and this should have been the best choice for him too. He would be able to study under great general Han as well. Sigh, how could she become the thing that held him back?

"Do you mean it?"

"I do!"

"It'll be too late if you start regretting it in the future." Even if he ignored the consequences of just discarding her after using her, shilly-shallying around had never suited him in the first place.

"I won't regret it."

As she watched Li Qingshan vanish through the door, Han Qiongzhi finally could no longer hold her feelings back anymore. She cried as she lied on the table. Li Qingshan, you bastard! Han Qiongzhi, you're so useless! It's just a man!

Suddenly, she felt something on her head. She lifted up her head and met Li Qingshan's eyes.

Even with Li Qingshan's heart of steel, his feelings still could not help but grow tender. To think that this reckless, arrogant woman would also have a soft side like this, and it was all for him too. If he let her slip by, it would become something he would lament about his entire life. He extended his hand, wanting to wipe away her tears.

"What brought you back?" Han Qiongzhi pushed Li Qingshan's hand away and wiped away her tears frantically.

"Sorry..."

As soon as Li Qingshan uttered that one word, Han Qiongzhi grabbed him by the wrist as if she was afraid that he would vanish all of a sudden again. "You!" Then she let him go again. She felt like she was pitifully vulnerable whenever they spent time together.

However, it also made her seem extremely worth protecting. Li Qingshan held her hand and promised softly, "Don't worry, I won't be leaving."

"Who wants you anyway!" Han Qiongzhi tried to shake him off, but she failed. "You should go. Stop bothering me now."

"Can you wait until I come back?"

"Why would I want to wait for you?"

"The bright and beautiful days of spring have the perfect weather for boating," Li Qingshan smiled. He tossed aside the final layer of worries in his heart. He was in an excellent mood too, so he immediately took the initiative. Since he wanted to take her as his companion, they had to spend some proper time together!

Han Qiongzhi's mind was thrown into utter chaos by him. She faltered constantly, unable to talk properly for a moment.

"Alright, I'll just treat it as you've agreed to it." Li Qingshan decided for her. Looking at her rosy lips, he wanted to kiss her goodbye, but he was afraid of scaring her, so he rubbed her head instead. He turned around and left.

"You- come back sooner." Han Qiongzhi could not help but stand up.

Li Qingshan glanced back. He could still see the tear streaks on her face; her short hair was rather messy, but she was unable to hide the delight on her beautiful face. Although she was shy, she still stared right at him; there was undisguisable sincerity.

For a moment, she seemed absolutely adorable. Li Qingshan almost changed his mind and declared that they would go boating right now.

“Alright, Qiongzhi.” Li Qingshan smiled and closed the door.

Han Qiongzhi sat there in a daze for quite a while. She bit her lip, but she was unable to hold back her smile. She could not help but stand up and pace around. She stood by the window and stretched. It really was a bright and beautiful day of spring. She could not help but begin to look forward to it.

Knock, knock, knock. There were a few knocks on the door, and Han Qiongzhi wiped her face in a hurry, removing the tear streaks and recovering her frosty demeanour.

An envoy in black walked in, trembling. “Ma’am Han, I want to go on leave. My mother...”

“Alright, permitted.”

Fifteen minutes later, news that ma’am Han’s crankiness had finally passed over spread through the entire building. This sir Li sure had a wondrous effect on her. There really was a weakness for everything. The envoy responsible for the missions log was deemed to have rendered a meritorious service too.

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In the sky, above the clouds, Xiao An looked at the smiling Li Qingshan and pouted. Hmph, does he really have to be so happy?

Li Qingshan seemed to read her mind. He pinched her cheeks. “You’ll understand once you grow older.”

Xiao An asked rather curiously and eagerly, “When I’m older, will you marry me too?”

Li Qingshan said, “Forget about it. I don’t want to be hunted down by those monks of the Chan Monastery of Deva-Nāga. That’s a place on par with the Sword Collection palace.” Just the thought of the fate awaiting him if he married their genius female disciple terrified him.

“I refuse to accept this!”

“It doesn’t matter even if you refuse to accept this. Just stick with your job of very impressive future prospects of being a nun!” Li Qingshan sniggered.

Under Xiao An’s attack of “If you don’t agree, I’ll cry.” all Li Qingshan could do was give in. “Alright, alright. I’ll marry you, I’ll marry you!”

Xiao An immediately cheered up, but she then became troubled again. “But what if they really come looking for trouble?”

Li Qingshan saw how she was contemplating this question seriously, so he showed her his sturdy arm and smiled. “Then I’ll smash all of their bald heads to pieces!”

“Then I’ll help you.” Xiao An found this to be quite a good idea. She had yet to even formally join the Chan Monastery of Deva-Nāga, yet she had already begun to think about how she would abandon them in betrayal and turn against them.

A small city appeared within the fertile land beneath them. Li Qingshan took out a map and checked the location. They had already arrived at their first stop.

It was noon, but it was still rather chilly. The streets were mostly empty, with a few people here and there. Only a group of children laughed and played around energetically, but they ended up disturbing a few people’s naps, earning a scolding and being shooed to one side.

“Where be the damned bandits of the Green Wolf gang!”

Suddenly, an explosive yell woke up everyone from their dreams. They all emerged from their homes to see just what was going on. Just who was looking to die, coming and making trouble for the Green Wolf gang?

The leader of the Green Wolf gang was currently eating with a few friends who were also outlaws. He had already become rather tipsy. When he heard that, he shuddered and fell into a rage. “Someone’s come to make trouble. Brothers, let’s check him out and finish him off.”

Thirty or forty good men of the Green Wolf gang emerged and stood battle-ready at the entrance. The leader of the Green Wolf gang sat in an armed chair at the very centre.

Many people stuck their heads out from the sides of the streets. The children had even widened their eyes. They saw a figure that was not particularly tall cross through the dust, making his way over slowly on the perfectly straight streets.

The leader of the Green Wolf gang squinted his eyes and made out the person. It was a child around eleven or twelve years old. He wore a wide-brimmed straw hat in his hand and wore a shabby cotton garment covered in patches. He held a brush in one hand.

“So it’s a kid!”

“Has he lost his mind?”

However, the children just stared straight at him. Some of them pulled out a picture book from their clothes in a hurry. They looked at it carefully before looking up at the person again. They repeated this several times as their mouths gradually hung agape.

The leader of the Green Wolf gang’s furrowed eyebrows eased up. He had been expecting someone impressive, yet it was just a crazy kid. However, he did take special note of the yell from earlier.

“Who are you supposed to be, wanting to start something with our Green Wolf gang?”

The child declared clearly, “Green Wolf gang, you’ve been a scourge to the common people. You deserve a fate worse than death. Today, I will carry out justice and eliminate you for the common good!”

Everyone from the Green Wolf gang laughed aloud. The other outlaws said, “What are we blabbering with him for? Recently, what I’ve eaten has been so dull that my tongue’s almost dropped off! Let’s dig

out his heart! It'll go well with my alcohol!" As he said that, he even licked his bright red lips. Due to his tastes for human hearts, especially the hearts of children, the people of the jianghu called him the "Heart-feasting Ghost". He was also an infamous first-rate master.

The leader of the Green Wolf gang waved his hand. "Get him!" Two people immediately approached him.

The child pulled off a painting scroll from his back. With a tremble, he unfurled it. It was a painting of a vicious tiger descending from the mountains!

With a roar, a huge tiger lunged out and pushed down the two people with its front claws. It ripped open their bellies with its razor-sharp claws before lunging towards the leader of the Green Wolf gang.

This huge tiger was ten times as vicious as regular tigers. When it lunged into the group of people, it was no different from lunging into a flock of sheep. A massacre unfolded.

The faces of every single person who saw this froze in fear. Only the eyes of children erupted with surprise.

"It's him, it's him! It's him!"

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The "Heart-feasting Ghost" broke out into a cold sweat the moment he saw the huge tiger lunge out of the painting. This had clearly surpassed what regular people could achieve. He must be a legendary cultivator. No matter how powerful people of the jianghu were, it was impossible for them to rival cultivators.

He used his movement technique and fled over the buildings swiftly. However, when he had just leapt over two roofs, he felt his heart become empty, as if something was missing. Looking down, a bloody hole had already appeared on his chest before he knew it. His heart had already vanished.

He turned his head swiftly and saw that his heart was in the hands of a man, dripping with blood. He had eaten quite a few hearts throughout his life, but this was the first time he had seen his own heart. Indescribable agony and despair filled his mind.

"It's been quite a while since I've done jobs like this. Though, it seems like I still haven't lost my edge." Li Qingshan casually tossed the heart to Xiao An. She unleashed the Blood Flames of Corpse Incineration and turned that person into flames, bones and all.

At this moment, the battle between the huge tiger and the Green Wolf gang had ended too. The huge tiger from the painting was not particularly powerful, only at the level of third or fourth layer Qi Practitioners, but it was too easy for it when it came to dealing with a group of people from the jianghu.

This painting was obviously one that Chu Danqing had given him. Although the character he conjured already possessed similar abilities to this, he still used true qi to unleash these paintings in order to save his power of belief for the upcoming battle.

Li Qingshan fished out another painting from his hundred treasures pouch and tossed it into the air. It unfurled, but it was empty.

The empty painting flew around in the air and sucked away all the corpses before returning to Li Qingshan's hands. Now, a few dozen corpses appeared in the painting.

The painting was equivalent to a hundred treasures pouch for the school of Painting. Not only could it store inanimate objects, but it could even seal living creatures in there. It was extremely interesting. He was saving up these corpses as food for Xiao An. He carried out both the killing and the disposal, offering a one package service.

The child with the straw hat rode the tiger and bounded away. Everyone emerged from their homes and saw how not even a trace of the Green Wolf gang who had once run amok here remained. If it were not for the bloody marks on the ground, they basically would have thought it was all a dream.

The children's faces all reddened from excitement as they ran through the streets, cheering.

The adults were still clueless as to why they were so happy until someone suddenly recalled. "Hmm? Isn't that child a character from the picture book that our little baby girl gets us to read to her?"

"Don't tell me that the picture book is real?"