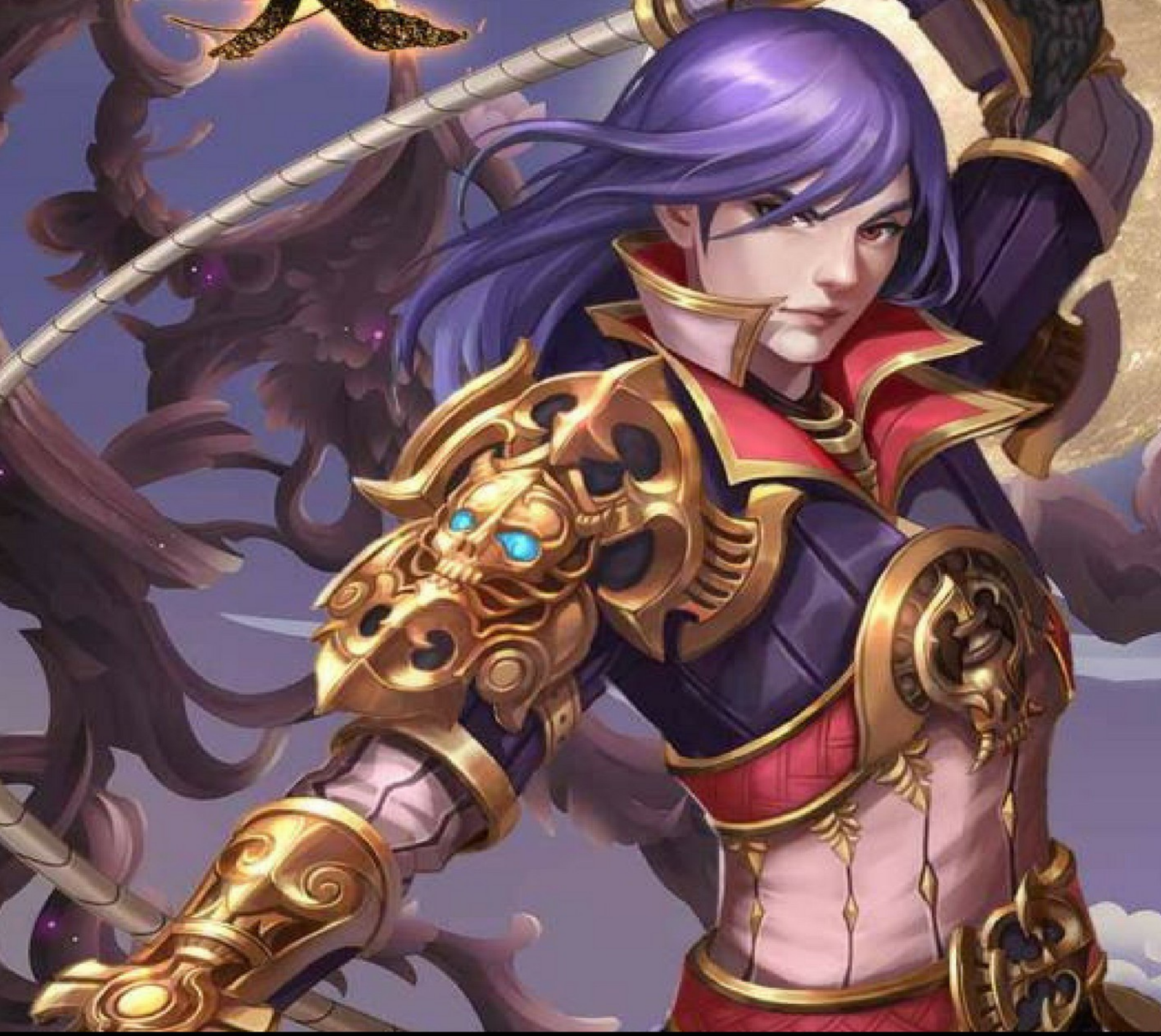

THE AVALON OF 5 ELEMENTS

BOOK 01

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The Avalon of Five Elements

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by

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Synopsis

The tens of thousands of universes have merged. The disintegration of spiritual force led to the momentous collapse of the great Cultivation World, a mighty era that had endured through millions of years of history. In the wake of the large-scale invasion of the Wilderness, the Avalon of Five Elements has become the practitioners' last stand.

After a thousand years, a lowly youth, who hailed from the Old Territory, toiled as a laborer for three years in the depths of the Wilderness. He then became an exception and obtained the opportunity to enter the Avalon Of Five Elements for further studies.

Bearing beast-like fighting capabilities and driven by the desire to take control of his life, the youth strived for greater strength and power. Little did he know that he would set off a majestic upheaval.

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Chapter 1: The Decision

Crunching noises spilled out of Fatty's mouth as he gnawed on the malt candy. The day's austere chilliness was chased away in the dusky afterglow that spilled over the vast land, the incoming breeze as gentle as a feather. Ai Hui wondered if he would remember this day in the future.

"Have you decided?" Fatty asked doubtfully.

"I have decided," Ai Hui replied. He had long made the decision, and there was no longer any hesitation.

Fatty sighed with some envy. He then commented, "You don't lose out to those wimpy kids. That would be a disgrace to me. I just can't understand what's so good about fighting and killing. Let's take this money, go back, and live happily for the rest of our lives. Do you know how many people enter the Wilderness? Two thousand! And only the two of us survived! This money is the price of our lives! If I die, my family can still get the money. If you die..."

"That's why I'm still alive," Ai Hui interrupted Fatty, who had stood up to speak with increasing agitation. Slowly, Fatty lost his distraught expression and calmed down.

The opportunity to enter the Avalon of Five Elements did not come easily. Initially, due to Ai Hui's inadequate natural abilities, he hadn't been qualified to enter. However, in the last three years, his performance had been exemplary. His ability to maintain composure in complex and stressful situations and his display of

courage and determination at crucial moments left an indelible impression in everyone’s minds.

When he made the request to enter the Avalon of Five Elements, the authorities ultimately gave their approval after consideration.

Out of the two thousand laborers, only two survived. Even if it was largely due to luck, it also illustrated the multitude of existing problems.

Fatty sat down, disappointed. He was too familiar with Ai Hui’s stubbornness. Soon after, however, he came to a realization and perked up once more to sincerely say, "Remember to write my name on the compensation payment form. Why benefit others when you can benefit me?"

Ai Hui did not bother to care about him. He casually pulled a straw of grass from the ground, put it in his mouth, and pillowed his head with his hands as he stretched out, content on the ground. For the past three years in the Wilderness, his mental state had been stretched to the limit every day. Blood, death, fighting, and killing. It was an ice-cold world where darkness and scarlet melded together.

He didn’t know how he had endured those three years, and he did not want to remember it either. After all, there were no happy memories.

The afterglow from the setting sun shone on his body. Feeling warm and snug, Ai Hui’s eyebrows naturally unfolded while his

steely face gradually relaxed into a state of tranquility.

It was so comfortable!

As Ai Hui's sun-warmed body loosened up, his mental state followed suit, as though a restrictive fog had been lifted from his mind to dissipate silently into thin air.

The warm sunlight and the slightly invigorating breeze contained an uncanny quality that stirred up strange yet familiar memories from deep within his mind. The three years... no, not the ones he spent in the Wilderness. The three years before that, the sunlight and breeze in the swordsman school had felt just like this.

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In those days, before the sun had even risen, he would have gulped in a breath of cold air, ready to start cleaning the school that had been remodeled from a worn-out warehouse. After three runs of wiping down the entire floor, his body would be warmed up, ready to start in on constructing wooden shelves. Each plank had been collected from the nearby streets and were of different sizes and thickness. As such, one could not complain much about how it looked put together.

After constructing the wooden shelves, he began to arrange the swordplay manuals the owner had obtained recently.

One yuan could buy ten kilograms of manuals on the market. Paperbacks were cheap—but still more valuable than bamboo strips—while the ones that were bound with iron and had gold covers were a bit more expensive. Though there was a lot of work to be done, there was no one to rush him. In fact, Ai Hui had never been hurried along. He was able to leisurely flip through and peruse the manuals.

Occasionally, he fantasized about how well-off he would be if he were to live in the Cultivation Era. He would have sold swordplay manuals until his hands went soft.

After arranging the swordplay manuals, he started organizing the various flying swords and treasure swords.

At this point, the sun would have risen. Just like now, it would be warm and cozy. The corners of Ai Hui's mouth involuntarily quirked into a slight smile.

Even though the flying daggers and treasured swords had lost their Spiritual Force and were just a bunch of unlit scrap metals, under the sunlight, the beauty of their antiquity would often captivate Ai Hui.

Flying swords represented the apex of the Cultivation World. For generations, the flying swords had been the favourite weapon of master blacksmiths. There were all kinds of oddities, and they existed in various shapes and sizes, there were all kinds of oddities. Some of the shapes were so weird that people could not even associate them with flying swords.

He did not dare to touch those that had rusted too much. If they broke, the owner would scold him again.

There was no salary for him, but all his meals were provided. To someone who had led the life of a miserable vagabond for the last ten years like him, this deal was as beautiful as the sunlight right now. He could not any better words to describe it.

The owner was a good man. It was just that his way of handling business was not as good.

Would a successful businessman run a swordsman school?

Ai Hui had stayed at the school for three years. During this period of time, less than ten people had visited the school. Upon seeing the signboard that hung over the entrance of the school, ninety percent of the visitors turned their heads and left.

In this day and age, were there even any Swordsmen left?

Other than countless swordplay manuals, treasured swords and flying swords, the swordsman school practically had nothing else. The owner had travelled to various marketplaces that sold rubbish just to obtain these things. Even when he travelled to foreign places to do business, he would buy back a batch of such things.

His zeal for Swordsmanship was obviously irrational. The transport fees alone was much more expensive than what they

actually costed.

Naturally, there were times when Ai Hui felt that the owner's pathetic financial power might only allow him to adopt a cheap hobby like Swordsmanship.

Ai Hui had tried to persuade the owner to switch to bodybuilding, and such. These concepts would at least had more prospects than Swordsmanship. The owner flew into a rage and berated him. At that point of time, Ai Hui realised that the owner's business management skills were truly appalling.

Guarding a completely empty school, Ai Hui felt that he might as well read and played around with the swordplay manuals. Eventually, he did not become a Sword practitioner, but to his perseverance in training, his fighting capabilities improved a lot. His fighting capabilities did attract a few wimpy kids.

Due to the owner's incapacity,his business failed and he could not pay back his debts. Eventually, he committed suicide. Ai Hui was saddened by this incident. The owner was a good man, but not a determined one. It was only right for one to pay back his or her debt. The school should be passed on to other people. These were what Ai Hui told himself on the last day when the debt collectors came to confiscate the school.

The crude wooden shelves that he made were thrashed to the ground. The swordplay manuals were scattered across the floor. Some of these manuals, the owner had retrieved from distant cities. The sword rack that he had wiped and cleaned every day were stomped to pieces by the debt collectors. According to the

owner, that rack used to reside in the abode of a sword expert. The flying sword on it had been used to shed the blood of thousands and intimidate the mighty heroes of the past. The Nine Tone Sword Chime that hung under the eaves was also smashed and fragmented. It, too, had its own lofty history as a noteworthy, prized possession of the Nine Tone Sword Sect in the past. When Ai Hui witnessed these acts, like a terribly wounded wolf that had been pushed to the brink, he lost control and frantically lunged forward.

It was just a struggle, yes, and the last struggle he could make.

Ai Hui did not know the owner’s name. So he found a wooden slab, carved the word "Owner" onto it and used it as the memorial tablet. He used twigs as joss sticks, and burned all the swordplay manuals for the owner. After kowtowing to the tablet, he prayed that the owner would be able to pursue his dream of becoming a swordsman in the afterlife.

Covered in injuries, he fixed his gaze on the building that was now in shambles for a long time before turning his back and leaving. He walked through the streets of mottled light and shadow, the sunlight filtering past the uneven roofs of houses lining the pavement. His legs strode forward mechanically as he continued onward in a trance-like state without a goal or destination.

Even after a year, the feelings of helplessness and loneliness remained fresh in his mind. He remembered that he felt somewhat cold, his fingers clutching tightly to his shirt that had been washed until it had been bleached of color. Both his hands were plunged

deeply into his pockets. The sunshine on that day had been different from today's. The chill had pierced into his very marrow. After walking for an unknown period of time, he finally awoke from his stupor to the feeling of extreme hunger. At that moment, the cold and hungry Ai Hui saw the Avalon of Five Elements' recruitment notice for laborers in the Wilderness.

Having nowhere else to go, Ai Hui went in.

And luckily, he survived.

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As Ai Hui withdrew from his emotions, he discovered that his body had tensed up involuntarily. He could not help but laugh bitterly in his heart. Such a beautiful moment was once again spoiled by his unpleasant memories.

He heaved a deep breath of air and tried his best to uncoil his tensed muscles.

By good fortune, he survived the entire three years in the Wilderness. Only two people out of two thousand men survived. One was himself, and the other Qian Dai, also known as Fatty.

The families of those dead laborers would receive a compensation fee, while those who survived were able to receive a large sum of money. In regards to this, the Avalon of Five Elements was never stingy. Fatty prepared to go home. His family was filled with

orphans and widowed mothers, and he had to provide for them. The burdens that he carried far exceeded Ai Hui's.

"Fine, I know you're a determined person and will never change your mind. You have a bad temper, along with many other issues like seldom listening to other people's advice. You're not young anymore, and you still behave like this. How are you going to find a wife in the future? Try not to spend too much of your money..." Fatty continued to talk incessantly, perhaps because he knew they were going split ways soon.

Since he was used to Fatty's irritated grumblings, Ai Hui didn't care. However, the moment Fatty mentioned the word money, he felt a slight headache. Whenever this fellow talked about money, he would rise into a frenzy.

Indeed, the veins on Fatty's neck began to pulsate. Ai Hui made a prompt decision and quickly threw a pouch at him and said, "This is for you!" Fatty cast a puzzled glance at Ai Hui and caught the pouch with a speed that didn't seem in character with his body size. After he caught the pouch though, his small, beady eyes immediately widened.

Using chubby, carrot-like fingers, he whisked open the pouch in an instant. As he glanced inside at the pouch contents, his body fat began to tremble madly with agitation. Ai Hui ignored him and turned his face the other way. Fatty's face when he saw money was horrendous.

Fatty rushed over and grasped Ai Hui's arms with a sharp smack. His face was filled to the brim with emotions while tears welled up

in his eyes.

Upon seeing Fatty's behavior, Ai Hui felt emotional as well. Perhaps he had thought too poorly of him. After both of them had been through so much together, this friendship was rather sincere and deep. Unused to such situations, he wanted to tell Fatty to get lost, but at the thought of their impending farewell, he tried his best to restrain himself and soften his tone. He then shakily said, "I'm alone anyway. There isn't much for me to spend the money on. You're going back to the Old Territory, and you have a huge family. You definitely need more money than I do...."

"Good brother! You're really my good brother!" Fatty choked with emotions as he shook Az Hui's hand desperately. With both his eyes glistening with tears, he then continued, "The Avalon of Five Elements takes care of your lodging and meals. Since you won't be needing the remaining half of the money, how about you give them to me as well?"

He was naive to think too highly of this fellow. Ai Hui's arms, which were grasped by the Fatty, flipped over, gripped the latter and lightly but forcefully pushed. Like a portly cloud, the Fatty flew out for more than thirty meters before crashing to the ground, causing the surrounding wheat and barley to fly everywhere.

"Get lost!"

It felt good to be able to finally speak his mind.

Ai Hui brushed his hands lightly, and then cautiously felt for the pouch in his pocket. Fatty had extremely nimble hands, making them difficult to guard against.

Meanwhile, Fatty picked himself up, covered in dirt.

At that moment, a whistle sounded from the distant assembly camp, and the two became silent.

It was finally time for them to part. This would be the last time they met. Ai Hui had to head for the Avalon of Five Elements, while Fatty had to return to the Old Territory. The rapid descent of the orange sunset elongated their shadows on the ground.

"Ai Hui, you must survive!"

"Okay."

Chapter 2: The Arrival

Ai Hui carried a threadbare backpack and stood in the crowd with a gloomy face. He was feeling thoroughly terrible. Just now, when he opened his pouch, he'd found all his money gone, replaced by a heap of stones.

That wretched Fatty still stole from him at the end of the day!

He swore that once he returned to the Old Territory and saw this fellow, he would beat the hell out of him.

Shaking himself out of his daze, he exhaled deeply. He prayed that the Avalon of Five Elements would really provide him with lodging and food like Fatty had said. Otherwise, when they met, he would... beat him up with more force.

For now, he put the issue of the stolen money aside and focused on what was happening before him.

It was still too early for the reporting time, but the Induction Ground's entrance was already surrounded by students excitedly greeting each other. In groups of three or four, they held animated discussions and asked questions without holding back.

After staying in the Wilderness for so long, Ai Hui was not used to the bustling scene before his eyes. He was more accustomed to the silence, killings, and dangers that had been his life for three years. Back then, his instincts would have gone on high alert at anything within five meters of him.

However, within his range right now... there were fourteen people.

He fidgeted restlessly, but it was pointless. He could only try his best to restrain the urge to escape or kill these fourteen people on impulse. In the Wilderness, an approaching unknown creature would immediately activate the fight-or-flight response in him.

Fine, it was the “Wilderness” again...

He had already sensed his incompatibility with his surroundings even before entering the Induction Ground. Taking in a deep breath of air, he forcefully calmed his palpitating heart. He knew that this was a mental barrier that he had to overcome.

After a while, he summoned the courage to force his way through the crowd, heading towards the Induction Ground’s entrance.

Squeezing through the crowd that pushed against him like torrential currents, Ai Hui was drenched in sweat, his clothes disheveled. Panting hard, he felt that this fifty-meter trek was somehow more tiring than walking for fifty kilometers.

Upon reaching the entrance, Ai Hui raised his head and gazed up at the towering gate.

From a visual estimate, the Induction Ground’s entrance gate was approximately sixty meters tall, giving it an imposing

atmosphere The gate itself was poorly assembled; however, it was made up of pieces of irregular iron panels put together. Its appearance was akin to that of a large, patchy rag that was speckled with rust and riddled with scratches everywhere.

In front of the metal gate was a half-meter-wide stone slab with a perfectly straight groove slashed across its surface. Years of corrosion had smoothed its corners, and a few droplets of water collected along the edges.

Ai Hui stared silently at the gouged slab of stone.

Everyone in the Avalon of Five Elements knew the story behind it. Even he knew about it since it was related to swordsmen.

It was known as the “ultimate defensive line.”

During the dark ages when the Wilderness invaded, this groove that was one meter in width and two hundred meters in length became the final defensive line in a battle to the death.

The last famous swordsman in history sacrificed his life to carry out the most dazzling sword strike to kill the enemy leader, carving out the ultimate defensive line.

Inspired by his bravery, the human race tenaciously defended against the invasion and persevered until the opening of the Avalon of Five Elements.

They dragged the scrap metal collected from the battlefield to assemble the towering metal gate that stood today, riddled with scars . Eventually, the Induction Ground was built upon this place by the pioneers who wished for the future generations to remember that dark era and to never forget the purpose behind establishing the Avalon of Five Elements.

The sufferings of the individuals would fade through the passage of time, but the memories and legends would pass on from generation to generation.

The history behind the Induction Grounds surely made it a place of utmost importance to the Avalon of Five Elements.

The only reason Ai Hui knew about the ultimate defensive line was because of the swordplay manuals that he had arranged back in the swordsman school.

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Almost all of them that mentioned it praised the strike to the greatest extent, saying that it saved humanity, beginning the chapter of a new era and so on. For those who cherished the legacy of Swordsmen, that strike marked the ultimate end of the Cultivation Era and the beginning of the Avalon of Five Elements.

These facts had nothing to do with Ai Hui, however. Even if his job was to arrange numerous swordplay manuals, he’d never thought to revive swordsmanship.

That was where the owner was foolish. Because of it, his business failed, he owed a huge debt, and he lost his life. Ai Hui felt pretty good to witness the historical remnant that he had read about in numerous swordplay manuals, but it was tinged with sadness when he thought about the owner.

Soon, however, he regained his usual calm. After enduring three years in the Wilderness, he was used to life-and-death situations. He was not as sad as he used to be over such matters. As long as those who were alive did their best to stay alive, those who were dead would be able to rest in peace.

Done admiring the monument, he quickly escaped from the crowd and withdrew to the outskirts. His heart rate returned to normal, and he heaved a sigh of relief.

Suddenly, at the corner of his eyes, he caught sight of a familiar figure. Ai Hui's facial expression swiftly sank. With large strides, he lifted his leg and kicked it with lightning precision.

Bang!

The plump figure flew across the air and plummeted heavily to the ground.

Before Fatty could get up, a foot was planted onto his face. "Hand the money over," Ai Hui growled.

"It's all gone!" Fatty replied without even blinking his eyes.

“Whose money is gone?” The threat in Ai Hui’s tone grew heavier as he pushed down with more strength.

“It’s all gone.” Fatty said quickly, “I’ve already sent the money home.”

“My money.” Ai Hui’s tone remained composed, but even the most insensitive person could sense the anger surging beneath the facade of tranquility like scorching lava.

“I used it to buy a spot for this place,” Fatty said with swag, before continuing, “I had no other choice. The application date has long passed, and only money could buy me a spot here. I actually pulled a lot of strings, and your money happened to be just the right amount. You better treat me well. Haven’t you heard that debtors are always the bosses? If I die, you won’t get your money back…”

Fatty continued to babble from under his foot. Suddenly, the anger disappeared and with blank face, he stomped his foot ferociously onto Fatty.

The surrounding people withdrew their gazes from this scene in disgust. Fatty’s body was riddled with dirt and mud. Compared to him, Ai Hui’s clothes were presentably clean, but they were obviously washed till the point of losing all color. The backpack that he carried was washed out as well, appearing extremely shabby.

With a face entirely covered with muddy footprints, Fatty helped himself up without the slightest sign of guilt or embarrassment.

Moving away from the crowd, they sat down. Fatty produced a malt candy from out of nowhere and popped it into his mouth with a crunch. He kept looking around, curiously sizing up his surroundings.

“How come you’re not excited at all?” Fatty cast a puzzled look at Ai Hui and continued, “Hey, it’s the Induction Ground! Now that we’re here, we’re no longer laborers! Give it another five years, and we can bring our entire families to the Avalon of Five Elements. This is where we can make a huge difference in our lives. Do you know how many people from the Old Territory would kill to be here?”

Ai Hui was too lazy to reply. He then pulled a strand of grass from a nearby pile of weeds and chewed on it. He asked, “You’re of which element?”

“Fire element!” Fatty exclaimed as he squinted his beady eyes. “I had no idea that my physique would be that good…”

All of a sudden, Fatty stopped talking as he realized he had divulged certain information.

Ai Hui swiveled his head and asked with a doubtful look on his face, “Your physique is good?”

The Avalon of Five Elements ruled the Induction Ground with a firm hand. The people living within the Avalon of Five Elements, regardless of their gender or social status, were required at a certain age to enter the Induction Ground to study. As for the people from the Old Territory, as long as they passed the physical test, they would be able to enter as well.

Unflustered, Fatty replied, “Yeah, just a bit more, and I would have passed. My innate capability is way better than yours. Otherwise, even if I wanted to buy my way in, it would’ve been impossible. With how strict the Induction Ground regulations are, it wouldn’t be easy to enter just with connections.”

No matter what, he could never let Ai Hui catch on to the fact that he obtained a spot through passing the physical test. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be able to explain the missing money. Fatty reminded himself of this fact repeatedly, remaining calm so as to not reveal anything.

“Oh,” Ai Hui replied and withdrew his gaze. His physique was average and far from the basic requirement.

“It’s a pity that we have different elements,” Fatty said regretfully. His physique was of the fire element while Ai Hui’s physique was metal. This meant that they would be separated into different teams.

Ai Hui agreed with Fatty. They worked well together, especially with the deep level of trust they’d developed. He could also take care of Fatty if they were on the same team.

As if he knew what Ai Hui was thinking, Fatty reassured him. “Don’t worry, no matter what, I’m still a veteran who roamed the Wilderness before. How can I be bullied by those wimpy kids?”

At that moment, a scarlet cloud flew over from the distant skies and landed slowly on the ground, triggering a wave of commotion. Dismounting from the cloud was a well-dressed, handsome young man, causing many young ladies to cry out in admiration.

“That’s extremely expensive!” Fatty’s gaze was captivated by the cloud in an instant. Envious, he continued, “The quality of this Fiery Floating Cloud is excellent! Its color is a bright scarlet. No signs of impurity. Look, doesn’t the shape of the cloud look like a burning flame? Well well, this Fiery Floating Cloud is of the highest quality. This lad must have come from a very powerful family. I have to find a chance to toady up to him!”

Upon biting the grass straw to nothing but dregs, Ai Hui suddenly missed the times in the Wilderness. At least there, the Ironback Canes could be found. Not only was it sweet, it also lasted longer. Even after gnawing on it for half a day, it would still be chewy. He shot a glance at the Fiery Floating Cloud and then withdrew his gaze. Not only was it eye-catching, it was slow as well, making it the perfect prey in the Wilderness.

This Fiery Floating Cloud was like a signal. After it appeared, various kinds of strange flying objects flew in from all directions and landed on the plaza before the Induction Ground.

Fatty became feverish with excitement as if he had taken some drugs. A string of words that Ai Hui had never heard of started to shoot out from Fatty's mouth. His eyes were very sharp. Not only could he identify those flying objects, he could also name their prices.

While listening to Fatty's gibberish, Ai Hui's bored gaze scanned the crowd. In the Wilderness, it was rare to see such young and tender faces. Everyone there was like a beast—fierce, agile, and dangerous.

Meanwhile, the youths here had delicate faces that radiated sunshine and vitality. Their excited looks were filled with hope for the future. The guys were proactively chatting and laughing alongside the girls, displaying elegance and humor in an attempt to attract their attention. The girls shyly blushed, resembling vermillion clouds dyed red by the morning sun. The corners of their lips displayed hints of laughter, as beautiful as blossoming flowers.

The sweet taste of the grass straw diffused throughout Ai Hui's mouth. He felt distracted, yet a little envious at the same time.

A yearning look flashed across his eyes, then disappeared. His face returned to normal, indifferent and calm. When he thought about the owner of the swordsman school, the three years he spent in the Wilderness, and the laborers that had been reduced to nothing but a pile of bleached-white skeletons, he felt that he was very fortunate.

Being alive was far more important than anything else. Being

alive was the greatest fortune.

At this moment, Fatty's non-stop gibberish became much more pleasing to his ears.

The towering gate began to open slowly. Ai Hui stood up and brushed off the dirt on his body, his face steeled with determination. He knew that what lay beyond the door was a brand-new path—a path that he could not have imagined.

He did not know where it would lead to.

Just as he entered the Wilderness three years ago, he took a step forward, speaking to Fatty without turning his head, "Let's go."

Chapter 3: Anger

“My name is Ai Hui, and I’m sixteen years old. I’m pleased to be with all of you in the same class. Please take good care of me.” Ai Hui tried his best to keep his tone gentle and composed as he stood on the podium. He had to keep reminding himself that this was not the Wilderness.

His vantage point allowed him a panoramic view of his surroundings, and he found no hidden dangers. After introducing himself, Ai Hui descended the podium steps in an uncultured fashion.

Some of the students were surprised at Ai Hui’s age and broke out into lively discussions.

“He’s old, and he’s still able to enter the Induction Ground? He’s even got such a weird name.”

“He’s probably from the Old Territory…”

Seeing the commotion, Teacher Xu, who was standing off to one side, gave a gentle cough and said, “For those students coming up next, try not to give a brief description of yourself and talk more about your backgrounds. This way, your classmates will have a better understanding of you.”

Upon returning to his seat, Ai Hui heaved a sigh of relief. Compared to being in a battle, the current situation left him far more bewildered.

Aware of his disordered breathing, he inhaled, and then exhaled deeply. Gradually, the nervousness disappeared, and his body was restored to its peak form once again.

To the others, Ai Hui appeared oddly quiet. No one realized that the peaceful and withdrawn guy that sat in the corner of the classroom was actually a dormant beast that could erupt at any time with terrifying strength.

The three years he spent in the Wilderness had left him with too many scars.

For example, his choice in seating.

He specifically chose a spot that was beside the window. From there, he'd be able to see outside, making it easier for him to defend against any incoming attacks. Or if the attacks came from within the school compound, he could immediately escape by jumping out the window.

It dictated how he observed his surroundings. At any moment in time, he was secretly monitoring the area around him—the teacher on the podium, the students around him, the structure of the school compound, and the placement of tables and chairs. Too often, these minor details were the key factors in deciding one's fate—to live or to die. One could never complain about an overabundance of information.

He didn't consciously make these decisions. Everything came

naturally to him.

He had around two hundred classmates, and most of them were quite young. This was evident from the naive and tender looks on their faces. There were a few fellows that dressed elegantly and appeared haughty, clearly coming from influential families. Ai Hui recognized one of them as the same noble who came flying in on the high-quality Fiery Floating Cloud.

His name was apparently Duanmu Huanghun, somewhat prideful and rather strong. Ai Hui took mental note of him.

This guy had been appointed as the class monitor. What is a class monitor, he wondered. A team leader? It was never a good idea to let an arrogant guy be the team leader. The experienced Ai Hui made silent observations from the side.

However, this had nothing to do with him.

It was only a pity that he and Fatty weren't assigned to the same class.

At this thought, he felt some regret.

But in the next moment, Teacher Xu said something that crushed this feeling and replaced it with overflowing fury and endless killing intent.

"Next, I will announce the fees that are charged by the Induction

Ground and the school. Everyone can feel that the concentration of elemental energy in the city is much stronger, right? Training in such an environment will save effort and ensure better results.

"The standard rent for a single room is fifty thousand yuan per year. As another option, we also provide a more luxurious dormitory that has an elemental energy concentration nine times higher than the outside world's. This upgraded room costs seventy thousand yuan per year, and the students who can afford it are free to apply. Now, let's talk about the food. The food sold within the grounds are rather cheap. Daily meals cost two hundred yuan per day, and this includes the breakfast..."

Ai Hui's cheeks twitched indiscernibly. He didn't want to listen to any more. He tried his best to control his facial expression, but the rage within him was practically consuming him. Under the table, his clenched fists were riddled with pulsing veins.

The Induction Ground provided room and board? Haha!

Why didn't he kill that wretched Fatty at registration?

The teacher continued to talk non-stop on the podium. His saliva flew across the air and landed on the blackboard, seemingly forming a glittering word—money.

Even after half an hour, this fellow was still talking about the fees! Ai Hui had the sudden urge to charge forward and kill Master Xu who now seemed like an aggressive, life-threatening beast. No, Master Xu was also a beast that had a deep blood feud with him!

Ai Hui squinted as the look in his eyes turned ice-cold. Haha, he had killed so many beasts like the one in front of him right now.

An hour passed...

By now, Ai Hui's anger had completely disappeared, his ice-cold gaze replaced by a lifeless one. He was resigned to his fate, and it would be a bitter death.

He was even tempted to escape back to the Wilderness.

The dangerous beasts with their blood-stained ivory fangs in the somber Wilderness now appeared gentle and cute.

Instead, shouldn't that be the true appearance of the Induction Ground? This place was actually a hundred times more dangerous than the Wilderness!

When Teacher Xu was perfectly satisfied, he finally stopped. "Those students that came from the Old Territory should have received a sum of money after passing the aptitude test, correct? This is to be used for your daily allowance and study purposes."

He did not pass the aptitude test...

Ai Hui looked insipidly at the teacher.

“Of course, that money is only enough for your basic necessities. If you wish to obtain more resources and opportunities, you’ll have to work harder. There are a total of seventy-six cities in the Induction Ground that provide plenty of job opportunities and daily missions for you to earn reasonable remuneration. I have to remind everyone, however, that your main objective in coming to the Induction Ground was to learn and train, not make money. Don’t waste too much time on earning money and delay your training—the gains will not make up for your losses.”

Ai Hui heaved a sigh of relief. Luckily, there was a way out of this predicament. Like a deer that had barely escaped from the tiger’s claws, the joy from his new lease on life formed a sheen of cold sweat across his forehead.

Ai Hui dabbed at his forehead and revised the risk level of the Induction Ground in his mind!

Teacher Xu began to distribute thick stacks containing detailed information: a timetable, a map of the local area, a job list, a mission list, locations of all available lodgings and restaurants, and routes to various cities.

“Everyone has three days to settle their room and board. After that, we will begin lessons. Note that Introduction to Elemental Energy is not within our syllabus. For those who have never attended this course before, you can self-study at the library or attend Teacher Dong’s introductory class. Class dismissed.”

Ai Hui searched for Teacher Dong’s introductory class on the timetable and circled it. This was a class he definitely needed to

attend.

However, the most crucial problem that he had to settle right now was the issue of money. He was penniless and didn't even have money for lunch.

He sat perfectly upright and used his sharp vision to quickly scan through the hefty information in his hands. The first thing he looked for was the phrase "All meals provided." Ai Hui heaved a sigh of relief when he saw that many places had it. Then, he began to use his fingertip to follow the listings one by one until suddenly, his fair and slender finger stopped in its tracks.

The sharpness and intensity of his gaze disappeared, becoming reserved and puzzled as he became somewhat lost in his own thoughts.

Chewing a grass straw in his mouth, Ai Hui carried his shabby backpack in one hand and a map in the other and walked out of the school compound. Unfamiliar streets and shops passed before his eyes. Various objects he had never seen before whizzed past his body and over his head, and the people around him discussed topics that he knew nothing about.

Ai Hui realized that he'd been calmly observing the unfamiliar environment around him.

After spending three years in the Wilderness, his strength still couldn't be considered powerful, but his mental strength had grown much stronger. Though it wouldn't be easy, he had the

courage to live alone and take on the uncertainties of this world and .

This was probably what growing up was all about, and to mature faster than others was not necessarily bad.

He laughed to himself. It seemed that after leaving the Wilderness, his temperament had become more unpredictable. Slinging the shabby backpack over his shoulder with the grass straw still dangling from his lips, he looked at the map and walked alongside his shadow under the sun towards his destination.

Luckily, the place wasn't hard to find since the Commission Center building was eye-catching and located at the center of the city.

"Are you seriously going to accept this commission?" The old man in charge of allocating commissions warned Ai Hui, "The area is quite big, and the daily cleaning workload is rather tough. Honestly speaking, I hadn't expected anyone to take on this commission. The owner of this training hall hasn't returned for the past twenty years. Before he left, he deposited a sum of money into our account, and since it hasn't run out, we've been releasing the same commission every year. However, you must know that the remuneration for this commission follows the standard from twenty years ago. People stopped taking this commission for ten years now. I have to remind you that the pay will be very small, barely paying for your meals. Are you sure you still want to accept this commission?"

Ai Hui answered with a question of his own, "Can I have a partial

advance payment?”

The old man realized Ai Hui’s financial problem and nodded. “You can. And remember, once you take up this commission, you can’t quit before you leave the Induction Ground. Do you want to reconsider your decision?”

Ai Hui bluntly replied, “I accept it.”

“Very well.” The old man quickly handled the formalities for him. “That place is very spacious. You can stay there and save your lodging fees. The advance payment has been sent to your card. Here’s the key, and the address is on it. Finally, welcome to the Induction Ground.”

“Thank you!” Ai Hui thanked the old man from his heart and gave a sincere bow.

“Such a polite kid.” The old man revealed a smile. “Continue to work hard. Strength is everything.”

Ai Hui did not know how to react to the old man’s kind gesture, but he tried his best to return the smile. “I will.”

As the saying went, the heart would never panic with money in hand. Ai Hui’s mood had lifted, and the world seemed more beautiful to him now.

He was amused by the various, bizarre scenes on the street. Ai

Hui felt like a tourist, taking an interest in everything around him.

An enormous Three Leaves Bamboo Cart flew over his head, making him stop in his tracks to look up.

A spacious bamboo cage was suspended under the hovering Three Leaves Bamboo Cart. Inside it were a few rows of bamboo chairs filled with passengers. At the head of the bamboo cart, there was a rainbow-colored cage. The vines atop the cage emitted a multi-colored glow and formed the words “Green Mountain City”, making them clearly visible from afar.

Ai Hui had seen a Three Leaves Bamboo Cart in the Wilderness before, but that model had been much uglier compared to this one. The bamboo cage on it had overgrown, colorful poison spikes, resembling a monster. Although its main purpose was to transport goods, the amount that it could carry was not a lot. With the wandering ferocious beasts and their terrifying offensive power, operating the cart was a dangerous job in the Wilderness.

Wood elementalists had little passion for combat, preferring to stay behind the front lines.

However, when Ai Hui saw the Three Leaves Bamboo Carts everywhere, he could feel the flourishing prosperity of the Induction Ground. Even the elementalists he held in high regard could be found all over.

As the Three Leaves Bamboo Cart flew towards the horizon, he withdrew his gaze and continued walking forward.

Within a short time, he finally found the alley where the training hall was located at. According to the map, it was closer to the end.

The deeper he walked in, the more he felt as though he had entered into an entirely different world. The desolate, ancient air suddenly engulfed him as he observed the surrounding old-fashioned houses that had clearly been there for many years.

Abruptly, Ai Hui stopped in his tracks.

Chapter 4: Sand Puppet Lou Lan

Not far from him, in the middle of the alleyway, a figure struggled in what seemed to be a pool of yellow quicksand.

Ai Hui increased his vigilance. The first thought that came to his mind was earth elementalists.

They had many unique killing moves that were difficult to guard against. When there didn't seem to be any changes to the situation, Ai Hui took a closer look and discovered something strange about the figure—only the top-half of its body was visible.

Its skin was slightly yellowish with a coarse, gritty texture, and on its face, it wore a black mask that seemed to be made of some kind of dense rock. Ai Hui opened his mouth and blurted out, "Sand puppet?"

The figure stopped struggling and cast a glance at Ai Hui before replying, "Yes, you can call me Lou Lan."

It was a male voice, deep and hoarse.

Sand puppets were a favorite of earth elementalists. They were easy to make and repair, would undertake any tasks without complaints, and were very suitable for manual labor. This one happened to be made of the high-quality heavy sand produced by the Yellow Sand Manufacturer in the Avalon of Five Elements. It was easy to recognize the sand puppet based on its composition, but also, he had seen plenty of them in the Wilderness.

“It appears that you’ve encountered some troubles.” Ai Hui walked to the front of Lou Lan and squatted. “Is it your sand core?”

If a sand puppet malfunctioned, it was most likely because of the sand core. It was the most important component of their bodies, crafted by earth elementalists using heavy sand. Each core was unique, however, since earth elementalists each had their own crafting methods.

The sand core was pivotal in the formation of its body since they were entirely made of individual particles. Hence, if the core broke down, the sand puppet would be reduced to a pool of yellow sand.

“Yes, it’s a chronic problem.” Lou Lan sounded somewhat helpless. “Can you help me? My master is Master Shao. He lives in the second building from the end of the alleyway. Could you deliver a message to him?”

“The second building from the end of the alleyway?” Ai Hui raised his eyebrows. “Seems like we’re going to be neighbors for some time.”

Seeing Lou Lan’s rather high intelligence, Ai Hui assumed that a powerful earth elementalist lived next to him.

Just as Ai Hui put his hand into the pool of yellow sand, he immediately felt the tug of strong earth elemental energy crushing him like a grinding millstone. His entire face shuddered as he

covered his palm with metal elemental energy, making it into a razor-sharp dagger.

"Try to bear with it."

Just as Ai Hui finished his sentence, the metal elemental energy gathered in his hands suddenly exploded outward.

Bang!

A low, muffled explosion could be heard from within the pool of yellow sand as invisible shockwaves diffused across the area. Lou Lan's upper body froze in the pile of trembling sand.

Two seconds later, his eyes brightened. The dispersed yellow sand rapidly gathered around his body like a pile of metal dust attracted to a magnet.

In the blink of an eye, not a speck of sand could be seen on the floor. With a recovered body, Lou Lan started to move his body around. Amazed, he asked, "Such a magical method, how did you do it?"

"It's a simple method, "Ai Hui corrected him. He picked up his shabby backpack and slung it over his shoulder. "It's only for emergencies though. You still have to go back and examine your sand core again."

He wasn't lying; it really wasn't some ingenious method. Ai Hui

had seen earth elementalists in the Wilderness use this method to treat problematic sand puppets every once in awhile. It didn't work every time, but it did at least eight times out of ten.

Admittedly, however, this was Ai Hui's first time trying it himself. No sane earth elementalist would let a laborer repair his or her sand puppet.

Lou Lan naturally didn't know this. Instead, he felt that Ai Hui possessed the demeanor of a very capable individual.

"Thank you very much!" Lou Lan bowed and thanked him sincerely.

"Don't worry about it. My name's Ai Hui." Ai Hui waved his hand, signalling Lou Lan to not fret over it and continued walking towards the alley's end. "Let's go, we're heading in the same direction."

Lou Lan followed beside Ai Hui and asked, "So where are you heading?"

"The Vanguard Training Hall. Is it located here?" Ai Hui asked casually.

"We are indeed neighbors." Lou Lan's deep voice contained a tinge of excitement. "We're right next door. Is this your house? It seems no one's been here in a long time."

Ai Hui's walking pace slowed down, but he acted natural as he replied, "No, I've taken on a commission that requires me to clean up this place."

Lou Lan oohed. "So you're a new student?"

"You got it." Ai Hui nodded. He could already sense that Lou Lan seldom left his house.

A sand puppet's intelligence had the capacity to develop further. While Ai Hui was in the Wilderness, he had seen combat sand puppets behave cunningly and callously—truly killing machines.

There was a saying, "One can easily tell the character of an earth elementalist by looking at their sand puppet." Judging by Lou Lan, he could tell that the master, Master Shao, was an unworldly earth elementalist that focused on trainings.

"We've arrived. This is the Vanguard Training Hall." Lou Lan pointed at an old-fashioned house at the end of the alleyway.

"To build a training hall in such a secluded area is really..." Ai Hui shook his head. The three years he had spent in the swordsman school made him sensitive towards issues regarding training halls. He came roughly knowing that it would be out of the way. However, now that he saw this place with his own eyes, he realized that he had underestimated just how remote it would be.

Was the landlord a depressed individual like the owner of the swordsman school?

Possible. Didn’t the old man say that the landlord hadn’t contacted them for twenty years? Perhaps he’d been hinting at the landlord’s unknown fate.

Whatever. Ai Hui didn’t care too much. After all, he was doing this for the money. The training hall and the fate of the landlord had nothing to do with him.

Clusters of spiderwebs covered the door, and the signboard over the door was stacked with layers of filth, rendering the inscribed words illegible. If he didn’t know this place was called the Vanguard Training Hall, he wouldn’t have been able to recognize it.

He took out the key, easily unlocking the door. It seemed he had found the right place.

As he pushed open the door, heavy stacks of dust fell down like snow.

Ai Hui stood at the entrance and waited for the dust to settle before he stepped in.

The courtyard was dilapidated while the weeds had grown taller than an actual person. Most of the overgrown vegetation were sword reeds, appearing like a sea of blades pointed at the sky. Ai

Hui's eyes twitched at the scene. The landlord must have had a weird taste to grow sword reeds in his own home.

The plants were generally used to make grass swords, which was exactly what Ai Hui used as a weapon.

However, when Ai Hui saw the overgrown courtyard, he began to feel the beginnings of a huge headache. Sword reeds were difficult to cut due to their extreme durability that far exceeded even steel's. That wasn't even the worst part. Sword reeds grew in thickets, so if someone accidentally fell into it, their body would be covered in cuts and bruises.

Ai Hui shook his head and laughed bitterly.

Another upsetting matter was that these sword reeds were too thick and old. If they were at most five years old, he could use them to make grass swords, but these were useless to him.

"I can help you," Lou Lan offered.

Ai Hui shook his head. " I can do it on my own. You should go back and check on your sand core. What I did just now was a stopgap measure. It won't solve the root of the problem."

"Okay then." Lou Lan tilted his head. "You can wait for me to return tomorrow."

"I can do it on my own. Since I've taken the money, I should

work on it myself," Ai Hui replied as he opened up his shabby backpack. He did not have the habit of throwing his own tasks at other people to do.

"Okay, I'll go back first then." Without another word, Lou Lan's body dissolved into a pool of sand that disappeared into the ground.

Although sword reeds were considered by many as a troublesome plant, Ai Hui knew that wasn't the case.

After three years in the Wilderness, Ai Hui considered himself a fledgling botanologist. It was only a pity that he wasn't a wood elemental; otherwise, he felt he'd have much better future prospects than with his current affinity for the metal element.

His backpack was filled with an assortment of objects: animal bones, pelts, seeds, and colorful stones. These were the spoils of war and savings he'd obtained during his three years in the Wilderness. Most of these he had collected himself, while some had been given to him by other elementalists as rewards or as handouts because they were considered useless by their previous owners.

Ai Hui guarded them closely. No matter what, he never allowed himself to lose his backpack.

From his satchel, he took out a small, red bottle containing a kind of fire poison called Flaming Timbre that he had personally concocted. Its toxicity was not strong enough to be used in combat,

but it was an essential item that everyone carried in the Wilderness.

There, the overgrown vegetation could blot out the sun, making many places difficult to access. To set up camp as well, the area had to be cleared away.

Unfortunately, there were countless plant types in the Wilderness that were exceptionally resilient, even more so than sword reeds. Manpower alone could not get rid of them, and they were resistant to ordinary fire. Only a fire poison like Flaming Timbre could dispose of them.

As Ai Hui unstoppered the bottle, a sulfuric smell immediately diffused through the air. He then poured the lava-like Flaming Timbre onto the sword reeds.

As soon as it touched the leaves, the lush green became an ash-gray color that rapidly spread throughout the entire thicket with a visible speed.

Gradually, the sulfuric smell in the air dissipated, and after approximately five minutes, the sea of sword reeds had turned completely gray.

Pfff!

The sword reeds collapsed like an avalanche, leaving the entire area littered with plant ashes.

Ai Hui skillfully buried the plant ashes into the ground. By doing so, he could effectively suppress any future weed growth since they avoided the smell of Flaming Timbre.

Fast with his movements, in the blink of an eye, he had cleared the entire courtyard. Using a broom, he swept away the spiderwebs in the room corners then drew water from the well to wipe the floors clean. With several years' worth of dust built up, he had to do five to six runs to clean it all.

In the corners of the house, there were stone grooves with old calabash gourds. After clearing away the dead leaves that had accumulated in the gourds, Ai Hui wrapped vines around the pillars and eaves before hanging the calabashes on them.

The windows were opened to ventilate the house.

He hung the weather-beaten wooden signboard in the main hall, washed the bronze incense burner and stuck in them three joss sticks that he had found in a cupboard.

After working hard for the entire day, the training hall became as clean as new.

Nightfall arrived, and the calabashes that hung under the eaves emitted a gentle glow, giving the training hall an ambient lighting. The bluestone benches were clean and neat. A simple and rustic wooden house. Neatly-placed equipment. Spiralling incense that contained traces of sweetness.

Like a dream hidden within the depths of his mind, the tranquil scene before him seemed to appear without any warning.

He was caught off guard and somewhat startled by the captivating scene, unable to resist its charm.

He was slightly startled.

Chapter 5: Blind Battle

It was surely true that the mind could not win over an empty stomach.

When Ai Hui returned to his senses and realized that he had not eaten anything the entire day, an overwhelming rush of hunger engulfed him.

Limbs weakened, he supported himself by holding on to the wall.

An empty sack could not stand upright, this idiom made so much sense now.

As he staggered out of the alleyway, he caught sight of a noodle house and almost crawled his way over.

"Boss, one bowl of noodles!"

"Okay!"

After eating, Ai Hui regained his strength, but when he went to pay his bill, his eyes almost popped out of their sockets. "How... how much?"

"One hundred and fifty yuan, thank you for patronizing my store," the boss replied.

"One... one hundred and fifty yuan?" Ai Hui asked incredulously. He stared at the boss with a darkening expression and a murderous aura. Since childhood, he'd never been one to be pushed around.

"New student?" The boss furrowed his eyebrows. This was not the first time such an incident had happened here. He pointed helplessly at the wooden signboard in his shop. "The prices are listed here."

Ai Hui's eyes followed the boss's hand to the signboard, an unpleasant feeling rising like bile in his stomach.

The boss was speaking the truth...

Ai Hui reeled out of the noodle house with an ashen face. He finally knew why no one was willing to take up the commission on the training hall. The monthly salary was only four thousand five hundred yuan. Barely enough to pay for his meals? Who taught mathematics to the old man at the Commission Center? Reveal yourself now!

Thirty bowls of noodles!

A bowl of noodles each day. When Ai Hui touched his stomach, which did not seem full even though he had just eaten, and thought about his future, his face turned pale. He stepped into the Induction Ground with lofty aspirations, thinking he could become a powerful elementalist and take control of his life. However, he did not expect himself to be defeated by a bowl of noodles sold in the Induction Ground.

If he couldn’t even fill his stomach, why bother talking about training?!

The night breeze sent a bone-piercing chill down his spine, causing him to tremble non-stop.

No, he had to think of a way to earn money!

After five seconds of self-pitying, Ai Hui pulled himself together. Money was important not only to ensure a full stomach but also to benefit an elementalist’s training. While he was in the Wilderness, he had followed elementalists around just to hunt dire beasts.

A dire beast’s skin, flesh, tendons, and bones were considered treasures.

The bones and tendons could be made into weapons and the skins into armor. As for the dire beasts’ blood, they were usually used to concoct elixirs, and the flesh was mainly used to make elemental food.

The so-called elemental food was rich in elemental energy, which was highly beneficial to one’s training.

The current elemental energy system had been inherited from the extensively detailed cultivation system. It was impacted so deeply that it still retained certain cultivation aspects that could still be seen today.

Ai Hui was no longer an ignorant teenager who thought that diligent training was all that was needed to become more powerful.

The streetlights lit up, brilliantly illuminating the nighttime Central Pine City. New students wandered in groups, and the streets bustled with life. As newly-admitted students, they did not have any worries yet. The excitement from entering the Induction Ground continued to burn within them, making them brim with hope for the future.

Perhaps the laughter and joy surrounding him alleviated Ai Hui’s worries.

He wandered around with both hands plunged deeply into his pockets, leisurely walking alone through the myriad of beautiful lights. He somewhat enjoyed this moment filled with the bustling crowd, the churning mist under the light, and the wafting aroma of food. This was a special moment for him. Even though he was always unknowingly on high alert, his cautious mind had relaxed a bit at the sight of the lively atmosphere and the innocence of the ordinary people.

He roamed aimlessly around the streets when suddenly, a signboard caught his eyes.

The signboard wrote, "Blind battle! If you can last for five minutes, you can take away fifty thousand yuan!"

Fifty thousand yuan!

Ai Hui’s eyes promptly lit up, resembling a hungry wolf that had identified its prey. His hands that were previously in his pockets were now touching his stomach, subconsciously rubbing it.

Not really full yet....

How many bowls of noodles could fifty thousand yuan buy? It didn’t seem worth it, but how come he felt hungry again?

Without completing his thought process, he lost control of his legs that had already walked through the entrance.

The body was always honest with its needs...

....

Shi Clan Training Hall.

The door to the resting lounge opened, revealing a tall, elegant, and frosty lady brimming with confidence. She wore a black windbreaker and a hat that covered almost her entire face. The young lady pulled off her overcoat and passed it to a middle-aged man behind her asking, "Blind battle? This concept is rather interesting. I like it!"

"I’m glad that Young Mistress is pleased." The middle-aged man quickly bent his body and took the jacket from her. "We’ve

received word from the clan to inform Young Mistress of the situation. There aren’t many experts in Central Pine City. Most of them are new students. Therefore, we came up with a new concept like this, but we’re not certain whether it will work or not."

"You didn’t announce my name, right?" The young lady sat down and crossed her gorgeous, slender legs. She took the glass of fruit juice in front of her and sipped leisurely. Her long hair draped over her shoulders, flawlessly framing an exquisite oval face and eyes that shone brightly like stars. Her facial expression exuded extreme confidence that was tinged with pride. Her features made her breathtakingly beautiful but also gave her an imposing aura. Even when calmly sitting on the sofa, she emitted a powerfully oppressive air.

"No!" The middle-aged man quickly denied. " If we announced Miss Xueman’s name, who would dare to come? Your reputation is truly intimidating. We planned the blind battle and prepared a mask without eyes holes to prevent anyone from recognizing you."

"It appears that all of you have put in a lot of effort. Thanks for the trouble." Shi Xueman smiled with satisfaction. "Tell everyone that they’ll be rewarded with a three-month bonus."

As a beauty who received both attention and recognition in the Induction Ground, she would be watched wherever she went. However, she was a smart individual who knew when to stay low-key.

Power was the absolute truth. This was what she had been taught from a young age.

"Thank you very much, Young Mistress," the middle-aged man hurriedly said with an uncontrollable burst of happiness showing in his eyes. A three-month bonus was a huge sum of money to them, and more importantly, they earned praise from Young Mistress. Getting in her good books would definitely be exceptionally beneficial to their futures.

Shi Xueman continued her line of questioning. "How many people have signed up?"

"As of this moment, twenty-three people." Just as the middle-aged man finished his sentence, he tilted his head and continued, "Twenty-four people. Someone has just signed up. We hoped to attract more people by not setting an entrance fee, but it’s just that we had no time to advertise this event with the time we were given."

"It’s enough. It seems I can have a good workout tonight." Shi Xueman lightly stroked her eyebrows as she gave a thin smile. Suddenly, she withdrew her smile and asked, "How long before it starts?"

"It begins at eight-thirty. There’s still fifteen minutes left," the middle-aged man replied. He could not help but remind, "Young Mistress, you will have to hold back a bit. I believe many new students will show up. If you injure them, I’m afraid it might bring about some troubles."

"Don’t worry." Shi Xueman slowly nodded her head. "I put on the

Suppression Bracelet."

The middle-aged man heaved a sigh of relief. He was most worried about Little Mistress injuring the new students. If she hurt the senior students, the Induction Ground would be lenient, but the Induction Ground paid more attention to the new students. With the Suppression Bracelet that limited the powers of an elementalist, he felt now that he must have over thought the matter.

Given Young Mistress's genius and her harsh self-expectations, how was it possible for her to come all the way here to bully a new student?

"You can leave now. I need to prepare," Shi Xueman said plainly.

"Yes!" The middle-aged man bowed and left the resting lounge.

Shi Xueman withdrew her smile, donning a more serious expression. She came to Central Pine City only to accompany her grandfather in visiting a friend, but she did not have any thoughts of slacking off. Before she left, she had already notified her family's training hall branch in Central Pine City that she planned on training there. She just did not expect them to put in so much effort in setting up a blind battle.

This was her first time fighting in one.

By wearing the Suppression Bracelet, her strength didn't differ

much from the new students', testing her techniques even more. She was unsure how much of her actual capabilities would be exhibited in this battle.

However, she never shied away from unknown challenges. Instead, the uncertainty aroused her fighting spirit and even made her eager for it to come.

It had been a while since she had felt such excitement. She began to adjust her combat attire, tying up her long, draping hair with a red ribbon, revealing her beautiful, snow-white neck. Her unhurried movements and solemn expression gave the impression of vigilance.

Upon wearing the mask, the world before her was replaced with nothing but darkness.

The unfamiliar blackout sent a quiver through her heart.

Closing her eyes, she slowly adjusted her breathing, feeling around her meticulously. The world before her blinded eyes became hushed, allowing her to hear sounds that she usually overlooked. Instead, they now resounded through her ears like fish silently emerging from the depths of the sea. Her heightened tactile sensitivity extended throughout her body, the subtle streams of air that blew by her skin enough to make her tremble involuntarily.

This was a brand-new world—a world she had never experienced before.

It gave her extreme excitement. Her instincts told her that if she could master this unfamiliar world, she would definitely make a breakthrough in her level.

Time passed silently, allowing her to clearly feel out this quiet and alien world.

"The blind battle is about to start. You have three minutes to prepare. The blind battle is a five minute endurance match. The last one standing on the arena after five minutes will win the prize money of fifty thousand yuan. To make it more realistic, the arena has been fully covered with the non-toxic and odorless Ink Night Fumes. It will only affect your vision, perfectly simulating the night scene. To prevent unnecessary injuries, this endurance match will be fought using bare hands. Everyone, please wear your defensive gears and mask. The match will begin in one minute's time."

Shi Xueman stood and headed towards the door that connected the resting lounge to the arena.

It was as if she had used a ruler to measure her pace, stopping right where her mask touched the door.

She waited silently, resembling an artist's most perfect sculpture.

"The blind battle is about to begin. Counting down now, ten, nine, eight..."

Shi Xueman remained motionless.

"Three, two, one! Battle begins!"

The door hinges slid open.

Without any hesitation, Shi Xueman entered the arena. At that moment, she lost the faint light that had previously shone through her mask. She was now truly in a world of pure darkness.

The Ink Night Fumes was worthy of its name!

Shi Xueman secretly praised it in her mind.

The Ink Night Fumes was a kind of smokescreen that was seldom used by people because there were only a small number of wood elementalists who knew how to concoct it, and it also had an extremely expensive price tag. Its effect, however, was rather remarkable. Shi Xueman’s recent acclimatization had been shattered immediately.

Suddenly, an ominous feeling rose in her heart.

Chapter 6: Success

Unlike the others who felt as though they were bound hand and foot, Ai Hui was like a fish in water, glad to be back in a familiar environment.

In the Wilderness, darkness ruled. Numerous massacres and sneak attacks occurred quietly in that very darkness, seizing lives and warmth. Strength didn't matter; the elementalists who were unable to adapt to the dark would not survive.

Ai Hui soon sensed a presence nearby—so close that he anticipated they would pass each other.

Initially, he had no intention of attacking. As long as he managed to hide and keep silent in a corner for five minutes, he could collect the prize money and leave because the rules stated that he would win as long as he persevered for five minutes without being defeated.

It was, however, a matter of life and death in the Wilderness. No rules applied.

When Ai Hui realized that the situation was not as he had expected, he responded instinctively. The opponent was dangerously close to him. If the opponent attacked, he wouldn't be able to launch a counterattack. Ai Hui entered a flowing state and gauged the danger level using the terrifying

dire beasts that lived in the Wilderness as a benchmark. He

would never foolishly assume that the people around him would be unable to adapt to the darkness.

Countless life or death experiences had taught his body that when such situations arose, initiating an attack would give him a greater advantage.

His footsteps were light and graceful. Like a cat in the night, each step he took was absolutely noiseless.

His movements were very slow, to the point that not even the sound of wind could be heard. This was where Ai Hui's rich experience came into play. Within the dark environment, each breath or sound was as piercing as a dazzling ray of light.

Silence was darkness's best companion.

Ai Hui vaguely sensed his opponent's position and gently advanced towards it.

He was in a highly anticipatory state. The flesh and muscles throughout his entire body were in a critical state, like a volcano on the verge of eruption. Nobody would have been able to discern this, however, from his external appearance.

Suddenly, he stopped and held his breath.

He was a seasoned hunter; he sensed that his prey had detected his presence.

He did not know how to describe this sense of awareness or where this intuition was based. There was no need for substantiation in the Wilderness. There was only victory or failure, life or death.

He stood in place like a statue, without a single movement.

On the other side, Shi Xueman smelled the faint trace of a dangerous odor. Although she wasn't certain, it was enough to put her on guard. She focused all her attention on the surroundings, vigilantly using her ears to capture any sounds.

The surroundings were very quiet as if there was only emptiness.

But somewhere a little further away, she could hear the breaths of a few people. Although they were suppressed, she managed to capture the noises. In fact, she heard someone tiptoeing quietly around her left side.

Inwardly she shook her head. At this point, any movement would lead to an attack.

Right then, about ten meters away, a cry of surprise and a stifled groan could be heard, followed by the collisions of intense punching and kicking. Soon, chaos took over that area.

Shi Xueman mentally heaved a sigh of relief. It seemed it was an illusion. There was no one within a three-meter radius from where

she stood.

Fighting in the dark was indeed very different.

Shi Xueman felt stimulated by such an unfamiliar battle. Her nerves tensed up like never before. Her perception of the surroundings was also unprecedentedly acute. If she could keep this up, her fighting abilities would take a qualitative leap.

Before her eyes unfolded a path she had never seen before.

She felt like a hunter hidden within the shadows, waiting for the best opportunity to strike. Confidence bubbled up within her. Under such a high level of alertness, even the slightest change in her surroundings could not escape her.

While she was preoccupied with this fresh experience, she suddenly felt something brush against her shoulder.

It broke her reverie and made her hair stand on end. She had not moved, so why would she bump into anything?

Someone was close by! She'd been unable to detect anything—a presence, a sound, even a change in airflow. A chill shot up her spine.

Her reaction was too slow however. Even as she finally realized the danger, it was already too late.

When Shi Xueman had been lost in her thoughts earlier, the statue-like Ai Hui made his move. He moved excruciatingly slowly, even more so than a ninety-year-old lady. He advanced with his five fingers carefully extended, grasping and exploring the area before him. His body leaned forward slightly, with the flesh and muscles in his body all ready to make a lunge.

With Ai Hui's high level of concentration, he blocked out the battle noises from close by and remained completely unaffected. All his attention was on his fingertips. He knew that if he came into contact with someone, the battle would be over in a blink of an eye. Victory or defeat, the result would be pronounced at this moment.

The moment his fingers felt an obstruction, Ai Hui launched an attack without hesitation.

With knees slightly bent and tendons creating a burst of energy, his body sprang forward with lightning speed like a nimble and fierce cheetah. The sensation beneath his fingertips became more solid, his rich experience leading him to deduce that he had touched his opponent's shoulder.

When Shi Xueman responded by violently lunging forward to push against his attack, she lost her balance on the spot, and her body tumbled towards the ground. Her left hand, which had been ready to counterattack, lost effectiveness as she instinctively reached out to regain balance.

However, her arm became entangled with his, locked into a vicious attack that numbed her right arm.

The attack that completely suppressed her did not stop there. Shi Xueman was greatly shocked as her opponent's body wrapped around hers like a snake. His body pressed up against her back tightly like an octopus. His legs were like thick and solid steel wires. They extended to her front and held onto her legs as his toes clasped onto her calves like a metal lock.

Never in her life had Shi Xueman had such close contact with a man. However, at that point, there were no butterflies in her stomach. There was only fear. Deep fear.

The tough body lock made her feel like a fish caught in a net, lacking the power to struggle. She wanted to remove the Suppression Bracelet, but her limbs were clamped tightly, unable to budge. She didn't hear him gasping for breath either, not even the rise and fall of his breaths. The ice-cold silence caused her great fear. She felt as if she was being attacked by a lifeless machine, and its steel cables had wrapped themselves around her. Her terror surged when she felt her opponent slowly tightening his grip.

She smelled death.

The intense fear and her strong will to live made her struggle with unprecedented strength.

Hair continuously swept across her mask where beneath it, her eyes were shut, her face grim and unfeeling. It was normal. Even a

beast would struggle its hardest before death, how much more so would a human.

The fight wasn't over yet. It was now a battle of wisdom and tenacity.

His grip on her slightly slipped.

Upon realizing that her struggle was taking effect, Shi Xueman's body wriggled even more intensely.

Ai Hui was like a hard-hearted hunter, steadily pressing down onto the main joints of the prey's body, letting it struggle and waste its energy. When the prey eventually runs of out strength, it was time for it to die.

Soon enough, Shi Xueman ran out of breath and sweat started pouring from her body. She could feel her strength rapidly reducing. As she grew more and more tired, her opponent's grip became tighter and tighter.

At this moment, she awoke from her fear.

She regained a small measure of composure. The results from years of tough trainings was immediately displayed. She'd been born into a large and honorable clan and experienced many things since childhood. Initially, she had lost control of her mind and body because of her momentary panic, but now that she had recovered from it, she hurriedly created a countermeasure.

A bizarre ray of light flashed, the elemental energy within Shi Xueman beginning to operate. Her body that had been bound tightly suddenly trembled.

This slight tremble was not as aggressive as the struggle she had put up earlier, but the energy it released was so great that it far exceeded previous attempts to break free.

Ai Hui only felt a shocking amount of force penetrating his body before his limbs became numb, causing him to nearly let go of her.

Danger!

His prey had skills beyond his expectations. As soon as his mind recognized the precarious situation, his body reacted accordingly. WIthout a moment of hesitation, his left forearm that had been holding onto his target rose up like a viper. With lightning speed, his fingers opened up and reached for his target's throat.

Unlike the slow, silent hunting from earlier, this move made a sharp crack and was quick like lightning.

Shi Xueman's heart trembled, and sweat started pouring from her body once again. She had no doubt this claw on her throat was going to leave five bruises.

Luckily when her opponent let go of her arm, she was given an opportunity to resist. Her delicate, snow-white arm swung out like

a pendulum, blocking her throat without the least bit of delay.

Boom!

The force of impact brought acute pains to her wrists. She jolted backwards but could not dodge completely. Her throat tightened as black flashed across her eyes with impending unconsciousness. Yet, she knew that no matter how difficult it was, she had to resist. She was resolute in her fight. Ignoring the burning pain of her neck, she used the only mobile part of her body—her wrists—to block off her opponent's violent attacks.

This defensive move was one she was most familiar with from practice. Although her opponent's attacks were sharp, she managed to block them nevertheless.

Moreover, she quickly found a possible weakness, but she wasn't sure.

Until now, he had not utilized the elemental energy within his body. Was he holding back, or was it too weak? She couldn't be sure.

Shi Xueman's tenacity led Ai Hui to feel a stronger sense of emergency. Instinctively, he launched an even more intense and murderous attack.

The heart!

A blow to any enemy's heart would render them defenseless.

But first, he needed to remove his opponent's armor. To him, that was not a major problem. He learned to unfasten armor and untie ropes in the Wilderness. The barbarians wore rough and sturdy armor with ropes that often could not be damaged by even swords. Only a certain technique could undo the knots from a dead barbarian's body armor, which had been an important part of his job.

With his right hand, he quickly and quietly loosened the ropes that held her armor together. If anyone had witnessed that scene, they would not have been able to detect any pauses in his finger movements at all.

Like a slippery loach invading into her armor, his right hand felt another knot. He untied it without any further thought; any protective layer was an obstruction for him.

Upon touching his opponent's skin, a lethal glint appeared in his eyes as his murderous instinct kicked in and burned fiercely. His five fingers formed a claw and speedily pinned down against his opponent's chest where the heart was located.

Yet at the last moment, he recalled that this was not the Wilderness; he was fighting for the 50000 yuan prize money. Instead he decided to first suppress his opponent's vital points. If she continued to resist, she had better not blame him for being relentless because then he would not hesitate to kill.

Boom!

Target hit!

He could clearly feel the body in his arms, which had been resisting earlier, become rigid.

Eh?

In the dark, Ai Hui had a keener sense of touch. Suspicion arose.

This... does not... feel... quite right...

Chapter 7: Resolution

Ai Hui was unable to make sense of the matter. After some time, he suddenly understood what he was grabbing on to.

Feeling a lump of burning charcoal in his hand, he didn't know whether to hold on or to let go.

D*mn it!

Ai Hui couldn't help but curse inwardly. He had no idea whom he was cursing at either.The motionless body in his arms wasn't putting up any resistance at all. From a fighter's point of view that was a good thing, but why was he feeling this unreasonable sense of guilt?

Seconds felt like years as he became drenched in sweat.

Clang Clang Clang!

The gong sounded, signaling the end of the battle. Ai Hui quickly removed his hands from his opponent and even considerately fastened the knots of her armor. He quietly got off her back and tiptoed into the smog.

He was feeling guilty... It was better to stay far away from the target.

Re-entering the crowd, Ai Hui let out a sigh of relief. This unexpected mistake left him lost and helpless. Luckily he had a mask on and the night smog was dark and dense. He felt his face burning and felt the urge to turn around and leave.

Luckily, his last trace of determination remained—the fifty thousand yuan!

Along with the scattering smog, Ai Hui's embarrassment slowly dissipated as well; it was only an accident. All kinds of accidents happened on the battlefield, or so Ai Hui told himself.

Mhmm, he made so much sense, there was nothing to refute!

After convincing himself, Ai Hui felt calmer.

Soon the smog dispersed completely and the head of the training hall was shocked to see over ten people remaining. He expected two or three to remain at best because he knew of his mistress's powerful fighting abilities. When it came to such realistic combat drills, she gave it her all, never going easy on her opponents,.

Why were there so many left? Could it be that Mistress was unable to adapt to the unfamiliar blind battle mode?

Seeing the training hall's lack of response, someone from the audience blurted out, "What about the money? Are you going to give it or not?"

A few others chimed in immediately.

“Exactly, you’re not trying to renege, are you?!”

“Hurry up and hand out the money! We’re busy!”

The middle-aged man glanced at his mistress, but she had no reaction whatsoever as though she did not see his questioning gaze. He was the head authority after all and had the right to act according to the situation. Moreover, to the training hall, fifty thousand yuan was nothing. Although he did not expect so many victors, even a few hundred thousand yuan of prize money could still be taken out easily.

Upon receiving the money, everyone immediately cheered.

To students, the fifty thousand yuan was not a small sum at all. Now they could bear to spend extravagantly on things they normally restrained from buying!

The crowd started to disperse.

Ai Hui blended well into the masses, no different from any one of them.

Fifty thousand! Money in hand, he had long forgotten the awkward incident from earlier. He was on cloud nine!

With no time to waste and full of vigor, he rushed into the noodle shop like a gust of wind. He confidently extended and opened his palm, saying to the boss in the most domineering manner yet since morning, “Boss, give me five more bowls!”

Finally, he could eat all he wanted without holding back.

Only...

Ai Hui shifted his gaze to his opened palm. The hand that had just...

Snap! His fingers balled up into a tight fist.

All kinds of accidents happened on the battlefield, Ai Hui told himself once again, before digging into his noodles with a clear conscience.

The head saw his mistress standing alone at her original position, and he had a premonition. She had already been standing there, without any movement, for more than ten minutes.

“Miss!” he could not help but call out.

It was as if his mistress did not hear him at all.

His sense of foreboding grew stronger. Had an accident occurred during training? He simply could not imagine his mistress getting

hurt. What a joke that would be; the trainers in the Induction Ground able to potentially outlast his mistress could be counted with one finger. Although she suppressed her powers in an unfamiliar blind battle, he did not believe anyone here could have caused her trouble. Her biggest problem was her inexperience with blind battling.

All of a sudden his eyes flashed. Could it be that Miss was going through a moment of enlightenment?

Indeed, was this not the legendary moment of enlightenment? It must be!

He became agitated since he was in charge of the training hall and the blind battle was his arrangement. He had provided his mistress the opportunity to experience a moment of enlightenment; it was surely a huge contribution. He fantasized about advancing his career and achieving great success, unable to suppress a silly grin.

Meanwhile, Shi Xueman was at a loss.

What happened a while ago was a big blow to her, leaving her completely stupefied.

From the incident until now, her mind was completely blank. She did not hear the middle-aged man calling out for her and did not even realize the battle was over and that every contestant had already left.

She slowly regained consciousness from the muddleheaded state she was in.

Her whole body trembled but she tried to contain it. It was just an accident, she told herself but to no avail as her shudders continued from head to toe. She tried her best not to cry, but the great humiliation she suffered caused her to shake uncontrollably.

Even if it had been an accident, she absolutely would not let that damned fellow get away with it!

She gnashed her teeth and promised this to herself, emphasizing every word. Immediately, her trembling stopped and she no longer felt the urge to cry. It was as if that sentence had strange, magical powers.

That's right, she absolutely would not let that damned fellow off!

She regained her confidence from before, revealing the return of the high and mighty goddess.

She took off her mask, her eyes shining with radiance once again.

The middle-aged man's expression rapidly changed when he fixed his gaze upon his mistress's white-as-snow neck, astonished to find five purplish finger marks.

Oh god... He could not believe his own eyes and almost cried out in alarm; luckily he managed to hold his tongue.

Miss had been defeated!

If this piece of news were to spread, it would cause a big commotion in the Induction Ground. Here, his mistress's skill level was one of the highest, ranking among the top five. Who could possibly beat her? His first instinct was that someone in disguise must have pulled a prank.

However, he rejected the idea soon enough. Miss's secret whereabouts were kept well hidden, and her trip to the hall was by chance. Judging by the marks on her neck, her opponent must have held back or else her neck would have been shattered by now.

Now that he thought of how his mistress had gotten into an accident in an event he had organized, the middle-aged man's back was drenched in no time.

The fortunate fact that she was safe and sound brought some life back into his body, but his legs still felt a little weak.

The unmasked Shi Xueman looked the same as she always had as she said faintly, "Find out who the contestants are. Every single one of them, as well as those lying on the ground."

The middle-aged man dared not hesitate and immediately obeyed. "Yes!"

He could hear the frigid chill in her tone and knew that she was

extremely angry. Since young, she had never suffered or been in such an unfavorable situation. Out of the corner of his eyes, he peeked at the finger marks on his mistress's neck and felt a wave of fear come over him.

Perhaps if he knew what exactly happened at the end, he would have fainted by now.

Although he was quick to obey, he was whining inside. He said humbly and carefully, "I have been negligent in keeping track of their information. Investigations must be done through other methods, so I may need assistance from the clan."

He did not anticipate such a command. In his mind, the contestants were merely his mistress's sparring partners. What was the point of keeping track of their names and backgrounds when they were going to be defeated by her?

"At all costs," Shi Xueman said coldly. "The clan will utilize all its power, so check it thoroughly for me."

The middle-aged man's heart trembled. "Yes!"

He felt his mistress's resolution.

There was nothing strange about it. After unexpectedly meeting a threatening opponent, neither she nor the family clan could possibly sit by and idly watch. He had enough confidence that if the clan were to mobilize its full power, he would be able to

identify that man no matter how well he hid.

Shi Xueman walked towards the hall's main entrance, seemingly covered in frost.

Once outside, she observed the people walking around on the streets before turning to look at the hall once more. She clenched her fists and walked away.

.....

When Ai Hui held on to the wall for support as he walked out of the hall, and he held onto the wall for support as he walked into Vanguard Training Hall as well.

The difference was that before, his limbs had been weak from hunger but now he was too full to walk. With much effort, he finally shambled his way from the alley to the hall's entrance, taking him a whole ten minutes.

On the stone steps before the training hall entrance sat Lou Lan looking quite bored.

Ai Hui felt it strange. A bored sand puppet... such an image seemed unfitting.

"I have been waiting for an hour." Lou Lan stood up and patted the dust off his body upon seeing Ai Hui approach.

Ai Hui had never met such a “smart” sand puppet before. Patting dust off his body took it to a whole new level. Eh, you are a sand puppet, there will not be dust as long as you do not pat your body.

Plus, I do not remember us being close friends, he thought.

Opening the door, he asked, “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.” Lou Lan crooked his head and thought for a while, as if searching for the right words. “We are neighbors, and I am paying you a visit.”

The sky was dark, but Ai Hui could clearly see the black mask on Lou Lan’s face. Upon seeing it, he was reminded again of the incident from earlier. He got the sinking feeling that he was traumatized.

He asked absent-mindedly, “Why are you wearing a mask?”

Lou Lan replied, “Because I do not have a face.”

“No face?” Ai Hui was slightly taken aback. “Then why not make one?”

It was very easy for a sand puppet to mold a face. Some of them could even change their faces as they pleased.

Lou Lan answered, “Master Shao felt it was troublesome.”

Ai Hui thought about his neighbor, the earth elementalist, who was shut off from the world. Indeed, it was like him to think that way. It was normal to have odd characters amongst the earth elementalists, and Ai Hui had personally met even stranger and more dangerous ones. In comparison, while Master Shao had a strange personality, he did not seem as menacing.

“Actually, it is not a big deal,” Ai Hui said but at the same time, he felt the futility of his words. He knew there was really no need to brood over the incident although it did feel pretty good.

“There is no need, I am just a sand puppet. I do not need a face,” Lou Lan explained seriously. “Who would remember a sand puppet?”

Ai Hui, who had been opening the door, stopped midway.

He felt like saying something but as the words were about to come out, he became uncertain.

“Yeah.”

Ai Hui seemed to sigh. It seemed cruel, but he couldn’t say something he didn’t mean. In the Wilderness, sand puppets were only second to the laborers easily eliminated and destroyed.

No one would remember a sand puppet. What chance did a

laborer have?

We are both desolate, but I have fifty thousand yuan, he thought.

With his spirits raised, Ai Hui proudly hoisted the door open.

“Welcome in.”

Chapter 8: The Sword Embryo

Ai Hui lied on his bed adjacent to the wall with a sword nestled within his arms. Slowly, his pitch-black eyes opened to the darkness and a cold ray of light sharply flashed before he returned to his harmless appearance.

He'd been away from the Wilderness for a few days now, but he still wasn't used to sleeping on a proper bed.

He checked the sword embryo within his body which he had been growing for three years now and found no abnormalities.

He put down his grass sword, the sensation of the sword embryo within his body disappearing. In the past, he was overly-dependent on the sword, always holding on to it and never letting go regardless of the situation. Later on, he realized that doing so caused his body to lose its vigilance, so unless he was in a battle or keeping watch at night, he forced himself not to touch it.

To survive the Wilderness, Ai Hui had to have something up his sleeves, and that something was the sword embryo.

On his third day in the Wilderness, he almost lost his life. From that moment onwards, he started his obsessive search for greater strength because only then could he survive that cold place. He had no one to go to for help, the elementalists never gave him face, and he was neither clever nor capable of bargaining for what he wanted.

Wild beasts wielded extraordinary strength when forced to desperation. People would too, under similar circumstances.

Like a drowning man, Ai Hui desperately latched onto any chance of hope he could find.

For example, he filled his mind with knowledge from swordplay manuals.

The disintegration of spiritual force sent the cultivation world tumbling down, ending the era of cultivators. However, the cultivation system was deep-seated, advancing so greatly in the hundreds of thousands of years of its existence that it far exceeded what people imagined today.

Body training, spell formation, weapon training, five elements, necromancy and so on... there were all kinds of strange and abundant practices that utilized spiritual force. Coupled with humankind's rich imagination, the most resplendent and grandest cultivation system was brought into existence.

Amongst the vast jumble of magnificent cultivation types, Swordsmanship always held the greatest value. Within the cultivation world, regardless of generation, the strongest followed the path of Swordsmanship.

During that era, swordplay manuals of great origins were created, bringing about reigns of terror every now and then. Today, they were buried between piles of old books and other garbage, not worth a single yuan.

Swordsmen made up the majority of the cultivation world. It was only natural then that all sorts of strange concepts were born from the community.

Ai Hui first eliminated the sword manuals that required spiritual force. These types of manuals were frequently used by the big sects and schools to figure out how to utilize spiritual force more effectively back when it was still ample. The manuals that he eliminated next were those he could not understand. Books that were cryptic and abstruse were in excess, comparable to the amount of hair on a cow's body. He could be considered a semi-expert with his experience flipping through an astonishing number of sword manuals, but he still found many of them too profound—some were archaic while others were deliberately mystifying.

After he filtered them out, there were some sword manuals left.

In the Cultivation Era, none of these manuals would be considered orthodox, and an honest and learned man would even deem them as demonic.

Despite seeing them before, Ai Hui was not completely free from fear. These sword manuals were strange and unpredictable, completely beyond the limits of a normal person's imagination. For example, one manual taught cultivators to cut all emotions and desires, lust included, in order gain supreme mastery of the sword. Another, the Dream Demon swordplay manual, instructed them to lie inside of a giant coffin, induce a coma, and train within the Dream Demon himself. Upon mastery, the sword skills they accumulated would marvelously become applicable in reality.

In the past he glanced through these manuals out of interest and nothing more. Now, the thought of training according to these books sent shivers all over his body. Ai Hui finally managed to find a book that seemed less eerie and strange. It had no name and was badly damaged, and the only words on the cover stated at the top, the method to plant the sword embryo.

After a detailed examination, Ai Hui more or less understood the meaning of sword embryo, and it was actually quite simple. The human body could only grow so much, but there was no limitation to developing the three essential life-sustaining energies within—the essence, the breath, and the spirit. These energies, however, held no form, drifting harmlessly like mist. Therefore, the creator of this sword manual came up with an extremely interesting theory; that is, the human body was like a sword's sheath and the three energies made up the real sword.

How then, could the three incorporeal energies come together to form the sword? The manual proposed a unique solution. Since it was difficult to congeal the energies into one entity, they could be treated instead as soil to nurture the sword embryo from within.

Compared to the other books, this sword manual was obviously one of the more sensible ones.

So without hesitation, Ai Hui followed the instructions on the sword manual and surprisingly succeeded in planting the embryo.

Back in the swordsman school, he would never have taken the

risk, but in the Wilderness, what was there to worry about? People died every day, and he didn’t know when it would be his turn. Risk meant nothing to him. Instead, he was more concerned about the effectiveness of the so-called sword embryo.

Survival was his top priority.

Three years passed, and he entered the Induction Ground after surviving the Wilderness, yet the sword embryo was still a seed with neither movement nor change.

Ai Hui was rather unperturbed about this matter. It was enough for him to have stepped out of the Wilderness alive. He didn’t hold unrealistic expectations from it either since the book was badly damaged with illegible instructions towards the end.

The sword manuals from the era of cultivation believed that all routes eventually led to the same destination. No matter how odd or unorthodox the method, all of them ultimately went back to the the words "spiritual force." From this, he gathered that future training would most likely be related to the spiritual force as well.

Nevertheless, Swordsmanship was outdated, and it was worthless to train according to these manuals. He was not like the boss of the swordsman school who obsessed over these manuals and falsely believed in sword mastery.

He simply had no intention of growing the sword embryo any further.

While the manual did mention that meditating while holding on to the sword would help nourish the embryo, Ai Hui did it to improve his alertness at night instead.

There was something intriguing about the sword embryo. It came to life whenever he held on to his sword and his six senses became sharper as well. He could detect any slight sounds or movements around him. Later on, many elementalists became aware of his keen vigilance and soon the night watch became one of his main tasks.

This allowed him to loot from the battlefields, albeit only the leftover bits and pieces.

For three years, Ai Hui carried the sword and meditated without sleep, persevering for what seemed like a day.

The Ai Hui of the past shivered in the cold mud while the Ai Hui today had a warm and safe room of his own to sleep in until the morning light.

He felt contented and blissful.

Today was the first day of lessons, and he looked forward to it. He hadn’t left the house ever since he claimed the fifty thousand yuan prize.

Outside, the sky was still dark with only a glimmer of light—still some time before sunrise.

Ai Hui energetically jumped off his bed, landing soundlessly like an agile cat. The carpet under his feet was made from rough woven fibers that was somewhat prickly, but Ai Hui felt nothing. With the glimmer of light shining in from the horizon, the room was illuminated enough for him to not bother turning on the light as he washed himself in the dim room.

His familiarity with darkness could be seen as a gift from the Wilderness where danger lurked in every corner and any trace of light would draw them to him.

He skillfully removed the trap he had set behind the door and pushed it open. A rush of fresh air entered his lungs, giving him burst of energy.

The slightly illuminated sky and the quiet training hall brought back memories of the swordsman school. The familiar sensations washed over him, and even the cool air seemed to have become more fragrant. The sharp and stiff edges of his face softened, a warm smile tugging at his lips.

He began to mop the floor with quick and light strokes.

Soon, his body remembered the familiar movement and reflexes quickly took over.

Even before the sun came up, Ai Hui was finished with his cleaning chores. Without bothering to wipe the sweat off his body, he looked around the well-polished hall feeling genuinely satisfied

and happy.

Gazing at the sparkling ground, however, he was reluctant to step on it.

During his three year stay in the Wilderness, he fought in the muddy swamps and amongst dried, decaying leaves. He became accustomed to coming across rotting monster corpses with his shirt stained with blood. Over time, the stains dried up and faded into the same brown patches until he could no longer tell his blood from the beasts'.

The soles of his feet came into contact with the clean wooden floor. A familiar feeling.

This dirtless, quiet hall was like a dream from deep inside his heart.

The past two days had been a time of adjustment, but gradually he was starting to enjoy this new lifestyle. He even had the thought that life would be pretty good if he could carry on living like this.

Feeling childish, Ai Hui laughed before turning around to pack his things. He had a tight schedule after all.

The sword embryo's ability to keep him alive was not worth mentioning. His mastery of elemental energy paled in comparison to most people, so he faced much greater pressure as well.

The Induction Ground had strict rules: failure to activate the natal residence within a year or inability to reach the Initial Completion level within five years would lead to an expulsion. For students who came from the Avalon of Five Elements, their parents would be blamed for their shortcomings whereas students from the Old Territory would lose their chance to qualify as a member of the Avalon of Five Elements and be banished back to where they came from.

Those who attained the Initial Completion would have to leave the Induction Ground as well since it signified their right to qualify as a registered elementalist.

Five years was all the Induction Ground could give. In reality, Ai Hui had only four years because there was one more rule—students above the age of twenty had to leave the training grounds.

He didn't have much time left. If he wanted to take charge of his own fate, he had to work harder.

And if he felt inferior? Then he had to snap out of it and work even harder.

The sun rose from beyond the horizon and shone brightly in the cold, blue sky. After packing, he slung the old cloth bag over his shoulders and exited the hall with a blade of grass in his mouth and the sky behind him.

The early morning streets were quiet and dark, still asleep. From beyond the mountains and rivers extended the first thread of light,

entering homes and illuminating the streets.

Ai Hui luxuriated in the sunlight.

In the Wilderness, the hours before dawn were the most dangerous. It was a time ripe with the danger of sneak attacks, when deaths and fresh blood were aplenty.

But with the arrival of the sunlight shining on the grassfield dews came the massacres' reveal and the retreat of the dire beasts and barbarians like the tides, returning peace and tranquility to the Wilderness.

While the school building was not far from the training hall, it was not near either.

The closer he got to the school, the more concentrated the student crowd became. The streets bustled with activities, and it was an unfamiliar sight for Ai Hui. Upon seeing the young faces full of vitality and eagerness, Ai Hui felt somewhat envious. Their faces showed no traces of blood-soaked battle injuries and lacked vigilance against the outside world since they had never experienced a massacre.

They were flawlessly pure and led happy lives.

Ai Hui felt out of place. He bit down hard on the bit of grass, allowing the raw, grassy taste to spread within his mouth.

To them, the Induction Ground was a school. To him, it was his new battleground.

Rather than happiness, survival was of a greater importance.

He took a step forward and entered the school building.

Chapter 9: Introduction

Shi Xue Man gazed at her body in the mirror. The fair, flawless body she had once been proud of now had five faint, yet eye-catching, finger marks above her left breast. A few days had passed but the bruises still hadn't disappeared, causing her to believe her opponent had used substantial force.

A baleful look appeared in her eyes. She did not want to recall what happened that day,but every time she bathed she could see the finger marks on her body. It made it difficult to restrain the anger.

Luckily the marks on her neck were gone, since school was reopening today.

She dressed, the usual confidence returning to her face.

In the dining hall outside, food had already been prepared. As she entered, her grandfather gazed at her with a gentle smile. "Come, have your breakfast."

"Grandfather," she called out sweetly before sitting down beside him. With her mother's early passing and her father's busy work schedule, her grandfather had been the one to raise her. Therefore every morning, she accompanied him during breakfast.

A servant delivered a bowl of hot soup to the table. She trained regularly and so all her meals were specially prepared to replenish her elemental energy and nourish her body.

Sip by sip, she drank her soup that had been brewed meticulously with expensive ingredients. Not only did it benefit her training but it also tasted fresh and delicious. Today, however, she was somewhat in a daze.

The grandfather had raised her since young and so knew her very well. He asked warmly, “Why? Are you still thinking about that incident?”

WIthin the family clan, his granddaughter possessed unmatched talent. Always sensible and never pretentious, she was in fact more hard-working than others. Since childhood, she displayed excellent skills that surpassed even her father’s and was regarded by the clan as the next generation’s leader. The whole clan was pleased with her and all the seniors adored her greatly.

The old man was deeply proud of his granddaughter’s achievements. In his eyes, she was perfect, but the only thing that worried him was her pride. Like her father, she had never experienced any setbacks.

But the old man had plenty of experience. He understood that there were many hidden talents in this world, and there would always be a higher mountain. No matter how outstanding his granddaughter, someone out there would be better.

And this was exactly what happened.

When he saw the marks on his granddaughter’s neck that day, he

received a shock and a fear that still lingered. If her opponent used just a little more strength, she would have died on the spot. Then, he quickly realized that her expression was somewhat off.

This setback must have been far greater for her than he had expected.

To him it was nothing, but he knew Shi Xueman needed more time to process since her life had been smooth-sailing so far.

If he knew the truth of the matter, he would have ripped Ai Hui into pieces.

“No.” Shi Xueman lowered her head and continued eating.

Seeing her like that, the old man could not help but laugh. “Why do you think you lost?”

He knew from experience that avoiding the problem wouldn’t benefit the youngsters.

Shi Xueman paused, still holding on to the spoon. She was stumped by his question. Three days had passed yet she was still deeply ashamed and resentful. All she could think of was how to find that damned fellow and dismember his body into a million pieces.

Although she was no fool, her anger had blinded her. Hearing her grandfather’s reminder, she immediately addressed what she

neglected so far.

“The opponent was very familiar with blind battling.”

As the details from that battle replayed in her mind, Shi Xueman’s expression became solemn. Since the incident, this was her first time recalling it without falling into a blind rage.

老人无声笑了，循循善诱：“还有呢？”

The old man laughed silently, guiding her along. “What else?”

“Rich battle experience, fast reflexes, unfeeling, knew how to utilize his advantage…” Once Shi Xueman regained her cool, she displayed powerful insights. She mumbled to herself, “Come to think of it, he must have sensed my presence and location right from the start unlike me who couldn’t detect his movements. He was an expert in blind battling, able to fight well in the dark. He chose a close quarters combat style which in the darkness was ideal. It forced me into a passive position without space to maneuver at all. By doing so, I couldn’t display my numerous techniques while he could unleash his full powers.”

The old man listened carefully knowing that he only needed to hear her out.

“He deliberately allowed me to struggle to expedite my energy consumption. Cunning. His elemental energy doesn’t seem very strong since he didn’t engage it from start to finish, so I had no

way of confirming his level."

Listening to her, the old man responded, "If he defeated you without engaging his elemental energy, he is definitely skillful."

"Very. Also, like me, he must have been wearing a Suppression Bracelet." Shi Xueman didn't refute his statement. She thought for a bit before adding, "When he was locking me in, I utilized [Arching Fish Back] but could not break free."

For the first time, the old man lost his composure. "He blocked your [Arching Fish Back] without using elemental energy? Was he old?"

[Arching Fish Back] was an ingenious technique used to struggle free. It emulated a fish's reaction when startled—full of explosive strength. The old man was quite shocked by the fact that the opponent actually managed to suppress her [Arching Fish Back] without using elemental energy.

"Mhmm." Shi Xueman gravely nodded. "He had exceedingly strong murderous intent. Originally I planned on using [Arching Fish Back] to break free to remove the Suppression Bracelet, but it failed. However, he shouldn't be very old or else he wouldn't have attacked for fifty thousand yuan."

Thinking back, she couldn't help but respect him. As a girl, immobilization was more disadvantageous. As such, she was taught [Arching Fish Back] at a very young age, and she spent a lot of energy mastering this technique to the point that it was now a

part of her.

But even she could not maintain control over the burst energy of [Arching Fish Back].

“Suppressing [Arching Fish Back] without elemental energy and not too old... it must be a student then,” the old man exclaimed in admiration. “Looks like there’s an amazing talent among the new batch of students this year. I wonder who he is, and why haven’t I heard of him?”

“Grandfather, you must investigate carefully for me!” Shi Xueman shook his arm and pleaded, “I will not take this lying down. We must battle once more in the open, no tricks.”

The old man laughed loudly. “Okay, okay, okay. How could I reject Xueman’s request?”

Clearly Xueman intended to erase her previous humiliation, but it was acceptable for youngsters to hit a snag due to their zealousness. Moreover, he was very curious about this young man who suddenly appeared and overpowered his granddaughter. Interesting.

Shi Xueman was overjoyed upon hearing the good news. If Grandfather was willing to help, that damned fellow would definitely be unable to escape!

Wait and see! I will not let you off!

A dangerous aura flashed across her eyes.

The old man noticed her expression. Having gone through the ups and downs of life, he certainly knew what she was thinking. He muttered, “He held you down without engaging his elemental energy. I’m afraid his skill surpasses yours. You have to be careful.”

Shi Xueman raised her head, burning passion in her eyes. “Xueman will surely strive hard!”

The old man was somewhat surprised. This was his first time seeing her with such an exuberant fighting spirit.

Looks like this failure was a major setback for her, the old man thought cheerily.

At this point, Ai Hui did not realize the trouble that fifty thousand yuan brought upon him as he was attending his introductory lesson.

The sunlight rays entered through the windows, shining onto his desk and the floor, making even the dust particles visible. They could be seen drifting lazily in the air.

The school was empty except for six people. Very few were required to attend this introductory class. Whether they hailed from the Old Territory or the Avalon of Five Elements, most young

children had already been exposed to the basics.

Teacher Dong stood on the podium radiating passion and flinging spittle everywhere. He talked about the countless years of planning and preparation as well as manpower that went into the Avalon of Five Elements. With Cultivators from different sects aiming towards the same goal, the Avalon today was stable and beginning to infiltrate the Wilderness. He also mentioned the Avalon's ability to now proceed from defense to a counter-attacking phase and so on.

Unlike the other students who were dozing off, Ai Hui was enjoying his lesson. He had previously dabbled in swordplay manuals, but his knowledge about the Avalon's history came mainly from gossiping master elementalists in the Wilderness.

Talking about history was Teacher Dong's favorite pastime. He spent more than half of his class time on it with very little focus on the basics of training.

For what purpose was this messy history lesson given, and what did it have to do with them? The students privately called this the saliva class. They detested wasting their time on such things, but the teacher in charge of their basic training class was Teacher Dong. Moreover, he was known for his bad temper. If anyone who skipped his classes dared to consult him about training, he wouldn't even bother acknowledging their presence.

Who asked them to have zero understanding of the basics?

Needless to say, students who came from the Avalon of Five Elements knew the basics. Those who were properly homeschooled went straight into the advanced classes while others were placed into the intermediate classes. Even students from the Old Territory received training from a young age. While the different environments contributed to the disparity in skills between them and the students from the Avalon, the former did not have many problems dealing with the theoretical aspects.

Survival was always the strongest motivation for change. After thousands of years of progress, the five elemental energies had already become widely used.

Unfortunately, this made the number of students who had to start from the very basics like Ai Hui pathetically few.

A person had to lower his head when living under someone else's roof.

Teacher Dong talked non-stop for a long time. When he finally started on the topic of training, the other students became much more enthusiastic.

Unfortunately, Teacher Dong's passion lied only in imparting history. Without any interest in explaining the formation of elemental energy, he ended the class after only half an hour. In fact, by the time Ai Hui finished reflecting on the information gained from class, he was already gone.

Unlike the students who were aggrieved, Ai Hui felt overjoyed

from the enlightening lesson.

After three years in the Wilderness, he became capable and experienced, never backing down in the face of danger. In this, he stood out amongst the many laborers around him, gaining the trust of master elementalists and even having the few kind-hearted ones impart a skill or two.

Danger lurked in every corner of the Wilderness, however, and could appear at any time. Under such circumstances, no one was willing to patiently and systematically educate him on training routines.

Three years later, he had learned many skills, but they were all practical moves, fragmented and incomplete.

While he fell behind theoretically, he gained much experience from real combat and in this aspect, none of his classmates could compare. In addition, he was good at analytical thinking and reflection, or else he would never have been able to create the sword embryo. Despite the simple and scattered knowledge he had accumulated in the Wilderness, he spent countless hours contemplating each and every piece of information. Yet due to a lacking foundation, his learning produced limited returns, accumulating a number of questions that he had been puzzling over.

During Teacher Dong's short lesson, he taught little about the definite methods to train and more on the theories relevant to elemental energy—which was precisely the area Ai Hui fell behind in...

Chapter 10: The Society of Excellence

Elemental energy was nothing uncommon.

During the early Cultivation Era, it was heavily studied but not utilized as widely. Due to spiritual force's more abundant and active nature, it was easier to use than elemental energy. In fact, the ample production of spiritual force suppressed the generation of elemental energy, and so the study of elemental energy was mostly limited to small sects.

It was only in the Wilderness where the spiritual force was thin that elemental energy could dominate.

It had to be said that the cultivation world was favored by nature, as if the heavens had blessed the people with abundant spiritual force that covered the land. For a long time, almost every cultivator held themselves upright with pride, assuming their cultivation world as the core of the world.

Yet they failed to take into consideration the living environment of the Wilderness. Gradually, the spiritual force became thinner, taking everyone by surprise. As the the foundation of the cultivation system, once the spiritual force disintegrated, the resplendent cultivation world collapsed as well.

Millions of years later, the Wilderness neglected by the cultivation world became their undefeatable enemy.

The elders who were forced into a corner frantically searched for

a new source of power, and the ones who taught them best were their enemies, the dire beasts and barbarians. Under these strenuous circumstances, elemental energy was explored and expanded; however, it was the cultivators with their accumulated wisdom from over millions of years that quickly created their own system of five elemental energies.

As the theories developed, the system stabilized and the Avalon of Five Elements gradually became stronger as well.

Metal, wood, water, fire, and earth were the five basic elements that made up all living things. When the five elements were stable in nature, they formed matter. When they were active in nature, they formed the five elemental energies. In the existing theory, there were no observable differences between the five types of elemental energies outside of their different forms. Rather than existing as separate entities, they simultaneously transformed and suppressed one another, becoming a perfect cycle. This was also the reason why five elements usually existed simultaneously instead of alone, and why the natural matters had complicated properties.

Teacher Dong taught only the most foundational reasonings that were obvious to most people who would find the lesson dull and useless. Nevertheless, to Ai Hui, it explained many of the questions that puzzled him. He was most familiar with swordplay from countless manuals, be it traditional or unorthodox. However, without the foundational spiritual force, these things had no value at all. In fact, if the sword embryo didn’t germinate within three years, any hope of future growth would be lost.

Still, it was undeniable that flipping through the countless sword manuals did expand Ai Hui's horizons. The ancient swordsmanship theories had been developed maximally to be profound and wide-ranging, as he had displayed in the Wilderness. His operational styles were quite different from the others, moving even the most skillful masters to wonder.

It was not by luck that he came out of the Wilderness alive.

His current fragmented knowledge was slowly starting to make more sense. This excited him because in the past, he had some vague ideas but now he realized that they were not impossible to achieve.

He restrained his restlessness, however, as it was not time yet. He needed more knowledge.

Coming to the Induction Ground was the right decision to make. Just from the first lesson, he had already gained so much which came as a pleasant surprise, and he looked forward to the other lessons.

The days of attending class were simple yet enriching, as beautiful as the sunlight. He especially cherished the first lesson. For someone like him with a mediocre aptitude, such an opportunity did not come easily. Like a sponge, he greedily absorbed any nutrients available.

Teacher Dong's introductory course was very short with only ten lessons, but Ai Hui did not want them to end. Despite his packed

schedule, he realized that only Teacher Dong's class involved the theoretical aspect of elemental energy formation. Teachers from other classes imparted either practical skills or the specific methods to train. Very few were like Teacher Dong who focused on the logic within.

Perhaps they felt that for the new students, learning how to train was sufficient.

By now Ai Hui had more or less gotten used to the student life in Central Pine City. He didn't feel the same agitation he once did when standing in front of the Induction Ground entrance. Studying in the city was relaxing and rules were flexible. For any class, as long as he met the requirements to a certain standard, attendance became optional.

However, he still had a class he was required to attend with the classmates from his first day, and in charge of it was the very same Teacher Xu.

Everyone had different skill levels and so picked different classes. It was usually difficult to come across one another, and it was only in homeroom that he got to meet these classmates.

Except no one was paying Ai Hui any attention.

Most of them probably didn't even remember his name anymore since a mediocre and quiet student like him had no presence. Seeing that everyone was present, Teacher Xu began. "I called you guys over this time to tell you about the Society of Excellence."

Upon hearing the words “Society of Excellence,” the students from the Avalon of Five Elements became excited whereas those from the Old Territory looked puzzled.

“Society of Excellence is a club that selects gifted students with outstanding skills and potential. Not only will there be specialized teachers to guide them in the training process, the lessons will also be put into practice. For example, you’ll be involved in the school’s operation or spar with students from other cities and so on. You will even have the chance to enter the Wilderness with the teachers to experience its conditions.”

The students, thrilled at the thought of visiting the Wilderness, started chattering.

In their eyes, the Wilderness was mysterious and full of the unknown. Moreover, with the teachers’ company, safety was not an issue. They started to desire the opportunity to see for themselves what the Wilderness was all about.

In the sea of excited students, Ai Hui alone was indifferent since he had no desire to join this club. Having guidance from the teachers didn’t sound bad but at this point in time, it was more important for him to accumulate ample elemental energy to activate his natal residence.

As for the Wilderness, he had stayed there long enough. It was nauseating for him.

Seeing the enthusiastic faces, Teacher Xu smiled. “Of course, the selection process is strict for you guys who just entered the Induction Ground not too long ago. According to the criterias from previous years, you’ll need to have activated at least two palaces.”

The students howled in grief. Following this standard, only three to five students qualified. As for those who still had a chance, their eagerness bled through, unable to be hidden.

“This is the minimum criteria, but it’s not impossible. Everyone should give it a try,” Teacher Xu encouraged before continuing, “As for how to be chosen, have a look, and you’ll know. All I want to say is that our city has prepared rewards for those who are chosen. They’ll distribute valuable resources that would be advantageous to your training. Work hard, everyone. Duanmu Huanghun, distribute these materials.”

Ai Hui had seen Duanmu Huanghun, the strongest student in his class, that first day by the school entrance. He could tell from his luxurious clothes that he came from a rich family.

Towards the society, Ai Hui remained indifferent. He reckoned that the reward would be pretty good but not worth the hassle, which made it unappealing to him. Plus, his skills were still lacking.

His train of thought shifted to training. Central Pine City‘s training environment was superior, almost like heaven. As he carefully planned his training, Duanmu Huanghun, who was distributing the materials, passed Ai Hui without stopping. He then mockingly said, “You don’t need this since you don’t even

know the basics yet.”

Ai Hui was confused. Duanmu Huanghun’s hostility was uncalled for. Plus...

How childish!

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Shi Family

“Are you sure there are only six of them?”

Shi Xueman did not speak loudly, but the temperature of the whole hall seemed to have dropped by over ten degrees. All of the servants and bodyguards quivered.

The head of the city branch paled, responding with a trembling voice as his body shivered non-stop, “I have committed a sin! None of the contestants’ names were recorded, and the new batch of students just started school, making it a highly difficult task. Only through rumors from students and neighboring merchants did we manage to find these six.”

By now, he was filled with regret. Did he have nothing better to do—why a blind battle? He practically dug his own grave!

Shi Xueman took a deep breath and reined in her emotions. She

knew he wasn't at fault; instead, she had been slow to react. If she hadn't been in a daze, she would have easily gotten hold of the information and that damned fellow would not have escaped.

"You've worked hard. This is not your fault. You did very well," Shi Xueman said in the same cold tone.

The middle-aged man teared. Recently, he was placed under unimaginable pressure recently. The investigation hit a dead end, and he was on the verge of collapsing.

Immediately, the tension within the hall dissipated significantly.

Shi Xueman unhurriedly said, "But regarding this, I will need to trouble you further. Everyone present will assist you. Find him at all costs."

The middle-aged man was surprised at her determination, but this was not the first time he heard the words "at all costs" coming out of her mouth. Also considering the nature of her character, he did not think it so surprising anymore.

"I will work hard." He dared not guarantee again. After thinking for a bit, he continued, "I have an idea but am unsure if it will work."

"What is it?" Shi Xueman asked straightforwardly.

"This way of searching is like fishing for a needle in the ocean,

but I was thinking that if he could be a threat to you, he must have great skills. I would go so far as to say that within the Central Pine City, he would be the cream of the crop. With such abilities, entering the Society of Excellence should not be a problem. Should we narrow our search then, to the members inside?”

At the battle, he had seen Shi Xueman but not that mystery man, so he was unaware of the details of their battle. Therefore, only his mistress had the ability to judge that man’s capability.

After listening to his words, Shi Xueman’s eyes brightened. When her subordinate looked at her again, she said without hesitation, “Watch that club. Give the name list to me the moment you have it.”

“Yes!” the subordinate hurriedly agreed.

Shi Xueman turned and left quickly. She didn’t want to waste any time; instead, all she could think about was training. Her eyes burned with passion and spirit.

Even if you are stronger than me right now, I will not give up. Absolutely!

This humiliation… I, Shi Xueman, am going to make you pay for it.

Chapter 11: Ai Hui's Hypothesis

Of course, Ai Hui had no idea that a vengeful someone was looking all over for him. Even if he knew, he wouldn't care. Who had time for that? He didn't even feel like entertaining Lou Lan whenever he visited, and he was such a nice sand puppet…

Ai Hui was completely engrossed in his own learning and trainings. It was as if he had entered a vast new world full of rich colors. There were so many hidden places within the Induction Ground to train in that Ai Hui discovered something new every day.

He was lost in happiness and never tired of it.

No place required more skills than the Wilderness where it was devoid of warmth, clear-cut and without any pretense. Within the Wilderness, there were no suitable grounds for him to train. Places with a slightly more concentrated elemental energy was already occupied by either powerful, dire beasts or the barbarian tribes.

And since he had to advance forward with the team, he had little time to train, especially with the tedious odd jobs to complete. He could never rest well either as the elementalists never seemed to need it with their brisk work efficiency.

No teacher would be able to explain this. The elementalists who were willing to teach him a skill or two were already considered very friendly and kind whereas whenever he met the bad-tempered ones who happened to dislike him, inevitable suffering

ensued.

Compared to the Wilderness, the Induction Ground was like heaven.

Ai hui possessed unrivaled passion that had been accumulating and bubbling for three years. Once released, the intensity of its explosion exceeded that of a volcano eruption.

Ai Hui was as if possessed, immersed in his training.

He knew he had a low aptitude and did not dare to set unreachable goals. He only hoped to become a registered elementalist. The problem was that even this goal required an extraordinary amount of effort in order to be realized.

How could there be any time to waste?

These four years was the only time for him to change his destiny. He knew a second chance would not come.

Since the Wilderness trained him to be adaptive, it did not take long for Ai Hui to settle down comfortably into the city. His strategy for schooling also gradually changed. Initially he took every available class but gradually he began to filter, learning how to pick and choose.

It was important to always understand the circumstances as well as the most crucial problem at hand as he had learned to do so in

the Wilderness that was so cold and full of death.

Right now, the most pressing concern was activating his natal residence.

If he didn't manage to accomplish this within a year, he would have to leave the school.

The training ground he chose for himself was the Suspending Golden Pagoda.

Located about one hundred fifty miles outside the city, few students were willing to travel so far even by the Three Leaves Bamboo Cart just to train, leaving the pagoda mostly deserted.

Needless to say, Ai Hui refused to take the Three Leaves Bamboo Cart. The cost of the round trip exceeded one thousand yuan; he'd feel the pain for days.

To him, traveling the one hundred fifty miles was a warm-up exercise. In the Wilderness, the pace of combat was shockingly fast. Although Ai Hui was a laborer who didn't need to take part in the battles, he still had to keep up with the team while carrying all the supplies. The first thing laborers learned in the Wilderness was to run—only then could they keep pace with the team. Nobody wanted a slow-moving laborer who was unable to follow.

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Ai Hui's body was neither robust nor were his strides very big, but he was steady and the top half of his body was motionless, lacking any unnecessary movements.

He traversed not the main roads but through the mountain forest like a nimble cheetah, effortlessly loping through in a straight line.

It took him twenty-six minutes this time to rush down to the pagoda, five minutes faster than the previous attempt. Ai Hui was satisfied as he was fond of progress.

A dilapidated iron pagoda appeared before him with nobody else around. It had a total of seven floors and many areas were in ruins. Its history could be traced all the way back to the Cultivation Era, back when it belonged to a great sect and was used to suppress others. After the spiritual force disintegrated, however, the sect collapsed leaving the pagoda to fall into decline. What stood before him now was the preserved remains.

It survived the ravages of time thanks to the metal wind cave beneath. The gales it received from the cave contained concentrated metal elemental energy that eventually transformed the once wooden pagoda into an iron one that remained today. Later, the Induction Ground remodeled it into a training ground, but since it was in a remote location with no discernible advantage over the many other training grounds within the city, very few visited.

The Suspending Golden Pagoda was actually not meant for beginners but rather for students who already activated their natal residence.

Ai Hui had another plan.

He approached the entrance and heard deep rumbling.

Ai Hui finally understood why the place was so deserted. Just by listening to the sound of the wind, he knew that the metal wind inside was extremely strong. Almost none of the seniors who wrote the guidebooks recommended this place.

According to them, the Suspending Golden Pagoda was like an upside-down waterfall of overwhelming power. The metal wind currents contained dense elemental energy that was bonescrapingly painful when blown against the body. Unfortunately, it was also extremely pervasive, able to enter the pores deep into the flesh, multiplying the suffering. In comparison, the whirlpool within the city's hot springs was gentler and much more comfortable. Obviously, no one would ask for trouble by coming here since both environments produced the same results.

What spurred Ai Hui into visiting this place was a seemingly unremarkable sentence that he came across while reading a particular senior's guidebook:

If your endurance is great, go straight to the Suspending Golden Pagoda; the results are quite good.

In terms of affinity, he had little confidence with his low aptitude that probably wouldn't fulfill the minimum requirement. But

when it came to endurance, it was a different story.

During his stay in the Wilderness, he managed to form a tenuous strand of elemental energy after drinking a specially brewed elemental soup. In it were ingredients he had accumulated over time including a piece of Dire Beast's meat given to him by an elementalist.

The elemental energy formed by humans was closed to that of a dire beast's meat and thus was easily absorbed.

This was the underlying reason behind the high cost of Dire Beast's meat as well as why countless elementalists risked their lives hunting them deep in the Wilderness.

The extremely precious wisp of elemental energy often saved Ai Hui's life in times of great danger.

An elementalist once bluntly informed him that he had a low aptitude and no affinity with elemental energy. And unfortunately, training with external items was something only the rich could afford to do.

During his training later on, he realized that the master was indeed right. Even after three years, his elemental energy made little progress. Admittedly, there were many possible reasons such as insufficient training time, low concentration of elemental energy, lack of structured guidance and so on. But almost zero growth? Ai Hui saw for himself exactly how low his aptitude was.

However, he had no plans to give up. In fact, since then, he'd been racking his mind for a solution.

In the end, his only source of help came from those outdated and worthless sword manuals.

The manuals from ancient times were practically synonymous with "genius." No one but the gifted could think about touching them and even more so in prestigious sects. But there were certain exceptional cases in which mediocre swordsmen made a name for themselves within the cultivation world, gaining skills that struck fear into the people's hearts.

In the long past era of cultivators, tens of thousands of cultivation worlds had yet to merge. One of those fragments was a small sect known as the Void Sword Clan where a disciple named Wei Sheng lived. He was not gifted yet he had great accomplishments, able to disdain other outstanding heroes.

Ai Hui had glanced through enough swords manuals to know that Wei Sheng was not the only such swordsman.

Although Ai Hui had zero interest in Swordsmanship, these swordsmen fought their way to the top in a society that nurtured only natural talents. Certain that they must have possessed some other qualities, Ai Hui hoped to find them out.

These powerful fighters had similar characteristics like tenacity, diligence, and inhuman concentration. These were worth learning but clearly required great effort. After studying further, he realized

they had another trait in common.

Where there is bad, there is good. If someone was unable to perform in a certain aspect, it was not erroneous to shift focus. The seniors who had average aptitude managed to carve a path for themselves only because they found their own strengths.

Ai Hui had felt that his interpretation was logical but not employable.

That is, until now. After attending Teacher Dong's introductory course, his doubts were swept away. He now knew that the so-called bad aptitude meant a lower affinity between a practitioner and the elemental energy. Due to his lack of aptitude, the majority of the energy dissipated as soon as it entered his body, leaving only a little behind.

This was why he had negligible progress.

Everyone was born with different and unalterable aptitudes. This news was, to most people, no different from a death sentence.

Yet instead of feeling dejected, Ai Hui started thinking of ways around it instead. Since his body had less affinity with elemental energy, what advantage did he have over others?

He had to have an advantage. He had faith. Even if it wasn't obvious or very useful, it had to exist.

The heavens would not be so unfair.

Other than affinity, what else was involved in the training process?

Upon reading the senior's words, his eyes brightened. Yes, other than affinity, there was endurance.

Didn't his lack of affinity mean that his body was not sensitive enough towards the elemental energy? In that case, the metal wind currents people shied away from could actually be bearable.

That was when Ai Hui understood. Was this endurance not the advantage he'd been searching for?

Insensitivity towards elemental energy indeed slowed his training progress but theoretically, shouldn't he be able to handle a higher concentration of elemental energy? He was not a helpless rookie any longer with his rich battle experience. Any slight advantage could be put into good use.

There was another advantage, however, that Ai Hui discovered very quickly.

Having a high endurance meant that he could undergo a more intensive training.

And now here he stood to test his hypothesis.

Chapter 12: The Gifted and the Garbage

Teacher Dong was aware of Duanmu Huanghun's arrogance and felt the beginnings of a headache. He was a talented young man no doubt. Elegantly dressed with a solid build, and his handsome face carried a devilish charm—definitely the type that girls swooned over.

Other than his haughty nature, this fellow had few shortcomings. But of course, he had every right to be proud.

He was born into a prestigious sect that had a long-standing history within the Avalon of Five Elements. In fact, an ancestor of the Duanmu Clan contributed to the creation of the Avalon. Not only that, but Duanmu Huanghun was outstandingly talented. Of all the students, he was among the top five.

Teacher Xu felt his head throb. There was nothing wrong with being proud—it was normal for youths to be hotheaded. Plus, which youth was not? Perhaps he had been teaching in the Induction Ground, he had seen many talents, causing him to worry when he noticed Duanmu Huanghun's hostility towards students of a lower realm. However, as an experienced educator, he kept a straight face and asked calmly, "How is it going? It's been awhile since school started. Any impressions?"

"It's okay." Duanmu Huanghun responded with slight aloofness. "Just that the academic program is too simple."

Teacher Xu smiled. "That's because you were homeschooled and

have talent. Of course you'll find it easy. This is also why I chose you as the class monitor, so I have high expectations for your excellent leadership skills. I hope you won't grow lax and continue to work hard."

Upon hearing his teacher's confidence in him, he became excited. Compliments were irresistible to youths his age. Leader, what an admirable title, he thought. Just thinking about it moved him. He puffed his chest out and replied loftily, "Do not worry, Teacher Xu, I won't let you down."

"You can do it!" Teacher Xu sounded exceptionally certain. "Then as a leader, how should you treat teammates who are not as strong as you? Of course you must help them! It is the responsibility of a leader after all. Let me assign you a mission. Ai Hui is slightly weaker, and I need you to assist him. How does that sound? Think you can do it?"

Duanmu Huanghun's jaw dropped. He was stunned.

"I knew from the start that you were born to be a leader!" Teacher Xu continued happily without waiting for a response. "I will leave Ai Hui in your hands! I don't expect the impossible. Hopefully, one year from now, he'll be able to activate four palaces."

Duanmu Huanghun was left speechless. Activating four palaces in one year? What a joke—this garbage had yet to open his natal residence...

“What is a talent? A talent is someone who can achieve the unachievable!” With a stern expression, Teacher Xu asked, “Duanmu Huanghun, are you doubting the talent in you?”

“No—” Duanmu Huanghun blurted out.

But immediately after, his face darkened as if he had just swallowed a fly. He felt terrible. Right from the start he disliked that trash Ai Hui. Of the whole city, only six students were required to attend the introductory course but one of them just had to be from his class. As the class monitor, he couldn’t get himself to like this burdensome garbage.

What right did this garbage have to be teammates with a gifted student like himself?

And now the teacher actually expected him to be in charge of this fellow. This lightning bolt seemed to strike him out of the blue.

He was going insane. Just looking at this guy made his blood boil. But now that he was supposed to help him, wouldn’t he have to see this garbage every day? Duanmu Huanghun was certain he’d go crazy by the end—no, maybe he already was!

Going into Teacher Xu’s office had been a giant mistake. Something so ridiculous actually happened to him!

Duanmu Huanghun stumbled out of the office, still in shock.

After a few steps, he suddenly understood what he just promised to do. He agreed to assist that garbage into activating four palaces! If being in charge of this garbage was like stepping into mud, activating four palaces in a year was like falling into a poisonous swamp.

The elemental energy system had more or less reached maturation from thousands of years of development and improvement. Different family clans and schools had their own unique practices, but the core methodology did not stray from the system of the five residences and eight palaces.

The production of elemental energy first occurred in the five residences, or the natal residences. Each produced different elemental energies: fire from the heart, wood from the liver, earth from the spleen, metal from the lungs, and water from the kidneys.

The initial step to any training system was to activate the natal residence. Only then could the first door that separated the physical body from the external world be opened. The natal residence acted as a catalyst in the absorption of elemental energy which had a nature that differed greatly from spiritual force. While the energy was stored within the body, its flow did not follow the meridians.

After much fumbling, humans managed to find eight elemental energy storages and named them palaces. When all eight were filled, an Initial Completion was accomplished.

In the Induction Ground, filling four palaces was not a big deal.

Not to mention the seniors, even he had four palaces filled.

But Ai Hui was a piece of garbage who had just completed his introductory course. Loading four palaces? What a joke!

If not for Teacher Xu's good reputation and public praise, Duanmu Huanghun would have suspected him of pulling his leg. Only a genius could progress from nothing to four palaces within a year. Why then would such a genius require his help?

His face was as black as the underside of a pan. He almost turned and charged into Teacher Xu's office again.

But once he recalled the teacher's words that "a talent is one who can achieve the unachievable," he abruptly stopped in place.

That's right, he was a gifted genius!

Duanmu Huanghun clenched his teeth. He roughly pulled apart his beautifully embroidered shirt collar. Pfft, 'defeat' was not a word in his dictionary. A genius like him could never give up so easily.

Poor garbage, you better thank Heaven for blessing you with such an opportunity.

Duanmu Huanghun raised his chin and readjusted his collar, regaining his usual grace.

He strolled down the corridor and thought hard on how he could reach the target Teacher Xu had set for him, not caring about the adoring gazes from the girls lining the corridor. Thanks to the knowledge and experience he had from being homeschooled, he quickly came up with a few possible plans.

His eyes lit up and his handsome face was full of concentration. Instead of his usual arrogance and viciousness, another kind of aura fell upon him.

The smittened female students were so distracted by him that they lost their footing and fell hard on the floor. Duanmu snapped out of his thoughts and raised his head. As his enchanting eyes fell upon them, they momentarily forgot their pain—they were love-struck.

Duanmu Huanghun involuntarily laughed, his warm smile mesmerizing.

Thud, thud, thud!

A series of tumbling noises rang out in the hallway.

Ten minutes later, Duanmu Huanghun stood ashen-faced beside the hot spring's whirlpool. He scanned his surroundings a few times, but saw no one at all. Despite searching the usual training grounds frequented by students, he could not find Ai Hui. He even asked a few classmates but no one had seen him.

Damn it!

Steam was coming out of his ears. Duanmu Huanghun had never been so angry before.

It was humiliating enough for him to teach this garbage, but d*mn, this piece of trash was lazy! Not only did he lack the skills but he also wasn't hard-working, unable to even attain the basic training routines. How was this useless lump of mud going to transform into a solid wall?

Yet no matter how angry he was, he still could not locate Ai Hui's whereabouts.

He specially made a trip to the dormitory to ask around, only to realize that Ai Hui did not stay there. No one knew where he lived.

Godd*mn!

Chapter 13: Wind of the Suspending Golden Pagoda

The world inside the door was entirely different.

After spitting out the blade of grass he had been chewing, Ai Hui had just stepped into the Suspending Golden Pagoda before he was battered and overwhelmed by intense gales.

All he could hear were the deafening roars of the wind—a fierce sound that he had never heard before. Beneath him were iron fences, and violent metal winds that spewed from the depths swirled into a turbulent vortex that stormed throughout the pagoda.

Yet before he could gain his footing, Ai Hui was sent flying into the air by the wind. Like a lone leaf swaying in a storm, all he could sense was the world spinning around him.

Bang!

Ai Hui grimaced with severe pain as his back forcefully slammed into a wall. The metal wind was so severe that he could not even open his eyes. Even worse, it felt like innumerable small needles were pricking through his muscles and piercing deep into his bones.

Ai Hui's face turned pale as the unspeakable pain instantly spread all over his body. He had underestimated the pagoda.

However, thanks to Ai Hui's extensive experience in life-and-death situations, the second he realized his mistake, his body reacted instinctively. Under such a circumstance—which was completely out of his control—the first thing he had to do was protect himself.

He huddled himself up with his arms on his head.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

He was like a ball bouncing around the pagoda.

The penetrative metal wind continued to submerge him in a flood of pricking pain. Ai Hui felt powerless—a familiar feeling that seemed to bring him back to his initial days in the Wilderness. As the seconds passed, the pain became increasingly severe, to the point that it almost exceeded what he could bear; he felt as if his bones were being rasped by millions of files.

When was the last time he was in such a fluster? He could not really remember; even in the Wilderness, he had never been in such a state for long.

Although he was aware that the Suspending Golden Pagoda was for those who had opened their natal residences, he assumed that he could persist because he was confident in his own endurance.

The extremely concentrated metal energy in the wind permeated

into his flesh and blood without showing any signs of diffusion, which indicated that this metal energy could not be absorbed by his muscles.

Underestimating your rivals can put yourself in a terrible state, just like Ai Hui's situation at the moment—it could not be more disastrous.

The first step for elemental energy cultivation was to absorb elemental energy into the muscles. One of the quickest methods was to consume elemental soup because a dire beast’s meat was rich in elemental energy. This was best for beginners to absorb and was how Ai Hui had cultivated his own meager amount of elemental energy.

This method was excellent but expensive. Evidently, a poor wretch like Ai Hui could hardly afford it.

Another conventional cultivation method was to absorb elemental energy from outside and was referred to as Elemental Energy Input. In this approach, the type of elemental energy could not be chosen casually, and most people would prefer a mild type for easier absorption.

The needle-like elemental energy contained in the metal wind of the pagoda, however, was not moderate at all. The prickling pain indicated that it could not be easily absorbed and was hence hurting his muscles.

Ai Hui tried to assimilate the energy into his own, but soon

realized that he was being too naive.

Although the metal elemental energy appeared to be as thin as a strand of hair, it was much more concentrated than his own.

It was only at this moment that he finally realized why the Suspending Golden Pagoda was only for those who had opened their natal residences.

Bang!

Striking into something violently, Ai Hui was suddenly jerked back into reality, but he soon felt as if all his bones were broken. Although that collision had been unpleasant, he could now discern that the prickling sensation in his back had weakened.

Ai Hui suddenly realized something. Maybe…

Bang! Although he had struck himself on the wall yet again, Ai Hui rejoiced excitedly.

He could still clearly perceive the pain in his muscles, but the prickling sensation had been considerably reduced. Even though he was amidst such chaos and was unarmed, Ai Hui was calm enough to observe the slightest changes of his body.

Whenever his body was knocked into something, the metal elemental energy scattered and was more easily absorbed than the energy in the wind, hence decreasing the pain.

Nevertheless, Ai Hui's luck didn't last long before his expression abruptly changed.

The scattered energy had not even been completely absorbed before additional elemental energy permeated into his body, intensifying the pain while causing him to feel as if he had a severe case of dropsy.

Although in theory, those who had opened their natal residences could choose to train at the Suspending Golden Pagoda, Ai Hui did not know that there were actually very few students who would decide to do so. This was because the metal wind was too wild and the elemental energy—despite being extremely concentrated—was incredibly difficult to absorb.

Worse still, there were endless amounts of energy in the pagoda.

The moment he thought of this, Ai Hui realized the danger of his situation. If he stayed for any longer, the growing pain will dull his mind and consciousness, finally resulting in the explosion of his body.

He had to leave RIGHT NOW!

Ai Hui stretched his body as he carefully guided his own little bit of elemental energy to his eyes. He could not possibly escape such a perilous environment with the strong wind preventing his eyes from opening.

Under his meticulous control, the elemental energy inside his body was infused into his eyes for the first time.

Perhaps because his body was experiencing an indescribable prickling pain, Ai Hui felt only a slight discomfort in his eyes before immediately overcoming it.

As his vision returned , Ai Hui was able to view the interiors of the pagoda for the first time.

Ai Hui swirled along with the wind like a dead leaf. Due to long periods of erosion and metallization by the metal wind, the surrounding cross-grained walls glimmered with a dark metallic luster.

The inside of the pagoda was empty; everything, including the staircases, was long gone.

To Ai Hui’s surprise, as the metal wind spiraled higher, its strength did not weaken, but instead, grew stronger.

Yet he had no time to look up. Time was very tight, and he had to escape before the energy surpassed his body's limit.

Ai Hui was intensely focused as he prepared himself by carefully adjusting his position. With his entire body tingling with pain, it was exceedingly strenuous to maintain a state of concentration; but this was not a difficult problem to the experienced Ai Hui.

Seeing the gate of the pagoda rapidly approaching, Ai Hui twisted his waist and stretched his body like a spring, as he slightly touched his toes to the ground.

Pow!

Forcefully pushing his toes, Ai Hui folded his body into a strange angle—as if his waist was broken—and placed his hands on the ground, resembling a large cat arching its back.

Using both his hands and feet, he frantically scrambled out of the Suspending Golden Pagoda.

The instant he exited, all of his strength dissipated, making him feel pain so severe that he felt like he was dropped onto thousands of needles.

Ahhh!

The anguished cry frightened away a mass of birds from the nearby woods.

Ai Hui screamed for 20 minutes before he recovered from the pain.

It was really unbearable!

Even with his face contorted in pain, tears in his eyes, and non-existent strength, Ai Hui struggled and eventually managed to get on his feet.

There was a significant surplus of metal element in his body—even lying still could not stop the bone-stabbing pain.

Long-lasting pain is no better than short-term pain!

Remembering that the bumping had helped ease the pain, Ai Hui quickly made up his mind.

He hastily rushed to the nearest tree. Pow! The tree snapped.

Next, he crashed into a large stone in front of him. Bang! The stone shattered.

Ai Hui anxiously searched around. What else can he crash against?

Ahhh!

The birds and beasts of the woods fled in panic. Behind them, a miserable cry lingered along with the sand and dust in the air, while countless trees fell down one after another as if there was a horrible, mad ancient beast running amok.

Chapter 14: Harder than Iron, Stronger than Steel

Lou Lan, who was sitting by the entrance of the Vanguard Training Hall, was bored to death.

When he finally noticed the limping Ai Hui, who had a bloody nose and a swollen face, he crooked his head and curiously asked, "Ai Hui, what happened?"

The moment Ai Hui identified Lou Lan, Ai Hui's dull eyes suddenly brightened. Without any hesitation, he grabbed onto Lou Lan and shoved the door open. "Do me a favor!"

Lou Lan stood up immediately and replied somewhat happily, "Okay."

Hurriedly pulling Lou Lan into the training hall, Ai Hui chose a spacious area before firmly standing still. With a serious expression, he sincerely requested, "Beat me up!"

Lou Lan opened his eyes wide as he gawked at Ai Hui; he thought he had heard wrong.

"Come on, hit me! As hard as you can!" Ai Hui urged.

He had been crashing and knocking into everything on his way back, but the amount of metal elemental energy that remained in

his body was still aplenty. However, he had exhausted all his strength. Let alone knock into something, he was unable to lift even a single finger at this point. Plus, he did not dare to act recklessly in the city; he could not afford to pay for any damages.

But when he saw Lou Lan, he had immediately thought of this fantastic idea.

He could get the same results without even exerting any strength.

Lou Lan tilted his head and looked at Ai Hui seriously, before concernedly asking, "Ai Hui, have you gone crazy?"

"I have not. This is all part of training." Ai Hui racked his brains and then briefly explained, "I have created a secret training method."

"Oh..." Lou Lan had apparently started to understand the situation.

"Come on, come on!" Ai Hui vigorously encouraged him. "Use more strength. The harder, the better. Do not worry about hurting me. I have a high endurance!"

"But, I do not know how to fight," Lou Lan replied meekly.

Ai Hui felt like he had been struck by a bolt of lightning. His eyes were opened wide, as he stammered in disbelief, "Do... do not

know how to fight?"

Fi.. fight?

Ai Hui was almost convinced that he had misheard. Indeed, the word ‘fight’ had become unfamiliar to him. To a seasoned fighter who had undergone three years of hardship and severe training in the Wilderness, ‘fight’ was too trivial a term. He only registered the word after two seconds.

Wait, did not know how to fight? A sand puppet that did not know how to fight?

Ai Hui stared at Lou Lan expressionlessly.

All the sand puppets that he had come across were skilled fighters. They were also heartless, sly, and good at disguising and setting traps. They strictly followed orders and had all kinds of deadly tricks up their sleeves that were impossible to defend against.

Sand puppets were real killer machines; it could be said that they were born to battle.

But this was the first time he had encountered a sand puppet that did not know how to fight.

Ai Hui involuntarily blurted,"Then what do you know?"

Lou Lan counted on his fingers. "I can wash, cook, buy groceries, clean the house and garden, make tea..."

Ai Hui was utterly flabbergasted; he felt that his perception of the world had been hugely challenged. Was this... still a sand puppet?

When he finally regained his focus, Ai Hui demonstrated his powerful adaptability. Having no other choice, he could only reassure Lou Lan. "No problem, I will teach you!"

However, he did not sound confident.

Lou Lan, on the other hand, was thrilled. "I will work hard!"

Night soon arrived. The calabashes were lit as they released a brilliant white light, which enveloped the hall in a glow as bright as snow. Two entangled silhouettes could be seen. "The way you just attacked isn't right. You're a sand puppet with no joints. You should not blindly imitate. Lou Lan, you're a sand puppet! You should be soft when you have to and hard when you have to. Elemental energy is the key. Use it to strengthen your attacks!"

"Harder than iron! Stronger than steel!"

"Pay attention to the angle! Yes, the angle of attack is very important. Do not hold back!"

"Stop only when I ask you to. Yes, you are improving! Ooh, that is fierce. Use more strength! Ahh..."

Time ticked by.

Lou Lan was excited because he believed that he was progressing swiftly. He always felt happy whenever he was able to learn something new. Although he believed that Ai Hui's obsession was slightly strange, he was still glad to be able to help.

Keeping Ai Hui's oft-repeated advice "Do not hold back!" in mind, he struck hard.

Lou Lan beautifully launched fifteen consecutive strikes as he compiled enough energy to release a final blow. A resounding boom was produced by a punch that surpassed all his previous hits. Like a human punching bag, Ai Hui formed a graceful arc as he flew more than thirty feet away.

Superbly done!

Lou Lan was extremely satisfied with his recent attack; he had executed it perfectly, without a single mistake.

Ai Hui gasped for breath as he laid pitifully on the ground. His gaze was unfocused, and he looked lifeless.

Lou Lan bent over, tilted his head and earnestly asked, "Ai Hui, are we going to resume training?"

Ai Hui could no longer feel the sting because all of his muscles and flesh were aching. The remaining metal elemental energy should have dispersed. Let us end it here...

However, Ai Hui immediately realized something horrifying: the muscles in his face had become numb from the previous explosive attack, and now, he could not even open his mouth. Not only that, his whole body was paralyzed.

Did he just teach Lou Lan how to launch a paralyzing attack? Damn, why did he do that?

"Ai Hui?" Lou Lan crooked his head. "Are we going to continue?"

Enough! It was enough! More than enough!

Ai Hui moaned inwardly.

Lou Lan's face appeared to dawn with realization as he suddenly recalled something. "I understand now! You mentioned earlier that I should only stop when you say so. I got it, let us resume! Lou Lan will continue to work hard!"

Lou Lan transformed one of his arms into a sand whip and launched an attack at Ai Hui while repeatedly muttering, "Harder than iron! Stronger than steel!"

No! Ai Hui's moan turned into horror. No, no, no! Hey, hey, hey! Enough! Stop training! Let us stop training...

Bang, bang, bang!

Amidst a barrage of violent, storm-like attacks, the helpless Ai Hui felt himself crumbling inside.

Duanmu Huanghun looked gloomy. All his close friends were intentionally avoiding him, as they knew that this fellow had better not be provoked when in a bad mood. However, now, he was not just in a bad mood; he was in an incredibly dreadful mood!

They all knew that Duanmu Huanghun was an exceedingly proud person, who had always exuded grace and elegance. When had they ever seen him with such a black face? Moreover, with his expression worsening each day, he now looked as if he was ready to kill. Anyone with well-working eyes would shun him as well.

Duanmu Huanghun was feeling extremely terrible. After scanning the school compound yet again, his face darkened.

Damn it! That bastard!

He clenched his fist so hard it became white.

It had already been a few days! That damned garbage actually dared to skip so many classes!

His pride was already hurt from the fact that he had to coach a rookie. He desperately tried to console himself. Look at the bigger picture! I will become a leader! I am a genius!

Yet reality had actually dealt him such a brutal blow. He could do nothing about it except swallow his anger and humiliation.

It was awful enough that he had failed to find Ai Hui after making so many trips down to various training grounds. He had already accepted the fact that Ai Hui was the lousiest student of the entire Induction Ground and had long since planned to drag him over and drill him, but...

This fellow did not even attend classes!

At this point, all Duanmu Huanghun wanted to do was curse. He had seen lazy people, but never any to this extent!

If you don't even go to class, then why in the world did you join?

It had not been easy for him to lower his pride and concede to his teacher’s request. But what happened now? He could not even find that fellow!

Duanmu Huanghun was crying inside. Why are you toying with me? What wretched luck I have, for me to experience something this ridiculous! For me to meet such a ridiculous person!

Just the thought of this garbage damaging his reputation of a great genius sent him into a blazing fury.

Just you wait!

Hate was swiftly growing in Duanmu Huanghun’s heart.

Chapter 15: Replenishing Elemental Energy with Soup

Ai Hui bewilderedly opened his eyes, while his aching body allowed him to take just one breath of the chilly air.

"You’re awake?"

Lou Lan pushed the door open and entered the room with a steaming bowl of soup in his hands. Despite being quite a distance away, Ai Hui could smell the alluring scent that wafted towards him, unintentionally causing his stomach to let out an embarrassing, loud growl. Making a conscious effort to swallow his saliva, he weakly asked, "What time is it?"

"It’s eight in the morning," Lou Lan replied, as he carefully handed the soup over to Ai Hui.

The moment he laid his eager hands on the bowl, Ai Hui momentarily forgot about his aches and immediately wolfed down the heavenly, delicious soup.

"What time did last night’s practice end?" he asked indistinctly.

Not long into last night's session, his consciousness had started to fade, which rendered him unable to recollect anything about what had subsequently happened.

"Five in the morning," stated Lou Lan.

Five...

Ai Hui's reaction was a bit sluggish, but then his expression suddenly stiffened. He finally realized the reason why his entire body was throbbing with aches and why even moving a single finger had become a painful ordeal. His cheeks twitched in disbelief, as he asked, "You were beating me up the whole time till five in the morning?"

Ai Hui immediately felt uneasy when he thought of his unconscious self being violently beaten up like a punching bag. "I'm very sorry," Lou Lan sincerely apologized. "Although you didn't ask me to stop, I had to end the practice at five to prepare breakfast for Master Shao. But now I have already completed this morning's tasks and can continue practicing with you. Shall we begin?"

Feeling sorry for thrashing him 'only' until five in the morning, though...

Ai Hui shook his head firmly and hurriedly cried out, "No thanks!"

With last night’s tragic experience still vivid in his mind, Ai Hui could not muster up the courage.

When Ai Hui noticed that Lou Lan seemed to be a bit down, he

coughed, and remarked, "This soup tastes pretty good."

Ai Hui had no idea what soup it was; he was only cognizant of the fact that the soup was incredibly delicious and that it was undoubtedly the best that he had ever consumed. Furthermore, after drinking the soup, a pleasant feeling of heat had gently washed over his body, flowing through every nook and cranny of his being and leaving him feeling comfortably warm.

Lou Lan, having just been praised, perked up quite a bit. "Ai Hui, your training places great strain on the body. To prevent deficiencies that could further develop into internal injuries, you must timely replenish and nourish your body," he quipped.

"You are really amazing!" Ai Hui could not help but exclaim. "No wonder I feel my body heating up, it's just like when I had previously tried some elemental soup. Now, that was a perfect dish, one that even had elemental energy!"

Lou Lan’s tone rose slightly. "This soup also replenishes elemental energy."

"This soup? Elemental food?" Ai Hui was momentarily stunned. Elemental food was incomparably more expensive than average meals. The school provided such food as well, but even though it could be considered cheaper than what was available outside, it still carried a hefty price tag.

An ominous premonition rose up in Ai Hui’s chest. He slowly began, "The ingredients for this soup..."

"They were found in your bag, Ai Hui," Lou Lan replied matter-of-factly. "Although they were just scraps, the ingredients were of decent quality and were suitable for brewing soup. While a standard recipe wasn’t followed, please rest assured that at least seventy percent of the elemental energy was utilized."

Ai Hui felt as though he was forcefully hit by an iron rod. "Just... just how much did you use?" he asked, stupefied.

"Don’t worry, I have used up everything. I can guarantee that there was absolutely no wastage," Lou Lan wholeheartedly pledged.

This was totally not the kind of guarantee he was looking for...

Thump! With his heart filled with despair, Ai Hui stiffly collapsed back onto the bed with a forlorn thud. The ingredients that he had painfully accrued for over three whole years had disappeared just like that! After three years of scrimping and saving he had finally accumulated a few valuables. The mere thought of his precious ingredients being used up after just a night’s rest left him trembling with unbearable heartache.

If Ai Hui understood what utilizing seventy percent of the elemental energy meant, then...

"Ai Hui, you should start cultivating now to properly absorb the elemental energy," Lou Lan reminded.

Ai Hui quivered in realization. His ingredients had already been spent, so there was no point in feeling resentful anymore. He gritted his teeth and crawled out of bed; no amount of sweat or blood could deter him from making full use of this elemental energy.

Ai Hui sat crossed-legged, and according to Teacher Dong's method, he focused entirely on guiding the silver of elemental energy along the path of the five residences and eight palaces.

Of the eight palaces, the four that were the easiest to open were those present in the four limbs; the left hand palace, the right hand palace, the left leg palace and the right leg palace. The other four palaces—the sky, gate, sea and earth palaces—were located from the space between the eyebrows down to the tailbone, and were significantly harder to open.

However, regardless of whether the natal residences were opened or whether the eight palaces were accessed, the flow of elemental power always revolved around the five residences and eight palaces. The only difference between the various schools laid in the sequence of routes that the energy could take in the body. Different paths would result in entirely distinct results, giving rise to the myriad of available cultivation methods. Additionally, the marvels and profound mysteries of each of the eight gates presented many opportunities for deeper research and exploration. Each school would pick out an area for further study, and over time, the knowledge gained from the extended periods of research would gradually accumulate and consolidate into their esoteric, unshared secrets.

Ai Hui had chosen the safest and simplest route; it started from the four palaces in his limbs and was followed by the space between the brows. From there, he continued downwards, using the elemental energy to thread between the sky and earth palaces.

Once he started to guide the elemental energy, however, Ai Hui felt different than usual.

Ai Hui had never perceived anything like it; his elemental energy had been significantly strengthened after flowing through only the left hand palace. Gentle yet lively, the elemental energy lightly coursed through his body, causing him to feel lithe, alive and full of vigor. The movement of elemental energy was practically effortless, a far cry from the heavy sluggishness that he usually experienced.

It was not long, however, before Ai Hui became agitated, as he discovered that the elemental energy within his body was gradually dissipating outward.

His body's affinity for elemental energy was still too low.

Preventing himself from becoming distracted again, Ai Hui concentrated on the flow of elemental energy, and pressed on, making use of every precious second.

Do not waste it!

Just thinking about how this elemental energy had stemmed from his three years of cumulative efforts provided Ai Hui with a burst of adrenaline. His entire attention was centered on the elemental energy within his body, which was now surging with speed akin to that of a crazy, sprinting wild horse.

On recognizing that Ai Hui was fully engrossed in his cultivation, Lou Lan silently stepped out of the room.

As time crept by, Ai Hui, who had continued to meditate cross-legged, started to emanate a slight, silvery glow. If one moved closer, they would be able to see that this thin layer of light consisted of numerous needles of converging light rays, which were, in actuality, the manifestations of the dispersing elemental energy.

However, despite Ai Hui's strenuous efforts, a large amount of elemental energy had still dispersed into the surrounding atmosphere.

As he cultivated, Ai Hui gradually began to comprehend some insights; he soon realized that the silver elemental energy was the type of energy that was most abundant in his body. This silver elemental energy was, in fact, a form of the scattered metal elemental energy. However, being finer and with a milder attribute, it appeared to be somewhat like fireflies gently floating within his body.

It existed in a free-floating state and was also the fastest dispersing type of elemental energy.

The other type of elemental energy present was much more stable and had a high affinity with his physical body, and every time Ai Hui circulated his elemental energy, he would absorb large amounts of it. More importantly, it could also bind and incorporate large quantities of the free-floating metal elemental energy into Ai Hui's original pool of elemental energy.

This kind of elemental energy probably existed uniquely in the elemental energy replenishing soup.

Ai Hui had finally understood why so many people risked their lives and delved into the Wilderness to hunt for dire beasts.

Even though the metal elemental energy had dispersed until there was practically nothing left, Ai Hui did not cease his practice, and he persistently channeled his elemental energy. His body, as well, was unceasingly emitting a faint aura.

Chapter 16: Meeting of Rivals

The faint silver glow gently lingered around Ai Hui as smoke-like spirals, gradually transforming into hazy, sword-shaped forms that flitted about. Suddenly, everything vanished with a flash.

Ai Hui was entirely immersed in his cultivation, completely unaware of what had just occurred.

An hour later, he finally opened his eyes, which were filled with an incomparable joy. He had never experienced such a marked improvement in his past three years of arduous practice. Ai Hui could barely contain his excitement; after all, he had persevered for three years before now finally glimpsing the light.

What else could make one happier?

Although he ultimately absorbed only five percent of the metal elemental energy, the total elemental energy within his body had been tripled; an unimaginable improvement for him.

Even though Ai Hui had a low absorption efficiency, it did not particularly concern him, as this shortcoming could be overcome with persistent practice and perseverance. To him, any visible improvement—no matter how little—was an achievement. He was most afraid of staying utterly stagnant despite practicing for many years.

Ai Hui carefully reflected on his training. Lou Lan's soup had fulfilled a crucial function; without it, Ai Hui would not have been

able to absorb such a relatively large amount of metal elemental energy. Without its aid, however, Ai Hui did not know how much energy he could have absorbed, but he sensed that the result would have been drastically different.

Ai Hui shook his head and banished these distracting thoughts to the back of his mind.

The wealthy had their own practice methods, but the less-affluent had theirs too.

While the metal elemental energy that was infused into his body was exceedingly harsh, it was, at the same time, much more condensed and pure. Although Ai Hui could only absorb a tiny fragment of the energy, it was countless of times purer than what the average novice could achieve. Because he was aware of this, Ai Hui did not stop cultivating the elemental energy, even when most of it had already dispersed.

Most students pursued a higher cultivation level and hence vigorously strived to strengthen their elemental energy. Ai Hui, who had an abundance of combat experience, had encountered all types of powerful individuals. He had come across many elementalists who had similar cultivation levels but vastly different fighting strengths. Ai Hui had long since comprehended that the purer the elemental energy, the easier it was to manipulate, thus allowing one to have greater efficacy in their attacks.

Ai Hui had also understood that although the silver of elemental energy in his body was weak, it was extremely pure, and because it

was also highly versatile in his hands, this elemental energy had repeatedly saved his life. Several of his tricks had even been praised by elder elementalists.

Powerful weapons are no match for those readily on hand!

When Ai Hui stepped out of the room and saw a pristine, completely clean training hall, he was shocked.

Noticing Aui Hui's expression, Lou Lan explained, “I had some spare time on my hands and so conveniently cleaned up the place. If you aren’t happy, though, I will not do it again.”

“You did a way better job than me,” Ai Hui stammered with embarrassment. The hall looked as if it was thoroughly washed clean, and even the remote corners were totally free of dust. Ai Hui had always claimed that he was a hall-cleaning specialist; never did he imagine that there would be someone who was several times better.

When he received the praise, Lou Lan was obviously elated, and he cheerfully remarked, “I am a sand puppet, and we are better at such things."

Who would remember a sand puppet?

Ai Hui wondered why this phrase had suddenly popped into his mind. He glanced at Lou Lan, and then said out of the blue, “Thank you for the elemental energy replenishing soup. It was very

useful.”

Ai Hui rarely praised people in the same way; in fact, towards others, he was usually much more guarded and distant. In front of Lou Lan, however, he was evidently much more relaxed. Was it perhaps because Lou Lan was a sand puppet? It certainly seemed to be the case.

When he heard that his soup was effective, Lou Lan felt even more pleased. Suddenly, his eyes started to glow with a rather demonic yellow light as he earnestly began to scrutinize Ai Hui.

Ai Hui felt his hair stand on end.

“The bruises and swelling require some time to recover, but the muscle damage has largely healed,” Lou Lan unexpectedly reported, as the glow in his eyes disappeared.

After listening to Lou Lan's report, the uneasiness that Ai Hui was feeling had completely vanished. He also started to feel that Lou Lan, with his unusual set of abilities, was becoming stranger by the day. Lou Lan was proficient in preparing meals, brewing soup, cleaning and even appeared to be well-versed in medical treatment. Just what kind of combination was this?

“I am going off to practice,” said Ai Hui, as he prepared to leave. He planned to make necessary preparations and purchase a few things before heading back to the Suspending Golden Pagoda.

“I should head back to work too, then. Goodbye, Ai Hui,” Lou Lan replied as he waved farewell. Immediately after, his body transformed into a pile of sand, before seeping into the ground and completely disappearing from the training hall.

Duanmu Huanghun occasionally scanned the crowd as he marched alone on the streets. Ai Hui had not attended class for the past several days, leaving Duanmu Huanghun with no choice but to bring himself outside and try his luck in finding him. He knew that trying to find someone like that was like trying to find a needle in a haystack. However, if he was to tell Teacher Xu that he wanted to give up, that would be very embarrassing for him.

Just thinking about that scoundrel, Ai Hui, made him tremble with anger.

His devilishly charming yet refined, good looks attracted the attention of many who passed by.

However, a good number of beautiful women had tried to approach him, only to be scared off by a furious, ice-cold gaze. After finding a camphor tree by the road, he leaned his slender body against it and started to leisurely eat a skewer of candied fruits. The bright crimson of the candied fruits contrasted sharply with his pale face, painting a dazzling, striking image.

The young ladies were afraid to approach Duanmu Huanghun, so they flocked together nearby to gaze at him. Oh, how they longed to be that skewer of candied fruits that he held in his hands!

Duanmu Huanghun, however, continued to stand with an elegant air of nonchalance. He had long been accustomed to being stared at and could care less about others were watching him.

“Duanmu Huanghun! Let’s see how you’re going to escape now!”

A yell suddenly rang out from the opposite side of the street. After a quick glance, Duanmu Huanghun promptly chose to ignore the situation and continued to leisurely eat his candied fruits.

A well-built, young man appeared not too far away from Duanmu Huanghun. With gleaming eyes and a mocking glare, he taunted, “Did you go into hiding after finding out that I, Zhao Zhibao, want to challenge you? Are you terrified? You disappoint me. I was under the impression that Duanmu Huanghun was some type of genius, but it seems like he’s just a coward!”

Duanmu Huanghun did not even bat an eyelid.The enchanting sight of his long eyelashes, which gracefully stood against the glowing backdrop of his pale complexion, was enough to invoke jealousy from all the young women present.

The onlooking group of young ladies started to go wild with excitement.

“Zhao Zhibao! How can you simply shoot your mouth off like that? You’re not even qualified enough to challenge our Huanghun!”

“Exactly! Do you think that any random Tom, Dick or Harry can challenge our Huanghun?”

“Take a good look at yourself, with your long hair, boxy torso, and equally boxy legs. Hehe! Are you trying to act like a wooden trunk with a mop stuck on top?"

Hearing the taunts and jeers of the young women, Zhao Zhibao's face flushed crimson as he flew into a rage. He had always considered himself to be a cut above the rest, and hearing of Duanmu Huanghun’s talent did not instill even the slightest amount of fear in him. Since he was a student that ranked in the top five of his class, Zhao Zhibao was particularly confident in his own extraordinary strength and had hence openly issued a challenge to Duanmu Huanghun.

“So this is our talented Duanmu Huanghun, but his talent is in hiding behind a bunch of girls! Ha!”

Duanmu Huanghun, however, still did not lift a single eyelid. He then spat out the rosehip seeds that he was chewing, and said flatly, “I’m not in a good mood today, so you’d better scram.”

“Not in a good mood? Ha! Come on, beat me up!” Zhao Zhibao teased.

Five minutes later.

Without even a minute ripple in his expression, Duanmu

Huanghun elegantly withdrew his leg. Zhao Zhibao's beaten body could be seen lying pitifully on the ground; not even his face was left untouched. Finishing his last rosehip seed, Duanmu Huanghun tossed his bamboo stick aside before finally walking away indifferently.

“Pop!”

Zhao Zibhao's gaze froze; he was too scared to move. The bamboo pick had forcefully dug into the earth barely two centimeters away from his nose.

The girls who were watching cheered and screamed while they trailed behind Duanmu Huanghun like a swarm of bees

A lady inconspicuously stood at a nearby street corner, wearing a light veil over her face. If one could look closely, however, they would see a glint in her eyes. Shi Xueman had unobtrusively come to Central Pine City to explicitly visit her clan’s training hall, but little did she expect to witness such a scene. She had long heard of Duanmu Huanghun’s renowned name, but she had not anticipated that he would be here in Central Pine City as well. Furthermore, he had displayed his exceptional prowess.

Could it have been him?

Shi Xueman quickly shook her head. Even though it was a blind battle, that scoundrel’s fighting style was completely different from Duanmu Huanghun’s; it was more violent and ferocious, much like that of a wild beast.

She shortly turned around and left in the direction of her clan's training hall.

After twenty whole minutes, Zhao Zhibao finally recovered some of his energy and started to effortfully struggle to get himself off the ground.

However, when he lifted his head, he saw something that stunned him.

Someone with a similarly battered face was walking towards him.

When Ai Hui, who had just finished buying his things, saw Zhao Zhibao in the middle of the street, he too was completely taken aback.

The two of them looked far too alike; they both had bloody noses, swollen faces, and bruises covering every inch of their bodies. Even their facial features were similarly disfigured, and both of their clothes were tattered as well.

When Zhao Zhibao, who had just been beaten to a pulp, saw Ai Hui as a reflection of his miserable state, he believed that the situation itself had appeared to ridicule and humiliate him. He felt a sudden rush of inexplicable anger, which propelled him off the ground, and he viciously barked, "I am not in a good mood today, you'd better scram!"

Ai Hui narrowed his bruised, swollen eyes.

Chapter 17: Conveniently

Ai Hui felt that he did not have a good disposition and in the Wilderness, it was unnecessary. Instead, traits like strength, aggression, and perseverance were required. Even in the most desperate of times, one must be able to put everything on the line in exchange for a chance to survive. Those with a delicate disposition were the first to be eliminated.

Besides, who wouldn't get riled up after being beaten up all the way till five in the morning?

Ai Hui was like a volcano that was ready to explode, but he could not find an outlet. Lou Lan wore his naivety like armor, so his sincerity exposed no openings. Fatty was still the best since Ai Hui could beat him up whenever he felt like it.

Here, someone had served up a sandbag just when Ai Hui felt like beating someone up.

Squinting his swollen eyes, a cold murderous intent surged through Ai Hui's heavily bruised body. He promptly threw the stuff that he had bought on the floor, clearly not caring if they shattered.

Zhao Zhibao saw the other person walk towards him and the anger he felt rose to another level. He had no choice except to endure his loss to Duanmu Huanghun, but he simply could not accept having some random person from the streets challenging him. How could he not be angry?

With an evil grin on his face, Zhao Zhibao lunged at Ai Hui with his hands extended. His palms gave off dense, red flames.

The red-hot tongues of flame lashed out as the hollow of his right palm flashed radiantly, raising the surrounding temperature. Zhao Zhibao was extremely satisfied. Duanmu Huanghun had knocked him down before he could even utilize his elemental energy, then humiliated him by trampling him for five whole minutes. Now, his thoroughly damaged self-confidence soared with his flames, making Zhao Zhibao feel mighty again.

His carelessness had led to his defeat at Duanmu Huanghun's hands. Yes, it must have been so. If he had circulated his elemental energy earlier, the outcome of the battle might have been different.

His opponent's silhouette was distorted by the flames. It had become tiny and insignificant, just like the countless other opponents he had defeated in the past.

Blame it on your bad luck!

Zhao Zhibao let loose an explosive cry. With an expert step forward, the streams of fire emanating from his right hand appeared to be molded by an invisible force, with two flame pillars spreading out like wings. The sharp overbearing cry of a crow rang out from amid the flames, creating the awe-inspiring image of a flaming crow spreading its wings.

Zhao Zhibao's heart filled with ecstasy.

[Crow's Wings of Ice and Fire] was a move employed by both fire and water elementalists. Being a fire elementalist, Zhao Zhibao naturally practiced the Fire Crow. The first skill he learned upon opening his right hand palace was the Fire Crow. The form manipulation involved was not difficult for him, but manipulating its form was only the first stage of the skill. The crow's cry was the next level and the elemental energy's resonance with the skill signaled a sharp increase in its power.

Zhao Zhibao did not expect himself to make a breakthrough at this moment. He felt it was a pity that such a magnificent skill was wasted on such an unworthy opponent. Not using this skill in the fight against Duanmu Huanghun left him filled with regret.

Ai Hui was unconcerned.

[Crow's Wings of Ice and Fire] was a commonly seen move and was nothing to make a fuss about. It was certainly not easy for him to achieve the crow's cry at his age, but that was about it.

In the moment that Zhao Zhibao lunged forward, a glimmer of light flickered in Ai Hui's pupil.

Almost simultaneously, he brazenly dashed toward his opponent.

Ai Hui's actions gave Zhao Zhibao a slight shock. Rather than hide, Ai Hui had unexpectedly rushed toward him. Was his brain

not functioning normally? Since his opponent had a death wish, Zhao Zhibao was most certainly not going to go easy on him.

As the distance between the two rapidly grew closer, Zhao Zhibao became more and more excited. His eyes grew wide with excitement as an evil grin emerged upon his face. Ready to knock his opponent down with one blow, he prepared to raise his right palm.

Just as his opponent was about to collide into Zhao Zhibao's palm technique, Ai Hui swerved his body, disrupting Zhao Zhibao's rhythm.

His opponent's maneuver left Zhao Zhibao feeling unspeakably annoyed. Any moment later, Zhao Zhibao could have blindly accelerated his palm at his opponent. Any moment earlier,he would have time to make the necessary adjustments. This maneuver, however, was perfectly timed and completely stopped him in his tracks. The resulting discomfort left him reeling.

Both parties were extremely close, so Zhao Zhibao had no time to alter his move. All he could do was twist his palm toward its side, sweeping at Ai Hui in a chopping motion.

Wait a minute, where did he go?

Zhao Zhibao's eyes suddenly grew wide, as if he had seen a ghost. His opponent had completely disappeared right in front of him.

Just what was happening?

Bang!

Zhao Zhibao felt an intense pain in his right ribs, which slowly spread to the rest of his body in a flash. His body began to stiffen. How was this possible……

His mind was a blank, unsure if the intense pain or the sudden shock had rendered him incapable of thought.

After swaying aside, Ai Hui had bent over like a limber cat toward Zhao Zhibao’s right ribs. He did not even use elemental energy for this blow. The nerves in this area were bundled densely such that any strong strike was enough to momentarily stun someone.

After having gotten the upper hand with just one move, Ai Hui seized the opportunity, turned to his side, and infused elemental energy into the soles of his feet. A silver light flashed as Ai Hui quietly pressed his back onto Zhao Zhibao’s chest. Ai Hui’s arched back was like a compressed spring. Upon release, a powerful force exploded from his back, hitting Zhao Zhibao’s chest like a wild rhinoceros.

With a loud thud, Zhao Zhibao was sent flying backward in an arc.

Bang!

Zhao Zhibao landed heavily on the ground. Instantly, Ai Hui appeared beside Zhao Zhibao, relentlessly pursuing him in a demonic manner. Without any hesitation, Ai Hui pressed his right knee into Zhao Zhibao's back while his left hand gripped onto his opponent's head. His right hand conveniently grabbed the bamboo skewer stuck in the ground, then viciously stabbed Zhao Zhibao in the back of his neck.

Ai Hui could easily stab a wild beast in the throat with a blunt chopstick, let alone with a bamboo skewer that had such a sharp edge.

The whole process happened smoothly, as fast as lightning.

At the instant that the bamboo skewer was just about to pierce through Zhao Zhibao's skin, Ai Hui had a sudden realization—this was not the Wilderness! He forcefully stopped the bamboo skewer. On Zhao Zhibao's neck, a fresh red dot the size of a needle prick emerged and a drop of crimson blood seeped out of the wound.

Zhao Zhibao, who had been knocked silly, had no idea that he had just narrowly missed death.

This was not the Wilderness!

Ai Hui reminded himself once more, as his gaze became solemn and withdrawn. Ai Hui then conveniently threw the bamboo skewer back to the ground.

“Ah!”

Zhao Zhibao let out a mournful cry that abruptly stopped.

Ai Hui withdrew his hand from Zhao Zhibao’s nape without taking so much as a glance at the now-unconscious Zhao Zhibao. Winning against such an opponent did not give him any thrill or excitement. Without any concept of timing, Zhao Zhibao’s attacks were utterly superficial. Moreover, this opponent became distracted in the middle of the fight. Such a lackluster performance left Ai Hui feeling unsatisfied.

As a result of his strong occupational habits, Ai Hui certainly did not forget to rake in his rewards.

Zhao Zhibao was stripped bare of his possessions and even his armor was not spared. Such thoroughness had long been ingrained into Ai Hui’s basic instincts.

Earning twenty thousand yuan put Ai Hui in a good mood. His opponent’s clothes and materials were of good quality, so Ai Hui put them on without any hesitation.

Picking up his belongings, Ai Hui continued toward the city gate.

Duanmu Huanghun had yet to give up. He picked out a high ground near the city gate, waiting idly for his target to show up. He plucked another skewer of candied fruits seemingly out of

nowhere and began leisurely eating it.

Since he's not in the city, could he be outside?

After giving Zhao Zhibao a good beating, Duanmu Huanghun felt himself becoming more placid. This was the only way into or out of the city.

A group of young ladies hovered nearby, their eyes gazed upon Duanmu Huanghun passionately. They suddenly became agitated.

"Look! Zhao Zhibao!"

"He looks so pitiful! His face and body are all out of shape!"

"He deserves it! How dare he challenge our Huanghun, this is already letting him off easily..."

Duanmu Huanghun, who was standing on high ground, shot a quick glance at Zhao Zhibao before looking away. He had no interest in those he defeated. Duanmu Huanghun had not looked Zhao Zhibao in the eye even once during the entire encounter. He did not care what Zhao Zhibao looked like before and cared even less now that the man was all battered.

Ai Hui spotted Duanmu Huanghun before quickly retracting his gaze. Eating candied fruits instead of attending lessons or practicing, the whims of a spoiled brat were indeed strange.

He too heard the chatter coming from the group of ladies, but he had no inkling of who Zhao Zhibao was.

Noting that it had nothing to do with him, Ai Hui disregarded the commotion and walked toward the Suspending Golden Pagoda.

Chapter 18: Fumbling

Defeating an amateur did not stir up Ai Hui's emotions, but the short battle did give him the opportunity to witness his own improvement. The increased elemental energy had a direct effect on his strength. The metal elemental energy absorbed from the Suspending Golden Pagoda was much purer than that of common sources. The elemental energy within his body was still considerably weak, but a threefold increase in elemental energy implied much greater room for development.

Ai Hui walked toward the Suspending Golden Pagoda, stopping outside its front gate. With the previous experience still fresh in his mind, he did not hastily enter the grounds this time.

The howling gales within the pagoda were still as intimidating as ever.

Ai Hui took out the rope he just bought, tying one end to a rock the size of a wicker basket. He tied the other end to his waist, lifted the rock, and threw it into the pagoda.

The rope suddenly stretched taut and a powerful pulling force quickly followed. Ai Hui was well-prepared, but still he stumbled.

The terrible metal winds within the pagoda violently tossed the rock in every direction. The force that pulled on the rope was beyond Ai Hui's expectations. He struggled to keep his body steady, but was still dragged toward the pagoda's entrance.

Since was truly lucky to have made it out of the pagoda previously, Ai Hui felt a lingering fear.

The rope suddenly relaxed, as the force pulling him forward disappeared. Ai Hui was still exerting his power backward and was unprepared for the sudden change. He reacted quickly, gently tapping the floor with his palm as he fell before he soared back up and landed squarely on his feet.

The rope had snapped. Ai Hui pulled the broken end over to investigate and found that the rope had a large number of tiny pinhole-like punctures through it.

Discovering that a rope made of grass was not good enough, Ai Hui shook his head. The numerous tiny holes were caused by fine silver strands of metal elemental energy piercing the rope. The rock would probably not last much longer either. Within moments, the slamming sounds coming from within the pagoda came to a halt, and a crashing noise followed. The rock must have been shattered into a pile of small stones.

The metal winds were truly ferocious!

No wonder this training ground was only recommended to those who had opened their natal palaces.

Luckily, Ai Hui had a backup plan as he pulled out an iron chain that was as thick as his wrist. Dragging this iron chain all the way to the Suspending Golden Pagoda had worn him out. He flung one end of the iron chain into the pagoda, waited a while, then pulled

it back out. The chains remained undamaged. The metal fences in the pagoda that Ai Hui saw during last visit gave him the idea that an iron chain might be able to withstand the metal wind.

Ai Hui expended a large amount of effort and spent an entire hour pushing a rock larger than himself to the pagoda. There was no other choice since he had smashed up all the surrounding rocks on his last visit.

He wrapped one end of the iron chain around the rock before attaching the other to his waist.

After ensuring that the ends were firmly secured, Ai Hui took a deep breath and jumped into the Suspending Golden Pagoda.

Once inside, Ai Hui was immediately swept up by the violent metal winds, spinning around like a top. A powerful force unexpectedly pulled at his waist, nearly snapping him into two. The iron chain wrapped around his waist was stretched so taut that it was perfectly straight. Seeing that his method worked, Ai Hui heaved a sigh of relief. He barely had time to rejoice before his back slammed into the wall. He promptly covered his head with his hands, curled into a ball, and allowed himself to bounce around like a rubber ball.

This time around, Ai Hui stayed inside for a shorter duration. Rather than wait until he had almost hit his limit, Ai Hui used the iron chain to pull himself out once he started to feel bloated.

Having dragged himself out of the pagoda, Ai Hui heaved a sigh

of relief. The world inside the pagoda was completely different from the world outside of it. Ai Hui had managed his training well—his mind was clear and he still had some energy left.

He started to hit his own body.

After his previous training session, Ai Hui had pondered over how he could absorb metal elemental energy. Ai Hui's pursuit of power was unquestionable, but he had no desire to be beaten up every day from dusk to dawn. That was an experience he had no wish to repeat.

He thus devised the method currently being employed.

In order to absorb metal elemental energy, the first step he had to take was to scatter the fine silver threads of energy that had been taken into his body. If a smaller amount of it was taken in, then perhaps he could handle this step himself.

Hitting himself and getting hit by others were essentially the same. The experience, however, was wholly different.

Ai Hui hit himself with maximum effort while simultaneously observing any changes within his body. He closely monitored his strength and technique, fumbling around to get a feel for the most effective combination.

He had a poor aptitude and was poor financially as well. All he could do was put in more effort.

He gradually uncovered some tricks to this training, but soon encountered another problem: he was unable to reach the metal elemental energy within the muscles of his back. He deeply contemplated his options before resting his gaze on the Suspending Golden Pagoda.

This pagoda that had been exposed to the metal winds for so many years should be quite sturdy. As such, the walls of the Suspending Golden Pagoda certainly seemed like a highly suitable piece of equipment for Ai Hui to ram his back into. Ai Hui quickly realized that he was thinking too much. The walls of the pagoda were as hard as metal, so dashing into them just two or three times would probably shatter his bones.

A substantial portion of the metal elemental energy in his back was not yet scattered. Ai Hui suddenly thought of his recent fight with the “amateur swollen guy” where he had executed the [Arching Fish Back] move.

This skill, [Arching Fish Back], reminded him most of the blind battle. When he had locked his opponent down, the move she attempted to use to counter him was the [Arching Fish Back]. Ai Hui, who constantly performed work that required copious amounts of strength, had the utmost confidence in his brute power. His opponent had shocked him by wielding a surprising amount of force and, almost breaking free of his grappling technique.

He could sense that his opponent’s elemental energy wasn’t particularly strong and that her physical strength wasn’t great

either. The fact that her Arching Fish Back was so powerful made it clear that she had profound martial attainments.

Ai Hui had developed a strong interest in this move and copied it. In the three years he had spent in the Wilderness, Ai Hui learned many skills that were unorthodox and fragmented, but were highly practical, just like the [Arching Fish Back].

However, he rarely had an opportunity to use this move. Getting locked down by an opponent at his current level would spell certain doom. He would not even have the chance to execute the move.

A flash of inspiration gave him the idea to use the [Arching Fish Back] to send “amateur swollen guy” flying earlier that day. This experience helped him to find other uses for the technique. He began to repeatedly use the [Arching Fish Back] against the walls of the pagoda.

Not long after, he made another discovery. When he was curled up training in the pagoda, the part of his body that took in the most metal elemental energy was his back. Besides having an astonishing amount of explosive power, the [Arching Fish Back] had a jolting effect as well.

No wonder his arms had gone numb during the blind battle.

The effectiveness of his idea boosted his morale significantly. Ai Hui became even more meticulous at his task.

Once all the metal elemental energy had been scattered, Ai Hui sat in a lotus pose. He began to enter a meditative state, absorbing the dispersed metal elemental energy.

An hour later, Ai Hui opened his eyes. He could feel an increase in his elemental energy. Although his improvement this time was much less than that of last night, that was to be expected. The thought of that bowl of elemental energy replenishing soup still made his heart ache. Last night's progress might have been remarkable, but the cost had been huge.

This method of training might be long and arduous, but it didn't matter to Ai Hui as long as he saw possible improvement. For him who had struggled through dark and difficult times, but refused to pass into oblivion, hardship was not an issue.

Chapter 19: Possessing The Arching Fish Back

Looking at the profusely sweating Shi Xueman, the middle-aged man was filled with regret. In hindsight, organizing the blind battle was truly a bad idea. He had brought this upon Miss Xueman.

Among the descendants from the current generation of the Shi family, Miss Xueman was the most passionate. Despite her seemingly cold exterior, she was actually a warm person and was cherished by everyone. His eagerness in obtaining merit had resulted in Miss Xueman's tireless training, for which he blamed himself greatly and felt terribly guilty. He had tried to persuade her a couple of times, but to no avail. Once Miss Xueman had made up her mind, there was no turning back.

This aspect of her personality was very much like her father's.

The middle-aged man sighed deeply. He had worked together with Xueman's father before and had the utmost admiration for him. The figure in the training hall drenched with sweat reminded him of the past, and his mind wandered back to 20 years ago.

Currently, Shi Xueman had finished her training and was headed toward the middle-aged man. "Uncle Yong Zheng, you don't have to worry too much about me. I can practice on my own," she said while wiping her sweat.

The way she spoke was ice-cold, yet not completely distant.

Shi Xueman had only recently found out from her grandfather that the person in charge of the training hall was her father's colleague. Although his lack of talent limited his accomplishments, she still respectfully regarded him as an elder on account of his good relationship with her father in the past.

"I'm worried that it's too exhausting," Uncle Yong Zheng replied. "You don't have to be so hard on yourself. Sigh, your father used to be exactly the same. He couldn't even sleep a wink whenever he lost to someone. Like father like daughter indeed."

Shi Xueman quietly listened. From a young age, she had rarely met her father. The impression she had of him was based on what others told her.

"This list contains the name of all the newly enrolled students in the Society of Excellence," Yong Zheng said as he handed over the namelist. "I will continue to monitor any new members. Although repeating this so many times makes me sound really long-winded, I still want to remind you that you don't have to be so harsh on yourself since that was just a fluke."

Shi Xueman took the list, calmly saying, "Uncle Yong Zheng, that was not an accident. A loss is simply a loss, and there are no excuses for it."

Expecting such a reply, Yong Zheng smiled wryly..

Shi Xueman suddenly asked, "Uncle Yong Zheng, how do you feel

about organizing another blind battle?”

“Organize another blind battle?” Yong Zheng was momentarily shocked, but quickly responded, “Is Young Mistress thinking of luring him into a trap?”

“Indeed,” Shi Xueman said with a nod, “I have concluded that there are only two possible reasons as to why that person would participate in the blind battle. The first is that he is interested in the battle itself. With his skill in fighting in the dark, it would not be surprising for him to be enticed by such a unique competition. The other possibility is that he is poor and simply joined for the prize money.”

Yong Zheng muttered, “The first reason seems more probable. Someone who is strong enough to defeat Young Mistress can’t possibly be moved by a mere 50,000 yuan.”

“Xueman feels that way too. Can we spend some effort on another blind battle? A revamped blind battle should attract our target.” Shi Xueman continued, “Even though the second possibility seems less likely, we cannot completely discount it. The prize money must be raised.”

Yong Zheng’s eyes lit up as he said, “This is a great idea! Since he is so skilled in battling in the dark, a novel form of the blind battle is sure to entice him. As long as it is interesting enough, he will definitely be attracted. The prize money can easily be handled. We can raise it to 500,000 yuan.”

“Make it a million,” Shi Xueman stated resolutely. “I’ll be heading back shortly, so matters regarding the blind battle will need to be handled by you. I have a three-day rest period in two weeks and will be back again to trouble Uncle Yong Zheng then.

Yong Zheng sighed, “Leave it to me.”

As long as it was within his ability, he would carry out his mission thoroughly. To be honest, he was also very curious about this mysterious genius who could defeat Miss Xueman.

.....

The Suspending Golden Pagoda.

Ai Hui viciously smashed his back against the wall like a large, ferocious fish. A barely perceptible jitter traveled across his back at the same instant when he contacted the wall. An abnormally resounding boom rang through the air.

Ai Hui’s eyes lit up. This time around, there was obvious improvement in the power of his [Arching Fish Back]. It was now full of explosive power, far exceeding all his previous attempts.

Before he had time to rejoice, a peerless force rebounded from the wall. His body was flung several meters away from the wall like a rag doll.

Thump!

He landed heavily in the mud. Luckily, he was experienced enough to make adjustments in mid-air. Even though his landing position seemed to cut a sorry figure, he was not even scratched.

He casually plucked a blade of grass as he got up and started to chew on it. A pensive glint in his eyes hinted that he was deep in thought.

The power of that last [Arching Fish Back] had completely exceeded his expectations. If his [Arching Fish Back] had been this powerful in the previous fight, his opponent's chest would probably have been shattered.

The power of the [Arching Fish Back] was much greater than he initially thought. More importantly, he still had the capacity to improve.

Ai Hui spat out the grass chaff as his eyes flashed with excitement.

[Arching Fish Back] wasn't some superior skill, nor was it part of any system of skills. Not being part of a system meant that it was possible to train this skill independently. Training the power of this skill up a notch would certainly make it a killing move.

In his initial plan, [Arching Fish Back] was only intended to be used as part of his training, but he was pleasantly surprised when he unexpectedly discovered its use as a potential killing move.

He became even more engrossed in his training, repeating the same old routine everyday. He would enter the pagoda to gather metal elemental energy, exit the pagoda, and practice the [Arching Fish Back] on its walls. He would then proceed by sitting in a lotus pose, entering a meditative state, and absorbing the elemental energy. Repeating the process tirelessly, his elemental energy increased slowly but surely.

Possibly as a result of his increased elemental energy, his body's compatibility with the metal elemental energy had risen. As his [Arching Fish Back] became more refined, the efficacy of his trainings improved, but he soon discovered another issue. The metal elemental energy in his back was efficiently scattered with the [Arching Fish Back], but scattering the energy in other parts of his body with his palm was much less effective.

However, the technique used to generate power in the [Arching Fish Back] could not be employed in other parts of the body. The essence of the move lied in its use of one's spinal column and back muscles to mimic how a fish struggles to break free when caught.

Realizing that his progress was hampered by this issue, Ai Hui knew that he needed to go back and make some additional preparations.

He had previously returned one time for some dry rations and also asked Lou Lan for help with cleaning the training ground, to which Lou Lan happily agreed.

Continuously training for seven days had left him looking like a savage. His clothes were dilapidated but could not mask his impressive demeanour. Beneath his unkempt hair and dirt-crusted face were a pair of eyes as calm as water.

Chapter 20: A Sudden Turnaround

Activities of the Society of Excellence were not compulsory but few students would choose to miss them. No one wanted to miss the opportunity of receiving guidance from the seniors. Unlike teachers from the Induction Ground, the seniors from the Society were all seasoned frontline soldiers. They might not be good at theory, but they had rich battle experience. Thus, the skills and techniques they imparted were of high practical value.

To the frontline soldiers who were dispatched to be in charge of the Society, it was a lucrative and easy job: relaxing work, double the allowance, good food, and no requirement to guard against dire beast attacks during the cold, windy night. Instead, they were able to drink hot tea in a warm room. How enjoyable!

Because the demand for this job was high, every city's resident staff members were rotated every year.

Li Wei and Zhou Xiaoxi had just been transferred into Central Pine City and were newly in charge of the Society of Excellence. Li Wei was from the army unit whereas Zhou Xiaoxi came from the northern navy unit. Both units had friendly relations and were without conflict, so the two of them quickly became friends. After all, they were going to be working together for a year.

"What a tranquil place." Zhou Xiaoxi examined the surroundings and sighed, "How time flies. Fifteen years gone in the blink of an eye. I really want to go back in time. Being young is still the best."

Upon hearing that, Li Wei laughed. “And go after all the girls you failed to chase in the past?”

Zhou Xiaoxi rolled his eyes. “Do I look superficial to you?”

Without waiting for a reply, Zhou Xiaoxi continued in a deadpan tone, “Yes.”

Li Wei burst into laughter.

Zhou Xiaoxi asked suddenly, “If you were to return to life in the Induction Ground, what is the first thing you would want to do?”

“Sleep!” Li Wei responded without the slightest hesitation.

“Sleep?” Zhou Xiaoxi was quite surprised.

“That is right!” Li Wei sounded certain. “I would tell myself, Li Wei, you are going to be sleep-deprived for the next fifteen years, so hurry and catch some sleep while you can or you will not get a chance again!”

Zhou Xiaoxi laughed out loud. He asked somewhat curiously, “You had more activities during the night?”

“Yes.” Li Wei looked helpless. “Come to think of it, I was unlucky. Upon graduating from the Induction Ground, I moved directly to the frontline. Immediately after, the dire beasts became

increasingly active everyday. The first two years were not too bad, but they became rampant in recent years and harassed us almost every night."

Zhou Xiaoxi's expression became grave. In recent years, the frontlines of all regions had been in an increasingly tense state. The dire beasts had become abnormally restless, causing unease. As veterans who had been on the frontlines for a long period of time, they understood this feeling.

Civilians felt no pressure. Tension from the frontline had no effect on the leisurely lifestyle of those at the back who were protected.

Li Wei sensed the heavy atmosphere and smiled. "What are we worrying about? We are working under so many big shots. Let us just enjoy and cherish this one year. We can create more happy memories to make up for the past!"

"True, it is none of our business!" Zhou Xiaoxi had an evil grin on his face. "I am going to drill these rookies! When I was in the Induction Ground, the old men from the Society of Excellence tormented me like *****. Now I am motivated to do the same."

Recalling the hard times he endured in the past, Li Wei nodded in agreement. "In this area, we should not lose to our seniors! Look at this guy who just walked in, he looks sick. How can this be the case? The future of the Avalon of Five Elements is in his hands. How can such weak-shoulders carry that important responsibility?"

“That is exactly what I was thinking!” Zhou Xiaoxi agreed wholeheartedly. His smile became even more sinister. The way he gazed at the frail-looking student was the same way a big bad wolf looked at a fresh, tender, and snow-white rabbit.

Duanmu Huanghun looked pale. He was not feeling well, his vision was blurry, he felt dizzy, his limbs were going weak, and he was sweating all over. He would not have attended if not for the fact that this was the Society’s introductory gathering.

Standing guard by the city gate continuously for three days and three nights, he had not paid attention to the cold weather and had caught a cold.

That damned bastard!

Just thinking about that damned fellow sent him into a rage. He coughed uncontrollably. Just you wait and see. One day you will fall into my hands and I, Duamnu Huanghun, will not let you off!

“Student Duanmu, are you ill? Is it serious?”

Duanmu Huanghun snapped out of his anger and raised his pale face. He did not know who the man in front of him was, but he had a badge pinned on his chest pocket that revealed his identity. Duanmu Huanghun hurriedly replied, “Thank you for your concern, senior. I caught a cold, and it’s nothing serious.”

“I thought so.” Zhou Xiaoxi grinned, revealing his canines. “You have been crowned the most gifted student of the year. How could you get knocked down by a mere cold? Come, come, come. Take a look at the training plan I have prepared for you! A genius needs a genius training plan. Since you are feeling all right, let us start now. If delayed, we would not be able to make it in time for night training.”

Duanmu Huanghun looked at his senior in shock and thought he had misheard.

Night training? Taking a student ill with a cold for night training?

His pale, handsome, devilishly charming face was filled with bewilderment. Under his tall, handsome, and straight nose, mucus flowed down steadily from both nostrils.

As Duanmu Huanghun shivered in the cold with his mucus trickling down, Ai Hui was in the Vanguard Training hall soaking in a piping hot bathtub. He was extremely content, and all of his fatigue disappeared.

How comfortable!

Training halls were prepared for practitioners. Most came with special bathing spots to help practitioners recharge. In the past, at the swordsman school, he had made a bathtub for himself using an iron-plated bucket. During his three years in the Wilderness, taking a cold shower had been a luxury, let alone a warm bath.

He would depart once again when day broke.

Having a day of rest allowed his tensed muscles to loosen up. Lou Lan had advised him to consume a bowl of elemental soup as it would help to repair his muscle and bone injuries. The puppet also offered to brew it for him. Ai Hui asked about its cost. At least 40,000 yuan was the reply.

Ai Hui, who was in great pain, decided to save this offer for when he returned next week.

How expensive!

Yesterday, he went to a blacksmith to custom-order some things, and they had cost quite a bit. The iron chain he purchased previously was also quite expensive. If not for the twenty thousand yuan that he took from the amateur, beaten-up man, Ai Hui would not even be able to pool together forty thousand yuan.

The sky slowly brightened. As Ai Hui stepped out of his bath, he was energized and felt a boundless strength in his body.

After cleaning the training hall, he packed some water and dried rations before shutting the door and setting off to the smithy to collect his custom-made items.

Duanmu Huanghun held onto his clothes tightly as he shivered. His body was shaking and his legs were weak as he shambled into

the city. What a terrifying night. He did not know how he had managed to survive. His illness had worsened after a night of battling with the winds and he was freezing, starving, and exhausted.

His eyes were vacant, he was breathing very weakly, and he resembled a zombie.

His last rational thought was to seek a doctor immediately.

His dull gaze fell upon a smithy, and he happened to see a certain someone lift up the bamboo blinds before entering the shop.

Previously, he had scoured every corner for this person, but to no avail. Now, when he was not even searching, that guy suddenly appeared in a smithy!

His gaze was fixed, and all the rage that had been building up burst into flames. Forget the cold and the doctor… these thoughts were thrown to the back of his mind!

I have finally found you, you bastard!

He did not know from where, but a wave of energy came over him, and he charged towards the shop with large strides.

Upon reaching the entrance, he caught sight of Ai Hui’s back from behind the blinds. Duanmu Huanghun only had one thought in mind: Let us see if you can escape!

With an indescribable rage, he reached his hand out abruptly and grabbed onto Ai Hui’s shoulder!

Chapter 21: Target: the Heart!

“Boss, are the items ready?”

“They are done. They do not look very good due to the lack of time, but do not worry, they are of good quality and there will not be any problems. Take a look.”

Ai Hui conveniently picked up an item, carefully examined it, and was satisfied.. Although it did not look very refined, the blacksmith had pretty good skills, and the workmanship was very solid. As long as the items were sturdy and reliable, they were good enough for Ai Hui. He never bothered with aesthetics.

He packed his items and prepared to leave.

Sensing a presence nearby, he was immediately on guard. Upon noticing the weakness of the foot steps, Ai Hui relaxed. This was not the Wilderness, he reminded himself.

Suddenly, he felt something on his shoulder. A hand! His hair stood on end and he forgot his own reminder as his body reacted instinctively.

He did not dodge. Instead, he arched his back and closed in on the chest of this unknown threat. Exerting forcefully from his legs, Ai Hui’s body became like a cannonball as it powerfully shot backward.

Ai Hui was in a highly agitated state, so when he felt someone touching him, he launched the [Arching Fish Back], a technique he had been practicing for a whole week. He did it brazenly and without any hesitation.

Like a ferocious fish that leaped out of the water with a powerful jerk of its arching back, his technique was executed at full power.

Like a deluge breaking through a dam, the violent, surging force was abruptly unleashed.

Boom!

It was on point.

Immediately, Ai Hui knew his [Arching Fish Back] was completely on target. He felt his opponent fly back without any attempt to resist. It was like... like he had struck a feather-light sandbag.

He felt a little weird that the opponent made no sound. Enemies that received such a counterattack or hit would usually scream miserably, like in the bamboo stick incident.

Boom

A heavy object fell onto the ground.

Not even withstanding a single blow? Ai Hui was puzzled, but he suddenly realized what he had done. An ominous feeling rose in his heart as he turned around and saw a motionless fellow lying down on his stomach.

Ai Hui was shocked and annoyed with himself. Did he not just remind himself that this was not the Wilderness? Why did he attack without thinking?

Lying on the ground after a single [Arching Fish Back]? How weak was this fellow?!

Ai Hui ran over while mumbling, “Hey, hey, hey, are you okay?”

Turning this fellow over, Ai Hui saw his face clearly and was startled. Eh, was this not that fellow, Duan… Bangwan something? Ai Hui remembered thinking it was a strange name and did not understand why anyone would use it. Or did he recall wrongly? How was it possible for the evening to be carried with both hands? Or was it actually Duanwan instead?

“Bangwan, Bangwan, are you okay?”

Ai Hui had knocked him unconscious.

Ai Hui felt slight remorse. He had been too aggressive. Although this fellow was unreasonable, full of arrogance, and was unfriendly toward him, Ai Hui believed he would not go so far as to attack him. Again, he thought about how he had just knocked out his

fellow classmate…

Too aggressive… too aggressive…

While reflecting upon himself, Ai Hui picked Duanwan up and slung him over his shoulder. He then collected his items before rushing back to the training hall.

The moment he reached the training hall, he started to yell for his neighbor, “Lou Lan! Lou Lan!”

Soon after, a lump of sand seeped out from within the ground and metamorphosed into a humanoid form. Lou Lan was quite curious. “Ai Hui, what happened?”

“I injured a classmate by accident.” Without concealing, Ai Hui told the truth and felt his face burning. In the Wilderness, someone who mistakenly injured a fellow teammate would be marginalized. Ai Hui had not expected to make such a ridiculous error.

Eh, hold on. That fellow was not his teammate.

Ai Hui’s guilt was erased immediately.

In a rush, Ai Hui asked, “Lou Lan, you know medicine right? Help me take a look at him.”

“No problem,” Lou Lan readily agreed. A brilliant yellow ray of light shone from his eyes onto the unconscious Duanmu Huanghun.

This was the second time Ai Hui had seen Lou Lou’s eyes light up. Unlike the previous time, he was just a bystander this time and did not feel uncomfortable, but he still found it unbelievable. Most of the medical practitioners whom he had met were wood elementalists. Possessing a good understanding of life and nourishment, they were naturals when it came to helping the dying and healing the injured.

It was extremely rare to find a sand puppet who knew medicine.

Sand puppets could barely tap into wood elemental energy, but this very energy still had healing abilities. Ai Hui realized his ignorance.

“An external blow caused him to lose consciousness. He has a cold so his body is in a weakened state. This does not look good,” Lou Lan concluded quickly.

Ai Hui felt even more guilty. Although they were not teammates, he really should not have knocked this fellow down, especially when he was ill.

Ai Hui immediately asked, “What should we do now?”

“The easier method would be to recuperate,” Lou Lan responded.

“His body’s condition is not bad to begin with. A few days of rest would do the trick.”

“That’s good.” Ai Hui breathed a sigh of relief but quickly asked, “How many days? Is there a quicker solution?”

Ai Hui was sensitive to time. Upon hearing “a few days,” he creased his brows involuntarily. A few days of time... That was going to hold up several trainings. Lou Lan nodded. “But it would be more troublesome.”

Ai Hui hastily replied, “That’s not a problem, go on.”

“He already opened up the four palaces of his limbs and should not fall sick easily. Perhaps he had been suffering from pent-up frustrations. The rage within his heart inhibited the four palaces, allowing diseases to invade and caused a cold. However, he has a higher than average immune system. He will naturally recover when the palaces are reactivated and his suppressed anger is cleared.”

Ai Hui was surprised by Lou Lan’s composure and confident tone. After recovering from his daze, he inquired, “How do we do that?”

“Pat on his skin with elemental energy, starting from his limbs’ palaces. Move up to his heart, and clear the anger within it.”

“Okay,” Ai Hui said plainly. Without any delay, he peeled off Duanmu Huanghun’s clothes in a professional manner. Saving a

life was like putting out a fire. On the battlefield, there simply was no time to overthink.

Scanning across this fellow's pale body, Ai Hui clicked his tongue and made a comment about how this skin resembled that of a freshly slaughtered, shaved, and boiled pig.

Pat, pat, pat!

Ai Hui started slapping lightly and continuously with both hands. Fortunately, his elemental energy had improved or else he would not have been able to carry on.

He thought about how he was saving a sum from the medical fee and immediately felt less tired.

I'll hit! I'll hit! I'll hit, hit, hit!

Last one!

Target: the heart!

Ai Hui slapped at Duanmu Huanghun's heart area with great precision using the energy he had left in his palms.

Hah, mission accomplished!

Although Ai Hui had greater stamina than most, he was gasping and breathless at this point. He used both arms to support his body as he panted heavily.

Duanmu Huanghun's body jolted, then he slowly opened his eyes.

Their eyes met, and the air around them froze.

Chapter 22: Duanmu Huanghun's Roar

At that moment when Duanmu Huanghun opened his eyes, one would not know how to describe what he was thinking. In reality, his mind was blank.

His entire body was shivering due to the cold while a guy was pressing against his chest with both arms and panting heavily. He could not see the guy's face clearly. As his head buzzed, his mind blanked out as if he was heavily punched in the side of the head.

Ai Hui noticed that Duanmu Huanghun's eyes were open, however, his pupils... seemed to be disorganized?

Although he had seen a lot of grisly scenes in his life, Ai Hui panicked for a moment. When he first entered the Wilderness, there was a total of two thousand laborers. In the end, only two survived. The rest were forever buried in the muddy ground of the Wilderness. Ai Hui witnessed how they fell into pools of their own blood firsthand. He saw how their eye pupils dilated until life disappeared from them.

"Lou Lan, what's wrong with him?"

"Hey buddy, wake up! Are you okay? Don't fall asleep!" Ai Hui asked while slapping Duanmu Huanghun's face.

Lou Lan was somewhat puzzled at the scene before him. He then commented naively, "He's okay."

Smack smack smack!

Ai Hui slapped Duanmu Huanghun's face with force.

Duanmu Huanghun's unfocused eyes gradually regained clarity. His vision slowly recovered and the glazed look on his face disappeared. When he clearly saw the face of the person before him, his face turned blank.

Wasn't this guy that wretched bastard?

Wasn't this person the useless guy who skipped lessons, refused to train, held the entire class back, and had poor aptitude?

Wasn't he the main culprit who caused him to fall ill, wasted his time, and tarnished his reputation as a genius?

Fury gushed through his head and hatred filled his mind. Duanmu Huanghun sat up abruptly, wanting to rip this hateful fellow into a thousand pieces. Suddenly, his body froze.

Trembling...

His entire body was trembling in the cold.

His facial expression froze and his body froze. After a while, he lowered his head in shock.

He was only wearing his underpants. His thighs and arms were covered with bright red palmprints, contrasting greatly with the rest of his pale white body.

Ohh… No!

Fear appeared instantly in his widened eyes. What had this bastard done to him?

Once again, Duanmu Huanghun's mind was blank. He subconsciously grabbed the clothes beside him and scuttled out of the training hall.

Ai Hui and Lou Lan looked confusedly at the door.

"It seems that he has recovered. Lou Lan, you're really awesome." Ai Hui's voice was filled with joy. He could finally go back to training.

"Even though there was a short period of time when Lou Lan did not understand what was wrong with him, Lou Lan can see that he has recovered now." Upon hearing Ai Hui's compliment, Lou Lan was beaming with joy as well.

"Thank you, Lou Lan. I shall go to train now."

"Goodbye, Ai Hui."

Duanmu Huanghun walked on the street as a rustling, cold breeze blew against his chest. He was completely filled with despair. He did not dare to recall the scene just now or what had happened after he was knocked out.

To him, this was the darkest moment in his life.

After a while, Duanmu Huanghun gradually calmed down from the horror. Suddenly, he realized that he had recovered fully from his cold. He was a unique individual that could not be matched by ordinary people. After all, he came from an aristocratic family and had an outstanding aptitude that was meticulously nurtured by his family.

After he regained his composure, he thought of the reddish palmprints on his limbs and roughly understood how he recovered from his illness.

Duanmu Huanghun was somewhat surprised. How could trash like Ai Hui know such a method? Even an experienced and knowledgeable individual like himself needed to think for a long time before coming up with such an idea. Ai Hui used such an unorthodox method to cure his flu in the time that it would take for others just to think of this approach.

One must note that having a lot of knowledge was one thing, but putting that knowledge to practical use was quite another.

Perhaps this fellow was not as inferior as he thought?

A metal elementalist that specialized in healing?

Even though this seemed weird, this type of metal elementalist had appeared before in the history of the Avalon of Five Elements. Perhaps he did underestimate Ai Hui. After all, it was impossible to enter the Induction Ground with that fellow's inferior aptitude. He might have some other special talents, so the Induction Ground could have made him an exception.

After calming down and determining how his opponent cured his cold, Duanmu Huanghun did not really care about what had just happened. However, when he thought of being knocked by such a weak individual, his face darkened.

Even though he could come up with excuses, such as he was sick, he was exhausted, or his opponent's attack was too sudden, he still could not accept the fact that he was knocked out by a garbage classmate.

It was too humiliating!

Especially once he thought of the teacher's request, his face reddened. The teacher wanted him to guide the trash to success, yet he was knocked out by such trash.

Yes, he could come up with many reasons.

He was far too careless and underestimated his opponent. He let

anger get the better of him. His body was so weak that he caught a cold just by standing in the wind. His stamina was so low that a night of training left him completely drained...

However, there was not a single reason that Duanmu Huanghun could accept.

He was a genius!

Geniuses do things that others can't do! How could he compare himself to the ordinary people? That was slacking. That was failure.

Duanmu Huanghun, you are indeed an embarrassment!

Duanmu Huanghun cursed himself in his heart.

Suddenly, he noticed people on the street were pointing fingers and mocking him. Most of them were girls. As he walked past these girls, they covered their mouths and whispered about him.

No, it's not right!

No matter where he went, Duanmu Huanghun had never had such an experience in his life before.

Could it be that there was dirt on his face?

As he walked past a weapon shop, he stopped in his tracks. He picked up a shiny, polished sword, used its blade as a mirror.

He was dumbfounded.

Who was this guy whose face was swollen like a pig head?

A thought flashed across his mind. A blurry image intruded into his mind without any warning. A blurry figure seemed to be yelling something at him while slapping his face forcefully with both his hands in quick succession. The figure appeared to be continuously slapping him.

Smack smack smack....

Loud and crisp smacking sounds. His face was like a bun that was being steamed. It inflated slowly and then..

The face in his mind merged together with the image displayed on the reflection of the blade.

Duanmu Huanghun's lips quivered while his hand that gripped the sword trembled. Like a volcanic eruption, he clenched his teeth, let out a roar, and almost tore down the roof of the weapon shop.

"Ai Hui, I will rip you into pieces!"

Chapter 23: The Backless Armor

As Duanmu Huanghun's roar faded into the wind, Ai Hui never even heard a whisper. If he remembered anything from that incident, it was most likely the part where he recalled the time he spent in the Wilderness.

Outside the Suspending Golden Pagoda, custom-made pieces of armor were scattered all over the ground. Ai Hui picked them up and equipped them piece by piece. This was his custom-made "armor." Although everything was made out of steel, the appearance was simple and unrefined without any etched designs due to the lack of time spent on the construction. The helmet looked like an inverted bucket, simply having two slits that served as eyeholes. The front torso was protected by a piece of steel plate while the rest of the body parts were crudely made. Unexpectedly, the joints were rather flexible, displaying the skillfulness of the blacksmith who forged it.

The most peculiar part of the "armor" was its back. The entire dorsal section of this suit of armor was uncovered. This Backless Armor was specially prepared by Ai Hui for his training in the Suspending Golden Pagoda.

After wearing the full set of armor, Ai Hui moved around to test his mobility. It felt pretty good. Since Ai Hui had repeatedly stressed to the blacksmith to make it firm and solid, the armor was exceptionally sturdy and weighed around a hundred kilograms. Even though Ai Hui was used to hauling heavy loads in the Wilderness, he was still exhausted from carrying the armor to the Suspending Golden Pagoda.

Luckily, Ai Hui's body was used to long-term, arduous jobs, and his physique was rather strong. However, after donning the armor, he could still feel that his movements were somewhat restricted.

After fastening his armor, the neatly-dressed Ai Hui entered the Suspending Golden Pagoda once more.

Clang clang clang!

The collision between Ai Hui's armor and the walls of the pagoda was much more spectacular than before. Every crash sent sparks flying everywhere and the impacts were several times louder than before, creating ringing echoes in Ai Hui's brain.

After a while, Ai Hui acclimated to the deafening clashing sounds and started to experience the benefits of wearing the Backless Armor.

The metal elemental energy within the metal wind was unable to penetrate Ai Hui's armor, allowing all of the needle-piercing pain to converge on his back. Ai Hui rallied himself. He had spent a lot of time on the Backless Armor, and he derived this idea from the iron chain. Since the metal wind could not destroy the chain, it implied that the metal wind would not be able to destroy the steel armor either.

This improved training method proved that his conjecture was correct, and nothing motivated Ai Hui more than this discovery.

When Ai Hui felt the pain in his back had reached his limit, he grabbed the iron chain and pulled himself out. After exiting, Ai Hui was too lazy to take off the armor and went straight to his usual practice of executing the [Arching Fish Back] on the external wall.

Clang!

From the first collision, Ai Hui could feel the difference. His back felt as if it was going to fracture, requiring him to rest for a good five minutes before his strength recovered. A bitter smile appeared on his face. The dissipating effect of the metal elemental energy was superb and a lot better than its power. However, with the addition of the armor, the [Arching Fish Back]'s overall strength increased dramatically and caused some light bruises to appear on back muscles.

The [Arching Fish Back]'s strength might be great, but this improvement in strength was due to the armor. Looking at it from an overall perspective, the power of the technique itself had actually decreased dramatically, Due to the weight of the armor, even though the power released might be strong and ferocious, but it was somewhat scattered instead of focused.

Upon feeling that he had recovered his strength, Ai Hui contemplated for a while before he began to practise the [Arching Fish Back] again.

Clang!

This time around, Ai Hui shot forward and smashed onto the ground with a boom, filling the air with dirt and dust.

As the cloud of debris dispersed, Ai Hui struggled to stand up. Spitting out the dirt in his mouth, he strode towards the Suspending Golden Pagoda with raging determination in his heart.

Clang clang clang!

A tin-can man collided tirelessly against the iron pagoda.

The nightfall arrived as stars rose over the dome of the night sky. It seemed like the night breeze had scattered resplendent stars all over the heavens. Shortly after, the horizon was splashed with cyan skies while the clouds were dyed orange. The first glimmer of the rising sun shined upon the sleeping tin man propped against the wall of the pagoda. Glittering dewdrops coalesced on his metal armor.

Soon, the scorching sun hung high above in the sky, causing the perspiration within the tin man to boil and steam.

Day by day, time gradually passed.

Intense, continuous, and monotonous training posed a great challenge to the psyche.

When his exhaustion hit the limit, Ai Hui plopped down on his butt to sit. He was too lazy to take off the armor, so he only took off his helmet. It was taxing to wear this suit for a long period. Ever since he first put on the Backless Armor, even when he was sleeping or having his meals, he had not taken it off.. His facial expression was slightly distracted, which had always been the case whenever he trained up to his limit.

After sitting for around twenty minutes, some vitality finally returned to his absentminded face as he began to return to his senses. Upon regaining his awareness, Ai Hui immediately felt a powerful stab of hunger in his stomach. He quickly took out a flatbread from his bag. Ai Hui did not mind the dryness and hardness of bread, finishing it in an instant.

He reached into the bag once more, but failed to grab anything this time around.

No more?

He was momentarily stunned. After recovering, he flipped the bag over and searched through it thoroughly, but the bag was empty.

How long had it been? He could not remember, but he knew it was time to go back. As he prepared to leave, he paused for a moment before removing the armor from his body and hid it nearby. Since this thing was not worth much, no one would covet it. After he replenished his rations, he would be back shortly. Without the armor, he could afford to bring more rations.

After removing the armor, Ai Hui felt as nimble as a swallow. It was as if he stepped into a sea of cotton—moving felt light and airy.

The spirited Ai Hui surged forward and was shocked by his speed. Immediately, his eyes lit up. It turned out that wearing the Backless Armor nonstop while training produced such a benefit.

Without a word, he broke into a run and ran in the direction of Central Pine City.

Li Wei had a short stature, and he wore a very plain green garment. Unlike Zhou Xiaoxi, who had a robust build, Li Wei appeared scholarly and looked like the teachers in school. He strolled through the street in high spirits. Very few people knew that he studied in Central Pine City 15 years ago. Nonetheless, when he was free, he would come back to visit his old haunts.

Upon seeing the familiar yet modified landscape, he reminisced about the good old times. Numerous vague memories flashed through his mind.

The surrounding scenery changed as he strolled idly through the street. He knew for a fact that he had been to this place before, but he was currently unsure of his exact location. After all, he had not been to this place in fifteen years.

He did not realize where he was until a towering pagoda appeared in his line of sight.

It was the Suspending Golden Pagoda!

Immediately, Li Wei became excited, and his walking pace increased subconsciously. The Suspending Golden Pagoda was a place where he frequently trained in the past. He remembered he even wrote a book just to depict his experience in the Suspending Golden Pagoda.

The number of people here was still so scant!

He could not help but heave a rueful sigh. It was just like fifteen years ago.

The Suspending Golden Pagoda had never been a popular training site. In the past, he chose the Suspending Golden Pagoda as his main training ground because it was much quieter than the other places.

After fifteen years, the Suspending Golden Pagoda remained the same without many changes. He knew as long as the metal wind continued to blow in the tower, the Suspending Golden Pagoda would not collapse.

Li Wei walked up the flight of stairs. He was extremely familiar with everything here.

He continued forward while feeling the wall of the pagoda with his hands. Numerous memories of the days and nights he spent

there cascaded through his mind. A nostalgic smile appeared on his face.

His hands suddenly stopped.

Startled, he let out a soft yelp upon noticing what his hands had touched.

Chapter 24: Friends

Li Wei had trained in the Suspending Golden Pagoda for three whole years, so he was intimately familiar with its layout. The sensation he felt from his hands... something was wrong!

There seemed to be an indentation in the tower wall.

He moved closer to inspect. There was indeed a dent, and it was a big one!

Li Wei was utterly shocked. He knew how tough the walls were. After a thousand years of constant metal wind flow, the tower's exterior had completely metalized. It became extremely solid, something common metal could not compare to.

Li Wei tested the hardness of the pagoda wall and found it to be the same as before. Nothing had changed. The big dent he saw before him was clearly not caused by a natural process.

Could it be that a formidable dire beast had smashed against it?

Sure enough, he spotted several signs around him that indicated something had trampled through. Judging from the size, the beast must have been large. He imagined in his head a possible scenario: an enormous dire beast went crazy and it used its head to collide against the pagoda wall. The dent was created, but , the creature simultaneously ricocheted and fell far away due to the forceful impact.

He found a few traces of upturned soil. Oh, it appeared that the a wild beast had done this more than once.

It looked like this wild beast had brute force, but not brains.

Li Wei, believing that he had found a logical reason, shelved this question. He would notify the school to warn students about the appearance of a ferocious and possibly wandering beast. He was not too nervous since such a foolish wild beast would not be very threatening. Plus, students who dared to visit this pagoda had probably opened at least two palaces. A strong, but brainless wild beast would not threaten their safety.

If one, who had already activated two palaces, failed to handle such a beast , he or she deserved to die and Li Wei felt no sympathy.

He loitered around for an extended duration before turning to leave.

.....

Vanguard Training Hall.

Ai Hui looked at the piping hot soup before him and licked his lips. The appetizing aroma was too much to handle and he could not wait to dig in. He was uncertain about the effectiveness of this bone-benefitting soup, but just smelling it was enough to drive him

crazy.

Ai Hui admired Lou Lan's cooking skill. He believed if Lou Lan were to open up a soup stall, business would flourish. Whether it was at the swordsman school or the Wilderness, Ai Hui was forced to prepare his own meals. Practice made perfect, so he soon became a relatively good cook and believed his culinary skills were pretty decent. Compared to Lou Lan however, his skills were far inferior.

It was quite odd for a sand puppet to be an expert at preparing soup.

Ai Hui had lost track of the number of times that he puzzled over these quirks that Lou Lan had as a sand puppet, and he quickly discarded these thoughts as the soup stole all of his focus and attention.

"Drink it while it's hot since it's more effective this way," Lou Lan reminded him as he delivered the soup.

Ai Hui gingerly took the bowl from Lou Lan's hands, as if he was receiving a one-of-a-kind treasure. His final forty thousand yuan was spent on this bowl of soup. Ai Hui still could not believe that he had actually taken out all of his fortune to splurge on something like this. Such extravagant conduct.

Licking his lips once more, he raised the bowl up to his mouth and gulped it down.

The seemingly steaming hot broth was not as scalding as he had imagined. It was exceptionally delicious. The umami of the bones and meat had been brought out perfectly. Coupled with the fresh fragrance of the herbs, the soup had an indescribably well-balanced and harmonious taste. Its viscous,gelatinous texture seemed to slide down this throat.

Ai Hui did not stop drinking. It was as if he was pouring the soup down his throat without pause.

It was simply too tasty!

Lou Lan, go sell some soup!

After the last dregs entered his mouth, he licked the bowl clean, before setting it down and opening his eyes wide.

An inexpressible warmth surged upwards from the soles of his feet toward his heart, enveloping his whole body in a matter of seconds. The threads of warmth entered his bones and his face turned red, as if he was drunk. He felt a sensation of burning up.

“Quickly start training, Ai Hui. Spread the medicinal energy,” Lou Lan reminded.

Upon hearing this, Ai Hui altered his posture and started to punch and kick.

Lou Lan’s eyes flickered. Many moves were familiar since Ai Hui

had coached him previously. The moves were scattered and mostly simple, not at all gaudy or complicated. Yet, when Ai Hui used them, they felt completely different.

Sharp, fierce, murderous. It was as if a wild, ferocious, blood-thirsty beast took over his body.

Lou Lan envied Ai Hui a little. He was a useless sand puppet that could not even fight. He knew few who were like him. Sand puppets were war machines who saved their companion's life in times of danger. But him? He only knew how to clean the rooms, tidy the garden, cook, and perform other such chores. He did not understand why Master Shao had made him this way.

Maybe Master Shao only needed this kind of sand puppet, Lou Lan thought.

Previously Lou Lan had no neighbors, and no one talked to him either, except for the grocer. Oh, but that was work-related. Ai Hui was the first person he had gotten acquainted with outside of work.

We should be considered friends by now, Lou Lan reckoned.

Being able to assist Ai Hui made him happy. Was that not the reason why sand puppets existed? To help people?

Ai Hui, who was engrossed in his training, felt a ball of fire ignite within his body that made him sweat profusely. The moves which

previously required a huge consumption of energy were less strenuous now. This was especially so for the [Arching Fish Back]. He performed it and could sense that the power of his back had increased significantly. This improvement was even larger than the previous trainings.

Bit by bit, time passed. The fluctuations within his body settled down, and Ai Hui finally stopped his training.

His pupils were as bright as the stars, and he was soaked in sweat. However, he did not feel tired at all. In fact, he felt completely energized.

The intensity of his previous training session had been very high, and the multiple [Arching Fish Back] moves he had practiced against the pagoda wall carried unmatched power. Each time, the same amount of force would rebound and strike his body. He had sustained injuries of differing severity in many parts of his body. The metal elemental energy that his body had absorbed was as sharp as a blade and had no nourishing effect on his flesh at all.

Now, his internal injuries had disappeared. Ai Hui instantly felt that his forty thousand yuan was money well-spent. He was not short-sighted and was well aware that such internal damage carried hidden danger. Instead, he was simply used to being poor, and he had more pressing concerns to tackle.

What caused Ai Hui greater surprise was the fact that his elemental energy had clearly expanded. It turned out that the previously unabsorbed threads of elemental energy that remained in his body were now completely digested into his flesh.

“Lou Lan, thank you!” Ai Hui said sincerely. He did fork out the money to buy the ingredients, but Lou Lan was the one who stewed the soup. Where else could he find such an amazing sand puppet?

“You’re welcome.” All of a sudden Lou Lan recalled an earlier thought and blurted out, “Ai Hui, are we friends?”

Friends?

Ai Hui was stunned for a bit. He answered seriously and solemnly, “Of course!”

Lou Lan was overjoyed.

Chapter 25: How Kind!

As he drank the soup, he was so happy that he seemed to hear bells chiming softly.

Simultaneously, alarm bells clanged obnoxiously because he had just gone broke.

The forty thousand yuan he had left now settled heavily in his stomach. He had to stop his training plans for now. In a few days' time, he would not even have money for food with starvation looming in the future.

"Lou Lan, any ideas on how I can earn some money?" Ai Hui asked with some distress.

"Earn money?" Lou Lan stared blankly. It was the first time someone had questioned him on this subject, leading him to ask, "You're out of money?"

"Yes, it's all gone." Ai Hui pondered as he spoke. "If not for the fifty thousand from that blind battle, I would really have starved."

"Blind battle?" Lou Lan's eyes brightened. "You're good at blind battles? Then go participate in more blind battles!"

"How can there be a blind battle every day?" Ai Hui shook his head and felt a brief pang of guilt.

The incident resurfaced in his brain, leaving a weakened yet distinct sensation on his fingertips. Ai Hui inwardly sighed. Having overly strong fighting instincts had its downsides; he could clearly remember every single detail of that particular battle.

And he had no desire to remember such an embarrassing incident.

"Yes there is." Lou Lan raised his index finger with sparkling eyes.

Ai Hui was taken aback. Had the Shi Clan Training Hall organized another blind battle? It was certainly possible, Ai Hui thought as he mulled it over. Blind battles were pretty interesting, and training halls would not give them up so easily.

But what is this awkwardness I’m feeling?

A pang of hunger snapped him out of it before Ai Hui realized he was being senseless. What awkwardness, what embarrassment? These thoughts vanished like smoke into thin air. He asked hastily, "Where? Let’s go!"

No one could stop him from making money. He would kill God and Buddha if he had to. Girl…

Heh, heh, you better pray you won’t run into me.

A cold light flashed through his half-lidded eyes his heart as hard

as steel.

Because you're out of luck if we meet!

Ai Hui, with his murderous expression, raised his head and walked out like a heroic warrior ready for battle.

Shi Xueman surveyed the Central Pine City, lost in thought. In the past, this small city had been nameless to her, but now she kept returning to it whenever she got a break. It was here that she experienced her biggest setback and her most painful failure.

She would never, ever forget—not in this lifetime!

She clenched her teeth.

Her thoughts shifted to her blind battle strategy and wondered how it was progressing. She held high hopes for this operation. Although she was unprepared, and her skills were not enough to defeat that terrifying enemy of hers, she hoped only to find hints to help her identify that bastard.

Perhaps there would be good news today?

She was slightly expectant after hearing that the training hall had specially implemented many unique rules involving the blind battle. That fellow was an expert in blind battling, so how could he possibly not be moved to participate in such an interesting event? If she were him, she would not be able to resist entering this

upcoming competition.

If I find any clues, you are dead!

A bone-chilling, murderous look flashed across Shi Xueman’s icy face.

Meanwhile, in the garden, a fire cloud descended slowly with Uncle Yong Zheng waiting for her. She jumped onto the fire cloud and said, "It’s been hard on you, Uncle. How is our plan coming along? Any progress?"

Yong Zheng’s expression was a little odd, and Shi Xueman immediately knew something was wrong upon seeing it. She bluntly asked, "What happened?"

Shi Xueman knew something was wrong upon seeing his face. She asked bluntly: "What’s up?"

Yong Zheng smiled bitterly. "Go out and you will see, Miss."

Without further ado, Shi Xueman left the training hall.

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Ai Hui followed behind Lou Lan, slightly shocked. "Lou Lan, I didn’t know you were familiar with this area!"

Lou Lan explained, "It’s because I have to buy groceries, wine, and ingredients. Everything Master Shao needs, I buy."

Lou Lan’s owner remained a mystery to Ai Hui. He never knew of a wood elementalist who could create a sand puppet like Lou Lan. With curiosity, he asked, "He doesn’t go out at all?"

Lou Lan replied, "Master Shao’s leg is not in a good condition. Plus, he does not like going out or meeting people. Otherwise, you would have received an invitation to visit."

Only then did Ai Hui realize the reason why Lou Lan was only competent in life skills. There was no danger within Induction Ground, and Master Shao’s legs were weak, which meant that he required more assistance in his everyday life.

All of a sudden, Ai Hui stopped in his tracks staring at the street before him

in a daze.

"The ultimate blind battle! Amazing prize money! An extraordinary challenge for experts! No light, no smell, no color, no shadow!"

"Masked blind battle! The fifty thousand yuan prize money is waiting for you!"

"A wild blind battle! A different kind of fight, a different kind of

challenge!"

The multitude of swaying, colorful banners made Ai Hui's eyes cross. Every single training hall had one hanging outside its entrance, advertising their very own blind battle. He was dumbstruck. What was going on?

As if hearing his thoughts, Lou Lan explained, "I remember it was two weeks ago that the Shi Clan Training Hall organized a blind battle competition with a reward of one million yuan. It caused an uproar and many went down to register. Soon after, almost every other training hall followed suit, making blind battling the most popular challenge in Central Pine City. Two days ago, as I was getting groceries, I even heard people say that the blind battling trend was no longer confined to this city, spreading out to many other cities. How amazing..."

Lou Lan spoke with relish, as if it was an honorable thing.

Ai Hui regained his senses, the excitement growing in his face. The way he took in the scene in front of him was how a hungry wolf would eye a fresh, juicy lamb. Oh, no. A whole herd of them!

He had noticed from the previous competition that the other contestants were unused to dark conditions. Like this, in a blind combat, his fighting power's potential could be unleashed perfectly while on the other hand, his opponents would be suppressed and at a great disadvantage.

This battle was made for him!

Ai Hui grinned, exposing his snow-white canines, ready to attack.

His heart was set—except for the Shi Clan Training Hall's blind battle, he was going to participate in every competition available!

Thank you, Shi Clan Training Hall! How kind!

He happened to glance at the Shi Clan Training Hall and noticed a young lady at its entrance amongst the crowd. Like him, she stood in a daze staring at all of the advertisements. After a while, her shock was overtaken by a coldness that bleached her face of all color. Even from far away, Ai Hui could sense her rage.

Wow, wow, wow, this expression... Too vivid!

As if sensing Ai Hui's mocking gaze, the lady turned and glared at him before stomping angrily into the Shi Clan Training Hall.

Ai Hui, comparatively, felt this world was full of hope. His body burned with passion, ready to fight. His purse was unbearably hungry and thirsty!

"Lou Lan, let's start!"

Lou Lan was momentarily stunned. "Start what?"

"Earning money!"

Like a soldier marching into war, Ai Hui majestically strode into a training hall.

Chapter 26: The First Win

Lou Lan stood in front of the stage, feeling extremely nervous. The mask on his face concealed it well but his tightly clenched fist gave it away. While he was a stranger to battling, even he could tell that the situation onstage was subtly and abnormally dangerous. With a single moment's carelessness, anyone would be knocked down immediately.

On stage, Ai Hui used a simple yet exceptionally fierce technique to take the last contestant down. Lou Lan, who had been tense from the start, suddenly jumped up and cheered loudly with both arms raised.

Ai Hui got down from the platform with a few bruises and ten thousand yuan.

"You're too amazing!" Lou Lan's eyes shone brightly with unending respect for Ai Hui. Ever since his creation, his daily life revolved around the same routine: shopping for groceries, cleaning the rooms, and learning Master Shao's designated lessons like medicine.

Fighting was a novelty to him. His first time launching a fist at anyone was when Ai Hui had taught him.

And now, for the first time, he witnessed his first battle today. It was so intense that he felt breathless, completely forgetting that breathing was unnecessary for a sand puppet. Affected by the stifling atmosphere, his eyes stayed glued to the match in total

concentration.

His current lifestyle was peaceful and repetitive, and he had never thought to question it until today, when he suddenly felt that something was missing from his life.

He never thought it a bad thing in the past, until today. He suddenly felt that something was missing from his life.

His gaze fell onto Ai Hui's face.

There were a few bruises on it, making it look somewhat pitiful. Ai Hui, however, was not bothered in the slightest; his bruised face carried a trace of firm austerity, as if nothing could obstruct him. His gaze was determined, the light in them not bright like the stars but rather deep and reserved. Their depths were cold and distant like the faraway horizon when the morning sun had yet to rise.

Lou Lan's emotions were stirred. He felt a different kind of ice-cold passion from Ai Hui. It was a passion that never died out in spite of this dull life. A lonely passion that fought on through difficult times.

Ai Hui's silence was like the deep, dark sky, waiting quietly for the next break of day.

Lou Lan realized then what he was missing—it was this very passion for living. His own life and fate had already been decided, and he had no choice but to abide by these commands.

Lou Lan knew these thoughts were senseless.

He was a sand puppet, he reminded himself.

Ai Hui noticed Lou Lan's gaze and assumed it was for the bruises on his face. He said carelessly, "I'm fine, they're all small injuries. Such superficial wounds look scarier than they actually are."

As they made their way out, someone yelled from behind—

"If you're capable, stay where you are! Let's have another match!"

It was the last contestant defeated by Ai Hui. Unwilling to accept his defeat, he came to the conclusion that it was due to his carelessness. Seeing that fellow's course techniques that seemed to come from street gangsters made him even more unwilling to admit his loss to such a guy.

Lou Lan stopped but Ai Hui said while walking onward, "Ignore him."

"Spineless! Good-for-nothing! Coward!" Flustered, the contestant continued his verbal assault.

One after another, the other defeated contestants started chiming in, also feeling that their loss was unfathomable.

“He had an accidental win. You can’t count on him being so lucky every time.”

“Scram!”

……

Lou Lan took offense. How could these people act like that when they shouldn’t? They clearly lost—how dare they spill such ugly insults!

After a while, Lou Lan noticed Ai Hui’s lack of reaction and asked, “Ai Hui, aren’t you angry? Don’t you want to go back and beat them up?”

“What’s there to be angry about?” Ai Hui casually plucked a blade of grass from the roadside and put it into his mouth. “In the Wilderness, they’re all dead.”

Lou Lan fell into a daze. He found it difficult to describe the feeling he felt upon hearing Ai Hui’s words. They were steady and confident, yet also tinged by a slight melancholy.

Out of curiosity, he asked, “Have you been in the Wilderness?”

“Yes.” Ai Hui chewed on the grass. “Stayed in there for three years.”

“How awesome!” Lou Lan felt deep veneration for him.

To Lou Lan, the Wilderness was a mysterious and faraway place. The thought of leaving Central Pine City had never even occurred to him, and the only understanding he had of the Wilderness came from books. He was aware from the descriptions that danger lurked in every corner, but he did not know the sort of difficulties that had to be endured to stay there for three years.

Ai Hui was so amazing!

At this point, Lou Lan, was full of admiration for Ai Hui. He believed that in this world, the most powerful man was Master Shao, followed by Ai Hui. Oh, wrong. Both were powerful in different ways, so they should both be ranked first.

“Where are we going now?” Lou Lan thought of the ten thousand Ai Hui had just won and felt happiness bubble up at once.

“Next hall,” Ai Hui responded matter-of-factly.

“The next one? You want to continue?” Lou Lan was startled.

“Such a good opportunity.” Ai Hui involuntarily licked his lips and narrowed his eyes. He was like a wild beast that marked its prey and was ready to pounce.

Lou Lan was unsure why he felt a chill in his heart upon seeing Ai Hui's expression. As expected from an expert who stayed in the Wilderness—, Ai Hui had such a murderous spirit. It made Lou Lan curious aboutas know what the Wilderness was like.

They walked into the second training hall and were immediately were drowned in the clamor.

It was not unreasonable for blind battling to become a trend since it was a new mode of competition that proved to be a new challenge for people. This foreign method of fighting was highly unpredictable as it added a new variable besides skills. It was not uncommon to see practitioners with four palaces to be defeated by those with two. Even those with unsurpassable skills had to be careful on stage—a moment of neglect could result in failure.

Under such circumstances, past experiences were useless, and everyone became so clumsy it was even funny.

When Ai Hui walked in, a contestant on stage was being manhandled by an opponent who had no idea what he was grabbing on to. As he hurriedly applied force—rip!—the contestant's pants were pulled down, revealing his white, fleshy buttocks.

Those before the stage shrieked with laughter, their loud screams and whistles on the verge of making the roof collapse.

In such an environment, Ai Hui's facial expression was exceptionally jarring. He seemed to have overlooked the

contestant's shining, white bum and instead seriously observed the battle while scanning the other contestants onstage.

Everyone had opaque masks on their faces, but what interested Ai Hui even more was the fact that it was a partnered team battle!

If only Fatty was here, Ai Hui thought subconsciously.

He continued his solemn observation before he internally shook his head. There was no teamwork whatsoever between the contestants.

Ai Hui could not help but wish again for Fatty to be here. If they combined their powers, their chances of victory were high.

He glanced over the rules hanging on the signboard. Interested parties had to sign up in twos.

Another hall? But Ai Hui felt somewhat adamant in joining. He looked to the side, only to see Lou Lan highly engrossed in the match. His heart stirred.

Or, should he let Lou Lan try?

Chapter 27: My Sand Puppet

“Lou Lan, do you want to try?” Ai Hui turned his head and suddenly asked.

“Try?” Lou Lan reiterated vacantly, “Try what?”

“To go on stage and fight.”

“Go on stage....and fight?” Lou Lan’s eyes widened, and then he shouted, “Ai Hui, do you mean for me to go on stage and join the competition?”

Ai Hui, who had been perfectly composed, was startled by Lou Lan’s sudden outburst. He calmed his heart before replying, “Yes. It says here that a team of two is required to participate. If you don’t feel like, then...”

“Okay,” Lou Lan answered straightforwardly, but he was not without any hesitation. “But I have never been in a fight. What if we lose?”

“Then we move on to the next one,” Ai Hui replied matter-of-factly. “Win some, lose some. There's nothing wrong. You can take it as practice.”

His words eliminated Lou Lan’s worry.

However, when he tried to register, the manager plainly rejected him.

“Sand puppets are not allowed. They are not human, so they do not see with their eyes. Isn’t that cheating?”

Ai Hui could not argue with that.

Yes, it was entirely true that sand puppets were not humans; in fact, they were both remarkably different. They judged situations differently and did not have similar physiological mechanisms. Some sand puppets had an acute sense of smell, while others possessed the ability of reptiles to detect opponents’ positions through heat. Some even possessed the ability of bats to locate opponents through sound waves.

Throughout his life, Ai Hui had encountered all kinds of sand puppets, and he had gradually come to realize that many earth elementalists would create and modify their sand puppets to an unimaginable extent. Although the majority of earth elementalists were eccentric, antisocial, and dislikeable, no one could ignore their impressive presence on the battlefield, and it was chiefly because of their sand puppets that they were often deemed as the most dangerous of people.

Ai Hui felt like informing the manager that Lou Lan definitely had no such abilities, but in the end, he did not.

Lou Lan was the weakest sand puppet that Ai Hui had ever met. He could not see how Lou Lan could have possibly been designed

for battling; in his opinion, Lou Lan was a sand puppet that was purely constructed for lifestyle.

When Ai Hui saw Lou Lan's bright eyes dim, he patted his back and faintly murmured, “Let’s go.”

As they walked outside of the hall, Lou Lan looked down and kept silent.

Ai Hui, having sensed Lou Lan’s disappointment, started to silently think to himself. Lou Lan seemed to be really anticipating the opportunity to battle on stage, but as a sand puppet, he obviously had an advantage over the rest in such a blind battle. The training hall would never let him up on stage, unless...

Ai Hui’s eyes suddenly lit up; he had an idea!

He glanced over the signs of the surrounding training halls before setting his eyes on one of them and charging in its direction.

“This way, Lou Lan!”

Ai Hui brought Lou Lan into another training hall and headed straight to the registration counter. “I want to sign up.”

The staff looked pointedly at Lou Lan.

“He’s my sand puppet,” Ai Hui claimed, before hurriedly adding,

“I’m an earth elementalist. Can I bring him along to compete?”

Lou Lan, who was standing behind, was shocked.

“Earth elementalist? Then yes, you can.” The staff nodded; it was clearly not his first time in such a situation. “But your sand puppet is required to seal all sensing techniques and disconnect all telepathic communication. Also, soul-fogging grass would have to be stuck onto him, and if it falls off, then you will instantly lose. Are you still interested in participating?”

Ai Hui was secretly delighted; indeed, it was just as he had expected!

Sand puppets were the most important aspect of earth elementalists' fighting abilities; without them, earth elementalists were no different than sheep awaiting slaughter. Unless earth elementalists were prohibited from participating, which was highly unlikely because they made up a big community, training halls would have to use different methods to suppress and neutralize the natural advantages of sand puppets.

However, although Ai Hui had guessed at the possible preventive measures, he had never imagined that they would be so fierce.

Soul-fogging grass was concocted only by wood elementalists, and despite being non-toxic itself, it was used extensively in setting traps and making poison. However, since its most significant use was to interfere with their sensing techniques, it was used specifically to deal with sand puppets and had hence become hated

by all of them.

This was especially true for lower level sand puppets, as the soul-fogging grass affected them significantly; in fact, it would suppress practically all of their sensing techniques. Without their sensing techniques and their telepathic communication, these lower level sand puppets were basically useless. Ai Hui mused to himself that this was probably the reason for such harsh methods.

Lou Lan swiftly responded, “No problem.”

On hearing Lou Lan's reply, the staff was slightly taken aback. “Looks like you have an intelligent puppet.” He laughed. “Intelligent sand puppets have a great advantage. Eh, good luck to you both.”

Ai Hui knew that the man was correct. Without the ability to sense and receive orders, the sand puppet’s own judgments were being put to the test. That was why intelligent sand puppets could be said to have an advantage.

How rare! Lou Lan actually had an advantage here.

The staff produced a blade of emerald green soul-fogging grass and handed it over to Lou Lan. This was the first time Ai Hui had seen a full blade of soul-fogging grass, and it somewhat reminded him of a bean sprout.

Lou Lan stuck the soul-fogging grass onto his head.

Ai Hui was unable to contain his laughter. Lou Lan's head was made of sand, and now with a blade of grass sticking out, it was as if a bean had sprouted on it. The sight was indescribably amusing.

Lou Lan noticed Ai Hui's peculiar expression and started to have some doubts. "Did I stick it in the wrong place?"

"It's very good," Ai Hui reassured him, before commenting, "You look fresh!"

After registering, they both stood aside to wait for the commencement of the next match.

Ai Hui took this chance to impart some last-minute knowledge to Lou Lan. "Do not panic when you get up there and are unable to see anything. Do not stray far from me or I can't help you. Do not panic as well if you encounter an attack. Remember, you're a sand puppet and can transform. Come, let's create a warning signal. We shall use the sound of grinding sand. Do not be too noisy, just make it loud enough for me to hear. Stop talking once you get on the stage to prevent others locating your position. The moment you decide to attack, do not hesitate. Do you still recall the techniques we practiced together that night? Remember, if you fail to attack, move away immediately. The best solution is to roll on the spot. Remember, you are a sand puppet. You can flow towards the ground, and even flow on top of it..."

"Ai Hui, don't describe me as if I am urine! I am a sand puppet." Lou Lan resentfully corrected him, "Not a water puppet."

“Something like that.” Ai Hui chuckled dryly. “In any case, I will help you, so relax, rookie. This is the first battle of your life. From today onwards, you will be a sand puppet with combat experience. You will remember this day. But if it hurts too much, don't forget to surrender.”

“Got it,” Lou Lan replied honestly.

“Get ready to go on stage!” the staff called out.

“It’s our turn.” Ai Hui encouragingly patted Lou Lan's shoulder. “You can do it, my soup-brewing gem!”

Lou Lan did not notice the strange name Ai Hui had called him. His tone revealed some nervousness, as he began, “Ai Hui…”

Dong! Dong! Dong! The reverberations of the bell spread throughout the hall.

Ai Hui's gaze sharpened instantly; he seemed to transform into an entirely different person.

With steady hands, he wore the opaque mask.

Chapter 28: Lou Lan's suspicion

When Lou Lan put the training hall's mask on his face, he realized that he was actually wearing two layers of masks. It was an entirely original experience, just like how, at this very moment, he was standing on a stage in front of an audience.

While buying his usual groceries, he had passed by many training halls, seen many banners promoting blind battling, and had even heard many discussing it as well.

However, before today, he had never imagined that he would someday be standing on a stage and participating in a blind battle.

He truly would never have dreamed of it. Yet the reality was right in front of his eyes.

A battle awaited him; either he or his enemies would prevail. However, Lou Lan had a belly full of doubts; he wanted to tell Ai Hui that this situation was somewhat different to what the staff had described.

He reached upwards and lightly brushed his hand against the soul-fogging grass.

What he had wanted to tell Ai Hui earlier, before he had been rudely interrupted by his own thoughts, was that the soul-fogging grass seemed to have no effect on his ability to detect people. He could still "see" them.

Lou Lou deemed it weird. He was familiar with the soul-fogging grass, and according to what he had learned, it really should have been able to restrain his powers. But then why was he still able to “see” others?

This was the first time that he had noticed that his body was different, but he could discern it only because of this blind battle and the blade of soul-fogging grass stuck on his head.

Lower level sand puppets were significantly affected by the soul-fogging grass. Could it be that he was not one of them? Lou Lan felt that that was impossible. When a low-level sand puppet was perfectly adequate for cooking and cleaning, why would a high-level one be required? It was much more likely that his abnormalities were because of Master Shao's experiments. Master Shao was fascinated with research; whenever he gained inspiration, he would immediately test it out on Lou Lan.

However, these experiments had often led to problems arising in Lou Lan's body. For instance, during the time he had first met Ai Hui, his core had malfunctioned, and hence his body had started to fall apart.

Maybe it was some kind of new technology?

He reminded himself to ask Master Shao when he returned home.

In reality, the soul-fogging grass was not completely ineffective;

his field of vision was affected, and his surroundings had become much blurrier. Lou Lan also found out, that unexpectedly, the opaque mask on his face had the most noticeable impact.

Had he been using his eyes to observe the outside world? How strange...

Lou Lan was surprised; he really had not expected this. Sand puppets seldom used their eyes to observe the world because earth elementalists, with their exquisite techniques and colorful experiences, knew that their sight would be greatly impaired. Under Master Shao's meticulous guidance, Lou Lan had come to understand a lot about sand puppets. However, Lou Lan had never examined his own body and had never realized that it had so many unique qualities.

When he thought about it, Lou Lan felt relieved. Master Shao had never been one to abide by conventions.

It would have been odd if he had been like other sand puppets.

Lou Lan suddenly noticed that during the short moment he had been distracted, Ai Hui had already initiated contact with an opponent.

Ai Hui strangely groped in the dark; his legs were apart in a half-squat, while both his arms were spread out and open, like a crab's pincers. That's right! Ai Hui's posture was remarkably similar to that of a crab.

Ai Hui’s movements were silent. His soles were like those of a cat, uncannily inaudible.

How amazing!

Lou Lan inwardly exclaimed with admiration. Compared to Ai Hui, his opponent seemed much more amateurish; even Lou Lan could tell that the latter’s movements carried a tinge of panic.

The sight made Lou Lan recall scenes of wild beasts hunting. Ai Hui was like a slowly advancing wild beast, and his opponent was like an alarmed, fidgety prey.

Suddenly, while Ai Hui was in a crouching position, his palm made contact with his opponent’s waist.

At the moment of contact, both parties reacted simultaneously.

The opponent’s first response was to immediately direct a punch towards Ai Hui, but contrary to his expectations, Ai Hui was in a half-squat. The punch flew past Ai Hui’s head and struck empty air.

Ai Hu’s attack was much more effective.

The moment he felt his opponent’s waist, Ai Hui instantly reacted by swiftly gripping onto it and pulling it close. He then borrowed this momentum to thrust himself sideways and lunge for his opponent's calf.

The force, when compiled from top and bottom, momentarily threw Ai Hui's opponent off balance and prompted him to fall towards Ai Hui.

Ai Hui subsequently displayed his astonishing combat techniques. Like a nimble python, he did not retreat, and instead went forward and smoothly wrapped himself around his target. Ai Hui's feet shoved against his opponent's chin. His opponent, who had his hands crushed behind his back, was quickly immobilized before passing out after twenty seconds.

The referee, who had long since been watching from the sidelines, rolled out a snake-like whip and wrapped it around the unconscious contestant, before expertly pulling him off the stage. An experienced doctor swiftly attended to him, and it was only after a short while that he indicated that the contestant was all right.

Although the contestant was not injured, the incident had made the two referees tense up. Their expressions quickly turned serious.

"That earth elementalist was too relentless."

"Yes, his sand puppet did not move at all. An earth elementalist who can fight is quite rare."

"It's unsurprising, actually. Earth elementalists are a group of abnormal fellows. The abnormality is normal for them."

“That’s true.”

……

Even though they both were idly chatting, their gazes remained completely fixed on the stage.

The members of the audience were absolutely silent; they were shocked by Ai Hui’s sharp and fierce attack.

Ai Hui's previous move was neither dazzling nor exceedingly elaborate; in fact, he did not even engage his elemental energy. However, it had made the audience feel the scent of fresh blood waft towards them; it carried with it a sense of sharp danger. During the past several days, in the various training halls, they had witnessed all types of contestants with their unique fighting styles; some were meticulous, some were eccentric and hilarious, while others were disorganized and acted without thinking.

However, no match came close to the scene that had just unfolded in front of them—it had stunned them greatly.

A few seconds later, everyone came to their senses, and a commotion broke out off stage.

“How fierce!”

“Too handsome!”

“What’s that move called? Anyone knows?”

“Are you kidding me? So ferocious, and he’s an earth elementalist! How is anyone else going to win?”

“It’s okay, it’s okay. Hey, look at his sand puppet. Doesn't it look silly?”

……

The usual moves in previous competitions were all flowery and fancy, yet highly impractical and weak. However, upon witnessing Ai Hui's violent and sharp move, everyone's interest was immediately piqued, because it was much more unique.

Lou Lan stared blankly at Ai Hui as he stood on the stage, dumbfounded.

Unlike Lou Lan, the observers downstage were far away from the action, and so their reactions were less surreal. However, the moment Ai Hui had launched his attack, Lou Lan had felt his heart skip a beat.

After taking down the contestant, Ai Hui immediately started to quietly grope around as he stealthily advanced towards the next one.

The remaining opponent's earlier movements had inadvertently revealed his position.

As Ai Hui continued to feel around for the next target, Lou Lan couldn’t help but widen his eyes; he was afraid of not catching all the details. As an utterly inexperienced combatant, he had already forgotten his purpose of being onstage. He was completely immersed in Ai Hui's battle and was incredibly tense.

The audience observed Ai Hui as he locked onto a new prey; everyone held their breaths with their eyes wide open.

A blanket of silence had descended upon the training hall yet again.

Ai Hui was unaware of what was happening outside; the training hall had used a special method to soundproof the stage. Like a cautious wild beast with a silent bloodlust, he carefully and patiently approached his target.

However, at that very moment, an unforeseen event suddenly occurred.

Chapter 29: Zu Yan

A thread of fire had been ignited under Ai Hui’s feet.

Not good!

Ai Hui’s expression changed slightly as he instinctively dodged to the side. At that instant, with a smooth flip of the opponent's palm, Ai Hui's former location was set ablaze.

The contestant had not anticipated Ai Hui’s quick reaction, which ultimately led to the unexpected failure of his well-disguised attack.

Ai Hui, who had just barely managed to escape the column of fire, shot into the air like a cannon's projectile and charged towards his opponent. The latter was an expert in long-range attacks and had much stronger elemental energy; only by getting closer would Ai Hui stand a chance to win.

If Ai Hui’s previous attack had been soundless with hidden killing intent, then this lunge had thoroughly displayed his imposing and incomparably sharp bloodlust.

Sensing that Ai Hui was rapidly approaching, the opponent instinctively tensed up. This was precisely Ai Hui's strategy—to launch a psychological attack; any trace of panic from the enemy was favorable to him.

However, his opponent then made a very strange move: he got into a handstand position.

Lou Lan, who had been watching carefully, broke out in a cold sweat. This was bad!

At that moment, the opponent’s palms became enveloped in a blazing ball of flame. The dark red fire spread through the air like flowing kerosene.

This was...

Lou Lan felt that the scene was familiar; he had seen it somewhere before, but he could not recall anything due to his extreme nervousness.

"Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation!"

A member of the audience cried out in alarm.

"Zu Yan!"

"Oh my god! Zu Yan came!"

That remark caused quite a stir within the audience. Everyone was pleasantly surprised.

Zu Yan was an expert from Central Wind City. Although its school district was a year ahead, it was the nearest city to Central Pine City, and hence experts from both sides were quite familiar with one another.

Zu Yan's base level was not considered high as he had only activated two palaces; however, he had quickly risen to fame once he had succeeded in learning the absolute art [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation].

Elemental energy techniques had been in development for over a thousand years, but there were only a few which could be acknowledged as absolute arts. Absolute arts formed the foundation of a family clan; for example, Zu Family Clan's [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation] was created only after generations of esoteric perfection and gradual, continuous improvement.

However, when compared to the skills of the supreme manuals that had been passed down from the Cultivation Era, these absolute arts could be considered very young and new. Every family clan within the Avalon of Five Elements knew this exceedingly well, and hence no one dared to show disrespect and ignore their ancestors' contributions.

Since the Zu Family's lineage was predominantly predisposed to the fire attribute, this absolute art perfectly suited them. However, due to the exceptionally high level of understanding that was required, mastering it was extremely tough, and so the number of descendants of each generation of the Zu family who had managed to successfully learn [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation]

had never exceeded three. This had been the situation for many successive generations; unfortunately, it was like an ironclad law which never changed.

[Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation] was very hard to comprehend, but once it was understood, along with constant perfection and accumulation of elemental energy, one could smoothly become an expert.

Zu Yan was the first amongst his generation to understand [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation].

The Zu Family was a prominent clan of the Avalon of Five Elements, and the name of its greatest genius was naturally well-known far and wide. Therefore, as soon as the spiderweb-like fire net had lit up the stage, Zu Yan's origin had been swiftly recognized.

The audience started to grow increasingly excited; it was not often that they could witness a fight with a talent like Zu Yan. They were full of curiosity; to be called an 'absolute art,' exactly how powerful was [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation]?

The manager of the training hall was smiling so much that his chin could not be seen. The appearance of an expert like Zu Yan was a big boost to his business. They were just missing Shi Xueman; if only he could invite her from the nearby Shi Clan Training Hall, then the doorstep to his training hall would be broken from being trampled on by the throngs of people who would come to watch.

Everyone was holding their breaths and gaping at the scene on the stage. They were waiting to witness the magnificent show that Zu Yan was about to put on.

Ai Hui’s attack was as fast as lightning; the moment Zu Yan had gotten into the handstand position, Ai Hui’s fist was already flying through the air.

Zu Yan’s heart trembled. His opponent’s reaction had been much faster than he had expected. With both his palms planted firmly on the ground, everything within his surroundings was under Zu Yan’s control, and he could clearly sense the power of Ai Hui's punch. His opponent did not use any elemental energy, but the force of this blow was so outstandingly powerful that he could only have launched such a ferocious attack by compiling all of the energy from throughout his whole body.

If this punch made contact…

Zu Yan felt that it would be best not to try.

His reaction wasn’t slow either. With a slight drop of his wrist, his body curved backwards like a bent bow. With a burst of energy from his waist and abdomen, he tensed his right, pencil-straight leg and filled it with elemental power. The blaze rose dramatically, and like a flaming heavy axe plummeting down from the heavens, it filled the air with a red color.

A fist and a leg violently collided. Bang! An explosion rang out,

and sparks could be seen flying through the air.

Ai Hui only felt the rebound of an enormous wave of energy before he was sent soaring backward. Zu Yan also retreated with his palms by many huge steps before stabilizing himself.

Lou Lan was suddenly jerked back into reality, and without thinking, he rushed towards Ai Hui.

Zu Yan coolly looked on as his opponent's sand puppet saved his master. The raging energy and blood inside of his chest only soothed after a while; Ai Hui's earlier punch was similarly unpleasant for him. He had really not expected that his opponent would have such strength.

What was the most bewildering, however, was that his opponent did not engage any elemental energy in his attack!

Throwing such a fierce punch with just pure muscle strength—who was he? Was there such an expert in Central Pine City?

Could it be that he, too, was an expert from another city who came because of the news?

Central Pine City's blind battles had become well known in the vicinity and being so close to Central Pine City, Central Wind City was naturally interested in the battles as well. Although the training halls within Central Wind City had already started to organize a few battles, they fell behind in terms of creativity.

When people had time for leisure, they would take the short trip down to Central Pine City for some entertainment.

While Zu Yan was pondering over Ai Hui's identity, the flying Ai Hui had already been caught by Lou Lan.

Ai Hui looked a tad pitiful. His right hand was hanging down unnaturally by his side, and his fist was even burnt black. It was evident that the exchange had been quite damaging to him. Without even needing to check, Lou Lan could distinguish that Ai Hu's right arm was broken.

Lou Lan remorsefully blamed himself. He had boldly claimed that he would assist Ai Hui, but he had not been of any help at all. However, Lou Lan honestly had no idea how to handle Zu Yan. Although he had recognized [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation], it was of no use to the battle. Due to his lack of combat experience, Lou Lan was unable to come up with any solution at this time.

Ai Hui was like a battle god in the eyes of Lou Lan, but even then, he was not the enemy's match. There was now only one solution.

"Let's surrender," Lou Lan said honestly.

Contestants that were on the stage could not hear noises from outside, but the members of the audience could clearly hear everything that was being said onstage.

The audience roared with laughter upon hearing Lou Lan’s words.

"Hahaha! Is this a sand puppet?"

"Hahaha! This is the first time I’ve heard a sand puppet persuading his owner to surrender. Haha! Too funny!"

"I can’t stand it anymore, no, let me laugh, hahaha..."

"Hey hey hey, you are a sand puppet! You’re not supposed to submit even if it means death. You're supposed to sacrifice yourself and give your owner a chance to live! Hahahaha..."

Chapter 30: Adviser-type Sand Puppet

Ai Hui was not the least bit surprised by Lou Lan's actions; Lou Lan was purely a lifestyle sand puppet and an inexperienced battler, and behaving appropriately in his first competition was already an incredible feat.

The smarter the sand puppet was, the more affected it would be by its state of mind. On the other hand, low-level sand puppets, which had a much lower intelligence, could only follow orders blindly and emotionlessly.

That was the reason why many earth elementalists did not prefer intelligent sand puppets. The smarter they were, the more human-like they would become. They would have a greater sense of self-awareness and would independently judge many things for themselves.

Battle-type sand puppets were usually less intelligent. If they were like humans, who felt emotions like fear and anxiety, then they would become timid during fights, which was something that the earth elementalists, who had the desire to build slaughter machines, disliked the most.

However, the world is full of contradictions. Intelligence could also be said to be a quality that a killing machine should possess. Understanding how to make the right decision at the right time was undoubtedly the most important prerequisite of a top-notch slaughter machine.

Lou Lan was very intelligent, which was exactly the cause of his troubles during his first battle.

However, the current situation was not that bad; Lou Lan had not lost his head out of fear. Instead, he had persuaded Ai Hui to surrender, which was, in actuality, the right choice, considering the skill levels of both the contestants.

"He is using [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation], which is an absolute art," Lou Lan whispered. "His base level should only be of two palaces, but his [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation] has already managed to unlock [Hellfire Spider Web]. There's no way we can win."

The audience's previous reaction to Lou Lan's persuasion was to laugh, but these words sent them into shock.

"Don't tell me he's an adviser-type sand puppet?"

"He actually knows [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation]! He's an adviser-type sand puppet!"

"Such an intelligent sand puppet, this is an adviser-type sand puppet?"

"What day is it today? Not only did an absolute art appear, but an adviser-type sand puppet showed itself!"

The members of the audience discussed in hushed voices; they

were all bewildered.

Sand puppets had been in development for over a thousand years, and there were bound to be many unusual and bizarre types of sand puppets that would be invented. To the majority of people, earth elementalists were solitary and unique, and so the fact that they had strange temperaments was entirely natural. In fact, they even believed that it would be embarrassing to be called an earth elementalist if one had an overly normal character.

Adviser-type sand puppets were incredibly rare. Not only did they require a high intelligence and capacity for learning, but they had to also remain calm during times of danger and recommend the most valuable solutions.

In addition to being exceedingly troublesome to make, adviser-type also had high requirements, and much more was expected from them than other sand puppets. They were also very weak and would easily become a constant target in the battlefield, shortening their lifespans drastically.

Of course, earth elementalists were usually conceited when it came to their abilities and wisdom, and so they only used their sand puppets to complete odd jobs and ensure their safety. Thus, they did not favor adviser-type sand puppets.

However, to elementalists of other attributes, adviser-type sand puppets were their favorites—especially to those who had fists but no brains. These sand puppets had much better learning abilities compared to humans because they did not need to sleep and could untiringly and unceasingly study and absorb knowledge.

Who wouldn’t want a smart companion? It was due to this that the market price for an adviser-type sand puppet had always remained sky-high.

Out of everyone present in the training hall, the one who was enjoying the most was definitely the boss of the training hall. First, the Zu Family's absolute art [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation] had appeared, and then all of a sudden, that foolish-looking sand puppet was possibly an adviser-type puppet. He felt as if he had won the lottery twice in a day and was simply over the moon.

Ai Hui had originally planned to retreat. As Lou Lan had mentioned, the disparity in their skills was too big. He had no chance of victory.

He had came here only for the money. Since this opportunity was gone, he could just move on to the next training hall; after all, he was not one to care about the results of a fight.

However, upon hearing Lou Lan mention that his opponent had engaged an absolute art, Ai Hui immediately changed his mind.

He had stayed in the Wilderness for three years and had met many strong elementalists, but there were none who possessed an absolute art. However, he had witnessed the yearning in the faces of eminent elementalists whenever they spoke about absolute arts.

Ai Hui was unaware of how Lou Lan had managed to identify his

opponent’s move as an absolute art, but he trusted Lou Lan completely. Ever since they had become acquainted, Lou Lan had never spoken any unreliable words and, moreover, he had never spoken without thinking.

An opportunity was right before his eyes!

There would be no better chance than this!

Blind battling was a competition, and contestants did not have to worry about losing their lives, even if they lost onstage. To be able to fight in a competition, rather than on a battlefield, and to get to witness an absolute art—how could it be better than that?

Ai Hui started to become stimulated when he thought of this rare opportunity. Although his right arm was numb, it was as if incessant energy was flowing throughout his whole body.

"Go down first. I’ll join you soon."

Behind his mask, Ai Hui licked his lips. He then turned towards Zu Yan and crouched down slightly.

Lou Lan did not understand why Ai Hui would reject his suggestion. Ai Hui should have been able to assess the situation, right? Their skill levels differed too much, and it was evident that he stood no chance of winning.

However, since Ai Hui had chosen to continue battling, he also

had no reason to retreat. He suddenly recalled his previous observation: there was an intense passion, which he had never seen before, in Ai Hui. The type of ardor that he would never possess.

At most, he would just be broken and scattered…

Lou Lan repeatedly consoled himself.

He stood beside Ai Hui with his core fully operating, continuously racking his memory for relevant information concerning [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation].

Ai Hui had not expected Lou Lan to remain, but he did not argue against it. Unlike others, Ai Hui believed that this was an equally excellent opportunity for Lou Lan.

Being able to witness an absolute art during his first battle was… enviably honorable!

Ai Hui did not even consider as to whether or not the newcomer would suffer from a mental blow or setback. Compared to the Wilderness, where blood was splattered everywhere and mangled flesh could be seen at every corner, a competition like this was simply too gentle and heartwarming.

Although Lou Lan bravely stood by Ai Hui, he did not know what posture to adopt, and eventually ended up looking like a clumsy penguin.

Stars filled the eyes of the girls downstage as they held their hands against their bosoms.

"Such a cute sand puppet!"

"It looks so silly! I want one!"

There were others, however, who were more experienced, and they shook their heads one after the other. An adviser-type sand puppet entering real combat—wasn't that simply courting death? It seemed like this adviser-type sand puppet was not of a high grade because otherwise, he would have a higher IQ and would not behave so foolishly.

It was even more plausible that everyone had guessed incorrectly, and he was not even an adviser-type sand puppet at all!

The scarlet red flaming net on the ground resembled an enormous spider web, and Zu Yan, at the center, resembled a spider. Under the influence of his absolute art, he was cognizant of every movement within the hall. Yet, currently, he was only interested in the fellow with whom he just had a fistfight with.

Zu Yan also became a little excited upon realizing that his opponent had not left. He might as well give his opponent a moment to rest. He took advantage of his fire net to sweep the other competitors—similar to the autumn gales that sweep away the fallen leaves—off the stage.

At this point, Ai Hui could spare no time for Lou Lan. All his attention was centered on his opponent; he was of aware of nothing else.

Chapter 31: Hellfire Spider Web

Ai Hui's concentration had never been so fixated.

The contestant before him was the strongest he had encountered so far. Showcasing superior skills, the obvious gap in strength killed all suspense as to who would claim victory, but this strangely galvanized Ai Hui even more. Passionate, red-hot blood flowed in his veins like molten lava.

He was moved by the fact that he was about to challenge one of the legendary absolute arts.

Although his right arm was numb, hanging limply from his shoulder, and his vision was obscured in the darkness, his unprecedented focus led to an enhancement of the six senses.

Ai Hui clearly sensed his opponent who didn't bother to conceal himself. From the strange handstand to the heat emitting from his palms, Ai Hui could feel even the faint flickers of energy rippling along the ground.

The motion of the elemental energy was minute and Ai Hui had not detected it earlier.

The surprise attack he had launched earlier had probably been detected through this weak energy web.

The other side had already quietly cast an inescapable net,

waiting for prey to intrude. Absolute art indeed, Ai Hui admired. Setting traps was a technique he was also proficient in, but he had not previously detected this snare at all. Evidently, his rival had next-level skills.

He suddenly thought of Lou Lan's earlier words. That guy could cast the [Hellfire Spider Web].

The spider was an arthropod that Ai Hui was familiar with. He had seen all kinds of spiders in the Wilderness. Both the [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation] and [Hellfire Spider Web] appeared to be related to spiders—perhaps this principle could lead to victory?

Techniques were not named carelessly. Their names, more often than not, represented their characteristics.

Ai Hui knew how to catch spiders like the back of his hand. His heart stirred. Could it be…

His figure flashed as he abruptly charged forward. At the same time, he felt his opponent's body shift slightly. Indeed, as Ai Hui had deduced, the almost undetectable weak ripples on the ground were actually part of an extensive invisible network. His opponent was like a spider waiting within a spider web. The moment an intruder entered any corner of his web, it fell under his control.

In such a short moment, Ai Hui could not think of a better idea.

This was the first time Ai Hui had met an opponent who was vastly superior. [Hellfire Spider Web] was undoubtedly the most suitable technique to use in a blind battle.

“Since you do not dare to attack, let me!”

Zu Yan became impatient. He yelled loudly and initiated an attack. He smacked his flame-clad left palm on the ground, and his body fiercely lunged toward Ai Hui. The darkness did not affect his aim at all. Borrowing the force of his lunge, his straightened legs garnered elemental energy, and he once again dove at Ai Hui like a sturdy hatchet.

The sharp, sky-rending sound that followed brought with it the billowing crackle of flames. The ferocity of his attack was incomparable—even the audience was awestruck by the sheer force of Zu Yan’s kick.

As the attack approached, Ai Hui found himself beset by a feeling of helpless entrapment as the wind roared in his eardrums.

His heart palpitated, but like a weak candle flame shielded from the wind, he still had a trace of clarity. He bit his tongue, allowing the sharp pain to rouse him. The incoming flame chopped down, like a solid hatchet blade.

With all his might, Ai Hui threw himself to the side.

Boom!

Amid the flame-filled sky, the long legs impacted heavily onto the ground, like a heavy tomahawk thrown by a giant.

The solid, elevated stage shattered like a crispy biscuit. Fragments flew everywhere, revealing a battered and exhausted Ai Hui.

Zu Yan was quite surprised. His kick appeared sharp, but the real killer technique was the interference produced by the [Hellfire Spider Web]. This move had been trialed and validated. Opponents usually became distracted by his legs and their state of mind would be affected by the nearly invisible ripples.

During a deadlocked battle between two excellent combatants, a moment of absent-mindedness was enough to tip the scales of victory.

The interference of the [Hellfire Spider Web] surprisingly had zero effect on his opponent.

Zu Yan's interest was piqued. Those capable of dodging this skill were not nameless people.

"Who are you exactly?"

As if he had been injected with steroids, Zu Yan roared as he launched a storm-like attack. The collision between his heavy legs and the ground was so loud it made people shiver. A scarlet-red

blaze enveloped the whole stage, and the debris flew in all directions like a downpour. The pieces of the stage smashed against the elemental energy-powered screen, which isolated the stage from the outside, like raindrops pattering on a huge piece of banana leaf.

Stunned, the whole training hall fell into silence as everyone was rendered speechless by the scene happening in front of them. How could they have ever witnessed such a violent attack? The more faint-hearted spectators trembled uncontrollably, and those who boasted of being brave turned pale-faced.

Even the referees on the side looked tense. They were already prepared to rescue someone at any time.

Ai Hui's hairs stood on end. From the beginning and until now, danger had never left him. The intense crisis provoked his reflexes and he had no time to think at all. Dodge! Dodge with all his might! Relying on his instincts to dodge!

He felt he could suffer a direct hit at any time. No, as long as his opponent's leg brushed against him, layers of skin would scrape off even if he did not perish.

"Are you a mouse? Dodge! You only know how to dodge!" After launching consecutive missed attacks, Zu Yan gradually became angrier and his voice revealed it. "Do you think you can dodge?"

Zu Yan sped up his attacks.

Before the previous fire had even dispersed, a new flurry of flames were violently released with the heavy kicks coming his way. In the blink of an eye, the flames onstage stacked layer upon layer like scorching, red clouds.

Ai Hui was in an even more challenging situation. It was as if he had been surrounded by the raging sea and could be engulfed by the giant waves at any time. His energy was rapidly draining and at a faster rate than usual.

Sweat was pouring out of his body, he was panting for breath, and his throat was hot like a blazing fire.

The audience offstage gradually recovered from their initial shock and soon discovered something abnormal. That strange, pitiful earth elementalist always appeared to be in jeopardy, narrowly avoiding collapse and destruction. But, a long time later, that fellow had actually not been hit yet!

How odd!

Those with even the tiniest brain could tell something was not right. Dodging a move or two was possibly due to luck. More than ten strikes? Absolutely not a fluke.

Slowly, someone started to notice a possible explanation.

That earth elementalist could anticipate Zu Yan’s attacks, and his actions were extremely nimble, lacking any slight delay and

sloppiness. His moves were so fluid, it was as if his whole body had been coated with oil.

With such smooth dodging, this was definitely not an obscure figure!

Everyone was racking their brains to recall which earth elementalist was known to be an expert in this battling style. Wait, earth elementalist...everyone felt a sense of unexplainable awkwardness.

If it had been another individual, they would receive it well, but remembering that the person on stage was an earth elementalist, the crowd felt uncomfortable.

Such smooth battle moves carried out by an earth elementalist. What a violation of laws.

Shouldn’t an earth elementalist’s moves be dictated by his sand puppet?

Eh? Only at this point did everyone remember. Where was that slightly foolish sand puppet?

Chapter 32: Secret Signal

Everyone had forgotten Lou Lan.

Zu Yan had initially paid no attention to Lou Lan. Additionally, he had been provoked by Ai Hui, and while fighting, he had naturally neglected a useless sand puppet. Ai Hui was in a highly strained state and was completely relying on his instincts and wealth of experience to dodge. He, too, had no time to spare for Lou Lan. The members of the audience were enthralled by Zu Yan's dazzling and sharp moves and were staring, full of shock, at the stage. How could they possibly remember that clumsy sand puppet?

All this while, Lou Lan was standing in a corner, watching Ai Hui dart around the stage. He pondered expressionlessly over the possible ways he could assist Ai Hui.

He had completely recovered from his initial nervousness, but alas, it was now of no use.

He was truly a rookie when it came to battling; he was completely unable to enter their combat. Ai Hui, whom he regarded as akin to a war god, was forced to flee around the stage without the least bit of energy to retaliate.

The opponent's skills were too powerful!

With such an absolute disparity between the strengths of both parties, Lou Lan could not come up with a practical idea to turn the

situation around.

If Ai Hui had stopped and asked, “Lou Lan, have you thought of something?”

He would definitely respond, “We’d better surrender.”

He would then tell Ai Hui that judging from the current situational development, they were bound to be defeated at some point. Ai Hui’s right arm was broken, and its treatment would cost quite a bit. If the fight continued, he would sustain more injuries, which in turn meant spending more money. He would then, as a loyal friend, remind Ai Hui that he was destitute. This was the most logical thing to do.

Yet apparently, over here, all logic was thrown out of the window. Lou Lan vividly remembered Ai Hui’s eyes: they were not bright but instead ice-cold and profound, while slightly flickering with an intense battle intent.

Was that deeply hidden passion going to erupt at this moment?

Lou Lan was a little envious. He did not understand why Ai Hui was so determined and reckless. Why did he choose to fight on, knowing that he was far weaker than his rival? Why didn’t he surrender even after being chased around until he could not even hit back?

Was that passion?

Lou Lan seriously assessed himself but found no such passion within himself.

He mocked himself. He really was thinking too much.

Lou Lan, you're a sand puppet, he reminded himself.

Nevertheless, to have a friend like Ai Hui was truly something to be happy about. Moreover, he was battling alongside Ai Hui! Huh? Suddenly remembering the battle, he scanned across the aggressive scene that was taking place not far away and muttered uncertainly to himself, "Somewhat alongside…"

He had been a little troubled, but his unhappiness immediately vanished—like smoke into thin air.

Although I do not have that kind of passion that you do, you are a friend. Lou Lan's one and only friend. That, in itself, was a sufficient reason to battle, Lou Lan said to himself.

Lou Lan was a sand puppet!

Lou Lan's body suddenly shattered and transformed into a pool of sand.

The stage was filled with a surging airflow, and Lou Lan borrowed its energy to noiselessly hover in the air. Occasionally,

fire fragments would pass through his body, but he displayed no reaction; he was like an unremarkable cloud, floating silently amongst the raging storm of violent flames.

Lou Lan not only had a degree of understanding of [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation], but he had also read descriptions of [Hellfire Spider Web]. [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation] had been classified as an absolute art mainly because of its enormous potential for growth. Once comprehended, the absolute art's strength would jump to a higher level with each palace opened.

With a base level of only two palaces, executing [Hellfire Spider Web] was remarkably difficult, and at the very least, four would be required for complete implementation. [Hellfire Spider Web], when executed with only two palaces, had an enormous loophole: it could affect only those enemies that were on the ground. If enemies approached from above, they would not trigger the response of [Hellfire Spider Web].

It was a pity that Ai Hui could not fly.

However, as a matter of fact, all weakness were only significant when two opponents were of similar strength. In the current situation, with such a large gap in skill level, identifying a weakness was somewhat useless.

Lou Lan floated in midair, as he calmly drifted along with the airflow.

Lou Lan could feel that the opponent was consuming huge amounts of elemental energy and physical strength, and this was evident from his increasingly slow attacks and his large, heaving breaths. However, Ai Hui was comparatively more miserable; his whole body was thoroughly exhausted.

Lou Lan could even sense that Ai Hui’s legs were trembling.

He could not help but admire Ai Hui. Willpower was an unfamiliar word to a sand puppet. He had only read it in books previously, but today, he had finally witnessed Ai Hui's marvelous determination for himself. He could now sincerely feel what willpower was.

Ai Hui was too awesome!

At that moment, Ai Hui lunged to the side, narrowly avoiding a massive leg that descended from the sky. Boom! It forcefully smashed on the ground. Yet another near miss.

Seeing that the opponent was close by, Lou Lan decisively made his move.

Zu Yan had not expected Lou Lan’s attack since all his focus was on Ai Hui. Furthermore, the attack came from midair, which was not under the jurisdiction of his [Hellfire Spider Web].

Whoosh!

A clump of sand suddenly materialized and wrapped Zu Yan up at lightning speed. A layer of fine sand started to make its way onto Zu Yan's palms. Eventually, a thin layer of sand had appeared in between Zu Yan's palms and the ground.

Caught completely off guard, Zu Yan's expression changed. With the layer of sand separating his palms from the floor, his connection with the Hellfire Spider Web was affected. His sense of his surroundings immediately turned blurry.

Rustle! Rustle! Rustle!

Countless grains of fine sand started grinding against one another.

The sound of grinding sand was like a bolt of lightning that pierced through the clouds and struck Ai Hui, instantly illuminating his almost unconscious brain.

"...Let's set a secret warning signal. The sound of grinding sand. Not too loud, just enough for me to be able to hear..."

His slackened pupils suddenly contracted as Ai Hui's demeanor abruptly changed.

He adjusted his posture and his right foot stomped vigorously on the ground. Creak! An ear-piercing sound, caused by the friction between his shoes and the ground, was generated, which was followed by a cloud of green smoke. Ai Hui's body was in a steeply

inclined position—almost parallel to the ground. He maintained his balance by placing his hands on the ground to support his body.

Ai Hui, who had just stopped himself, unhesitatingly garnered his last bit of strength and elemental energy. He then engaged all limbs before shooting out, like a spring, towards the miserable figure that was bundled up by the yellow sand.

Ai Hui arched his body slightly in midair.

The moment his back touched something, his body reacted instinctively.

[Arching Fish Back]!

Boom!

Unlike the explosive sounds that were being caused by Zu Yan's massive legs, this sonic boom was exceptionally dull and muffled, as if it had come from deep underground. However, it carried with it an even more frightening amount of power.

The yellow sand was like a hurricane; it was flying everywhere. As if a wild rhinoceros had slammed into his body, Zu Yan, with a resounding boom, was sent airborne before smashing against the isolation screen. A moment later, his limp body, which was spread out like a flatbread, started to slowly slide down.

The referees at the side rushed towards him, and after a brief

inspection, they sighed a collective breath of relief. “No worries. He's just unconscious.”

There was only dead silence throughout the training hall; everyone present was left utterly speechless by the turn of events.

The [Arching Fish Back] from earlier had drained every single drop of energy from Ai Hui’s body; he could not even lift a finger right now.

Rustle! Rustle! Rustle!

Countless granules of yellow sand rolled about on the ground, resembling many creeks converging. Soon, a large lump of sand—Lou Lan—appeared in front of Ai Hui.

The sand moved under Ai Hui’s body and propped him up, before gently sliding him off stage like moving quicksand.

Everyone dazedly looked on in silence. They had yet to recover from the earlier shock.

The golden sand did not pull Ai Hui out through the exit, but instead, slid towards the manager of the training hall. Pu! The mass of quicksand spat out the soul-fogging grass, which landed on the manager's table.

Then, a part of the flowing sand transformed into a palm and extended out in front of the manager.

The manager was still standing in shock.

After waiting for ten seconds, the golden sand hand impatiently slapped down on the manager's table a few times, before moving back in front of the manager. It continuously gestured—with a thumb and index finger made of sand—as a hint.

The manager instantly understood and hurriedly brought the prize money over, fluidly placing it on top of the palm of yellow sand.

It was only then that the golden sand pulled Ai Hui through the deadly silent hall, before exiting under the astonished gazes of the dumbstruck crowd.

Chapter 33: Repercussions

Shi Xueman allowed herself to stop and catch her breath; however, she did this only after she managed to destroy twenty-seven wooden stakes and shatter thirty-seven iron targets consecutively.

Wiping off the beads of perspiration that trickled down her forehead, Shi Xueman realized that after venting her anger, her pent up frustrations were finally relieved. She had initially been so confident about fighting a blind battle, but reality had given her a cruel slap in the face.

Shi Xueman felt that ever since she had encountered that scoundrel, her luck had started going downhill. Everything had become increasingly unfavorable for her.

When she noticed Uncle Yong Zheng shuffling hurriedly in her direction, she halted her training, and a trace of hope inadvertently rose within her. "Have you found any news of that scoundrel?"

"Miss, we just received news that Young Master Zu Yan was beaten unconscious at a training hall.

Shi Xueman paused for a moment, before responding, "Ah, Zu Yan? He was knocked unconscious? What's the situation now?"

She had known Zu Yan when she was a young girl. Both of their families were on good terms, and they were close family friends.

Zu Yan was younger than her by 2 years, and she had always seen him as a little brat. When they were both children, he had always followed her around like a shadow; however, when he grew older, his talent had also emerged. Nobody had expected that Zu Yan would be the first in his family's younger generation to successfully comprehend [Flaming Heavenly Fire Transformation].

Since then, Shi Xueman had hardly seen him, and she had reckoned that he was locked up at home training. As the sole seedling of the new generation, the Zu family placed him with the utmost importance. In this aspect, though, Shi Xueman was no exception, but in spite of that, she was more diligent and had higher expectations for herself. She did not need to live under the constant supervision of others, and as such, her family did not impose many restrictions on her.

Yong Zheng replied, "The Zu family’s servants took him home."

"That is good to hear," Shi Xueman softly sighed with relief. Shortly after, her expression became grave, as she asked, "What is the background of the opposite party?"

"We are not sure yet. There have been many skilled practitioners from the outer-states recently participating in blind battles at Central Pine City." Yong Zheng paused before continuing, "Currently, we only know that the other party is an earth elementalist. He also has a brilliant sand puppet that aided him in defeating Young Master Zu Yan in the blind battle."

"Blind battle?" Shi Xueman asked, surprised. Her first thought was of that scoundrel from the previous battle. However, upon

thinking some more, she realized that if the opposite party had a sand puppet, then it could not be the scoundrel. Shi Xueman clearly remembered every detail about that scoundrel, and while she was unable to determine his identity, she was entirely certain that he was not an earth elementalist.

Furthermore, it was highly unlikely that that scoundrel could defeat Zu Yan in a blind battle.

The Shi family and Zu family were family friends, and thus, Shi Xueman knew much more about the Zu Family's legacy skills than the ordinary person. She had long heard that Zu Yan had managed to activate two palaces according to [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation], and as long as two palaces of the [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation] were activated, he would be able to learn [Hellfire Spider Web]. [Hellfire Spider Web] was similar to a spider web, in the sense that it would spread around an area to detect any movements within its surroundings. It could be said to be a weapon that was designed for blind battles.

In fact, it seemed as if blind battles were tailored specifically for Zu Yan.

Shi Xueman knew that in a standard duel, she had an eighty percent chance of defeating Zu Yan. However, in a blind battle, Shi Xueman clearly understood that she would not even stand a chance in defeating him.

Yet Zu Yan was actually beaten in a blind battle!

Furthermore, he was knocked unconscious!

One could imagine the astonishment that Shi Xueman was feeling. She tried to recall the identities of skilled earth elementalists of the Induction Ground that could defeat Zu Yan. While there were many earth elementalist members who were definitely stronger than Zu Yan, it was difficult for her to pinpoint who exactly could defeat Zu Yan in a blind battle.

After gradually recovering from her shock, she sighed again. "Perhaps it's a good thing, lest he becomes arrogant."

Yong Zheng glanced at Shi Xueman and laughed bitterly to himself. He, too, was shocked when he first heard the news. Central Pine City could be described as ‘turbulent’ in recent times, but as a resident of Central Pine City for many years, he was used to the previous peace and quiet. In the Induction Ground, Central Pine City was a small city that never had many experts.

However, the sudden boom in popularity of blind battles had brought about a drastic change in the environment of Central Pine City.

The news of Zu Yan's defeat and the mysterious earth elementalist was sure to spread like wildfire; unfortunately, it would only attract the attention of more skilled experts. If news that the famous Shi Xueman was hiding in his very own training ground was disclosed, then Central Pine City would get even more crowded.

He sighed. He should not keep worrying blindly about such things.

He could only laugh bitterly when he recalled that the blind battle was initially his idea.

"Ask around for more information on this earth elementalist," Shi Xueman instructed.

Yong Zheng nodded affirmatively and replied, "Yes."

As predicted, the news of Zu Yan being defeated by a mysterious earth elementalist quickly spread around the entire Central Pine City at an alarming rate. Zu Yan was simply too famous. Although Zu Yan had managed to activate two palaces, it was not considered to be an achievement in the Induction Ground. However, the fact that he practiced the absolute art [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation] was sufficient enough for him to rise to fame.

Throughout the Zu Family's long history, the disciples of each generation who had managed to comprehend the [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation] were all over the age of 30. Zu Yan, who was able to comprehend an absolute art at such a young age, had already revealed his astonishing talent. This had greatly enforced the belief that he would have an exceptionally bright future. Due to his age, however, his power was now limited.

Moreover, absolute arts were absolute arts, after all. So what if Zu Yan had activated only two palaces? Zu Yan’s capability was definitely not any less than those who had managed to activate

four palaces.

Zu Yan had entered the Induction Ground while bearing the burden of being the top of the Zu's family younger generation. While he was not a common household topic, Zu Yan's fame definitely surpassed every student of Central Pine City.

Even the reputation of the top genius of Central Pine City, Duanmu Huanghun, was incomparable to that of Zu Yan.

One could only imagine the sensation that Zu Yan's defeat had brought to Central Pine City; the whole city was discussing the identity of the mysterious earth elementalist. The effect of this incident was not just limited to Central Pine City—after hearing about it, many outstanding experts of other cities had also become exceptionally interested; they sought to take part in the famed blind battles of Central Pine City.

However, no one knew about the miserable state of Ai Hui and Lou Lan—the chief protagonists of this incident.

……

Swoosh! Lou Lan slid down from the fence.

"Ai Hui, how do you feel?"

Remaining in the form of a puddle of quicksand, Lou Lan smoothly glided to the side of a mummified figure. The figure,

which was Ai Hui, looked far worse compared to Lou Lan; it was wrapped in countless of loops of white bandages and the right arm was pitifully hanging in front of its chest.

In the main training hall, Ai Hui was miserably resting on the rattan chair, chewing on a blade of grass. He mumbled, "Lou Lan, are you all right?"

"Master Shao said that I will only be able to stand after three days. Before that, I'm unable to heal you, Ai Hui," Lou Lan reported with regret, before continuing, "Do you want me to find Doctor Mu Xiu to heal you first?"

"Nope. I'm not in a hurry anyway. I will wait for you to recover and then heal me. I'm a poor man, you see!"

"Ok." Lou Lan did not protest and, like a snake, started to wind around a pillar that was next to Ai Hui. He stopped his ascent when he reached Ai Hui's eye level.

Ai Hui suddenly spoke. "Thank you for yesterday, Lou Lan."

"Why are you thanking me, Ai Hui? Wasn’t it supposed to be like this?" Lou Lan asked in confusion.

"I'm referring to not forgetting to take our reward when we left!" Ai Hui gazed up at the heavens while euphorically exclaiming, "So much cash! We are rich! We are rich!"

The cash reward was extremely generous—it amounted to five hundred thousand yuan, which was a tremendous amount in Ai Hui’s eyes.

"We won," Lou Lan burst out with joy. He was particularly happy that he had managed to win his first actual battle. Nothing could make him more satisfied than the fact that he had played a major role in the fight.

Suddenly, Ai Hui, his voice laced with concern, asked, "Oh yes, what did Master Shao say about your special abilities?"

Chapter 34: To Split The Cash

After they returned from the battle, Lou Lan explained the various odd quirks on his body to an astonished Ai Hui. Ai Hui was very familiar with the soul-fogging grass. While the effect of the soul-fogging grass in restraining a sand puppet was not definite, if a sand puppet was of low quality, the restraining effect would be very distinct. Although it was highly unexpected for Lou Lan to still be able to see when a whole blade of soul-fogging grass was placed on his head, yesterday proved otherwise.

From the beginning, Ai Hui felt that Master Shao was mysterious and brilliant. Many of Lou Lan's aspects continued to surprise him. Ai Hui had interacted with numerous sand puppets before, but Lou Lan was the most unique sand puppet that he had ever seen.

"Master Shao said he used a lot of his own inventions on me and never imagined that there would be such an effect. He did not know what I would be transformed into since most of the techniques he used were untested. As of now, I am a never-before-seen being. To put it simply, I am an experiment, but Master Shao never imagined that I would be effective in combat and was amazed by my performance. Regarding my current situation, Master Shao still needs time to contemplate."

As he neared the end of his speech, Lou Lan looked happy. He felt relatively joyful due to the fact that Master Shao was astonished by his accomplishments.

"You can definitely be a fighter!" Ai Hui said in an assured tone. He continued, "I feel that you have the potential to be a high-level

battle sand puppet!”

“Really, really?” Lou Lan’s tone was jubilant, like a kid who had just received a compliment.

“Of course!” Ai Hui thought of something suddenly and said, “Oh yes! We have one more deed to do.”

“What do we need to do?” Lou Lan asked curiously.

From lying on the rattan chair like he was at his last breath, Ai Hui suddenly jolted up as if he had ingested some miracle tonic. His pride was practically bursting out of his body and could not be constrained by the numerous bandages wrapped on him. Ai Hui cheered, “Split the cash!”

“Split the cash?” Lou Lan was somewhat confused.

“Of course we need to split it. Half of the cash reward belongs to you,” Ai Hui said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Lou Lan paused for a moment before saying, “We do not need to split the cash reward. I am just a sand puppet.”

“Who set the rules that sand puppets do not need to get a share of the cash reward?” Ai Hui asked calmly. “No matter whether you are a sand puppet or not, we fought together, and this means we are partners. Since half the merit is yours, half the cash reward is definitely yours too. This is the rule.”

Lou Lan said limply, “But....”

“There is no but!” Ai Hui insisted. “It is decided and it shall be this way in the future. Hmm, the one hundred thousand yuan from the first battle will be solely mine as I fought in the battle alone. The cash reward from the second battle is five hundred thousand yuan and we shall split it evenly between us. Take it away quickly before I get blinded by the amount of money we have! Adding up the cash from both battles, I will have three hundred and fifty thousand yuan!”

Ai Hui spoke in an agitated tone. Three hundred and fifty thousand yuan. To Ai Hui, this is a hefty amount that he had never before earned in his entire life.

I made it. I made it!

His mind was filled with that phrase. As he visualized the countless energy-replenishing tonic soups that he could now afford and their tantalizing smell, he unknowingly gulped.

Oh heavens have mercy on Ai Hui. A country bumpkin like him had never seen such a large amount of money before. With a trace of sleepiness in his voice, Ai Hui asked, “How are you going to spend the money, Lou Lan?”

Lou Lan was somewhat at a loss and said, “I don’t know...”

“What, you don’t even know what to spend on? Lou Lan, you are too silly ha ha.” Ai Hui’s voice was weary, and his speech was unclear.

But Lou Lan truly did not know. He never thought that he would be given a share of the cash reward. Since he the day he was first created, Lou Lan had countless interactions with money, such as when Master Shao sent him to buy ingredients, when he went shopping for daily groceries, and so on. However, the sand puppet had never had money that belonged solely to himself.

Nobody rewarded him with cash even if he helped them. He was merely a sand puppet. Wasn’t it natural and proper for a sand puppet to help human beings?

As a result, this was the first in his life that he received a sum of money that was his alone.

This sudden monetary gain affected him tremendously. Reflexively, he looked towards Ai Hui who had incidentally fallen asleep. Even while sleeping, Ai Hui pursed his lips, as if he was eating something.

Lou Lan gazed at Ai Hui silently while reflecting on what Ai Hui had said previously.

“No matter whether you are a sand puppet or not, we fought together, and this means we are partners. Since half the merit is yours, half the cash reward is definitely yours too. This is the rule...”

Partners ...

A feeling he never experienced before surged into him. Lou Lan did not know how to describe this feeling, but he felt that this would be a day he would remember for the rest of his life.

On this day, Lou Lan finally had his own money.

On this day, Lou Lan was treated as a partner and not just as a tool.

He realized that he had been unaware that he was lacking something, but now he was fulfilled . It was as if he had encountered a light at the end of a dark tunnel.

At that moment, he understood that he was no longer the same Lou Lan as before.

He was unable to describe the change, but he knew that he was different now.

...

“Huanghun, you are still not attending lessons today?” His friends who were getting ready to leave shouted through his locked door.

In his room, Duanmu Huanghun moved his face close to the mirror. Looking at his swollen face which still revealed the distinctive palm imprints, his eye twitched and he forced the words out of his mouth, “I am not going.”

“Then we’re leaving.”

While continuing their discussion, his friends turned and departed.

“What is going on with Huanghun recently? He does not even attend his lessons anymore. He never skipped any of his classes before!”

“Perhaps he is sick. Didn’t he catch a cold previously?”

“Oh yeah, it seems like he was also tortured by the instructor from the Society of Excellence. Thank goodness we didn’t join.”

“Oh please, we wanted to be in the Society of Excellence, but we were not accepted. Do you think just anyone can be like Huanghun? His popularity among ladies coupled with his handsome looks and capability made him number one in Central Pine City!”

Duanmu Huanghun turned green. Currently, he only wanted to cover his ears, but the comments of his friends outside found their way to his ears. Looking at the swollen face reflected in the mirror, every sentence was like a stab to his heart.

That damn cold! He was actually knocked unconscious by that fellow. He felt his emotions rising.

Thinking back to the humiliating measures that the scoundrel Ai Hui used, Duanmu Huanghun once again felt his face heating up.

Recalling the gesticulations from the many females on the street, his face was practically burning.

He was not sure if it was an illusion, but he felt that the face in the mirror was more swollen than before, as if it had transformed into a bun. The elegant, dainty chin was gone and his facial features were completely warped. His once charismatic eyes has also became lightbulb-like.

This is too humiliating!

This is simply too embarrassing!

This hatred cannot be contained. Just you wait, Ai Hui. I, Duanmu Huanghun, will definitely not let you off!

Suddenly, someone shouted from outside the window, “Rumor has it that Duanmu Huanghun is the number one expert in Central Pine City. I am Gu Tianning and I am challenging you to a duel. Duanmu Huanghun, do you dare to accept my challenge?”

Duanmu Huanghun tensed.

“Fellow student Duanmu Huanghun, don’t tell me that you do not have even an ounce of courage to battle? What a disappointment!” the newcomer shouted, his voice echoing into the distance.

Duanmu Huanghun trembled in anger, but looking back at the swollen face in the mirror, the urge to rush out disappeared. If he rushed out, he would surely become the laughingstock of Central Pine City tomorrow.

Just you wait, Ai Hui!

Chapter 35: Harvest and Explode

As Ai Hui waved his arm, he felt that he was strong enough to kill a bull. Lou Lan's skills were indeed trustworthy.

"Lou Lan, I'm going to train."

Ai Hui carried the dried food and water he had prepared during the morning and waved to Lou Lan.

With a clap, Lou Lan exploded into a lump of yellow sand and molded into a tight, yellow sand fist. "You go, Ai Hui!"

Ai Hui laughed and hoisted the bag over his shoulder tightly before exiting the Vanguard Training Hall.

Walking on the streets, Ai Hui clearly felt that there was a much bigger crowd than usual. Soon he understood that these people were mostly students from other cities who came over to participate in the blind battles. As he listened,their heated discussions involved experts they had met, mysterious earth elementalists, Zu Yan, and so on.

Ai Hui was baffled by the news. He had long forgotten about his disguise as an earth elementalist, so he did not put two and two together.

Very quickly, however, he heard something that he could comprehend.

“Have you heard? Gu Tianning challenged Duanmu Huanghun to a battle, but Duanmu Huanghun caught a cold and was unable to show up. What a pity.”

“Ah, that’s really a pity! I have seen Gu Tianning’s skills. He’s powerful! He ranked within the top fifty of the Induction Ground at fourty-ninth! Plus, he’s a berserker in battle. Duanmu Huanghun is the number one talent in Central Pine City. He’s the most outstanding kid in his family, so it definitely would have been an intense battle!”

“That’s why it’s unfortunate. Initially, Gu Tianning thought Duanmu Huanghun was finding an excuse. He only found out later that Duanmu Huanghun was really out with a cold and couldn’t attend classes for a few days.”

“Too bad…”

Ai Hui sneered while listening at the side. He despised Duanmu Huanghun greatly. What cold? Who was this guy fooling? If he had not personally cured Duanmu Huanghun, Ai Hui would have been deceived by this absurd excuse.

Duanmu Huanghun appeared to be decent, but it seemed like his morals were questionable.

Ai Hui, who was inwardly disdaining Duanmu Huanghun, soon forgot about this news after traveling less than ten meters. Ai Hui never cared about things that were irrelevant to him. Although

Duanmu Huanghun was a classmate, he was no different from any passerby in Ai Hui's eyes.

Ai Hui was very cautious toward the world. He was insulated, apathetic, and did not care if this planet perished or prospered. He was only concerned about his own small world.

The word "friends" had a completely different meaning to Ai Hui.

Fatty was unscrupulous, stingy, greedy, and timid, but he was actually also a softhearted and kind person who tried to be on good terms with everyone. In the Wilderness, he was the one who buried the workers who had passed away. Only Fatty would do something like this. Ai Hui would not since he found it meaningless.

He only cared about Fatty who was his friend during times of tribulation.

Fatty had saved Ai Hui's life more than once.

The worst incident occurred when the team was attacked by a bunch of dire beasts. Half of the elementalists died. The laborers, needless to say, were practically all killed or injured. Ai Hui was seriously injured and had lost consciousness. Trembling, Fatty pulled him out from the pile of dead bodies. While the elementalists panicked and just wanted to be on their way, no one bothered to care for the laborers. Fatty carried him, ran with the remaining team for five days, and lost ten kilograms doing this.

That was the only time he had been skinny. When Ai Hui regained consciousness for the first time, Fatty hugged him while wailing loudly, creating a scene Ai Hui could never forget.

Now there was Lou Lan. Probably because Lou Lan was a sand puppet, Ai Hui did not guard against him that much.

He felt this situation was quite good. It would allow him to direct all his energy into his training. His world was small, but it was all he needed.

Upon exiting Central Pine City, Ai Hui quickened his steps. No one noticed this youth with the shabby cloth bag. Although he had just earned a hefty sum of three hundred and fifty thousand yuan, he could not bear to spend it. His shabby cloth bag was still a shabby cloth bag. His dried rations were still hard and dehydrated pancakes.

In the future, he would have many necessities that required money.. These blind battles made Ai Hui realize that he was very naive for hoping to earn money through competitions. Even though he had joined forces with Lou Lan, his last victory had been a fluke within a fluke. Such luck would never befall him again. The blind battles within Central Pine City were now widely acclaimed and the number of experts competing started to increase. His chances of winning would only become slimmer.

Previously, he could depend on his familiarity with night battles to have an advantage over other contestants, but in front of all kinds of strange fighting methods and the absolute elemental energy disparity, his advantage became negligible.

No matter what, experience could never replace skills. Otherwise, he would not have to attend classes in the Induction Ground.

When he neared the Suspending Golden Pagoda, he met two city guards who reminded him about roaming wild beasts and warned him to pay attention to safety. Ai Hui was a little taken aback, but he expressed his thanks anyway. He had only been away for a few days, yet wild beasts started to appear.

It looked like he had to be careful, so Ai Hui raised his alertness. Having survived the Wilderness, he naturally would not be the least bit careless.

Arriving at the pagoda, Ai Hui scanned his surroundings meticulously. It was more or less the same as when he had left this place a few days back. There were no marks left by the wild beasts, causing Ai Hui to feel a little puzzled.

Although he was not sure how the beast sightings came to be reported, Ai Hui had extensive experience in this area and greater faith in his own judgment.

Upon retrieving his well-hidden Backless Armor and seeing that it was safe without a scratch, Ai Hui was relieved. This armor was quite expensive, and it could be considered as an important asset.

He put the armor on and fastened it before starting his unique training.

When Ai Hui threw himself into the pagoda once again, he felt different from before. The metal wind still pierced into his bones, but the pain induced by the silver strands of metal element had lessened significantly.

This caught Ai Hui's attention. After careful sensing and observation, he realized there was a slight change in his muscles. They were tougher, more durable, and denser. His muscles were initially like rice straw , while the strands of metal element were like steel needles that permeated into his body and caused shooting pains. Now, however, his muscles became more solid. The rice straw had become bamboo, naturally reducing the pain.

The metal elemental energy contained within these silver strands was much more condensed than the energy from typical sources. This promoted the growth of muscle strength more effectively than the common metal elemental energy.

This discovery incited Ai Hui. He knew he had found the right path.

There was still a lack of affinity, but he had better endurance. Although his absorption was less efficient, he could absorb a higher grade of elemental energy. The higher the grade, the more effective the training was for the body.

There was nothing more exciting than unearthing a path that belonged to him.

For this session, Ai Hui persevered for an even longer time.

His day became richer and more fulfilling. Ai Hui was very willing to endure the dull and dreary training.

Be it the absorption of elemental energy or the [Arching Fish Back], Ai Hui was full of vigor Before, Ai Hui only used the [Arching Fish Back] to disperse the silver strands of metal element in his body, but the previous blind battle had made him realize the effectiveness of this move. It could be formidable if trained properly.

Even an expert who practiced an absolute art and activated two palaces was knocked senseless by his [Arching Fish Back].

Currently, it was definitely his most powerful technique!

Ai Hui had brought a whole month’s worth of dried food. He also found a water source about two kilometers away. In that desolate Suspending Golden Pagoda, he started diligently training day and night without pause.

It was not hard work to him. No one knew how much he had wished to be able to focus on training without having to worry about anything else during his time in the Wilderness.

It felt so good!

Being able to feel his dripping sweat was something that felt

really good!

He could sense his progress every day. They were tiny, but firm and steady improvements that gave him a feeling of accomplishment.

Yes, his world was this small. He had never thought of saving the planet or becoming a hero. Training hard daily, without worrying about being attacked by wild beasts or about tomorrow's plans, was enough. How could such a life not be blissful?

He could not think of a happier life. He wished for this lifestyle to continue forever.

To Ai Hui, who was immersed in his training, one month ended in the blink of an eye. He only become aware of the fact that a month had passed when he reached into his cloth bag and felt that it was empty.

During that one month, Ai Hui did not waste a single second.

As he removed his Backless Armor, his face was full of surprise. His progress was so great that even he himself could not believe it.

Under the sunlight, a faint metallic sheen appeared on his skin. He had witnessed such a phenomenon before, but only from some of the authentic, master elementalists.

His skin became even harder. He tried using a sharp piece of

stone to scratch his skin but only created a shallow mark. His strength had obviously increased. His muscles, which had been refined by metal elemental energy, could produce greater explosive force.

His power was not weak to begin with, but it had now become alarmingly strong. Even without utilizing elemental energy, his base strength was five times more powerful.

The elemental energy within his body had grown even more obviously. In the past, his elemental energy was thin like a thread, but now it was as thick as a toothpick

The growth in his elemental energy would bring about a comprehensive growth to his fighting capabilities.

The force of his [Arching Fish Back] was also boosted compared to before. It was evident from the big dent on the pagoda's wall. Before, the subtle indentation could only be seen with the naked eye when viewed up close. Now, it was extremely obvious and could easily be noticed.

Judging from this pace, another two months was all Ai Hui needed before attempting to activate his natal residences.

Ai Hui was not in a rush to activate the residences because he could feel his continuous progress, indicating his tempering had not reached bottleneck. His experience in the Wilderness taught him that a robust body was essential at all times.

He witnessed some master elementalists perish, even though they possessed exceptional elemental energy, due to weak physiques.

His body could take it, so why shouldn't he take this chance to fortify it even further? Ai Hui managed to control his eager heart since he knew he was on the right path. He had seen a lot of swordplay manuals from the big sects and none failed to highlight the importance of the basics. These books should contain logic and truth if they had been passed down over tens of thousands of years.

Ai Hui started salivating after suddenly recalling Lou Lan's elemental energy replenishing soup. Like a gust of wind he rushed toward Central Pine City.

He was unaware that in the month he was gone, the world outside had been turned upside down.

Defeated, Zu Yan closed himself off from the world to train. Seeking a rematch in half a year, he proclaimed a written challenge addressed to that mysterious earth elementalist. Challenge notices were placed outside every institution within the Induction Ground.

Shi Xueman trained diligently as well. She felt that her skills were insufficient to defeat her enemy and was preparing for more arduous closed door training to sharpen her combat ability.

Central Pine City had become the most popular city within the Induction Ground. The blind battling trend swept across the

Induction Ground since it was a novel system of competition that attracted much interest. Teachers discussed blind battling techniques in classes and some more progressive schools even started to prepare lessons dedicated to blind battles.

During this month, within Central Pine City, the limelight belonged solely to one person—Duanmu Huanghun.

Duanmu Huanghun was renowned as the number one genius among Central Pine City's current batch of students and people thought highly of him. He was also one of the more popular students in the city.

The rise in popularity of blind battling brought along many expert fighters from outside of Central Pine. When many talented combatants gathered, there were naturally people who wanted to challenge Duanmu Huanghun, especially after he rejected Gu Tianning's duel request.

Sure, he had a cold, but many still scorned and looked down on him. Rumors spread that he was strong in appearance, but weak in reality, leading many fame-seeking students to challenge him one after another.

Duanmu Huanghun consequently exploded!

He consecutively defeated nine seniors, who were all at least four years older than him, within a week and spontaneously silenced the gossip.

But this was just the beginning. With a belly full of anger, Duanmu Huanghun wasn't satisfied just yet. During the next week, he headed down to different training halls to declare challenges to their respective experts.

Fifteen consecutive wins in a week!

One of his defeated opponents even had six palaces activated. Such a terrifying combat record immediately boosted his reputation within the Induction Ground.

The bloodthirsty Duanmu Huanghun had no intention to stop, however.

In the third week, he fought his way out of Central Pine City and into the rankings of the Induction Ground. He challenged and defeated the forty-ninth ranked Gu Tianning, the thirty-third ranked Cui Zhiyuan, and the twenty-fifth ranked Fu Hua.

The entire Induction Ground was momentarily silenced.

He jumped up to seventeenth in the newly announced rankings, becoming the only new student to place within the top twenty. He also became the leading student of this year's new students.

Historically speaking, the number of new students who managed to accomplish this could be counted on one hand.

With his outstanding accomplishments, Duanmu Huanghun

became one of the finest contenders in the Induction Ground. His astonishing talent and aptitude shocked the Induction Ground's management team. They allowed him to move up to a higher-level school district in order to receive better guidance.

Upon hearing the news, countless school districts were quick to react. Since Duanmu had yet to return to Central Pine City, they took the opportunity to catch him midway and attempted to pull this rare talent into their institutions by offering generous conditions.

What caused everyone to be taken aback was the fact that Duanmu Huanghun rejected all of them.

He publicly declared that he was going to remain in Central Pine and would only accept Teacher Xu's guidance.

This unexpected choice silenced the Induction Ground once again, but since everyone valued him highly now, they decided he was virtuous and respectful of those who had helped him along the way.

Duanmu Huanghun's glorious image received another boost. With his handsome looks, devilish charm, and naturally cool disposition, he became the man of many young girls' dreams. Many of them left their respective institutions in order to follow him as he went around challenging different experts.

No matter where he went, countless beauties trailed behind him.

The once-unknown Central Pine City was now beyond famous and had become a city envied by institutions from all other cities.

And today was the day Duanmu Huanghun was returning to Central Pine City.

Chapter 36: Nightmare

“I didn’t know that Duanmu is so strong!”

“Yeah, and he is so idealistic to choose to stay in Central Pine City. He is definitely a loyal person. I can't believe that I used to have prejudice against him before!”

“That’s right! Duanmu may seem cold from appearance but is actually emotional at heart.”

……

Today was the day of the return of Duanmu Huanghun to Central Pine City. When the faculty and students learned of the news, the entire school came together to distinctly hold a welcome ceremony for Duanmu. Whether teacher or student, everyone’s face was radiant with joy. A freshman had made it to the top twenty of the Induction Ground—it was an unprecedented honor, even in the entire history of Central Pine City. It not only brought fame but also tangible benefits to the city.

As long as they could retain Duanmu Huanghun, Central Pine Academy could get a high score every year, because the score earned by Duanmu Huanghun alone was more than all the other students combined. The score was tightly related to the rating and resources that would be allocated to the school in the future. As a result, Duanmu had definitely become the apple of everyone’s eyes.

Duanmu Huanghun's incredible achievement was totally out of the school officials' expectations. Moreover, when Duanmu announced to the public that he would continue to study in Central Pine Academy, they felt as if a delicious pie had fallen from the sky onto their laps. Not only was it the reason why a welcome ceremony was being held, but it was also why all the participants—whether teachers or students—were more than happy to do so from the bottom of their hearts.

The benefit that Duanmu had brought them covered many aspects, including a rise in teachers' salaries and the improvement of student's training resources.

However, this was all the more impressive to the female students of Central Pine Academy; Duanmu Huanghun had previously enjoyed an amazingly high popularity among these girls, but now, after becoming the idol of the entire Induction Ground, they had all started to go crazy over him.

"Girls, cheer up! We don't lose to the b*tches from other schools!"

"Exactly! Huanghun belongs to us. Who are they to meddle with us? Anyone who wants our Huanghun has to defeat me first!"

"Good things should always be kept for our own. Throw those b*tches away as far as possible!"

"Huanghun will know who really loves him the most!"

……

These girls had dressed up extravagantly in their favorite dresses to attend the welcome ceremony.

Faculty and students were gathered on both sides of the road, preparing to welcome their beloved Duanmu. The crowd stretched from the gate of the city all the way to the entrance of Central Pine Academy.

The shops along the road were decorated with flags, and each training hall had also adorned their entrances with colorful banners. The managers and merchants were all beaming with joy as flocks of people continued to bring much more profits to their businesses.

The sudden increase in popularity of blind battles had greatly improved the business of the various training halls in Central Pine City—now informally known as “The Cradle of Blind Battles.” Their businesses could already flourish along with the trend for quite some while more. Yet, they were also clearly aware that that would hardly last long, because, although blind battles were a new and hot topic at this moment, as time passed by, interest would eventually be lost, resulting in the inevitable plummet in profit.

The rise of Duanmu Huanghun, however, was a pleasant surprise to them.

As long as the glorious Duanmu Huanghun continued to stay in Central Pine City, the small city would no longer be as obscure as

before. What did ‘top twenty’ in the Induction Ground stand for? It stood for something that everybody looked up to, and in other words, the signature symbol of Central Pine City had now been changed—previously, it was blind battles, but from now on, it would be the great genius Duanmu Huanghun.

In the keen eyes of the businessmen of Central Pine City, Duanmu was definitely akin to a rare treasure. Apart from his own potential and prominent background, merely the fact that he was now ranked among the top twenty as a freshman was enough for them to amplify the hype and turn him into ‘the genius of the century’. Now, he was the leader among the new students. How many would come to challenge him? How many new, trendy topics would there now be?

Moreover, Duanmu had a face that was so beautiful that even women would cry out in envy. Think of all those female students who had just lost their minds in infatuation. They were identical to countless walking money!

Whose money was it the easiest to earn? Women’s!

The rise in popularity of the city was beneficial for everyone.

Almost all the residents attended the ceremony. They were all rather curious because the city had never before seen a genius that could attract so much attention. No one in Central Pine City had ever made it into the top one hundred, much less the top twenty. The highest ranking of Central Pine Academy students had hitherto been 292.

A lump of Fiery Floating Cloud was soaring through the air.

Duanmu Huanghun was elegantly seated upon the Fiery Floating Cloud, but his handsome and devilishly attractive face carried with it a tinge of weariness. It was indeed a heavy burden, to both his spirit and body, to consecutively challenge a large number of competitive rivals.

When he could finally glimpse the outline of Central Pine City, Duanmu heaved a long sigh of relief. He had purposefully set out overnight to avoid those crazy female students.

The past several days had been a literal nightmare to him. He believed that the misfortune had started from that insufferable task that Teacher Xu had assigned to him. When he looked back at those unbearable memories, he felt fury begin to well up within him—especially when he remembered the day when he had to refuse Gu Tianning's challenge because of his puffy face, which had earned him the name of a coward.

Even though Duanmu had endured through the immense shame, he really had not expected that every Tom, Dick, and Harry would want to duel with him after they heard of his refusal to accept Tianning's challenge. Having held in his anger for so long, Duanmu eventually could not take it anymore, and finally flared up.

That was why he thrashed the challengers without even saying a word.

Moreover, in his violent rage, he had rushed straight to all the training halls and battered those foreign masters, who had come to experience the blind battles, to a pulp.

However, Duanmu's anger was still not completely vented. Heaven only knew how many more outlets he needed.

Therefore, his next move was to rush out of Central Pine City, but the first person he encountered was Gu Tianning—the source of his grievances. When he thought of his puffy face and the taunts that were coming from outside, he felt an unspeakable humiliation.

In the end, Duanmu thought of only one thing, which was to fight. His fury was almost driving him insane, and there was only a single thought that was constantly echoing in his mind: I want to vent! I want to vent!

However, now, after having challenged another two strong opponents, Duanmu Huanghun was finally exhausted, and his rage was somewhat eased.

He felt much more placid now.

As for the invitations from other schools, he threw them into the dustbin without even a glimpse.

Stand up from where he had fallen!

He could not let Ai Hui off the hook so easily; he would not leave Central Pine Academy unless the resentment between them was settled. His intent for revenge was indeed hard to curb. When he thought of his puffy face, the killer intent within him became slightly uncontrollable.

He did not even have the courage to recall that horrible scene.

Damn! It was all because of Ai Hui. He was his nightmare, and he must destroy him!

Noticing the welcoming crowd at the city gate, he gracefully smoothed down his clothes, held his chin high and raised his head. His face returned to being cold and devilishly charming.

His vanity was greatly content as he returned as a triumphant hero.

Under the burning gazes of the crowd, the Fiery Floating Cloud stopped unhurriedly at the city gate. Everyone behind the gate held their breath; Duanmu Huanghun's cold yet handsome face quickly attracted attention. His tall and slender figure revealed his graceful temperament, and his gorgeous clothing, which was stained from travel, seemed to narrate a unique story of its owner's honor and achievement.

The unprecedented genius of the entire Induction Ground!

An absolute idol among the new students!

The Fiery Floating Cloud steadily hovered several inches away from the ground. Duanmu Huanghun, who was being stared at by thousands of people, effortlessly and dignifiedly stepped down from the Fiery Floating Cloud like a valiant, glorious hero.

“Oh, hello, Bangwan! You are here too?”

That voice had constantly lurked about in his nightmares, but now, from behind, it suddenly reached his ears like a thunderclap.

Duanmu seriously could not prepare for such an unexpected occurrence, and almost instinctively, his pupils dilated and his body stiffened, as he staggered and missed his step.

With a resounding thud, Duanmu Huanghun fell to the ground like a rigid stake.

Everyone instantly fell silent.

Chapter 37: Noodle House

Ai Hui had no intention to greet Duanmu Huanghun since he did not know him very well, and so had just planned to ignore him.

However, Duanmu's Fiery Floating Cloud had stopped right in front the gate and blocked the way. Moreover, it seemed to take ages for him just to step off the cloud. Ai Hui waited, and waited, until he eventually became really impatient, and greeted 'Hello!' out loud to remind that Bangwan that someone was waiting behind him and to please be quick.

However, right afterward...

Looking at the fallen Duanmu's face, Ai Hui felt contempt for his psychological weakness. His voice had been barely above a whisper. How could someone be so fearful? What about those dire beasts with their thundering roars in the Wilderness? This guy would simply be frightened to death!

Maybe the kids nowadays were like this. Anyhow, Ai Hui had always regarded him as childish.

Other than training, Ai Hui had never cared too much about anything else. As for the large crowd of people waiting at the city gate, well, what did it have to do with him?

When he arrived back at the training hall, he noticed that it was spotlessly clean; as usual, Lou Lan had done a good job. Now, however, Lou Lan was not present, which left Ai Hui to be free.

After finishing his shower, Ai Hui noticed that Lou Lan was still missing. All his hopes were dashed; it seemed like there would be no soup today.

As it was still early, he decided to head out and have some noodles.

Yes, noodles, which would cost him a hundred and fifty yuan for a single bowl! After all, now that he had three hundred and fifty thousand yuan on hand, he considered himself to be rather rich and could eat as much as he liked. Ai Hui had only been eating pancakes for the past month, and his mouth watered at just the thought of those noodles.

He immediately rushed out through the door.

Shi Xueman wandered the streets of Central Pine City without any specific destination. She had heard about the big welcoming ceremony for Duanmu Huanghun, but unfortunately, she could not witness it for herself. She had also learned from Uncle Yong Zheng that after jumping off the Fiery Floating Cloud, Duanmu had toppled over onto the ground in exhaustion. People were marveling at the hardship he had endured through to attain his current achievement.

Shi Xueman also admired his unprecedented feat of consecutively challenging three experts of the top fifty in just one week. It truly was no surprise that he was exhausted.

She herself had only managed to achieve the top one hundred during her first year of college; it was no wonder that Duanmu Huanghun was being honored as ‘The Genius of the Century’.

Nevertheless, she had no interest in Duanmu Huanghun; she was only interested in that mysterious expert who had defeated her. She once suspected that Duanmu Huanghun might be the one, but had shortly rejected the notion.

Duanmu Huanghun was of an apparent noble temperament—totally different from that of the mysterious master.

Shi Xueman was wearing an elemental energy mask to avoid being recognized by others, and now, she appeared to be an ordinary girl student.

Ever since that fateful blind battle, she would often come to Central Pine City in her free time, and she soon became familiar with its topography. In fact, she was presently enjoying the feeling of strolling aimlessly after an intense training session.

Detecting a mouth-watering aroma of food, Shi Xueman suddenly began to feel hungry.

Turning to the source, she noticed a noodle house. Actually, she seldom ate out at restaurants—to be more specific, she seldom ate anything except elemental food.

On account of her constant training, she was stringent with her

diet. Her daily diet only consisted of elemental food that was specially made for enhancing the results of her training.

Therefore, she hesitated...but she eventually succumbed to the temptation.

As it was not yet mealtime, there were only a few customers in the noodle house. The owner was engrossed in preparing spiced beef, causing an irresistible smell to linger in the air.

She casually entered, sat at a table, and requested a bowl of noodles. At that instant, a figure rushed in and sat at a table across from her. "Five bowls of noodles, please!"

Shi Xueman took a brief glance and realized that it was a male student who seemed familiar. She might have seen him somewhere before.

After pondering for a while, she remembered that last time in Central Pine City, while she was fuming over all the colorful banners advertising blind battles, she had noticed a mocking gaze coming from across the street...

...from this guy!

Last time, although Shi Xueman was filled with self-confidence, she had made a mistake, and now she felt slightly embarrassed. However, she was not annoyed with the boy because they were unfamiliar with each other. Admittedly, she was in a rotten mood

at that time, and she seemed to have given him an angry glance.

She smiled wryly. Just then, her noodles arrived, and she began to enjoy her delicious meal.

The noodles were incredibly tasty and totally different from the elemental food that she was used to. Try as she might, she could not stop eating.

Compared to her, though, the actions of the fellow seated opposite were far more exaggerated. He swept through the five large bowls of noodles in a line like the wind sweeping the leaves, causing a scene that was of great visual impact. Furthermore, his table manners were rude and wild, and with each bite, half the noodles of a bowl would disappear. Shi Xueman, who had happened to take a glimpse, was left stunned.

All the people she knew were restrained, elegant, and gentle while eating; she had never before seen anyone eat like him.

At the beginning, Ai Hui had noticed her since she had stared at him for a while, but having already adapted to life in the Induction Ground, he did not regard it as anything dangerous.

Now, he was so focused on the noodles that he had already forgotten himself.

He picked up a bowl and gulped down half the noodle soup before placing it down contentedly. He suddenly noticed the stupefied

lady sitting across from him.

Shi Xueman met his gaze, but she immediately realized that it was somewhat rude and quickly looked down. In an attempt to cover her embarrassment, she hastily called the owner to bring her the bill.

"That would be a hundred and fifty yuan, please," said the owner monotonously.

"Okay," replied Shi Xueman as she rummaged about for her purse. However, she suddenly froze, because she realized one horrible thing—she did not take any money with her!

She had taken a shower and changed her attire after training, but the purse was still in her previous clothes!

What to do? She had never encountered anything like this and totally blanked out.

"Excuse me, lady?" Noticing her absence of mind, the owner gently gave another reminder.

"Sorry...I...I forgot to bring money..."

Shi Xueman stammered, her face burning with shame—at this moment, she felt like hiding herself and disappearing.

The owner’s expression darkened.

Ai Hui noticed the scene. Looking at the lady’s face, which was almost buried in her arms, he shook his head to himself and said, "Hey, I’ll lend you the money. Give me something as a pledge, and I’ll return it to you once you pay me back."

Would he freely pay the bill? No. Ai Hui would never utter such profligate words.

One hundred and fifty yuan was a lot of money to him!

If there was nothing to pledge, he would not lend the money. He was not one to show sympathy, and simply his willingness to lend was already a great favor in his eyes.

He then took out the money and pointed to the bowls in front of him. "Bill, please."

Having paid for the meals, Ai Hui strolled out of the noodle house with a toothpick in his mouth and Shi Xueman’s bead bracelet in his hand.

Shi Xueman sincerely expressed her gratitude to Ai Hui. "Thank you. I will definitely pay you back. Please give me your address."

"Vanguard Training Hall." Ai Hui continued, "Bring the money, and I’ll give you the bracelet. Go home and get the money quickly. I’m leaving now."

Noticing the decreasing sunlight, Ai Hui hastily corrected himself. "Tomorrow would also be fine. Farewell!"

He quietly waved goodbye, without taking the clouds away from the sky.

1. The original text is extracted from a modern poem which is well known in China. Basically, it means "He left."

Chapter 38: The Inner Demon

When Shi Xueman returned to the Shi Clan Training Hall, she asked Uncle Yong Zheng, "Do you know where Vanguard Training Hall is?"

"Vanguard Training Hall?" After mulling over for a while, he shook his head. "No. There is no such training hall. Where did you learn about it?"

He had been responsible for the Shi Clan Training Hall of Central Pine City for a very long time, and therefore, he was familiar with everything about the city—especially with matters concerning training halls. He was literally one hundred percent sure that there was no such training hall in Central Pine City.

Now that the young mistress had mentioned such a bizarre place, though, he was seized with a feeling of foreboding. He was not worried about her safety at all because he clearly knew of her strength. However, having grown up in a relatively simple environment where she cared about nothing but training, she was naive and ignorant to the various ways of the world. This kind of girl would easily be cheated.

Shi Xueman described what had happened.

Yong Zheng felt even more uneasy. "The bead bracelet was the one you are always wearing?"

"Yes, that was the only thing I could pledge. It is Grandmother’s

memento, so I always wear it." She noticed the change in Uncle Yong Zheng's facial expression. "Uncle Yongzheng, was there any problem with that guy?"

When he heard that the bracelet was Shi Xueman's grandmother's memento, Yong Zheng felt himself break out in a cold sweat.

The bead bracelet was made of Calming Indigo Silk, which was produced by a wild beast known as the Winged Indigo Silk Bird. However, due to its sparse production, it was extremely precious; even in the Cultivation Era, such beads were invaluable.

Moreover, this bracelet was handed down by Shi Xueman's grandmother!

He was aware of the identity and status of Shi Xueman's grandmother. If this bracelet was lost in Central Pine City, which was under his jurisdiction, then how could he afford to take the responsibility?

"I'll go check right now!" Yong Zheng hastily rushed out, leaving everything else behind.

Shi Xueman was not a sophisticated woman, but she was clever; looking at Uncle Yong Zheng's nervousness, she immediately understood what he was thinking. However, she was not as worried, because although the bead bracelet was given as a pledge, it was she who had offered to do so. Therefore, she did not really believe it was a scam.

After a while, Yong Zheng returned, sweat dripping down his face. "Young Mistress, I got it. There is indeed a Vanguard Training Hall which had been closed for a long time. Recently a student moved in to do the cleaning and maintenance."

"Thank you, Uncle. Please give me the address. I'll go there myself."

Shi Xueman felt relieved. She was not worried of being cheated, as she was confident of getting back anything within the whole Induction Ground, let alone the small Central Pine City. She just did not want to see a kind deed turn out to be a scam, which would really make her unhappy.

Yong Zheng was also relieved. Thank goodness it was not a scam. He hurriedly handed the address to Shi Xueman. As for her safety, Yong Zheng was not worried at all.

He had long witnessed her powerful fighting abilities.

Along with the address and money, Shi Xueman headed out.

After the welcome ceremony, Duanmu Huanghun withdrew to his new residence. Due to his excellent contribution, the academy had arranged another place as his accommodation, which possessed the highest elemental energy concentration and was fitted with luxurious interior decorations.

....

Duanmu Huanghun could now finally relax and have some rest.

These days he had been constantly worn out. He had held on till now because of the resentment in his heart, but now that it was released, he was overwhelmed with fatigue.

Lying in bed, however, he could not fall asleep.

His mind could not help but wander to the awkward tumble at the city gate. Ever since his birth, he had never done anything so shameful. Under everybody's keen attention and at the most awe-inspiring moment of his life, he had totally disgraced himself.

The more he thought about it, the more furious he became. Damn it!

He himself was clueless to why he tumbled on hearing Ai Hui's voice at the time.

After pondering for a while, Duanmu Huanghun unconsciously sat up as he began to feel serious. A horrible phrase had suddenly occurred to him—inner demons!

The more he thought about it, the more he believed it to be true. Ai Hui's voice was indeed like a nightmare to him, and this was definitely an inner demon. As a genius in training, Duanmu Huanghun had always had a sharp intuition. Having analyzed his

abnormal reactions in front of Ai Hui, he knew that his judgment was right.

Inner demons were actually not that rare in the process of training, especially to geniuses of higher levels—Duanmu Huanghun had learned about this from many books and records. Inner demons were able to influence one's training, somewhat similar to a psychological barrier.

As one's base level increased, the requirement for a perfect mental state would become more demanding, although it may be different depending on the type of technique practiced. Some techniques would require practitioners to be aggressive and determined, while even the slightest fear may prevent them from going any further, whereas some techniques necessitated a tranquillity and indifference in one's mind, and if a practitioner could not free himself from worldly attachments, it would be hard to attain success in that technique.

Inner demons had always had a big influence on one's training. The affected person may find it hard to improve. In serious cases, one might even develop an obsession that would cost his or her life.

Last time, when he had opened his eyes in the biting cold, he had almost been traumatized by the palm prints all over his body. At the thought of this, his face began to burn. When he remembered his old puffy face, a furious flame blazed out in his chest, and when he recalled today's awkwardness – he felt as if a bowl of hot oil was directly poured to the flames in him.

Hatred! Old and new!

Duanmu Huanghun's eyes grew red in fury. He was now one hundred percent sure that Ai Hui was the demon in his heart. He thought back to a set phrase in training that he had read before—demon decapitation.

Only when one's inner demons were decapitated would one be able to return to the right path and prevent oneself from going astray. Demon decapitation did not necessarily mean the decapitation of the person who is the demon, but like untying a knot, one had to get over it by oneself.

Duanmu Huang decided to decapitate his inner demon!

It was a problem that he had ignored previously, and today, he would solve it entirely and release himself from his rage. Duanmu was quite certain of success; since Ai Hui's natal palace hadn't even been opened, he definitely had a negligible level of skill.

On the other hand, Duanmu had just defeated three of the top fifty rivals. To him, small potatoes like Ai Hui would be more than simple to defeat. He had not done this before merely because of the task assigned by Teacher Xu.

Duanmu Huanghun, who was now fully confident, began to think about how he should go about decapitating his inner demon.

Should he disgrace Ai Hui just as how Ai Hui had disgraced him?

Once this idea occurred to him, Duanmu became exhilarated. Yes, that was it! He thought over each step: first, make him catch a cold, and then treat it in the way as Ai Hui had done. He would pay him back in his own coin! Ah, and don't forget the puffy face! And the tumble!

A cold, evil grin appeared on Duanmu Huanghun's face. Ai Hui, just wait and enjoy the treat!

Duanmu Huanghun could not help but let out a wild, wicked cackle.

Mwahahahahaha...

Duanmu, lost in his great excitement, could not feel the fatigue in his body anymore as he grabbed an elemental energy mask and put it on his face. He could not wait to begin.

Chapter 39: Sword Dance

Vanguard Training Hall.

Ai Hui dragged the rattan chair into the garden and plopped himself down in satisfaction.

The quiet hall, the gentle light reflecting off the calabashes, the bright moon...they all made him feel exceptionally comfortable and calm. No clamor, no battle, no tension. His body and mind were both relaxed, making him feel slightly lazy.

When he had been in the swordsman school, he had enjoyed spending the nights like that—he would empty his mind, completely at leisure and carefree.

The rattan chair rocked on as the moonlight caressed his body. He was facing the open entrance. The noise coming from outside would pass through the deep alley and become muffled by the time it reached the training hall, but it added a touch of liveliness to the night.

As Ai Hui fiddled with the bead bracelet he recently received, he sensed that it was cool to the touch and very comfortable to hold. He was not sure if it was because of the pearl or the quiet night, but right now, he felt incredibly tranquil.

"Calming Indigo Silk?" Lou Lan entered and noticed the bracelet in Ai Hui’s hands. A yellow light flashed through his eyes before he offered an objective assessment. "The Calming Indigo Silk is of fine

quality."

"Is it worth a lot?" Ai Hui continued to sway on his rattan chair. "A young lady's collateral, a hundred and fifty yuan!"

"Very valuable." Lou Lan nodded, the bizarre light within his eyes dimmed as he settled down beside Ai Hui. "You've made great progress. Ah, and your body is more robust too. Such speed will allow you to charge for the natal residences in no time."

"A while more." Ai Hui shook his head. "I hope to temper my body first. The metal wind has a great effect on my body, so I'll accumulate a little more before going for the residence. That way I'll be more confident."

Lou Lan crooked his head. "If that's the case, then I shall make some blood-and-bone-strengthening cake. It's very effective."

"Thanks, Lou Lan." As an afterthought, Ai Hui asked, "Is it expensive?"

"Not expensive. A hundred thousand yuan worth of blood-and-bone-strengthening cake can last you a month," Lou Lan calculated.

A hundred thousand...not expensive...

Ai Hui choked. He just could not link "hundred thousand" and "not expensive" together. However, since Lou Lan mentioned that

the effect was quite good, he was convinced. He knew that Lou Lan would never speak without thinking and that the cake was sure to be quite effective. Whether it was the elemental energy-replenishing soup or the bone-strengthening soup, they had all been extraordinarily effective.

"Okay!" Ai Hui clenched his teeth. A hundred thousand yuan, let’s do it!

Ai Hui had sharp eyes, and he noticed a slight change in the sand from Lou Lan’s body. "Lou Lan, your skin color seems a bit off."

"Yes. I have the capability to learn how to battle." Lou Lan realized that he had to explain further. "Master Shao said that I wasn’t created to battle so there is no specific combat technique for me, but he said that I’m not weak when it comes to battling."

AI Hui stared blankly. "I don’t understand."

"That is to say, I can obtain battle skills through learning." Lou Lan continued, "But this requires time. I have been learning some basic techniques recently and they bring about a change to the nature of my elemental energy, so the color of my sand will change too."

Ai Hui finally understood. "Oh, so it’s like that."

"But I have a question. Can you help me?"

"Of course!" Ai Hui was certain. "Ask away!"

"I've seen many battle manuals that talked about weapons. What kind should I choose?"

"Weapon?" Ai Hui muttered, "You do not even need weapons since your body is your best weapon."

"Body?" Lou Lan looked doubtful.

"Yes." Ai Hui sat up straight and his expression became earnest. "You can shapeshift as you please, you can become soft, you can become hard. Aren't you your best weapon? Battling may be complicated, but it can also be very simple. Just like last time, you became a sand cloud and disturbed his vision, disconnecting the link between his [Hellfire Spider Web] and himself. That was amazing! It is the key to scoring more victories."

"It is?" Lou Lan rejoiced upon hearing a compliment.

"Yes, you are actually very powerful. As long as you can use your body well, you'll be in an invincible position." Ai Hui looked serious. "Battling is when you utilize your advantage to attack your opponent's weakness."

"Ai Hui, you're amazing! You know so much." Lou Lan was full of admiration, but then he peered at Ai Hui curiously. "Then what weapon do you use?"

"I use a sword."

Lou Lan recalled the grass sword in the room and realization dawned on him. "Come to think of it, you do have a grass sword, but I've never seen you use it."

"Give me a second." Ai Hui also was feeling that he had not touched his sword for a very long time and momentarily felt his hand itch. He turned and ran to the room to retrieve it.

Once the sword was in his hands, he felt the sword embryo between his brows come to life. The feeling that he had not experienced in a long time stimulated him.

When Lou Lan saw Ai Hui walk in with the sword in his hand, he tilted his head and muttered to himself, "Ai Hui seems different."

Ai Hui saw the moonlight shimmering like water, and his longing for the "sword embryo state" made him feel like dancing. Without thinking, he held his sword up toward the sky.

His dark, glimmering eyes were unmeasurably deep. A faint yet cool aura surrounded Ai Hui's body and filled the air.

His heart was as calm as water. It was as if countless sword manuals were suddenly blown open by the wind as the sword moves within the sheets came alive. They seemed to slowly float out of the pages and form many lively miniature figures.

Ai Hui started to waltz with his grass sword.

The grass sword, which was made from sword reeds, was about four fingers wide, three pounds heavy, and naturally sharp.

Ai Hui's movements were slow; he moved at a speed akin to that of an old lady. The air around him, however, seemed to solidify and thicken as he continued with his dance.

In the Wilderness, Ai Hui's development of the elemental energy had not produced much results, and so when he finally developed his meager strands of elemental energy, he did not dare to carelessly waste it. He only used it in times of extreme danger.

He utilized sword moves the most.

Ever since he had created a sword embryo, he had found sword moves to be very advantageous. It also made him realize that amongst the piles of sword manuals, there was also some useful information hidden within. Moreover, at that point in time, in the Wilderness, he had no other choice.

He had tried all the skills in the manual a few times before finally finding some usable ones.

They were all mainly simple, superficial techniques.

He thought about it and it made sense. The more powerful moves required a greater spiritual force and thus were no longer useful.

Contrarily, the simple, shallow techniques involved the operation of energy from the muscles and were hence more effective in today's era.

The pace of Ai Hui's sword dance increased and he appeared to be extremely focused.

Although the tip of the grass sword had no shine, the sword was reflecting the moonlight, making it float about the surroundings like a silverfish playing chase. It was indeed a heavenly sight.

He did not notice that there was someone by the door.

Shi Xueman was extremely shocked. She had not expected to see such breathtaking swordplay in this city. Sword lessons were taught in the Induction Ground too, but she had never seen such beautiful swordsmanship.

Could he be Central Pine City's hidden talent?

All of a sudden, Shi Xueman's gaze fell onto the pearl that was on Ai Hui's wrist. Her head throbbed as her face quickly turned pale.

Chapter 40: Eighty Million Worth Of Rage

Shi Xueman could hardly believe her eyes.

The Calming Indigo Silk on Ai Hui's wrist was like a candle placed above a fire grill, gradually melting into gluey liquid, as it unceasingly penetrated into Ai Hui's skin.

It was as if she had experienced a mental blow—her mind went blank.

That was the treasure that her deceased grandmother had given her!

She had been wearing it ever since she was young and hardly took it off. Looking at it was akin to looking back at her loving grandmother who would constantly dote on her.

She still remembered the time her grandmother had given her the bracelet. Her grandmother had smiled while saying, "My darling granddaughter, you must take good care of this Calming Indigo Silk. When you grow up and meet your Mr. Right, give this string of Calming Indigo Silk to him. This is the best token of love that you can give. It was produced by the Winged Indigo Silk Bird..."

But...

Shi Xueman regained her senses and bolted forward. Her voice

laced with tears, she cried out, "My beads!"

Ai Hui quivered and was immediately jolted out of the sword embryo's state. He realized that it was the young girl from the noodle shop and remarked, "Oh, it's you. Why are you crying? Give me one hundred and fifty yuan and I will return the beads."

Following which, Ai Hui touched his wrist and was instantly shocked motionless.

Something doesn't feel right...

Pausing momentarily, he looked down at his wrist and became flabbergasted.

There was only a bare string on his wrist. Where were the beads? He looked to the floor but there were no signs of the beads anywhere.

"Ai Hui, the pearls have been absorbed into your skin," Lou Lan said honestly.

Absorbed into my skin?

Ai Hui was struck dumb. What sort of situation was this? How could it be absorbed? He hurriedly checked his body. When he noticed that the surrounding of the sword embryo's seed had an additional circle of blue mist, he could not help but take in a deep breath.

Indeed, it had been absorbed by him.

Ai Hui felt as if his heart had been trampled by a herd of running wild cows.

Looking at the young girl from the noodle store, whose eyes were filled with tears, Ai Hui was at loss. "I...I am sorry. I did not mean to do it. You need not give me the hundred and fifty..."

The moment the words left his mouth, Ai Hui knew he said the wrong thing. Instantly, the teary eyes of the girl became menacing.

Ai Hui hurriedly added, "I will pay! I will pay!"

"That was a treasure that belonged to my deceased grandmother," Shi Xueman cried out.

Ai Hui was completely nonplussed; his intestines turned green with regret. If he had known that earlier, he would not have asked for a collateral and would have instead freely treated her to that bowl of noodles. This was indeed his fault. He could only say meekly, "This was my fault, I'm sorry, I am really sorry. I truly did not know things would turn out this way. I have no idea how I managed to absorb this item. Would it be alright if I compensate you?"

Shi Xueman gradually calmed down a little. "How will you compensate?"

She had witnessed the whole process for herself. In her mind, she knew that the other party did it unintentionally, and she, too, had never heard of Calming Indigo Silk being absorbed before.

"I have two hundred and fifty thousand yuan. I will give it all to you." While Ai Hui was unwilling to part with his money, he knew that he did not have other alternatives. This was indeed his fault and he could not bring himself to put the blame on others.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand yuan?" Shi Xueman laughed coldly.

"Is it not sufficient?" Ai Hui was momentarily struck dumb. A hefty amount of two hundred and fifty thousand was not sufficient for that string of worn-out, blue pearls?

Lou Lan, who was standing nearby, interjected, "Ai Hui, the average starting price of Calming Indigo Silk is usually three million yuan. This string of high-quality silk should be more than five million."

Shi Xueman glanced at Lou Lan. She was clearly aware that sand puppets who knew the market price of Calming Indigo Silk were quite rare. She replied expressionlessly, "This string of Calming Indigo Silk was of the utmost quality and thus, the bracelet was worth eighty million yuan.

Eighty...Eighty million yuan!

Ai Hui felt as if he was struck by a lightning bolt that was as thick as a water bucket. He was utterly devastated. His mouth dropped open and his eyeballs almost popped out of his sockets. Every single muscle on his body was as rigid as steel.

Ai Hui felt like countless somber shadows were cast upon his life.

Eighty million!

Oh, Grandaunt, what were you trying to accomplish by parading across the city with beads worth eighty million yuan?

Oh, Grandaunt, you had brought out pearls worth eighty million yuan but why could you not even bring out a hundred and fifty yuan in cash?

How big of an amount do you think one hundred and fifty yuan was, for you to use an eighty million yuan bead bracelet as collateral?

Sword embryo, you disgraceful fellow! How dare you absorb that string of beads that were worth eighty million yuan? How black-hearted are you? You are even worse than Fatty!

Eighty million, my...my...my...

Ai Hui did not know what to do. He had gone through a lot in his

life, having experienced many life-threatening incidents in his time in the Wilderness, but those experiences were thoroughly useless for the current situation.

He would rather face every single wild beast in the Wilderness than face this young girl from the noodle shop.

One thing was sure, though, that even if he sold himself, he would still be unable to earn eighty million yuan.

Well, Ai Hui had nothing to lose now. "I have no idea what to do. Even if you put me for sale, I am not worth eighty million yuan. Noodle shop girl, I will do whatever you say. I will definitely not renege on this debt."

"Humph. If it wasn't for the fact that you did it unintentionally, you would have been dead today," Shi Xueman said coldly.

Ai Hui glared at Shi Xueman in fury and wanted to say, "A gentleman can be killed but not humiliated." However, under the direct, ominous gaze of Shi Xueman, he simply muttered under his breath and turned around.

That damned sword embryo.

Why couldn't he be like Fatty? If he was Fatty, he would have said something pretentiously, like, "If I owe you money, I am your master. Given that I owe you eighty million yuan, I am the master of masters. You should wait upon me....."

Fine. He had some morals after all and was unable to commit such a shameless act.

Ai Hui was crestfallen.

For a moment, Shi Xueman was also at a loss. The Calming Indigo Silk was gone. Should she kill this person? No matter what had happened, the person did help her out of goodwill at the noodle house. She had also observed the entire process of the Calming Indigo Silk being absorbed and she knew that it was unintentional.

Make him pay? Even if she sold this chap, the amount she would get would definitely not be sufficient to cover the eighty million yuan worth Calming Indigo Silk.

Bash him? That would be letting him off too easily.

At that moment, Shi Xueman was feeling sullen and down; in truth, she did not care about that eighty million, but her heart was broken beyond repair over losing her grandmother's treasure.

Hence, Shi Xueman could not bring herself to just let him go either.

The two of them silently faced each other, rigidly standing.

Lou Lan was speechless as looked at the two of them. He added weakly, "While it might not be of much use, I have two hundred and fifty thousand yuan."

Ai Hui shook his head. "I should own up to my own wrongdoings, Lou Lan. I do not need your money."

Shi Xueman gave a cold ‘humph’ again and kept silent.

Suddenly, Ai Hui violently turned and looked upwards to the fence. "Who’s there?"

At the very same moment, Shi Xueman fiercely turned towards the fence and asked, "Who’s there?"

The two of them had spoken in unison.

"Heh heh!" An evil cackle was heard as a black figure appeared on top of the fence.

Shi Xueman had sharp eyes and instantly recognized that the opposite party was wearing an elemental energy mask. With a voice that sounded like she was forcing the words through her teeth, she indignantly asked, "Why are you acting so mysterious?"

She had completely forgotten that she, too, was wearing an elemental energy mask.

"Ai Hui, I can’t believe you actually have a sweetheart!" the dark figure on the fence exclaimed eerily.

Sweetheart!

Ai Hui and Shi Xueman simultaneously furrowed their brows.

Pfft! Was this chap worthy to be called my sweetheart? The rage, which had been restrained by Shi Xueman the entire night, instantly erupted.

Pfft! I do not want a sweetheart who doesn’t even bring out a hundred and fifty yuan! She resulted in me being extorted by that damned sword embryo of a hefty amount of eighty million yuan! The fury that Ai Hui had been holding back also exploded.

Shi Xueman’s figure turned green as it disappeared from its position.

With a gloomy expression, Ai Hui wordlessly charged forward with his sword.

Chapter 41: One Slash

Duanmu Huanghun had theorized numerous possible scenarios in his mind, but the scene in front of him was totally out of his expectations.

He started to laugh.

This guy who had not attended a single introductory lesson nor opened any of his natal palaces had actually dared to challenge someone of his caliber. Duanmu Huanghun was truly speechless at his audacity.

As for Ai Hui's sweetheart, well, someone who was attracted to a wretched fool like Ai Hui could not possibly have any skill.

Today shall be the day I sort out these two adulterers and decapitate my inner demon!

Duanmu Huanghun let out an evil cackle; his eyes were practically glowing.

The next moment, however, his smile froze.

A blurry figure materialized right in front of him like a watery illusion. Fragments of a face—which certainly did not seem to belong to a beauty—appeared to pool together in front of his eyes.

So…fast!

A flawless palm, as white as snow, gently pressed on his shoulder.

Duanmu Huanghun’s pupils widened into large circles.

Dong!

A deep, low boom, like that of a cannon firing, resounded; the sound was truly intimidating.

The exquisite palm stood out like a full moon in the dark night, as surging streams of air formed a ring around it. The ring, which had yet to dissipate, was similar to the smoke rising from the barrel of a rifle that had just fired.

Duanmu Huanghun’s body had disappeared.

He instantly flung through the air like a cannonball, smashing hard into the opposite wall and causing a large piece of the wall to collapse onto the ground.

Amidst the rubble, Duanmu Huanghun struggled to get back to his feet. A rattan shield weaved out of brambles could be seen on his shoulder. That blow had left him feeling dizzy, and he was currently seeing stars.

What fearsome strength!

Was Ai Hui's sweetheart actually a wild bull?

This...this was not rational...

How does Ai Hui have such a ferocious girl?

Although Duanmu Huanghun's mind was completely fogged up, he quickly realized the predicament he was in. He could feel that his reactions had become sluggish.

Dang it!

His body was extremely worn out, his strength totally drained. Most of his effort was given to try and stay clear-headed and his body could now no longer keep up. That blow was so powerful that his muscles were still trembling, and as a result of his immense fatigue, he was unable to control the elemental energy within his body.

At that very moment, Ai Hui jumped onto the wall, sword in hand.

As he was leaping through the air, Ai Hui's anger intensified. When he noticed a figure struggling to climb out of the rubble, he shot off the wall without any hesitation, pouncing straight towards his target's silhouette.

From mid-air, he saw the girl from the noodle shop appear beside his target.

She noiselessly drove her palm into the target's rattan shield.

This made Ai Hui even angrier. Not only did she finish the noodles, she was not even going to leave him any soup!

He viciously charged in their direction.

Boom!

A sonic boom rang out again, and a ring-shaped surge of air exploded outwards.

Before Duanmu Huanghun could even gather his wits, another terrifying force had hit him, and his vision blurred as he was sent flying once again. This attack was almost fatal, thoroughly eviscerating the last shreds of consciousness that he had left.

Duanmu Huanghun, who had been completely unprepared for something like this, was utterly defeated. Unable to retaliate even slightly, Duanmu Huanghun was like a lamb walking into its own slaughter. Shi Xueman, who had been thoroughly enraged by the labeling of her as Ai Hui's "sweetheart," was relentless in her attacks.

Dong! Dong! Dong!

The familiar intimidating low, resounding booms sounded out one after another, reverberating throughout the dark, narrow alley.

Ai Hui saw his target accelerating through the air like a rocket, leaving him in the dust. Rather than relieving his anger, continuously being unable to catch up with his target had only amplified Ai Hui's rage by many times.

This was the most stifled he had felt in a long time; his anger was practically boiling over. He grabbed his sword tenaciously, the veins on the back of his hand bulging. The girl from the noodle stall was as fast as lightning and he could barely even capture her movements with his eyes.

Ai Hui, who was completely focused on his goal, did not notice that the sword embryo had gradually begun to change. The seed of the sword embryo between his eyebrows was rapidly absorbing the blue mist around it, similar to the scorched earth of the desert fervently absorbing rainwater.

The seed of the sword embryo was tirelessly absorbing the wisps of blue mist.

Ai Hui could only feel the grass sword in his hand becoming lighter. With his eyes on the prize, Ai Hui made a mad dash for the mouth of the alley.

Similar to Shi Xueman, the word “sweetheart,” too, had triggered something within Ai Hui. His anger could only be doused by slashing Duanmu Huanghun with his sword.

Eighty million yuan!

Eating a simple bowl of noodles had left him eighty million yuan in debt!

He was now spending every precious ounce of his elemental energy without hesitation, which resulted in a dramatic increase in speed.

The blurred outline of the sword embryo on his forehead became increasingly distinct as it absorbed the Calming Indigo Silk. Previously, Ai Hui could only faintly discern the presence of the sword embryo’s seed.

Although he would warmly nurture his sword embryo, his efforts had never largely paid off—until this time.

Nobody noticed that a faint blue light had crept over Ai Hui’s eyes. The blue glow illuminated his face, causing him to look all the more grave and stern, like a reef hidden deep in the sea.

The speed at which the sword embryo’s seed absorbed the blue mist started to accelerate.

Ai Hui’s movement speed was also steadily increasing.

Ai Hui's anger grew and grew as he dashed down the alley. He was moving so fast that his vision was affected; the girl from the noodle shop and his target had become a blur.

The sound of the wind irrigated his ear canals as he swept past the lights of the houses on both sides of the alley.

He had never run at such high speeds before, even when chased by dire beasts. The fluids within his body surged like flowing magma, and the deafening roar of the wind in his ears competed with that of his heart pounding.

But…this speed was still not enough!

Although the silhouette of his target was right in front of him, it seemed like it would forever be out of his reach.

What other means are there…

The grass sword in Ai Hui's hands bobbed up and down with the movement of his body, swaying like leaves drifting in the wind.

The unique rhythm seemed to rouse a memory that was dormant within the recesses of his mind, and the grass sword started to resonate with his soul. With a light flick of his wrist, the grass sword swayed like a feather, gently slashing at the air ahead with a crisp, humming sound.

The oncoming wind was seemingly sliced through the middle by the sword, smoothly sliding past Ai Hui.

Ai Hui's body left a streaking, blurry trail as he dashed forward.

His solemn expression did not budge an inch and his glowing blue pupils showed no signs of emotion. They were firmly locked onto his target.

The soles of his feet forcefully pushed off the ground, propelling him into the air.

At that moment, the last strand of Calming Indigo Silk was absorbed by the sword embryo and the blue glow in his eyes vanished. The sounds that had enveloped Ai Hui also abruptly vanished—it was as if he had now entered a soundless void.

Not a single sound could be heard.

A familiar yet seemingly foreign sword manual flipped open, as if it had been practiced countless times.

When the light from the mouth of the alley came into sight, Shi Xueman had finally vented most of her anger. She had used the most violent method she knew, which was continuously blasting Duanmu Huanghun more than ten times, with each blast sending him flying further down the alley.

Looking at the unconscious Duanmu Huanghun flying out into

the alley's opening like a sandbag, she revealed a look of satisfaction. This fellow deserved to be severely punished for speaking out of turn. He may have escaped death, but at least it was not without enduring a living hell first.

He would likely be bedridden for half a month before he could even get up again.

She suddenly sensed something and briskly turned around!

Beneath the night sky, Ai Hui leaped into the air like a giant bird, the darkness acting as his wings.

An indescribable flash of light pierced through the sky.

It was as if time stood still.

Chapter 42: Calmly

It was the cheapest and simplest type of grass sword available, with no blacksmith's signature or any ornaments on it whatsoever. Many weapon shops would not even bother to display such a sword on their shelves; instead, they would likely tie such swords with rope and toss them in a corner, leaving them to collect dust. The selling price for such weapons was less than a thousand yuan.

Even the practice swords that Shi Xueman used during training were worth tens of times more than that grass sword.

She never imagined that a run-of-the-mill grass sword could emit such a resplendent light.

The light emitted from the blade resembled that of brilliant fireworks—it was the most dazzling sword glint she had ever seen. The moment the grass sword left Ai Hui's hand, it transformed into a ray of brilliance that was as fine as a steady drizzle. It left a gorgeous trail of light as it pierced through the air, flying towards the hooligan at the mouth of the alley.

Buzz! Buzz! Buzz!

The grass sword made short work of Duanmu Huanghun's clothes—it was as though countless hands were tearing away at them, and they were instantly shredded away, scattering around him like butterflies.

Shi Xueman, whose eyes were opened wide, quickly looked away.

Plop!

A smooth, pale body soared through the air from the alley, directly landing onto the main street.

At first, the pedestrians were rather dazed by the sight, but a couple of girls soon started shrieking uncontrollably.

Shi Xueman was visibly shocked, her gaze inadvertently landing on Ai Hui, who was currently in the air. That sword technique was definitely many times more skillful than what she had witnessed earlier. Could this be his true caliber?

She had met a few experts of swordplay, but not even a single one had left her in this much awe. Swordplay has been on the decline for quite some while, and although those experts possessed an abnormal fighting strength, they always appeared to be shrouded in an aura of despondence and lack of ambition. She greatly disliked the vibe they gave off and hence never had much of an interest in so-called swordplay experts.

However, that sword technique earlier..... it was truly amazing!

After Ai Hui unleashed that move, his entire body felt like it was moving independently of time. Snapping out of that soundless state of complete concentration, he felt as though he had woken up from a dream. His surroundings were utterly empty. Eh, in the air? He looked down and was instantly dumbfounded.

This high?

I actually…jumped this high?

Not good!

Ai Hui’s body started to plummet rapidly. His arms and legs were flailing in all directions and his face was a deathly white. He remembered the time he fell off a cliff this high in the Wilderness; he ended up half-dead and required half a month to recover.

Even worse, he discovered that his hands and legs had gone soft, and his elemental energy was thoroughly drained. Even the sword he was holding……was thrown away! Help!

Shi Xueman was frozen, still awestruck. By the time she had snapped out of her daze, Ai Hui’s situation was critical—he was a mere ten feet above the ground.

With a whistling sound, a wave of yellow sand swiftly swept past.

Lou Lan had arrived in the nick of time.

Although Ai Hui had a lingering fear after being carried by Lou Lan, he gave Lou Lan a pat on the shoulders. “Thank you, Lou Lan!”

“You’re welcome, Ai Hui,” came the overjoyed reply.

Ai Hui was satisfied with the results of his sword technique. Killing was not permitted in the Induction Ground, but upon seeing the naked body of the other party lying in the middle of the street for all to see, his anger dissipated quite a bit.

Suddenly, he frowned. “Lou Lan, look at that guy’s body. Doesn’t it look a bit familiar?”

Lou Lan turned to face the body. A yellow light flickered in his eyes as he stated matter-of-factly, “Yes, indeed. An analysis of his build reveals a match of greater than ninety percent with that of Bangwan, whom you had previously healed.”

“Oh, so it is Bangwan!” The revelation left him laughing with indignation.

Ever since the last time, when Bangwan had bluffed others by saying that he hadn’t yet recovered from his cold, Ai Hui had felt that his morals were highly questionable and treated him with disdain. Looking at him now, Ai Hui felt that he was indeed a childish, delinquent youth. He shook his head in disappointment. “Let’s go back, Lou Lan.”

From their conversation, Shi Xueman could discern a rough idea, and was under the impression that that naked figure was one of Ai Hui’s classmates named Bangwan. She simply had no idea that he was actually the great genius Duanmu Huanghun who had just dazzled the entire Induction Ground.

The flames of anger in her heart finally satiated, Shi Xueman started to calm down. Losing the Calming Indigo Silk may be difficult to bear, but nothing good would come out of harping on about it. As she walked back, she tried to think of ways to solve the issue.

She was not generous enough to simply let him off, but what kind of compensation should she seek?

Walking down the alley, Lou Lan enthusiastically said, “Ai Hui, I think I can restore the neighboring walls that have been damaged!”

Ai Hui was practically moved to tears. “Lou Lan, you’re really the best!”

“I’m just a sand puppet.” Lou Lan was especially glad that he could help Ai Hui.

Only with Lou Lan could he experience the warmth of spring. Ai Hui was deeply touched. He turned around to face the girl from the noodle shop, his face grim. “So tell me, how exactly do you want me to settle this?”

Shi Xueman had just thought of something, but Ai Hui’s tone made her furrow her long, shapely brows. She retorted, “Your tone makes it sound as if I’m the one who owes you eighty million yuan.”

Ai Hui was momentarily embarrassed, so he relaxed his tone. “Just tell me, what do I have to do?”

“You definitely can’t return the eighty million yuan all at one go,” Shi Xue Man said while giving Ai Hui a glance. “I have two conditions. The first is that you must become my sparring partner for swordplay and instruct me accordingly. The next would be to help me find someone.”

Ai Hui heaved a sigh of relief. “Great! It’s a deal then. I’ll teach you swordplay as well as help you to find that person in exchange for writing off my debt of eighty million yuan.”

“You wish!” Shi Xueman exclaimed grimly. “This is only the interest.”

Ai Hui was instantly enraged, and he warned, “Noodle shop girl, you better not take advantage of me!”

Shi Xueman remained unmoved. She said flatly, “How about you ask your sand puppet friend for the current interest rates that are out on the market?”

Ai Hui looked towards Lou Lan.

Lou Lan reported honestly, “The interest rates on loans generally start from ten percent.”

Ten percent was not really all that much. Wait, what's ten percent of eighty million yuan?

Eight million!

Ai Hui's eyes grew wide with fear.

"See, I didn't try to cheat you." Shi Xueman glared at him. "You think your swordplay is worth eight million?"

Ai Hui did not even utter a word.

With the ongoing decline of swordsmanship, even renowned experts of swordplay would not command eight million yuan. Moreover, Ai Hui was not so conceited to claim that his swordplay was on par with that of those experts.

The greatest tragedy in the world was to be stuck without a retort against the logical and factual arguments of others.

"I'm giving you the task of finding the person because you live in Central Pine City and should thus be more familiar with it." Although Shi Xueman felt that entrusting this task to such a fellow was rather ridiculous, any additional aid would be beneficial.

Ai Hui asked dejectedly, "What does this person look like?"

"No idea." Shi Xueman shook her head.

Ai Hui looked at Shi Xueman, suspicion written all over his face. “Are you trying to make a fool out of me? How am I supposed to find someone without knowing what he looks like?”

Shi Xueman muttered, “The last time I met him was in a blind battle at the training hall. Starting your search from the training ground should make things easier.”

“Training hall?” he blurted. It was now Ai Hui’s turn to sneer. “Lou Lan, how many training halls are there in Central Pine City?”

Lou Lan once again stated matter-of-factly, “Forty-six.”

Shi Xueman declared, “But of course, I still have more information.”

Chapter 43: The Pervert and the Message Tree

Duanmu Huanghun woke up in a daze.

There appeared to be a commotion around him...

Why was he feeling so cold? Why were his hands and feet all soft and his body so sore? Was he sick?

Duanmu Huanghun opened his eyes with much effort. Through his hazy vision, he saw quite a number of human-shaped figures surrounding him from above.

Could it be that the senior leadership was here to visit him out of concern for his illness?

The sounds around him gradually became more distinct.

“Wow, what an exhibitionist!”

“He’s really not wearing any clothes at all! Heavens, our school actually has people like that!”

“Could he be a rapist? Maybe he was caught in adultery?”

……

Not wearing any clothes…feeling cold from head to toe…

When realization dawned upon Duanmu Huanghun, he forced his eyes open. His face was planted on the ground, and he was surrounded by a large number of legs. The cooling sensation all over his body made him freeze in horror. All he wanted to do now was to dig a hole and hide in it.

Too…too vicious!

Duanmu Huanghun almost stopped breathing. The unwanted attention made him utterly embarrassed. He had never, in his entire life, experienced such helplessness before. He felt that his life was now dark beyond compare.

That nefarious Ai Hui and his partner in crime were simply too ruthless!

Duanmu Huanghun suddenly remembered that he was wearing an elemental energy mask and was hence unrecognizable. He let out a sigh of relief.

He needed to escape, immediately!

He could sense that the surrounding crowd was constantly growing larger, but the elemental energy within his body was not responding to his commands. He was filled with regret. Why did he have to pick a fight with Ai Hui when his own strength was

sapped?

He forcefully activated his natal residence, disregarding the consequent internal injury and the fact that he would need half a month to heal.

The onlookers' vision blurred as the naked figure on the ground vanished.

"Wow, an expert!"

"Public decency is dying with each passing day! How can such an expert be so shameless?"

"We need to lodge a complaint with the administration! That pervert must be caught!"

……

Pervert!

When he heard the mob's angry cries behind him, Duanmu Huanghun spat out a mouthful of hot blood. His internal injury immediately became more severe.

Ai Hui, you'd better watch out!

Duanmu Huanghun gritted his teeth.

……

Vanguard Training Hall.

Ai Hui drew himself up, preparing to listen to Shi Xueman's description of the target; after all, he had absorbed her Calming Indigo Silk. Even though the sword embryo was to blame, Ai Hui felt truly apologetic. Furthermore, the noodle shop girl did not seem to be capricious and was, in fact, a pretty decent person.

If he was in her shoes, he would chop the person who took his eighty million into mincemeat without any hesitation.

Since it was his mistake, there was nothing more to be said. Ai Hui knew the value of eighty million yuan; he was not some naive kid who knew nothing about the real world.

The noodle shop girl's good temperament was reflected in the fact that she did not get physical, in spite of possessing such power.

He was thus very serious about accomplishing his task.

Noticing Ai Hui's sincerity, Shi Xueman had a somewhat better impression of him. She began to list down the target's characteristics, counting the points with her fingers. "He is proficient in close quarters combat, highly experienced in real combat, and has a vicious fighting style."

Ai Hui instantly knew that this young lady didn't have much experience. "The information you have given is too general. Do you have his name? Maybe his age? How tall is he? Is he fat, skinny or well-built? Did he have anything unique about him? Perhaps some kind of deformity or disability? What about his hair and skin color?"

Shi Xueman realized that Ai Hui wanted more specific details. She quickly responded, "It was during a blind battle, and he didn't leave his full name. He is most probably a youngster. His height and build were rather similar to yours. As for other special characteristics...that's right, he had a lot of strength."

Ai Hui shook his head. "Still too little information."

Shi Xueman was slightly anxious. She clenched her teeth and racked her brain. Suddenly, her eyes lit up as she offered, "Oh, and he was very powerful."

"How powerful? What was his base level?"

"Possibly more powerful than me." She then added, "Not much stronger but not much weaker either."

Ai Hui nodded and agreed, "That does narrow our search down by quite a bit."

He was not simply shooting his mouth off. The power that she

had exhibited earlier had sent a lingering fear crawling up his spine—even someone as arrogant as Duanmu Huanghun was beaten to a pulp.

He reflected for a while, before asking prudently, “What’s your base level? It’s fine if you’re not willing to share.”

Shi Xueman replied spontaneously, “I have achieved six palaces.”

“Absolute arts?”

“Of course!”

Even though Ai Hui had already known she was fierce and powerful, discovering her base level still made him involuntarily suck in air through his teeth.

This girl…even Fatty would not dare to tell her that the debtor is the boss!

Ai Hui was glad that he had no plans to renege on his debt; otherwise, he might have already ended up in the sewers as a pile of dregs.

He sighed lightly, hiding his astonishment. “The target must be a renowned expert, further limiting the scope of our search.”

Little did he expect the seemingly ordinary girl from the noodle

shop to shake her head and disagree. “No! I am very familiar with all the renowned experts of the Induction Ground, and he is not one of them. The target is definitely a new student, someone who I have not traded blows with before.”

Ai Hui’s mind buzzed; the hidden implications of her words are rather frightening. What did she mean by being “familiar with the renowned experts?” Judging from the phrase ‘not traded blows with before’, they were definitely more than just acquaintances.

Furthermore, she had said it with absolute certainty. Didn’t that imply that she had sparred with them before?

Ai Hui felt his mouth turn dry. How unlucky must he be to owe someone so powerful eighty million yuan!

He took a deep breath, trying to remain calm. “How could any of the new students possibly have such a base level of six palaces?”

“Why not?” she countered, disagreeing. “For all we know, he could have a strange character and prefers to keep a low-profile. Maybe he enjoys preying on the weak.”

Ai Hui considered the idea for a while. “In other words, the target is a new student, who is actually an expert, with a build similar to mine. Also, his base level might be of six palaces or possibly even higher, knows an absolute art, has a vicious fighting style, and is proficient in blind battling as well as submission moves.”

“That should be about it!” Shi Xueman was very pleased.

Although he was young, Ai Hui’s maturity, calmness, and attention to detail left her highly satisfied.

Ai Hui decided to first temper her expectations. “I will put my best effort for this task, but luck usually plays a large role in finding someone. I cannot guarantee success.”

“It’s all right,” Shi Xueman casually replied. “You owe me eighty million yuan anyway, and I’m sure we’ll find plenty of things that you can do to pay off the yearly interest. As for reneging on your debt, nobody in the entire Induction Ground has dared to do such a thing to me before.”

The noodle shop girl’s callous words made the hairs on the back of Ai Hui’s neck stand on end.

Ai Hui swallowed hard. “What about the swordplay coaching?”

“I should be in the city once per fortnight. When the time comes, I’ll look for you here.” Shi Xueman observed her surroundings. “It just so happens that this is also a training hall. I’ll notify you one day in advance. Luckily there’s a message tree too, so keep a look out for it.”

“Message tree?” Ai Hui had no idea of what she was talking about.

Shi Xueman could tell that Ai Hui was clueless. She pointed at a seemingly unremarkable tree in the corner of the yard and explained, “That is a message tree. The leaves of a message tree are different from those of a normal tree, as every single leaf has the same pattern of veins. When it receives a message, the tree drops one of its leaves with the message written on it. It is a wood elemental technique. Did you not learn this in class?”

Ai Hui was astounded. He had not noticed anything special about that tree despite having swept the courtyard many times.

Shi Xueman walked to the message tree and plucked one of its leaves. She produced a book seemingly out of nowhere.

She opened the book and placed the leaf on one its pages, and a warm glow soon enveloped the leaf.

Shi Xueman suddenly cried out in shock.

Chapter 44: First Generation Message Tree

Hearing her cry out in surprise, Ai Hui could not help but ask, "Is there a problem?"

Shi Xueman shook her head and only spoke a moment later. "It’s nothing. I just didn’t expect the pattern of veins on this message tree to be this ancient."

"Ancient?" Ai Hui was muddled.

Shi Xueman raised her head and looked at him strangely. "You didn’t learn this in school?"

"I am a new student!" Ai Hui exclaimed.

He had a poor foundational knowledge and a low base level, yet his swordplay was strangely brilliant. Shi Xueman glanced at him, wondering who could have groomed such a freak.

She began to explain. "Message trees were invented by wood elementalists from the Jadeite Forest. These wood elementalists discovered that trees communicated using a unique language, which allowed them to transmit very fragmented information. Building on the language of the trees, the wood elementalists developed a message tree that possessed a greater informational capacity and an increased transmission range. Message trees differentiate from one another through the patterns on their veins. As the trees became more widely used, the wood elementalists in the Jadeite Forest realized that trees’ venation was not complex

enough to handle the increasing demand. As a result, they developed the second generation of message trees which have a more complex pattern of veins. As of today, there are already three generations."

Ai Hui asked thoughtfully, "So is this a first generation or second generation message tree?"

"First generation," Shi Xueman concluded.

"What an antique," Ai Hui said, as he gazed at the message tree in admiration. Perhaps he was influenced by the noodle shop girl's words, but he suddenly felt that this sprawling tree had a very simple, yet desolate feel to it.

"Looks like this training hall has been here for quite a while," Shi Xueman noted as she scanned her surroundings. "What about the owner of this training hall?"

"He left twenty years ago," Ai Hui said flatly. "It was already abandoned when I arrived. Could it have been of some importance?"

"Definitely," Shi Xueman nodded. "The first generation of message trees were not extensively popularized and were only used by a rather small circle of people. The original owner of this training hall must have been a rather remarkable person."

When it came to life-and-death experience, Ai Hui was miles

ahead of Shi Xueman, but with regard to historical and scholarly knowledge, Shi Xueman was naturally much more advanced.

"Regardless of its past, can it still be used?" asked Ai Hui.

He did not care an ounce about the training hall's past. So what if it was of historical importance? Would he get some money out of it? Certainly not. Ai Hui felt nothing for its potentially glorious history.

No one could compete with the swordsmen when it came to talking about history and romanticism.

Just look at those large swordsmen schools—they were easily around for thousands and thousands of years. Although the swordsmen were masters with realms many times higher than those of the Avalon of Five Elements, they could hardly claim to have ruled over the entire Cultivation World.

In the end, they were still wiped out, swept away by the tide of history.

Ai Hui was hence not interested in any of the 'history stuff' that the noodle shop girl was talking about. First generation or not, the most important matter was whether it could still be used.

"It can be used," Shi Xueman answered, a little bit astonished. Someone who found out that he was staying in a training ground of such historical significance should be excited and curious to find

out more, and maybe even hope to uncover an absolute art or two.

The person standing in front of her, however, was completely aloof.

"It’s settled then," Ai Hui said, nodding.

Shi Xueman shut her book. Looking at the time, she also nodded. "Okay, keep a watch on your message tree. If you have any information for me, you can send it to me via the message tree as well. Here is a leaf from my message tree, although I doubt you’d know how to use it."

Shi Xueman placed her own leaf on the branch from which she previously plucked a leaf. A soft, green light appeared between the leaf and the branch, joining the two.

"To send me a message, simply write on this leaf, but try to limit your word-count. Messages that I send you will appear here as well. Remember to take note and receive them."

Ai Hui turned his head and called out, "Lou Lan, I’ll leave this to you! Come find me at the usual place if there’s anything."

"Alright, Ai Hui," Lou Lan replied happily.

Shi Xueman glared at him and commanded coldly, "You’d better practice hard. The more powerful you become, the sooner you’ll be able to repay your debt of eighty million yuan."

With that, she swiftly departed.

Ai Hui let out a huge sigh, as he collapsed into the rattan chair. He whined, "Lou Lan, why am I so unlucky?"

A yellow light flickered in Lou Lan’s eyes as he deeply pondered the question. A few moments later, he returned back to normal and stated truthfully, "This question is too profound for me, Ai Hui. I don’t have any answer."

"Eighty million yuan..."

Ai Hui felt his eyelids grow heavy, and the regular sound of his sighs lulled him into dreamland.

Lou Lan had already left when Ai Hui suddenly woke up in the dead of night. The moment he opened his eyes, he was met with a sky full of stars. He lost himself for a moment, deeply awed by the boundless and mysterious night sky.

It took a good while before he snapped out of it, and he then promptly sat up in his chair.

During his training in the Suspending Golden Pagoda, his biggest change was that he was able to fall asleep because the intensity of his training would completely exhaust him. Resting against the walls of the pagoda, he would often fall asleep without even realizing it.

The seed of the sword embryo came to his mind. Although that detestable thing had absorbed the Calming Indigo Silk, which was worth eighty million yuan, it had allowed him to unleash such an amazing sword technique.

...

His first thought was to reach for his sword, but he soon let out a bitter laugh.

His only grass sword was already destroyed.

He shook his head and couldn’t help but let out another laugh. Since he was not able to sleep, he would train.

Two days later.

Ai Hui was carrying travel bags that were bursting with blood-and-bone strengthening cake as he waved farewell to Lou Lan. "Goodbye, Lou Lan!" he shouted.

Lou Lan dissolved into a pile of sand, subsequently transforming into a huge clenched fist of yellow sand. "Ai Hui, all the best!" Lou Lan shouted in return.

The sun’s warmth enveloped everyone on the streets. Ai Hui had gotten rid of the misfortune of the past two days, sweeping the

debt to the back of his mind. He was now filled with hope for the future and self-motivation.

"Did you know? Two nights ago, an extremely skilled pervert appeared here!"

"Oh yes, I've heard of it. A naked man reportedly ran onto the main street."

"Indeed, it's so scary! What's more, the pervert was highly skilled. Seriously! What if he takes a fancy to me? How am I supposed to retaliate? I'm so worried! A pity it's not our Huanghun, otherwise I would gladly not resist."

"What nonsense! Our Huanghun is such an upright young man!"

"I haven't seen our Huanghun for the past few days though."

"Our idol is injured, I heard he needs to rest for at least ten days. Have you forgotten that he tired himself out too much when he entered the city and fell as a result? He must have been injured since then. I don't even know how serious it is, how worrying!"

"Yes, he's so delicate yet he still went to challenge Gu Tianning and the others. It's so heart-wrenching that he's so stubborn!"

"That's what I love about him!"

...

Listening to the bunch of young girls chattering away, Ai Hui sneered in his heart. That childish, delinquent brat! That double-crossing backstabber! He was such a disgrace! He deserved to be spurned!

Ai Hui raised his head loftily and walked out the city gate, full of disdain.

When he eventually reached the Suspending Golden Pagoda, Ai Hui felt stirred up quite a bit.

Such training may be seen by others as dull and arduous, but to Ai Hui, it instead made him excited and gave him a feeling that he was steadily progressing.

Chapter 45: Unlocking the Natal Residence

The metal winds of the Suspending Golden Pagoda howled and screeched, but Ai Hui remained unmoved. It was as though he had fallen asleep; he seemed to have simply given himself up to the wrath of the metal winds, allowing them to fling him around the pagoda as they pleased.

The metallic luster on his skin became deeper with each passing day, and before long, it gave his skin the appearance of old copper. This was the sign that Ai Hui's [Copper Skin] was about to take shape.

Tempering the body with the metal element had always followed a certain dogma. The development of [Copper Skin], [Iron Muscles], [Steel Bones], [Silver Marrow] and [Golden blood] represented the five stages of such temperance, and achieving all five stages resulted in a very rarely seen metal element body of the purest form.

However, it was as they say: it is easy to develop elemental energy, but difficult to temper one's body.

This meant that as long as one had a decent aptitude, they could have some improvement through the accumulation of small amounts of elemental energy. On the other hand, body tempering required one to go through various long and arduous processes, making it difficult to achieve success without sufficient patience and determination.

Within the Avalon of Five Elements, there had always been controversy regarding metal element body tempering. Many elementalists believed that even with immense training, the human body could never match up to the physical prowess of dire beasts and that thus, body tempering was not a worthwhile pursuit. Furthermore, as one's base level increased, the fighting potential granted by elemental energy would start to far outclass that of the physical body.

As a matter of fact, the opening of each palace would grant an incredible boon to one's elemental energy, advancing their fighting ability by leaps and bounds. More advanced body tempering techniques, however, had a less direct effect on one's fighting ability.

Despite that, mainstream practices still involved at least some level of body tempering. The common opinion was that although elemental energy has a greater destructive power, a robust, perceptive body was more capable of utilizing elemental energy.

This was also the path that was followed by most metal elementalists.

Even the first stage, [Copper Skin], was usually only attained by students who had opened six palaces.

Besides the low cost-benefit ratio, beginners would often not choose to practice body tempering because the elemental energy they absorbed during the initial stages of learning tended to be of a more gentle nature, and such gentle elemental energy made it difficult to advance in body tempering.

That problem, however, was non-existent for Ai Hui.

The metal elemental energy in the metal winds are extremely harsh, and apart from tempering Ai Hui's physical body, the scattered metal elemental energy also yielded a purer form of elemental energy than what was absorbed by most beginners. As a result, even though he had a lower quantity of refined elemental energy, its purity was unmatched.

Armed with Lou Lan's blood-and-bone-strengthening cake, Ai Hui's training sessions were even more effective. Ai Hui improved by leaps and bounds, particularly in tempering his metal element body.

Lou Lan's blood-and-bone-strengthening cake was so effective that it almost moved Ai Hui to tears. Not only was it useful in healing his internal injuries, the cake was also very helpful to his body tempering. Since Ai Hui had not opened his natal residence yet, the elemental energy was especially damaging to his flesh.

Ai Hui was aware of the many bodily changes he was experiencing, of which his increasing physical strength was the most obvious. If he ever fought head-to-head with that guy with the [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation] again, Ai Hui would most certainly not be as easily exhausted.

If he mastered [Copper Skin] as well, he would then be able to withstand that fellow's powerful legs, and the fight would boil down to a battle of endurance of elemental energy.

The previous engagement may have been short and pathetic, but Ai Hui had received considerable benefit from it. His base level may not have increased, but the battle was an immense eye-opener and had raised his confidence.

He was extremely motivated after seeing the absolute art. To this date, he was still trying to figure out how his opponent's [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation] worked—it amazed him to no end. The advanced elementalists he had met in the Wilderness were truly formidable, but at the very least he knew where their power came from. However, the mysteries of the absolute arts were beyond his superficial knowledge.

If his opponent had been more experienced in combat, he would have been easily defeated, and Lou Lan and he would not have stood any chance of victory.

That very battle also made him more confident. He had not opened his natal residence yet and was thus considerably weaker than his opponent. Despite that, he was able to hold his own for long, and was eventually even able to make a comeback and defeat his opponent with, admittedly, Lou Lan's help. The victory certainly gave him a reason to feel proud.

He was not as weak as he had initially thought.

Body tempering was an unexpected surprise, but Ai Hui did not lose sight of his main objective—pursuing elemental energy.

As time crept by, the elemental energy within Ai Hui's body increased, the metallic luster on his skin further deepened, and the pagoda wall became dented a little more. Every single day was filled with progress.

Ai Hui lost himself in his training, barely noticing the flow of time.

He was disheveled, filthy, and exuded an unpleasant smell. Although he had finished consuming all the blood-and-bone-strengthening cake, Ai Hui did not return to the city—he had a strong premonition that his breakthrough was nigh.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

As was his routine, he slammed into the pagoda wall with his [Arching Fish Back]. The contact between the sturdy metal wall and his back muscles generated a loud, booming noise.

Beads of sweat exploded into a fine mist, engulfing Ai Hui as it surged forth with each slam.

After the last trace of metal elemental energy had been scattered, Ai Hui would sit cross-legged as always.

Something felt different the moment he began to circulate his elemental energy. The circulation of refined elemental energy was usually smooth and easily controlled.

Now, however, the elemental energy within his body felt rather wild, and circulated with great momentum, surging and raging against his control.

Ai Hui suddenly realized that the time to unlock the natal residence had arrived.

The elemental energy within his body had reached the limit that his muscles could bear. Like a reservoir bursting with water, the slightest disturbance would make it flow out of control.

Unlocking the natal residence was Ai Hui's first goal, and he was well prepared for it. The Induction Ground had a wealth of experience when it came to unlocking the natal residence, as they had encountered all kinds of situations before, and they hence had a solid treatise on the subject.

Ai Hui had learned from his past experiences that adequate preparation was the key to maintaining his composure. He valued the unlocking of the natal residence highly, and hence had a thorough understanding of every possible situation that may occur.

Very few people would develop their elemental energy to such an extent before unlocking their natal residence. After all, the amount of elemental energy that can be stored in the physical body was pathetically little compared to the natal residence, and it was an endeavor that did not have any evident benefits.

Few, however, did not mean none.

Throughout history, there had been several others who had similar conditions to Ai Hui, some by chance and others on purpose. The facts for such scenarios were also very clear.

At this moment, he remained completely unfazed, calm and collected.

He channeled his thoughts, slowly pushing the elemental energy of his body. Slowing down was the key to circulating elemental energy that was in such a state of overflow.

Steadily circulating the elemental energy, he gradually increased its speed, preventing it from going out of control.

Ai Hui's body began to emit a ring of silver light rays, a phenomenon caused by the circulation of elemental energy that had been developed to the brim. It indicated the dispersal of elemental energy and was certainly not good news.

Following his slow acceleration of elemental energy, the light gradually disappeared, and Ai Hui descended into a state of quietness. It was almost as if he was asleep.

However, the situation within Ai Hui's body was entirely different.

Chapter 46: The Opening of the Natal Residence

With the passing of each day, Ai Hui's elemental energy's circulation speed increased by one point.

After six consecutive days, the elemental energy within Ai Hui's body had increased to its maximum limit. Ai Hui felt that if it circulated any faster, he would lose control of his elemental energy.

At present, Ai Hui was almost drowning in the roaring revolution of the elemental energy within his body—it seemed to resemble the raging tornado of the Suspending Golden Pagoda. This was the first time Ai Hui experienced the astonishing effect of the revolution of the elemental energy, and if he had not read about similar situations, he would have now been at a loss of what to do.

Ai Hui was exceptionally calm since he was prepared for various different scenarios. What was there to be worried about?

Spinning with maximum speed, the elemental energy ignited a roar within his body, and his muscles started to tremble uncontrollably. In the midst of this high-frequency vibration, the elemental energy resembled the rushing torrents of a tsunami as it poured into Ai Hui's lungs.

In the past, whenever the revolution of the elemental energy had reached his lungs, it would meet an invisible barrier and would split into pieces like a delicate piece of paper.

Ai Hui jolted; his lungs had suddenly started to emit intense silver rays, which penetrated through his whole body. Despite sitting in the darkness, Ai Hui's silver lungs were clearly visible.

He involuntarily took a deep breath and heard a long hiss, which had a vague resemblance to the sound of a golden horn. Like a whale inhaling in rivers, a clear, visible stream of air current poured into Ai Hui's nose and rapidly entered his lungs.

This sound was the initial indicator of the natal residence being opened. In reality, the moment the lung's residence had opened, it had generated a form of suction, affecting the air particles, and in turn, creating the sound.

Ai Hui was unable to describe how comfortable he was feeling—it was as if he was injected with a new lease of life. All his fatigue was gone with a flourish, and the initial, violent elemental energy had stabilized immediately, becoming unusually meek.

He was unable to control the joy that spread across his face. Although he had found his path and was confident of opening the natal residence when he had first started training in the Suspending Golden Pagoda, he was still unable to control the delight of actually achieving his goal.

He now accomplished the first goal he had made after entering the Induction Ground!

He was, in fact, slightly shocked, and was in a momentary state

of disbelief.

This was much faster than he had initially expected.

The pressure that he had been experiencing since arriving at the Induction Ground now lessened significantly. At least he would not have to worry about being unable to open the natal residence within a year.

Ai Hui, having matured at an early age, could gradually calm down from his state of happiness. The opening of the natal residence was just the beginning. To be a qualified elementalist who can be officially registered in the book, he still had a long way to go.

Ai Hui widened his eyes and started to inspect his body. A few moments later, he was unable to resist the trace of happiness that spread to his face.

The opening of the natal residence had indeed brought about tremendous changes to his body.

The most distinct improvement was in the revolution of his elemental energy—the speed had increased tremendously. Ai Hui reckoned that the speed had been increased by onefold. This implied that the time for one complete revolution was now halved and hence his elemental energy would be refined with speed greater by onefold in one day.

At that moment, Ai Hui finally understood why average beginners were unwilling to train their elemental energy to the optimal point before attempting to open the natal residence.

After opening the natal residence, the efficiency of his training was drastically different compared to earlier.

Furthermore, the improvement brought about by the faster revolution of the elemental energy had an enormous impact on improving his battle skills. This also implied that the amount of time to develop the elemental energy was halved while the potential force of the elemental energy had improved by onefold.

The little pride that Ai Hui was feeling vanished like smoke in thin air.

His battling experience and keen six senses would help a lot in combat, but regarding absolute skills, he was totally lacking.

Opening the natal residence had a tremendous impact. Whenever a palace was opened, his strength would increase by leap and bounds. What would happen if he managed to open eight palaces? What kind of formidable speed would his elemental energy rotate with?

An immobile fist does not hold any threat, and similarly, motionless elemental energy would also be harmless.

The effect of elemental energy would only be exhibited when it

was in motion.

Having a rich combat experience, Ai Hui was able to easily understand this point.

His opponent's moves were as fast as lightning. The effect of his opponent's training was stronger by ten or even hundreds of times. Experience would definitely not be sufficient enough to make up for the drastic gap between their abilities.

Ai Hui calmed down and went to the front of the fence. He took a deep breath, and using his back, he knocked violently toward the Suspending Golden Pagoda. The moment his back was in contact with the wall, his entire body trembled.

[Arching Fish Back]!

Bang!

With a booming noise that was much clearer and louder than usual, the wall of the pagoda, which was harder than steel, became like rubber. The wall sank lower into the ground as a noticeable dent appeared on it.

Next to it was the dent that he had made when he was previously training the [Arching Fish Back]. There was a notable difference between the two.

Despite having trained in the [Arching Fish Back] for so long, the

initial dent was only half as deep as the dent that he had just made.

The increase of his elemental energy was indeed extraordinary.

Ai Hui's heart was filled with gratitude. Coming to the Induction Ground was indeed the correct decision.

Ai Hui was perfectly content and did not continue his training. Instead, he prepared to head back to the city.

He needed time to adapt to the changes of his new body and to supplement his newly found knowledge. What he had learned previously was basically all about the opening of the natal residence, and now that he had reached a new base level, he had practically no knowledge of the later stages.

A hasty but blind training session would only hinder his progress towards his goal.

If he did not ponder and reflect upon his training, and if he did not find the Suspending Golden Pagoda, his training would definitely not be as successful as now. Training was like a long battle; sufficient preparation was a must if he wanted to succeed.

Hence, Ai Hui needed to attend lessons.

Furthermore, Ai Hui had not yet forgotten about his promise to the girl from the noodle shop to find a particular person. A debt of eighty million yuan could not be simply forgotten.

For a long time, the Suspending Golden Pagoda would be a suitable place to train. Where else could he find such a good place to train, improve his elemental energy, and even practice the [Arching Fish Back]?

……

It was dusk when Ai Hui returned to the Vanguard Training Hall.

The first thing Lou Lan said when he saw Ai Hui was “You need a bath, Ai Hui.”

It was only after Lou Lan’s reminder that Ai Hui noticed how dirty his body was, and so he hurriedly ran to take a bath.

Afterward, Ai Hui felt so refreshed that he felt like he was floating on air. He laid languidly on the rattan chair. During the continuous training, Ai Hui was so focused that he had forgotten about everything else. While he did not feel anything then, later on, the fatigue had hit him suddenly like a concealed virus.

Lying on the rattan chair, Ai Hui was so lazy that he did not want to move a finger. Even his tone when talking was similar to a pig’s snort. “Lou Lan, thank you for your blood-and-bone-strengthening cake! It helped tremendously!”

“Really? I am happy to be able to help you, Ai Hui.” Lou Lan’s eyes flickered with yellow light. “Congratulations! Opening the

natal residence is a big achievement!”

“It’s still too early to say that. I am still unable to beat the young girl from the noodle store.” Ai Hui was as still as a dead pig, and without even lifting his eyelids, he asked, “Was there anything from the message tree?”

“Nope,” Lou Lan replied.

“One month without any news. Ha! I hope she has forgotten about the eighty million yuan.” Ai Hui was elated.

Lou Lan answered honestly, “I reckon that will be difficult, Ai Hui.”

“Let’s not care about her for now. We will first go for lessons tomorrow, then we will help her find that blind-battle person. Ah, we have such enriching lives!”

Ai Hui muttered to himself as his lids became increasingly heavier, before finally falling into a deep slumber.

When Lou Lan noticed that Ai Hui was asleep, he left quietly, not disturbing the peaceful Ai Hui in the slightest.

Chapter 47: The Adorable Teacher Xu

After Ai Hui had managed to open the natal residence, he no longer stuck out like a sore thumb in the school, which was something worth celebrating.

Back at the dormitory, which he had not set foot in for a long while, he looked at the bustling crowd and felt slightly disoriented. He could not help but smile. Could it be that he had become sentimental after leaving the Wilderness?

When he thought back, he realized that it had been a few months since he had left the Wilderness, and he had indeed changed tremendously.

He could fall asleep in peace instead of hiding in a corner while clutching a sword. He could accept people within close proximity without the desire to kill them to get rid of any possible threats. He could leisurely talk to Lou Lan and gaze at the stars while lying on the rattan chair instead of constantly having his guard up against any potential danger.

He did not know if these changes were good or bad, but for now, he was not going to reject them.

If this type of life were to continue, he would, in fact, be very happy.

He suddenly came across Teacher Xu along the way, whose face revealed a look of pride. “Student Ai Hui, you have improved a lot.

To be able to open the natal residence in such a short period, you must have put in tremendous efforts. Keep up the good work."

"Yes, Teacher." Ai Hui gave a courteous bow.

He truly respected the teachers of his school, because in his opinion, imparting knowledge was a very noble deed. It was exceedingly difficult to learn things in the Wilderness, as everyone had something to do and seldom were there people who were willing to use their precious time to help you. Not to mention that none of them cared to see if he had learned anything.

Initially, Teacher Xu was worried about Ai Hui's poor track record, but upon observing Ai Hui's base level, he knew that Ai Hui did not neglect his studies. Still, he instructed Ai Hui earnestly, "After opening your natal residence, you have more things to learn. Compared to others, your basics are much weaker. You must not slack off."

"I will work hard, Teacher," Ai Hui replied, showing his thanks.

Teacher Xu nodded. "I am relieved that you think that way. You must live harmoniously with your classmates. Some classmates might be easily irritated and have a bad attitude, but their intentions are good. To be able to open the natal residence so quickly, I am sure you have had such experiences before."

Ai Hui was confused. What did Teacher Xu mean by saying this? Was it to get him to avoid conflicts with his classmates?

Nevertheless, he nodded respectfully. “I will remember this, Teacher.”

Teacher Xu was very pleased with Ai Hui’s attitude. A respectful and diligent student would naturally be a good student. His vast teaching experience had enabled him to interact with many students. It did not matter if the basics were weak, as they can be learned gradually. As long as the students were equipped with a good attitude, then there would be an improvement. Since such students would not take shortcuts, they would have firm foundations. While it would be difficult for them to become a prominent hero in their own way, they would be able to be the backbone of the Avalon of Five Elements.

“Previously, I did not mention this to you as you had yet to open your natal residence. The school has many activities that you should actively participate in to expand your boundaries. After a period of time, all of you will have missions to execute. These would be considered as practical lessons and also as part of the assessments from the school,” Teacher Xu patiently said.

“Students have to go on missions, too?” Ai Hui was somewhat surprised.

Teacher Xu laughed. “Of course. All of you are here to learn skills at the Induction Ground. What’s the point of learning but not utilizing? You don’t have to worry too much. The missions would be easy in the beginning and only grow harder when your abilities become stronger. In the future, all of you will meet with various scenarios which would be more complicated and dangerous. More practice would be beneficial.”

“I will do my best, Teacher,” Ai Hui answered seriously.

Teacher Xu was finished with his preaching and told Ai Hui, “Go for your lessons.”

Looking at Ai Hui’s retreating back, Teacher Xue felt a little rueful. Ai Hui’s situation was the most unusual in his class. A laborer who did not manage to open his natal residence actually managed to stay in the Wilderness for three years and also come out alive. Truth be told, he could hardly imagine what Ai Hui had gone through in the past three years and how he had managed to stay alive.

Teacher Xue had always disliked and opposed the Avalon of Five Elements’ recruitment of laborers from the Old Territory. However, he was not influential enough to change anything.

When he first saw Ai Hui, he saw a thirst in Ai Hui’s eyes—a thirst for knowledge. To a teacher, there was nothing more touching than this.

Therefore, he personally made a trip to find Duanmu Huanghun to request him to help Ai Hui.

At present, it appeared that Duanmu Huanghun did a good job. He was aware of Ai Hui’s aptitude. For Ai Hui to be able to open his natal residence in such a short amount of time, without a doubt, it must have been Duanmu Huanghun’s doing.

Teacher Xu was very pleased with his own decision. He had no qualms about Duanmu Huanghun's gifts and capability. The splendid results from his previous military battles proved everything.

By helping Ai Hui, Duanmu Huanghun showcased his responsibility and compassionate heart. This made Teacher Xu delighted.

His gaze soon fell upon the walking Duanmu Huanghun.

Duanmu Huanghun also noticed Teacher Xu and hurriedly bowed. "Teacher Xu!"

"Have you recovered from your injuries?" Teacher Xu concernedly asked, before continuing immediately in a reproachful tone, "Student Duanmu, in the future, please do not be so competitive. While rankings may be significant, your body is of the utmost importance. You are still young and have a long way to go. Do not place too much emphasis on these useless rankings. Look at you, you pushed yourself over your limits which resulted in taking a month to recover. Do not do such things in future."

"I will heed your teachings, Teacher. Huanghun will definitely not make such rash decisions in future."

Duanmu Huanghun hastily, yet politely replied. He felt a pang of guilt in his heart.

“Your talent is excellent, given that you achieved a lot at a young age and I am not worried about your training. I am more concerned about your moral ethics.” Teacher Xu looked solemn. With a stern tone, he continued, “No matter how exceptional a person is, without a good character, it will ruin everything. Just like previously, there was actually a student running naked in public. When that happened, it was humiliating for the entire Central Pine Academy. This has brought about much fury, and we are determined to uncover what happened. No matter how powerful the person’s background is, once the truth is revealed, we will definitely not let him off! Eh? Student Duanmu, why are you perspiring so badly?”

Duanmu Huanghun had started to look increasingly guilty. He forced out a laugh. “I guess I have not fully recovered, and my body is still weak.”

With a voice laced with concern, Teacher Xu immediately advised, “You have to be mindful of your body. Do let me know if you need anything.”

“I will.” Duanmu Huanghun could not wait to flee from this conversation.

Teacher Xu then complimented him by saying, “Duanmu, you were very responsible. I didn’t think that you could attain such an outstanding accomplishment. Given that Student Ai Hui could open his natal residence in such a short period of time, the credit must definitely go to you. Initially, I was worried that both of your characters would clash, but it looks like I am thinking too much.

The two of you have been long-term partners, and it looks like both of you have pretty good synergy. Not bad. Since we are doing group activities today, the two of you shall be in the same group. Okay, time to go for lessons.”

Duanmu Huanghun was initially baffled. It took forever for him to react after Teacher Xu had finished speaking.

Ai Hui……and I in the same group?

Oh no!

Duanmu Huanghun clutched his head with both hands as he looked at Teacher Xu’s retreating back. His face was filled with terror.

Chapter 48: Attending Class

After opening his first natal palace, Ai Hui realized that his previous experiences were not as useful now. There was a drastic difference in the rotation of his current elemental energy compared to the past. Every move was composed of many minute details. If a small detail was not performed properly, it diminished the impact and power of the overall move. How to distribute the energy, how to revolve the elemental energy, when to speed up, when to slow down—all these details determined the ultimate power of a move.

Due to his wealth of practical experiences, Ai Hui was an ardent individual.

He had not spent time contemplating abstract ideas, and he did not believe himself capable of such conceptualizations. While he was able to achieve some level of success in the Suspending Golden Pagoda, he was not complacent. Teacher Dong was clear in his explanations and he himself had spent a long time in the Wilderness. Eventually, he was able to comprehend the ideas after putting in much effort.

Ai Hui possessed high self-awareness and knew that he was not talented. Most of the knowledge that he acquired was not learned conventionally.

The elemental energy methods in the Induction Ground had been progressing for a thousand years, polished by many geniuses and seniors. They would definitely be better than him. The only thing he could do was persevere, practice hard, and be diligent in

learning what the teachers taught.

What was considered studious?

It was to understand every detail that the teachers taught. Why was it fast here and why was it slow there? One would only be considered well-educated after breaking the information into smaller pieces, thoroughly deciphering these segments, and properly executing based on this knowledge.

The ticking time bomb of academic dismissal was no longer a threat with the opening of his natal residence. He now had four years to learn at his own pace without rushing through. As long as he was diligent and steadfast in his studies for these four years, he could probably become registered as a documented elementalist.

While the outcome was uncertain, this was a goal he was working hard to achieve.

Having seen so much life and death, Ai Hui had a clear understanding of the different facets of life.

He saw the frailty which prevented people from having ambitious thoughts and unrealistic plans.

While the teacher explained the basics in the training class, Ai Hui paid very close attention. Only a quarter of the class was present, with the rest of the seats empty. Most of those in attendance were from the Old Territory. As this was a really basic

class, there was little content that the students from the Avalon of Five Elements had not already learned.

Central Pine Academy allowed students to have the freedom of choice in their lessons. Since the background of every student varied, the guidance they required differed as well. Students similar to the genius Duanmu Huanghun were way ahead of the other normal students. Typical classes had no meaning for them. Central Pine Academy considered this scenario and appointed the most outstanding teacher to guide those exceptional students. Outside the classroom, outstanding students also had the guidance of the Society of Excellence.

Ai Hui never thought of himself as a genius, but he also never felt that Duanmu Huanghun was a genius—that disdainful, childish, rude youth!

Ai Hui greedily absorbed whatever the teacher was teaching. The teacher's surname was Wang. He taught the fundamentals, such as what to take note of during training after the opening of the natal residence, what new moves could be learned, and which teacher to consult to learn those moves.

Every aspect of the Avalon of Five Elements was closely tied to elemental energy. More than once, Ai Hui heard from the teacher that in order to establish a more comprehensive five elements elemental energy, the system must be perfected to attain the level of the Cultivation Era from hundreds of thousands of years ago.

The teacher's high regard for the Cultivation World caught Ai Hui by surprise, but he gradually understood why. The Avalon of

Five Elements was established from the ruins of the Cultivation World. From a certain point of view, they originated from the same source. However, the Avalon of Five Elements only had one thousand five hundred years of history. It was not even considered an infant when compared to the long history and glory of the Cultivation World.

When the teacher lectured about the proliferation of elemental energy training system in the Old Territory, Ai Hui could very well relate to the topic.

Before entering the Wilderness, he had always lived in the Old Territory. Compared to the Avalon of Five Elements, the Old Territory was a completely different world. It was once the center of the Cultivation World, but now had regressed to the level of a rural area. Life in the Old Territory was very slow and quiet. Under the protection of the Avalon of Five Elements, there were no dire beasts or barbarian tribes.

The Old Territory was not a place where training was often discussed. The concentration of elemental energy was very low; it did not have dire beasts, and it also lacked the materials for training. Furthermore, it lacked the guidance of teachers and the environment for training was very weak, though this situation had improved in recent years. Many elementalist who originated from the Old Territory would return to their hometowns when they reached a certain age and set up training halls to guide the locals in elemental energy training.

The teacher could not stop blabbering during his lecture and occasionally criticized some of the policies of the Avalon of Five

Elements.

Ai Hui realized that the teachers in the Induction Ground had their personal preferences. For example, Teacher Dong liked to talk about the history of the Avalon of the Five Elements and Teacher Wang, who was in front of him, loved to speak about the future. This probably had to do with the influence of the Induction Ground. Regardless of whether it was an influential family or the Thirteen Divisions, it was difficult to sway the Induction Ground.

Not only did Ai Hui not think these lectures were boring, he actually listened with avid interest. No matter if it was the past or the future, they were all things that he had no prior knowledge of, so he listened to expand his horizons.

“Suppose that each of you just opened your natal residence. I would not recommend immediately starting the training of new moves. Why? Because these techniques can easily limit our understanding towards elemental energy. Much of our understanding toward elemental energy was superficial. Some disagreed, arguing that the five residences and eight palaces were perfect and complete. Certainly, when compared to the old elemental energy system, the current five residences and eight palaces system is far more mature and complete. It is widely known that, to date, the development of elemental energy had only been in progress for a thousand years. Look at the previous Cultivation Era. The Cultivation System was so boundless and vast, yet so detailed. Comparatively, the five residences and eight palaces methodology was meager and crude. Therefore, everyone should be familiarized with their own elemental energy. Understanding this would be like understanding a partner.“

However, the students were evidently uninterested in this viewpoint.

The academic atmosphere in the Induction Ground was very liberal, especially for the teachers who faced even fewer restrictions. As long as the teachers completed their work, the school would not intervene in their personal affairs.

The lively and progressive atmosphere enabled the Induction Ground to have the most numerous theories and schools of thought in the Avalon of Five Elements. It was also touted that the number of teachers in the Induction Ground was equivalent to the number of researchers and schools of thought.

The students had long become accustomed and immune to each teacher's “personal research interest.” Not every teacher’s theories were of interest to the students.

Apparently, the teachers were used to such reactions.

Those extravagant and flashy moves were the most attractive for beginners. In their eyes, flamboyance was an indication of power. The teachers were once students and also familiar with such mindsets.

“Alright, alright. I know what you students want to learn. No matter how easy a move is, to properly practice, you must take note of your personal attribute. The easier the move, the more details you must take note of.”

The teacher saw that the students had long since lost their interest, so he decided to end the class.

He felt slightly helpless. It seemed that since he was born, nobody else was interested in whatever topics he wanted to learn about.

While there were many lectures on topics like this in the Induction Ground, it still made him feel emotional.

The students could not wait to leave, eager to prepare and practice their own combat techniques.

The teacher was collecting his stuff and preparing to leave when a voice rang out.

“Teacher, could you explain further? How do we improve our comprehension of our elemental energy?”

Chapter 49: To Take a Disciple

The teacher paused, but he quickly regained his senses. He could hardly believe his ears.

“What did you just say?”

Ai Hui repeated his question. “I think Teacher’s ideas were very interesting and would like to understand more. Is this possible?”

Upon hearing this, the teacher almost cried tears of joy.

Oh heavens have mercy on him. Finally, someone was interested in his theories.

For many years, he had proposed his theories, but no one was interested. Furthermore, as he did not have research subjects, it caused his theories to lack evidence and undermined the validity of his ideas. Nobody would believe a theory that had never been proven.

What was even worse was that without a research subject, he could not continue his study. He was beyond a certain age and his elemental energy had long since left the beginner’s stage, so he was unable to prove that his theories were correct using himself as a subject.

At the Induction Ground, there was only one method for a completely novel theory to gain everyone’s approval—the new

theory must be proven to be correct. And how to prove it? A successful case study was needed.

If a student trained based on his theories and attained some progress by gaining special abilities or becoming some type of expert, this would validate the theory and provide evidence that it was useful.

If many students achieved success through his theories, this result would be sufficient for his new theory to be regarded as useful and desirable in the Induction Ground.

Many a time, the teacher had fantasized that his theories would become famous in the Induction Ground and that he would be respected as a worthy figure. However, reality was cruel and his theories were currently of no interest to anyone. He did not even have a single subject to help further his research.

Until today!

Finally, someone was interested in his theories!

“No problem, no problem!” he said hastily. His face brightened and he asked, “What do you want to learn? Just ask whatever you want. Teacher has more than enough time.”

Ai Hui was extremely courteous and said, “Teacher, can you explain your theories in detail?”

Although many students were disdainful of the teacher's theories, Ai Hui felt that they were justified. Ai Hui had survived many real-life battle experiences and he was very clear that those extravagant-looking moves might not be of use in actual combat. The most dangerous moves were those that were subtle and not flashy. Despite being low-key instead of glamorous, these techniques were scary and deadly.

Not only was Ai Hui interested in the history and future of the Avalon of Five Elements, he was equally interested in different schools of thoughts and theories. He knew that his knowledge was limited. No matter how eccentric the teacher was, in terms of theoretical research on elemental energy, his expertise far surpassed what Ai Hui knew by several folds.

"No problem!"

The teacher perked up and organized his train of thought while calmly saying, "First, we need to start with the definition of elemental energy, even though our understanding to date is limited. Elemental energy is not as active compared to spiritual force. It is more stable and has components of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. This is common knowledge. When we are training our elemental energy, we absorb the elemental energy from nature and refine it. At first glance, this does not differ greatly from the training of spiritual force during the Cultivation Era. However, in reality, the discrepancy is like the gap between heaven and earth. This is also one of the reason why our ancestors failed to quickly develop a method of utilizing elemental energy after losing their spiritual force."

Ai Hui listened attentively. He had seen many swordplay methods and knew more about spiritual force than average people. Still, if asked what the differences were between spiritual force and elemental energy, he would be unable to list them.

“The first difference: spiritual force has no attribute whereas elemental energy has five types. Cultivators from the ancient times absorbed spiritual force from nature into their own body, then used their own secret arts to assign different attributes to the spiritual force like fire, water, lightning and so on. However, elemental energy is different. Since the elemental energy in nature has attributes, when we absorb it, we will only absorb the energy that has the same elemental attribute as we do.

“The second difference: spiritual force and matter are not interchangeable. Spiritual force is just spiritual force. It can be stored within a crystal, but it is unable to be converted into matter. However, elemental energy and matter can each be converted into the other. Metal, wood, water, fire, earth—each type of elemental energy has its own corresponding form of matter. This is the reason why we can make use of certain materials.”

Ai Hui listened in rapt attention. The teacher’s lecture was not complicated, but was still profound. While others might not be able to comprehend, Ai Hui was able to feel it. He recalled the many sword manuals that he perused and was able to use them to comprehend these theories better.

“These two differences prove one point: elemental energy is complicated. This is the root of my theory. What is another complicated subject? It is the human being!”

The teacher provided an answer that Ai Hui had not thought about.

Ai Hui widened his eyes and his face was full of surprise. He had never thought about people as a research problem. The study of elemental energy was like exploring an unknown, never-before-seen object. The effects of training were also linked to elemental energy and the method of training.

The teacher was pleased with Ai Hui's expression and continued, "The structure of the human body is generally the same, but in the minute details, it is completely different. Are there two completely identical people in the world? Nope! Even for twins, their abilities and physiques are completely different. Also, do not forget that while our body is made up of the five elements, everyone's composition is completely distinct.

"How did complicated elemental energy and complicated training manage to find a perfect harmony? This is the core of my theory!"

Unknowingly, Ai Hui found himself prompting the teacher. "How was it found?"

The teacher laughed; he knew that the student in front of him had been moved by his explanations. He did not answer, but instead countered, "If you have a new partner, what would you do in order to develop a rapport with him?"

Ai Hui thought for a moment and answered, “You first have to see if this partner is compatible. After that, you need time to build up the rapport.”

When Ai Hui was in the Wilderness, he had interacted with many elementalists. He had friendly relations with some and hostile relations with others. It was definitely an experience worth noting.

Shocked, the teacher did not think that Ai Hui could give such an answer. The question was out of context for Ai Hui’s age. Not only had Ai Hui answered, he managed to produce an extremely accurate and suitable answer.

The teacher could not help but reevaluate the student who stood in front of him. He could see that Ai Hui’s aptitude was not exceptional, yet the youth’s face revealed incomparable gravitas. Ai Hui was steady, calm, considerate, and willing to listen attentively. Furthermore, this student had his own viewpoints, and the teacher was moved.

Ai Hui noticed that the teacher was sizing him up and could not help asking, “Did I answer incorrectly?”

The teacher did not answer, but asked, “What is your name?”

“My name is Ai Hui.” Ai Hui hurriedly bowed.

“Are you willing to be my disciple?” the teacher suddenly asked with sincerity.

Not expecting such a query, Ai Hui couldn’t help but be stunned.

Chapter 50: Overwhelmed

Upon seeing Ai Hui's stunned expression, the teacher smiled a little, but soon resumed his no-nonsense demeanor. "Don't worry. Whether you agree or not, I will tell you everything I know and have studied. I will not conceal anything. Plus, even if you do agree, I can only review your training regimen and provide some pointers. Outside of that, I can't help much. I am poor and do not have many connections despite having taught the basics of training for thirty years."

He finished his last sentence somewhat self-deprecatingly.

Ai Hui felt odd. "Why are you interested in me? I have a low aptitude and am just as poor."

"Haha." The teacher burst out laughing. "I've known from the start that you have a low aptitude and are poor, but that's okay. You don't need much talent to understand my theories. All you need is patience and perseverance, which are qualities that I saw in you.."

Ai Hui no longer hesitated and made a respectful bow. "Your disciple pays respect, Master!"

The teacher was pleasantly surprised and truly moved. "Good, good, good!"

Ai Hui also became very enthusiastic. He had been an orphan since he was little. Now that a teacher was willing to take him in as

a disciple, one could easily imagine how touched he was.

One was an impoverished intellectual who had been struggling to elevate himself over the past few decades, but no one appreciated his ideas. The other was an inept youth who had a thirst for learning. One was old, the other young, but at this moment, they were like partners in crime.

It took half a day for them to calm down.

The teacher was a bit embarrassed. “I am already so old, but my emotions are still not tamed. Shameful, shameful!”

Ai Hui merely grinned.

The teacher continued, “I’ll have to tell you my name first. I am Wang Shouchuan. You are from the Old Territory right?”

“Yes, my name is Ai Hui and I am from the Old Territory. I worked in the Wilderness for the last three years.” Ai Hui introduced himself as well.

Wang Shouchuan came to a realization. “I’ve heard about you before. I remembered the moment you mentioned the Wilderness. Being able to survive after toiling away in the Wilderness for three years, you are remarkable.”

The longer the old man looked at Ai Hui, the more satisfied he became. When it came to survival in the Wilderness, not to

mention the laborers without combat experience, even the geniuses from the Induction Ground were not guaranteed to return.

The old man had taught thirty years of classes in Central Pine City and had seen all kinds of students. But one like Ai Hui? This was his first.

Why did it matter if he had a low aptitude? When did the Induction Ground ever fail to produce a few distinguished students out of those who had average potentials?

At the start, he had known that Ai Hui was persistent, but he was not sure if Ai Hui could sustain himself. Now knowing Ai Hui's history, however, freed the Wang Shouchuan from all his worries.

How else could an impetuous laborer survive a three year stay in the Wilderness?

Bearing typical hardship was even less of a worry.

The old man finally realized why Ai Hui possessed a certain maturity and stability that was atypical for his age. A disciple who had been sharpened by such an experience was not considered an ordinary person.

The old man knew that he had picked up a unpolished gem today.

"Come, come, come, let me properly explain my theories." The

old man was suddenly full of zeal. “You have said a lot. When it comes to human interaction, if two persons have conflicting temperaments and can’t agree on things, then wanting them to build a rapport would be a never-ending process, like the stories told in ‘Arabian Nights.’”

Ai Hui nodded his head repeatedly. That was true. He immediately thought of an apt example.

Duanmu Bangwan!

That despicable, disdainful, hypocritical, childish, heartless fellow. If Ai Hui were to be a team with this kind of person, Ai Hui would definitely have to get rid of him before the enemies.

“Having a compatible partner is very important. If both have similar personalities, it would be easy to connect on a deeper level,” the old educator said.

Ai Hui nodded his head once again. That was true. He thought of another perfect example.

Lou Lan!

Lou Lan was good, warm-hearted, helpful, kind, trustworthy, and had great culinary skills. Despite having known each other for only a short period of time, they had already become close friends who told each other everything without the slightest hesitation.

“Even with a suitable partner, time is still needed to mold the relationship. You have to spend time getting to know your partner, learning his habits, and letting him adjust to yours. This way there will be mutual understanding,” Old Man Wang concluded.

“That’s right!” Ai Hui agreed wholeheartedly.

“Elemental energy works the same way.” The old man continued, “In today’s training routines, people view elemental energy as more of a tool than a partner. There is nothing wrong with this since elemental energy has no consciousness. However, elemental energy as a tool is very complicated and not as easy as people imagine it to be.”

With relish, he concluded, “That is because the nature of elemental energy is mutable.”

However…

When he saw Ai Hui’s calm face, he was taken aback. As if his doubts were not resolved, he asked, “Aren’t you shocked? This is something different from what other teachers are teaching, right?”

“What you said made a lot of sense,” Ai Hui said matter-of-factly, before elaborating, “Just like metal elemental energy for example. Energy in the Suspending Golden Pagoda is more intense and milder compared to the energy in the Whirlpool Spring, proving that metal elemental energy can have different qualities. Although they are different, they can transform. This is nothing strange either. After the metal elemental energy flows out of the pagoda, it

will probably undergo gradual changes.”

The old man was dumbstruck. He had extensively researched before reaching this conclusion, and he had not expected Ai Hui to simply list out a reason.

Actually, Ai Hui wanted to add that the energy could be transformed even if it could not by natural process. By shattering it, for example.

Recovering from his stupor, the old man became even happier and complimented, “You have wits indeed!”

He continued, “Every human body possesses slightly different properties. Metal elemental energies of different forms would have different compatibilities too. This is why we need to find the elemental energy that is most convenient for us—so it can better suit our bodies. Training today only considers one issue: compatibility, or what we call ‘aptitude’—whether or not the energy is easy to absorb. But what if there is elemental energy that is more difficult to absorb, yet can be utilized even more smoothly and easily? Few people consider this.”

Ai Hui had no problem understanding, and even expounded from there. “Like me. I have a lower aptitude, but a higher endurance. I can choose to train with purer metal elemental energy. Although the absorption is slower, it is more effective when employed.”

Was this principle not very similar to his own training? Indeed, while both analyzed from different angles, their core idea was the

same. Plus, did this not clarify that Master's theories aligned with his own?

Ai Hui looked forward to the upcoming training.

The old man stared at Ai Hui blankly. Could it be that the ideas he had been deliberating for the past few decades were actually very simple?

Or was it that the student who was willing to listen to him, whom he had finally found and had luckily accepted as a disciple, was actually a genius?

The old man felt overwhelmed.

Chapter 51: Picked Up A Gem

Ai Hui looked at his teacher in anticipation, waiting for him to continue his explanation. While the old man had a dumbfounded expression, Ai Hui was not satisfied. He knew that his deductions were mostly based on feeling, and feeling was often inaccurate.

Teacher Wang was no master, but he possessed a strong foundation since he had lectured in the Induction Ground for several decades.

Deeply moved, the old man shook his head slightly. “We were meant to be a team.”

The old man knew that finding a disciple like Ai Hui was not an easy matter. There were many teachers in the Induction Ground who were stronger, more qualified, and more senior than him, but how many of them could find such a compatible disciple?

The Induction Ground encouraged teachers to accept multiple disciples, but the majority of the teachers did not.

A disciple was different from a student. A student had to attend the teachers’ classes, but a disciple had to continue their legacies and doctrines. Therefore, unless they really favored a student, teachers would not lightly accept someone as a disciple.

Most of the teachers believed that it was better to choose nothing than to select something substandard.

The old man was not someone with a reputation within the Induction Ground, and no one showed interest in his theories, but he still would not carelessly recruit disciples. No matter how uninspiring, his theories represented the years of hard work he had put in after all. If he were to impart his ideals to a student who did not agree, he would not rest in peace.

The old man was more than satisfied and pleased with Ai Hui. Although he was behind other teachers in terms of achievements, his luck in finding a compatible disciple was worth envying.

Ai Hui's yearning gaze made him even happier. "Let's talk about the second issue. Elemental energy is very suitable for you, but time is still needed in order to establish a good rapport. In other words, you have to unleash the potential of the elemental energy in your body. Everyone's elemental energy is different, yet how many moves are there? You've just activated your natal residence and intrinsically wield metal attribute, so there are twenty-two moves you can practise. Which ones fit you? You don't know. A lot of people choose the moves based on interest, feeling, formidability, and appearance. This approach is not beneficial. You've just activated your natal residence and stepped foot upon the path of training. The formidability of moves is not something you have to consider yet. What you need to ascertain is how you can lay a solid foundation for this tedious journey."

Ai Hui was enlightened by his words. The language was plain, but the meaning was exceedingly profound.

The old man's expression became stern and earnest. "Understand

your elemental energy and understand your body. The true meaning behind training is to achieve a perfect integration of these two.”

Ai Hui said respectfully, “ I will definitely bear your instructions in mind!”

The old man was quite comforted. He carried on, “Now let’s talk about the practical aspect—about how you should train. Tell me first, how do you develop your elemental energy?”

Ai Hui then sincerely shared how he first developed a strand of elemental energy in the Wilderness, how he trained in the Suspending Golden Pagoda, how he designed a set of custom-made backless armor, how he thought of using the [Arching Fish Back] to shatter the silvery strands of metal element, how he broke through the natal palace, and so on. He told his teacher everything pertaining to his elemental energy.

The old man was left stupefied once again. After a while, he hesitatingly asked, “You thought of these all by yourself?”

He knew it was a stupid question the moment the words left his mouth. Ai Hui had just talked about his ideas, how they came about, and where he had gotten his inspiration from.

Ai Hui nodded. “Yes, I thought of those.”

The old man was completely and utterly convinced that the

disciple he had just accepted was a genius! An extraordinary genius!

His eyes brightened and he gazed at Ai Hui as if he was looking at a unique treasure. Ai Hui's aptitude was low, and in this era where aptitude was deemed paramount, he would definitely not be considered a genius. However, he had matured early and acquired an extreme level of insight toward training. The old teacher had never seen such qualities in anyone else.

He had picked up a gem!

The old man's gaze made Ai Hui anxious. "Teacher?"

As if he had woken from a dream, the old man regained his senses and praised, "This is beyond my expectations, so I am truly shocked. You have such knowledge and experience despite having no one to guide you. Not bad, not bad at all! I believe you would succeed even without my help. I'm quite lucky, hahaha!"

Slightly embarrassed, Ai Hui did not know what to say.

He had never been commended before. Nothing came easily to him and he had to work hard for everything—training, the Wilderness, catching up with the team, and so on.

After hearing the compliment, he was at a loss, which was a rare occurrence.

Upon seeing Ai Hui's expression, the old man became happier. He chuckled for quite some time before stopping and becoming serious.

Ai Hui knew then that his teacher had something else to say. He also regained his focus.

The fact that his disciple was a genius truly stirred the old man's heart. Ai Hui had already proven his worth, and the old man was determined not to lose in this aspect.

His gaze flickered with wisdom and radiance as he began speaking, "Your train of thought is correct and you have a solid foundation. These are good. It is advantageous for you to have an overflowing amount of elemental energy before breaking through the residences. This we can talk about in future. Let's discuss the current problem you're facing with your training. Above the concrete methods lie additional methods. You utilize metal elemental energy, so what are its characteristics? Sharp, powerful, and effective in battle are some facts that everyone knows. There is nothing wrong with you adopting the metal elementalist's path of thinking. What we need to do now is to let you discern which metal elemental energy is the most efficacious for you!"

Ai Hui hastily followed the old man out of the school building.

They came to a shabby garden. Inside, there were heaps of strange tools of all shapes and sizes.

"This garden used to belong to another teacher. He moved out

and abandoned this place, so I use it now," the old man said softly. "Out of my personal interest, I have remodeled the items here and they have not yet been used. Plus, I had little else to do aside from teaching classes. A lot of things have accumulated over the past few decades."

Looking at the garden full of strange tools, Ai Hui could not contain his admiration. No matter who, for no matter how small of a matter, it was not at all easy to continue persevering for a few decades. Concentration and dedication required a calm heart that could endure loneliness.

"These things are finally going to be useful!"

The old man looked at his items with a certain ruefulness. He was unsure if it was due to the fact that they were collecting dust for so long or that they were finally going to see the light of day. Or could it be that he was feeling rueful about himself?

The good thing was that it was not too late!

With a face full of wrinkles, the old man stood proudly in the garden before his tools like a king overlooking his kingdom!

Chapter 52: Seven Word Name

“I’ve extensively researched the five elemental energies.”

The old man’s preamble stunned Ai Hui.

“The most studied topic regarding metal elemental energy is its deadliness. Combat is the metal elementalists’ main purpose. In terms of the level of complexity, metal element is the simplest one out of the five elements. Hmm, simplest does not seem right. I should say that they require the most concentration. Wood elementalists need a lot of botanical knowledge, earth elementalists have to maintain sand puppets, water elementalists have azure wings as well as the most intricate techniques, and fire elementalists have to learn to smelt metal. Metal elementalists have only one requirement: to pursue fighting strength. From this perspective, they are similar to the ancient swordsmen. Those bygone warriors paid no attention to other things and were pure contenders seeking to become the best. Metal elementalists are somewhat like this.

“Battling is a sophisticated matter. You have more experience and know this better than I do. It is pretty embarrassing. I have been teaching for so long, but have never been to the frontline or the Wilderness. I am also not a proficient fighter. I can only support you by helping you to understand your own body and your own elemental energy.”

The old man rummaged through the piled-up tools, revealing some copper armor. He patted the dust off of it and heaved a sigh of relief. “I did not throw this out after all. Come, let us try this.”

Ai Hui curiously glanced at the copper armor before him. The workmanship was rough and ugly. There were marks everywhere and it was obvious that it had been modified, since the sheen of the newer copper plates contrasted with the old. Many vein lines had been engraved on the armor and were overlapping in certain areas.

Ai Hui could locate the positions of the five residences and eight palaces by looking at the densely concentrated areas of vein lines on the armor.

“Teacher, what is this copper armor for?” Ai Hui asked out of curiosity.

“This is used to test your body. Of course, this is for the metal attribute,” the old man answered, somewhat pleased. “Its full name is a little long, but I call it the ‘Thousand Prajna Elemental Energy All-Seeing Copper Armor.’ ‘Prajna’ is a Buddhist term for ‘wisdom’ and ‘Thousand Prajna’ refers to its ability to imitate many kinds of elemental energy attributes. This one in particular is specifically used to test for metal elemental energy. ‘All-Seeing’ reflects the armor’s function, which is to identify the wearer’s aptitude. It can imitate all kinds of metal elemental energies, stimulates your body with these various energies, and tells you which type of metal elemental energy suits you the best. What do you think? Pretty good huh? I spent two months designing it and another three crafting it. The Induction Ground’s aptitude test is so rudimentary that it failed to detect a genius like you. Pfft, those myopic fellows!”

The old man was certain his disciple was a diamond in the rough

and had started defending him unconditionally.

"You're amazing!" Ai Hui sighed in heartfelt amazement as his eyes lit up. Although he had a feeling from the start that his teacher was skillful, after seeing the copper armor with his own eyes, Ai Hui's reverence for the old man flared up.

And that name!

Thousand Prajna Elemental Energy All-Seeing Copper Armor. Seven words... really long indeed.

While inwardly ridiculing that name, Ai Hui observed the unrefined copper armor with excited eyes.

Even a rookie like Ai Hui knew it would be highly beneficial to identify his most compatible metal elemental energy. This copper armor alone was enough for him to regard his teacher as respectable.

"Of course! How can I be your teacher otherwise?" The old man was full of pride.

Ai Hui could not wait any longer. "Can I try it on?"

"Come, come, come!" The old man hurriedly put the armor on for Ai Hui as he said, "Rest assured. I've mulled over the design carefully. My Thousand Prajna Elemental Energy All-Seeing Copper Armor is definitely an epoch-defining work of art. It is a

pity no one else witnessed the construction, missing a moment of such great historical significance. Oh well, pioneers are always lonely and singing loudly on their solitary journey. Us two, we will be fighting for the truth!”

As Ai Hui listened, he had a premonition. He thought of something as his helmet was equipped and buckled up. “Teacher, umm… Have you tried using this before?”

“Yes!” The old man gave a “don’t-you-worry” look, allowing Ai Hui to feel less nervous. His next sentence, however, made Ai Hui tense up immediately.

“But previously, one I had used ittois for the fire attribute.”

The old man patted the armor. It was tightly fastened and only Ai Hui’s eyes could be seen. He saw the anxiety in Ai Hui and comforted him. “Relax, the versions are all more or less the same for each attribute. Oh wait, I have to find the operating compass. Give me a moment.”

The old man dug through the garbage heap once again. “Hey, where I did throw it? Why can’t I find it?”

Ai Hui’s concern grew even stronger as he started to doubt his decision.

“Found it!”

The old man's cheer resounded from the mountain of equipment. Shortly after, he crawled out with his hair all messed up and a dark green plate in his hand. On it were all kinds of symbols Ai Hui did not recognize. It seemed impressive.

Strangely, Ai Hui regained confidence.

With his attire and appearance in disarray, the device in his hand, and his eyes shining, the old man relished in this momentous occasion. His dream was about to take off. His clothes fluttered without any breeze, his unkempt dismal hair was like that of a poet, and his radiant pupils seemed as though they could see through all worldly objects. He said in a low, but powerful voice, "I'm going to start!"

His hands, like flowing water, moved across the operating compass.

Bzzt Bzzt. A silver electric current flowed on the surface of the copper armor.

Ai Hui opened his eye wide in fear and his body shook non-stop like a sieve. He wanted to call for help, but nothing came out of his mouth.

"Eh, why is there lightning?" The old man was puzzled.

Ai Hui felt like crying. Who am I to ask if you ask me?!

The old man stopped operating the compass, walked to the now inert armor, and kicked it a few times before starting the remote again.

Ai Hui, who had just started to relax, opened his eyes wide once more, and his body again shook like a sieve as a numbness spread.

Black fumes billowed from the copper armor and Ai Hui was soon surrounded by black smog.

The old man muttered, “Eh, why is there smoke again? Did the rain tarnish it? Oh, oh, oh, wrong remote. This is for the wood attribute, no wonder, no wonder.”

Ai Hui almost passed out when hearing this.

He finally knew why he felt uneasy. He was going to quit this test the moment his body recovered.

That’s right!

Must stop!

Ai Hui swore to himself.

Then, he saw a silver compass and a hand. That hand lightly shook the operating compass as the old man’s voice was heard. “Nothing will go wrong this time! Ai Hui, it’s starting!”

Ai Hui’s immobilized body involuntarily trembled.

Even before the old man finished talking, Ai Hui’s eyes spasmed wide once more.

Chapter 53: Hegemon of the Palaces

If there were words to describe how Ai Hui felt then, it would have to be that his heart was being pierced by a thousand arrows!

The sharp metal elemental energy entered his body from all angles, and he felt as if he was a cloth puppet being stung by bees. Unfortunately, this happened only after his numbness disappeared, allowing the pain to intensify.

If it was not for the fact that he was used to the pricking pain from his stay in the Suspending Golden Pagoda, he would have been shrieking miserably and endlessly.

His time in the pagoda had trained him to better endure agony like this.

“Your stamina is quite impressive, huh.” The old man was amazed. Ever since this prototype was created, he had been the only test subject. He had experienced the pain from the fire attribute armor. His ghostly howls and wails gave an assistant teacher such a shock that he lost control and threw the operating compass far away.

On the other hand, Ai Hui had yet to make any sounds so far. He was indeed a wild beast in human form, one who managed to survive the Wilderness!

The old man’s eyes flashed. As a teacher with countless ideas, what was more important than a strong, durable disciple as a test

subject? He could practically imagine how having a disciple like Ai Hui would help him to advance his theories and research by leaps and lead to substantial breakthroughs.

A perfect partner to experiment with!

He licked his lips as if he had seen fine delicacies as he mumbled, “Increase the intensity, elemental energy becomes more fragmented, metal elemental energy is a little foreign, no problem, try a few more times…”

Thousands of heart-piercing arrows became thousands of ants devouring Ai Hui’s body and he began to tremble.

The old man was a good example of what would happen if decades of accumulated passion was released all at once. He had a frenzied gaze, was muttering to himself as he stared at the operating compass in his hand, and unceasingly adjusted the armor’s elemental energy while looking at the luster of the copper armor.

As he fiddled with the remote, the copper armor illuminated as well.

Ai Hui felt as if he had fallen into hell and into the eighteenth level no less.

The elemental energy stimulating his body was constantly changing. Numb, itchy, painful, hot, sore, and so on… all kinds of

different sensations appeared in different parts of his body.

Before today, no, before putting on the armor, he had never imagined that metal elemental energy had so many permutations. Every variation happened without any warning.

That feeling was simply… such a painful revelation.

Beneath the teacher's messy hair, his eyes were fervent and focused.

The light on the armor kept changing, and he stood by the side taking notes with each transition while saying words and terms that Ai Hui had no knowledge of.

Ai Hui had no other thoughts at this point. He just wanted this purgatory experiment to end as soon as possible.

This set of copper armor had no practical value. Ai Hui acknowledged that his endurance level was higher than average, but a few times he had almost passed out and a few times his mind went blank. He suspected that students with slightly weaker constitutions would be in danger. Even if it was not physically hazardous, it would be traumatizing and would become a mental block that hindered future training.

What an extreme product…

This thought floated across his mind, but what he focused more

on was his admiration for his teacher.

Although the entire process was like a tortuous purge, to the point where dying was a better choice, Ai Hui felt the potential of the procedure.

Even the many minute differences within the metal elemental energy were individually amazing!

Ai Hui had a very strong feeling that even if this test produced negligible results, his interaction with so many different kinds of metal elemental energy would be considerably beneficial for future trainings.

If he had not experienced it once for himself, he would be absolutely ignorant of the slight differences within the energies. They were all metal elemental energies, but each had subtle distinctions which would reveal their entirely unique nature.

Metal elemental energy had an overall character, but contained respective variations as well.

The teacher’s knowledge ran deep.

Ai Hui knew that when it came to principles like these, he would not be able to achieve any result just by fumbling about on his own.

All of a sudden, an intense wave passed over his natal residences.

At this point, the old man raised his head. “Let’s test your five residences and eight palaces to see which ones are stronger and which are weaker.”

Ai Hui was stunned. It was the first time he had heard that some of the five residences and eight palaces were stronger than others.

As if he had read Ai Hui’s mind, the old man started to explain, “Teachers do not usually lecture about this. It is more complicated since there are so many students and plenty of problems involved. You just have to think about it this way. Some people are right-handed while others are left-handed. Some were born with a stronger and more agile left leg. The human body is balanced yet unbalanced. The same goes for the five residences and eight palaces. Some would be stronger and others would be weaker. This used to be a heritage secret in some influential families, but now it’s widespread. Those families were amazing, and the research they have completed was so thorough. Knowing the strengths and weaknesses of your palaces would be very advantageous for your subsequent training sessions.”

Comprehension flashed across Ai Hui’s face. What the old man had said made a lot of sense and was very convincing.

“Your opened natal elemental residence is not bad since you only broke through after filling up your elemental energy. As I have said before, waiting is beneficial since it allows your natal elemental residence to stabilize. Most people, however, do not have the patience.”

The old man spoke while he tinkered with the operating

compass.

Shortly, a ball of bright light lit up in Ai Hui's left palm.

"Not bad, the palace in your left hand is not bad at all. It's a strong palace."

Soon, another ball of bright light appeared in his right palm.

"Palace in the right hand is a strong one as well. Not bad eh, there is balance in your hands and some moves can only be learned if there's balance."

"The palace in the left foot is a strong one!"

"Oh my, the palace in the right foot is also strong. Balanced legs and all limbs are balanced!" the old man commented in bewilderment, face full of excitement. "Son, you have a flair for combat! Balanced limbs... perfect reptile eh. I know a few extremely powerful moves which require coordination of the limbs. Two hundred years ago, the leader of the Infantry Division, Wu Yan, possessed precisely this balance of strong palaces in every limb. Know what his nickname was?Iron Octopus! Hahaha, you're indeed my disciple."

Reptile...

Ai Hui did not know what to say but... it sounded fearsome? Still, adding the word "iron" in front of "octopus" did not make it sound

any fiercer at all.

"Strong earth palace!"

"Strong sea palace!"

"Gate palace is strong! Ah ah ah ah son, if your sky palace is strong, you're invincible! A body full of strong palaces! Absolutely awesome! No points of weakness! A perfect five residences and eight palaces! Know what this is called? Hegemon of the palaces!"

The sky palace was located between the eyebrows. Looking at how agitated his teacher was becoming, Ai Hui was also excited. Hegemon of the palaces! It sounded domineering, but... why did he think about rape... (The chinese words for "Hegemon of the palaces" sounds like an abbreviation for a chinese idiom which means "to force oneself upon somebody; to rape")

A body full of strong palaces was more pleasing to hear.

"Sky palace, sky palace, it must be a strong palace... eh?"

The old man stopped suddenly as he stared blankly at Ai Hui's helmet.

Chapter 54: Twinkle Twinkle

Looking at his teacher surprised expression, Ai Hui stared vacantly at himself as his heart skipped a beat.

He was like a gambler scratching a lottery ticket. The first numbers matched and only the last one remained. The jackpot was just one number away. He felt his heart in his throat and excruciating pressure.

Ai Hui had always viewed himself as someone who could maintain his composure well, but at this instant, he could not contain his agitation at all.

He knew clearly that he was not gifted. Although Teacher had often proclaimed him a genius, this did not improve his inferior aptitude. With great difficulty, he actually managed to possess seven strong palaces. He was only one strong palace away from the legendary existence known as the hegemon of the palaces.

Sure, it was the first time Ai Hui had heard about the hegemon of the palaces. He did not actually know if it was truly legendary. Looking at his teacher's fervent expression, however, he was quite convinced that the title referred to a very powerful, natural talent.

From the start, Ai Hui felt pretty much hopeless when it came to his innate abilities. When someone suddenly informed him that he actually possessed a hidden and potent gift, one could only imagine the turmoil he felt after hearing the news.

But... Teacher is not moving nor saying anything...

The radiance in Ai Hui's eyes dimmed. All right, so he was not a hegemon after all. If the last one was a strong palace, teacher would have mentioned it immediately. Ai Hui recovered from his disappointment quickly and started laughing mentally. He had been too greedy. What more could he possibly ask for when his limbs were balanced and seven out of his eight palaces were strong?

As someone who had been fumbling in the dark for so long, he yearned for the light, but did not dare to claim the entire sun. He was like a poor and hardworking laborer, daydreaming about winning a small amount of prize money, but never wishing for an excessive windfall.

"Why is this light twinkling? Is it a strong or weak palace?" the old man muttered, his voice full of doubt. "Perhaps there's really something wrong with the copper armor? Seems like it, or it wouldn't flicker like that."

Silverish-white light glowed from seven of the palaces. They shined brightly and continuously. The sky palace, however, was sometimes bright and sometimes dim

For a moment it was a strong palace, but at another it became weak? Could it be that the sky palace was volatile? At this time, the old man had already readjusted his mental state. The old man kicked the armor and even smacked the helmet a few times. Same result.

“This is really weird, what is going on?” the old man mumbled perplexedly. “Is the helmet defective? I have to find the blueprints. Did something go wrong during the designing process?”

After much effort, Ai Hui took off the heavy copper armor. He was sweating buckets and was as wet as if he had been fished out of water. His clothes were drenched, his face was pale, his body exhausted, and some of his muscles continued to uncontrollably twitch.

Breathing in the fresh air, Ai Hui felt he was revived after what seemed like a lifetime ago. The letdown from earlier vanished into thin air and there was only joy after the calamity.

“Son, no problem!” The old man consoled Ai Hui. “I will redesign the Thousand Prajna. I’ve gotten many new inspirations and have already thought of the possible mistakes that have been made. Don’t worry, the new version will be perfect. I could even include new features. We can do a retest when it’s done!”

The word “retest” sent Ai Hui’s body into a fit of shivering.

He could not bear to imagine undergoing such a torturous test for a second time and hurriedly replied, “I think it’s very accurate, Teacher. I think the results are great, so we don’t have to test it again. Having seven strong palaces is good enough. It’s not too late to conduct a retest after I’ve developed my sky palace.”

The old man thought about it and concurred. Out of the five

residences and eight palaces, the sky palace was the hardest to develop. Most students left it for last. Judging from Ai Hui's progress, the sky palace was still a distant goal.

"What you said makes a lot of sense." The old man decided not to bother himself with the hegemon of the palaces. Plus, he could tell that his disciple was in a pitiful state and felt quite apprehensive. He had finally found a disciple. If he experimented too much on Ai Hui... No, if he trained Ai Hui so hard that he broke, where would he find another disciple as good as Ai Hui? Most people could not endure his test. He himself only managed to persevere for three minutes before crying out loud.

It wasn't a minor feat for Ai Hui to persevere through and complete the test.

The old man quickly smiled. "Son, having seven strong palaces is already a great gift. Let's discuss the concrete training methods. My secret methods."

Ai Hui's body had recuperated after a period of panting. He perked up upon hearing those words. Although his teacher wasn't very reliable at times, it was a fact that he had substantial knowledge.

Noticing that Ai Hui had revived by quite a bit, the teacher thought to himself that his disciple had quite a sturdy physique. Ai Hui's recovery speed was faster than most people's. Maybe he should test this out someday? This quality was quite rare, and it would be a pity if it wasn't put to good use. How could this advantage be effectively utilized? He had to think this over

properly.

"Sir?" Ai Hui saw that his teacher was in a daze and quickly called for his attention.

"Oh, oh, oh." The old man regained his senses and said lightly, "I will have to analyze your test results for a few days before giving you the report. Meanwhile, you should train according to the usual training methods and attend classes studiously. You should still go to class since I am not all-knowing. It is very necessary and beneficial for you to expand your horizons. Your training in the future will be quite different from the norm. Sculpting, for example."

"Sculpting?" Ai Hui was stunned. He had not imagined that training and sculpting would be linked together.

"That's right, sculpting." The old man was obviously enjoying Ai Hui's surprised expression. "Haha, didn't expect that, did you? A lot of knowledge is involved in training. What's the relationship between sculpting and training? You're attributed in metal elemental energy. The most appropriate training would be sculpting. It can strengthen your ability to control the elemental energy. Think about it. Elemental energy is like the sculpting knife. There are big, small, angled, straight, and uniquely-shaped knives used for different tasks. Furthermore, when you're sculpting, you should not place all your focus on controlling the elemental energy. Otherwise, you won't be able to sculpt well. It's not easy to manipulate your elemental energy as you like, when you like. If you can learn how to sculpt your elemental energy and wield it proficiently, your meticulous energy control would reach

an outstanding level. In the future, practicing complex moves would come easy to you."

Ai Hui's eyes glowed as the realization hit him.

That's right, if he could carve a complicated sculpture, his control over elemental energy would reach a whole new level!

"But, training has always been easier at the start. It would be very difficult for you to start sculpting immediately. I have already thought of a simpler training method." The old man smiled mysteriously.

Strangely, the grin of his teacher's face made Ai Hui hesitate. "What method?"

"You'll know when the time comes."

The unease in Ai Hui's heart became even stronger.

Chapter 55: Old Friend

It was already noon the next day when Ai Hui woke, struggling to open his eyes in the glaring sun. It was rare for him to sleep in so late.

Last night, he barely managed to crawl back to the training hall before flopping into his rattan chair and nodding off, only to wake up now. He preferred sleeping in the courtyard with the calming starry sky before him. This way, he was able to rise with the morning sun, its gentle warmth the best start to the day.

The afternoon sun was so much more scorching.

Come to think of it, his body's aches, soreness, and swelling were gone. Not only did his body's ailments mysteriously disappear, but after a good night's rest, he also woke up feeling invigorated and brimming with energy.

Ai Hui's spirits lifted immediately. With renewed energy, he felt able to welcome any challenges that came his way.

He decided he would have noodles before setting off to find the mysterious blind battler.

Embarrassingly enough, even though so much time had passed since his promise to the young girl, he had yet to start on the task. He wasn't like Fatty who could be so openly shameless. It was a truly enviable skill and a legitimate talent to have.

.

As soon as he reached the noodle store, he aggressively ordered five bowls of noodles once more.

After coming to the noodle store a few times, the owner was able to recognize him, especially after the previous incident. As the owner served the noodles, he asked concernedly, “It’s been a while, sir. Oh yes, did the girl from last time return the one hundred fifty yuan yet?”

Ai Hui, who was about to devour his noodles, froze, the chopsticks on-route to his mouth coming to a halt.

Not only did the owner touch a sore spot, he also proceeded to rub salt into the wound. Did he not know how to conduct a business?

What could he say? That he had an overbearing debt of eighty million yuan because of an inconsequential loan of one hundred fifty yuan? That a bowl of noodles led to his life’s tragedy, or that one hundred fifty yuan effectively smothered his desires in life?

Ah, this bizarre world, why did he still feel that he was in a dream...

In his heart, Ai Hui gave a helpless sigh and started in on his noodles silently.

Seeing his troubled expression, the owner sighed and placed a plate of beef before Ai Hui. He clapped his hands on Ai Hui's shoulder and consoled him, "There isn't any road that you cannot get through in life. Even if she did not return the one hundred and fifty yuan, it doesn't matter. You should still be the better person. Come, let Uncle treat you to a beef dish!"

Ai Hui's mood immediately brightened at the plate of mouth-watering beef in front of him.

"Thank you, Uncle!"

He began to devour the noodles and exceptionally fragrant beef in large mouthfuls.

After five bowls of noodles, he waved to the owner of the noodle store. "Goodbye, Uncle!"

Ai Hui started visiting various training halls, trying to find the target based on the clues provided by the girl from the noodle store.

Coming to a training hall for the first time in a while, he soon realized the quality of the blind battle competitors had risen tremendously.

Now, only those that were confident in their abilities dared to participate, making for more thrilling battles.

After observing a few battles, Ai Hui realized it was now impossible to earn money through blind battles. Despite the increased strength he gained from activating his natal residence, he was still lacking compared to the rest of the contestants who had more than four palaces. And while there were some younger participants, they were still renowned geniuses in their respective schools.

Duanmu Huanghun's continuous success in blind battles raised the standard of Central Pine City, drawing talented and hot-headed youngsters eager to experience the thrill and compare themselves to an acclaimed individual.

Blind battles had undeniably become a symbol of Central Pine City.

Even after six training halls, he saw no chance of winning in any of them.

What a pity. It was impossible to earn any more money from blind battles, but he had expected it to happen. Wanting to encounter such a good opportunity again was wishful thinking.

In the end, he searched through all of the training halls in Central Pine City but still failed to find the target.

As dusk set in, Ai Hui stumbled back to the Vanguard Training Hall, somewhat exhausted. Searching for someone was genuinely more tiring than training, but he rallied his spirits—being unable

to find his target on the first day was nothing surprising.

Finding someone was no easy task by any means, especially with such vague clues, making it akin to searching for a needle in a haystack. In the end, luck was more crucial than the method itself.

There had been no recent news of the little girl from the noodle store either. He idly wondered if she went on a long trip. He recalled Teacher Xu mentioning practice missions going on during this time—could she have left for a mission?

Ai Hui did not think on it further.

His life had become substantially busy between lessons, training, and searching for the masked individual. He also didn't forget to spend time revising the swordplay manual for the girl who said she would find him for guidance on his techniques.

Of course, what he meant by revision was actually a form of hypnosis before sleeping.

As for the incident involving the sword embryo, he didn't care; he was still unwilling to buy a new sword after destroying the last grass sword he owned.

On the contrary, it was actually in training that he invested the most time.

……

In the teachers' lounge, Tao Yiwei was surprised to see Wang Shouchuan hard at work. His condition was different from normal—almost as if Old Wang was on drugs. After working together for more than ten years, the two of them were exceedingly familiar with each other, so he could immediately spot the rekindled passion that had not been seen on Old Wang's face for a long time.

Perhaps Old Wang's theory had a breakthrough? Old Tao could help but mutter his suspicions in his heart, but he said instead, "Old Wang, looking at your joyous expression, I can see there's good news. Let me hear it and soak in the joyous atmosphere too."

Wang Shouchuan, who was immersed in analyzing the test results, lifted his head, unable to conceal the joy and pride on his face. "Sure enough, I can't hide anything from your sharp eyes. There is indeed good news—I've accepted a disciple."

"Huh?" Tao Yiwei was caught off guard but quickly recovered. With a surprised expression, he asked, "You—Old Wang is actually taking disciples?"

The Old Wang he knew had a terrible temper. He was also willful, stubborn, and fiercely driven, devoting his entire life to his theories. Despite that, he was a man of few words, unable to promote his theories, leaving his theories unknown to many.

For Old Wang to actually start taking in disciples was unexpected.

Tao Yiwei was somewhat envious. “Such a joyous event. Congratulations, Old Wang!”

He did not bother concealing his envy; he had yet to find a good disciple to pass his legacy on to. While Old Wang’s theory was nothing remarkable, his luck was quite good.

Secretly pleased, Old Wang remarked, “It’s still too early to say. My disciple’s strength is a bit disappointing.”

Old Tao could not help but laugh at Old Wang’s words. He knew his friend would not accept a disciple without good reason. “Then isn’t it better for you to test your theories first?”

“That’s what I thought, too,” Old Wang replied. “While that youngster’s aptitude is so-so, he’s not completely unremarkable. He could actually endure my Thousand Prajna test.”

Old Tao jolted in surprise. “He endured it?”

He was more than familiar with Old Wang’s Thousand Prajna. Not only did he help in the planning and design process, he was also the one to control the compass upon the first set’s completion. In the end, Old Wang only managed to endure for three minutes before wailing and clambering out.

Even at the designing stage, he already suspected that Old Wang’s idealistic mindset had made the Thousand Prajna of no practical value since nobody would be able to endure the entire process.

So how could Tao Yiwei not be astonished when he heard that Old Wang's disciple passed the test?

Chapter 56: Dai Gang

Wang Shouchuan grew even more pleased at the sight of Old Tao's stupefied expression.

Both were clear on the terror of the Thousand Prajna. In fact, like Old Tao, Wang Shouchuan used to think nobody would be able to endure its effects.

This had left Old Wang feeling a bit disgruntled. No matter how magnificent or unique the design, without any practical value, it was only an elaborate toy.

But with the truth revealed that the Thousand Prajna was indeed of use, how could he possibly contain his joy? Even more satisfying was that his disciple was the one to pull through the test.

After a while, Old Tao regained his senses and sighed. "You hit the jackpot!"

Able to bear the Thousand Prajna—who wouldn't want such an admirable disciple with a strong-as-steel willpower? Old Tao's eyes became slightly red.

"Isn't my disciple your disciple?" Old Wang sensed his friend's disappointment and deliberately pointed out, "I've come all the way here. Are you still going to keep this up?"

Old Tao laughed and pointed at Old Wang. "It's time to let your

disciple take advantage of me!”

Old Wang chortled together with his friend. “Of course, it would be a waste not to!”

“No problem,” Old Tao readily promised, “Find me if you have any problems. As long as your disciple is here, I won’t mistreat him.”

“Then perfect timing—there’s something I need your advice on.” Old Wang’s expression took a serious turn as he handed over the test results to Old Tao. “Take a look at this test results for me.”

With some curiosity, Old Tao received it and glanced over the contents before he burst out in a shriek, “Now you’re just bragging, aren’t you? Seven strong palaces out of eight—what a big gain!”

“But he almost never made it into the Induction Ground due to his weak aptitude.” Old Wang feigned modesty, but inside, he was secretly delighted.

“Aptitude? That’s all those guys care about.” Old Tao smirked disapprovingly. He and Old Wang agreed that the Induction Ground’s testing methods were overly simplistic and lacking.

Old Wang added, “Look at the test results for his sky palace.”

“Sky palace?” Old Tao’s gaze swept across the record before

questioning softly, “It doesn’t seem quite right. Is there something wrong with your Thousand Prajna? How could there be a sky palace that fluctuates in strength?”

Vexed, Old Wang replied, “Yeah, I found it strange, too. If only his sky palace was strong—he’d be the hegemon of the palaces.”

Old Tao understood Wang’s underlying thoughts and attempted to console him. “Don’t let your ambition get the better of you. It’s already rare to see seven, strong palaces after all. If you can’t stop worrying, why not try testing it again? Your Thousand Prajna is spoilt, that’s for sure. Or else, how is that even after teaching training basics for so long, we’ve never heard of a fluctuating sky palace?”

“Again?” Old Tao asked helplessly. “You should’ve seen that fellow’s expression when I made that suggestion. He was ready to flee!”

“Hahaha!” Old Tao burst into laughter at the thought. “I would do the same! You yourself started crying like a chrysanthemum after three minutes.”

Old Wang joined in the laughter. “Don’t even mention it—I’m afraid I’ll destroy him. There’s a lot of time for a retest, but I only have one disciple, so I’ll have to take it easy.”

“Did you report it to the higher-ups?” Old Tao reminded him.

“Of course.” Old Wang nodded. “Who’d dare forget?”

Teacher Xu arrived at the teacher lounge as usual, only to be swamped immediately by the teachers who rushed to greet him. After Duanmu Huanghun’s public declaration, Teacher Xu’s popularity skyrocketed, making him Central Pine City’s famous star. To many, Duanmu Huanghun’s decision to remain in Central Pine City was largely due to Teacher Xu’s personal charms.

Just like that, Teacher Xu became the number one teacher in Central Pine City. With his magnanimous personality, the people came to love and respect him sincerely.

For a whole ten minutes from the entrance of the teachers’ lounge to his booth, Teacher Xu returned the endless greetings. Only when he got to his table did he sigh in relief before noticing the two documents lying on top.

After leisurely pouring a cup of tea, he casually grabbed one and opened it. Glancing over the contents, he immediately sat straight up. That was the signature issued by the Elders Guild!

Dai Gang took a liking to Duanmu Huanghun and accepted him as his last disciple!

Dai Gang!

Teacher Xu couldn’t believe his own eyes; the news came too suddenly. Who was Dai Gang? Only the most senior minister and

one of the strongest wood elementalists around today. He created the absolute art [Death Commandment], which became one of the five most powerful skills used by wood elementalists, and innovated upon two schools of thought associated with the lotus and grass tendon plants, the [Lotus Chiropractic Technique] and [Grass Tendon] skills respectively.

Dai Gang was a man who disregarded the world around him and focused only on his research. Other than the two disciples he accepted in his early years, he had not taken another since then. Who would have thought that today, he would receive yet another? Teacher Xu knew without a doubt that the announcement would trigger a sizeable commotion.

Teacher Xu wasn't a naive, bookish type by any means. Duanmu Huanghun was no doubt a talent, but was he enough to catch Dai Gang's attention? It was certainly questionable.

He could sense the hidden currents; the alliance between Dai Gang and the Duanmu Family would bring about many change to the Avalon of Five Elements.

Moments later, he chuckled. The workings of the Avalon of Five Elements was not something a small character like him could grasp. No matter what hidden dealings may be working behind the agreement, it was a benefit for Duanmu Huanghun to study under Dai Gang who was not only a wood grandmaster elementalist but an outstanding educator as well. His first disciple, Lu Chen, was one of the three most prominent doctors of the present age, widely acclaimed for his extraordinary expertise. The second disciple, Yu Mingqiu, broke the record in becoming the youngest vice division

leader of Deathgrass, one of the thirteen divisions. He went on to invent an absolute art, [Galactic Streak], that allowed him to walk the world alone with his mastery of archery.

Knowing that his student had a bright future ahead of him, Teacher Xu was satisfied.

Only after some time did he finally recover enough from his shock to look over and open the second document—only to receive another small shock.

Wang Shouchuan had taken Ai Hui as his disciple.

He'd heard the name Wang Shouchuan before. He was an old teacher with several decades of experience teaching training basics in Central Pine City, with even more qualifications than Teacher Xu. He had little impression of this man except that he was unsociable and kept a low-profile; such an inconspicuous teacher could easily be found anywhere.

It was astonishing enough that such a quiet figure like Teacher Wang accepted a disciple, but the fact that it was Ai Hui shocked him more.

Teacher Xu admired Ai Hui and his sensibility, diligence, and polite mannerisms; he even managed to recently activate his natal residence as well.

Yet he also was aware of his low aptitude and weak foundation.

To put it simply, he was the worst student in the class. For Teacher Wang to choose such a disciple—what a strange individual!

Only in the midst of his considerations did Teacher Xu realize that these two students were in the same class; one at the top—gifted and skillful—and one at the very bottom, with a poor aptitude and shaky basics. Not only that, but both simultaneously gained mentors; one was a well-respected grandmaster and the other an unknown teacher.

How… interesting!

After so many years teaching, this was the first time Teacher Xu felt such bemusement.

Chapter 57: Embroidery

Chewing on a blade of grass, Ai Hui was sitting in the old man's small junk garden. He suddenly saw the copper armor and noiselessly shifted himself a bit further away from it.

The previous experience was simply so miserable that even a guy like Ai Hui, who had a steel heart full of determination, was traumatized.

The old man did not notice Ai Hui's subtle movement. He was busy elaborating on his analysis of the results.

"... low aptitude and a lower affinity between your body and elemental energy are actually not bad things. Other than allowing you to endure purer energy, the lower sensitivity allows you to absorb it from a wider scope. Precious racing horses, for example, are gifted but picky about food and are fed better meals than humans. A worn out, old horse like you can't run fast but can endure well and is easy to manage. You'll eat whatever grass there is and survive well. Eh? You're really eating grass!"

Ai Hui continued to chew on his grass sluggishly.

The old man stopped his discourse and hurriedly added, "Go on, go on, eat it."

He went on to say, "Looks like my example was really fitting."

Ai Hui felt weird now. Should he continue chewing or spit it out?

“I’ve tested the metal elemental energy at the Suspending Golden Pagoda, and it suits you very well. Train there in the future. As compared to your weak aptitude, your body is very strong. The effects of the tempering of your body are obvious. You’re of a lower grade now, so the result is optimal. The metal elemental energy in the pagoda is of a high grade and is not something that you were supposed to touch based on your current base level. But since your body quality is the most outstanding I’ve seen so far and you’re good at using it, the tempering is super effective. Of course, this has something to do with the fact that the metal elemental energy in the pagoda is of a high grade. The degree of metallization is the greatest on your skin, and [Copper Skin] is already about eighty percent completed. Judging from this speed, you’re about two months away from perfecting [Copper Skin].

The old man exclaimed with admiration, “This is my first time seeing someone developing [Copper Skin] even before activating a single palace. How astonishing!”

Ai Hui felt a little satisfied, knowing that he had surprised his teacher.

“Of course, the main point is still your seven strong palaces. Other than the sky palace, seven are strong and very balanced. It is an amazing gift and will come in handy especially when you’re selecting the moves in future. I remember there is a technique in the Induction Ground called [Big Dipper], which only requires seven strong palaces. Although it is not an absolute art, it is still incredibly powerful and wondrous.”

Ai Hui's eyes shone. He asked without the slightest hesitation, "Can I learn it?"

"Of course, you can apply as long as you get into the top five thousand within the Induction Ground." The old man carried on happily, "Oh, you're now my disciple. You only have to fulfill one criterion, and the institution will approve your application. I've already filed a record of our master-disciple relationship and sent it over."

Top five thousand…doesn't seem like much of a requirement.

The old man noticed Ai Hui's expression and guessed his thoughts. "Don't look down on this five thousand names. Their rankings are based on the entire Induction Ground. The best student from previous batches within Central Pine Academy barely squeezed into the top five hundred. Roughly, you'd have to be amongst the top ten in the school to enter the top five thousand within the Induction Ground."

Ai Hui was dumbfounded. "I have to get into the top ten in Central Pine Academy to make it to the top five thousand?"

"That's correct!" The old man laughed somewhat gleefully.

Ai Hui realized how naive he had been. Top ten within Central Pine City seemed like a faraway goal to him.

However, as if nothing had happened, he shortly asked, “What was the training method that you talked about previously?”

The old man was surprised by Ai Hui’s ability to adjust his mood. He did not know exactly how many setbacks Ai Hui had encountered since young—such an obstacle meant nothing to him.

The old man spat out a single word: “Embroidery!”

“Embroidery?” Ai Hui was shocked, and his face stiffened. A few moments later, he repeated lifelessly, “Embroidery? Like flower embroidery?”

“That’s right!” The old man answered with such certainty that Ai Hui knew there was no mistake.

Ai Hui stared at the old man with an unkind expression. Yes, he was his teacher, but if he was going to be so unreliable, they would have to have a proper chat.

Without the slightest embarrassment, the old man asked, “Embroidery, you understand?”

Ai Hui replied with an impolite tone, “Yes, women’s embroidery.”

“Rigid! Superficial!” The old man shook his head, full of disdain. “Embroidery takes elemental energy as the needle which threads the embroidery pattern. Is it easy? There are thick and thin

threads, soft and hard leather, cotton and silk. Are the complicated patterns easy? A skilled person can control ten elemental energy needles and embroidery patterns from different places at the same time. And do you know how many elemental energy needles can the best of the best control at once?”

“How many?” Ai Hui blurted out; he was lured by the old man’s words.

“The current record is nine hundred and forty-nine,” the old man answered, his face filled with awe.

Ai Hui was stunned. How in the world? He just couldn’t wrap his head around it!

“When present age embroidery master, Han Yuqin, embroiders with nine hundred and forty-nine elemental energy needles, it’s like enveloping black clouds or a shoal of fish moving together. Multicolored embroidery threads weave together in the sky like a rainbow. That’s also why her work is known as ‘The Rainbow Embroidery.’ No matter how complicated an embroidery design is, she never takes over an hour to complete it,” the old man said seriously.

“And the threads, do you think all of them are light? Coal thread is as fine as a strand of hair, but it is very heavy. How difficult would it be to control its movement with the light and floaty elemental energy needle? Soft silver thread is very soft, like water. Any error in power control will break it. And some leathers can only be pierced through by using elemental needles wrapped with a medicinal bag.”

The old man's description appealed to Ai Hui and left him speechless. He never thought that embroidery involved so much knowledge and details.

"Learn embroidery first and then sculpting." The old man gave his guidance. "If you can familiarize yourself with these two skills, you will definitely gain fine control over elemental energy. The more exceptional your control is, the more beneficial it is to you."

Ai Hui was convinced. He had to admit that the old man's words were very logical.

While it was a little embarrassing for a man to learn embroidery, he had no issue with it as long as he could become stronger. To say that embroidery wasn't as noble as hard labor would be utter nonsense!

The old man was pleased, but he concealed it well. "Smart choice! Son, you will definitely be proud of this decision in future! Don't worry, I don't speak without thinking. I made this suggestion after proper consideration."

"Where am I going to learn?" he asked boldly; he had now set his heart on it.

"Don't worry, there's a workshop I'm familiar with." The old man added energetically, "Follow me!"

Chapter 58: Threading a Needle

Ai Hui had a very serious expression on his face, and his eyes were cold and murderous. It was as if the surrounding air was about to freeze up. He could not even feel the fine beads of sweat dripping down his forehead.

He held a bright silver needle unsteadily between his right thumb and forefinger and grasped a thread with his left thumb and finger as he carefully tried to thread the elemental energy needle.

The eye of the elemental energy needle was very unstable. At times it was big, at other times it was small. It was extremely difficult to control. Ai Hui had been trying for half a day, but to no avail.

A girl's laughter sounded out from behind. When a man visited the workshop, all the young ladies naturally became curious and crowded around to observe. This workshop did not allow men to enter, so when the ladies saw Ai Hui, their eyes widened with curiosity.

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When Ai Hui started, everyone was immediately excited. They had never seen a man learning embroidery.

"How stupid, he couldn't even thread a needle after so long."

“Exactly, exactly, look at the sweat on his forehead and his fierce look!”

“That’s because he holds a grudge against the thread!”

……

The ladies chattered continuously since the spectacle was really entertaining to them. They felt it was like observing a rare animal, especially when they saw how clumsy Ai Hui was.

Luckily, Ai Hui placed all his attention on the elemental energy needle and thread, blocking out the background noises completely. Otherwise, he would have puked blood just by listening to their teasing.

In the workshop, work desks were separated by light muslin curtains. One could get a clear view into the work areas since the curtains were translucent.

Behind the curtains, Wang Shouchuan was having tea with the old lady, and they occasionally glanced over at Ai Hui’s direction.

“He hasn’t threaded the needle yet. Do you really think he’s suitable for embroidery?” the old lady questioned indifferently after turning back.

Old Wang sipped on his tea and answered casually, “I’m not hoping that he makes a living out of this anyway. It’s just an

exercise for him to train his elemental energy. Plus, haven't you noticed his tremendous determination?"

"A little." The old lady's voice carried a tinge of admiration. "It's not easy for someone his age to remain focused and not feel discouraged despite having failed for half a day."

Old Wang became pleased. He had taken in a good disciple and it made him uncomfortable all over if he did not brag a little. "Exactly! He may have a low aptitude, but he has seven strong palaces. And, he's really good at learning. He activated his elemental residence with overflowing elemental energy. He did it on his own without any guidance. Isn't he great? He even managed to endure my Thousand Prajna, so I'm impressed."

The old lady was astonished. No matter how she looked at Ai Hui, he seemed really ordinary. Who knew he was such an outstanding man.

"Seems like you're really pleased." The old lady was slightly surprised. She knew how bad Old Wang's temper was and he could be unreasonably stubborn and conceited at times.

"Not just pleased, but very pleased." Old Wang corrected the old lady. "I've only had two good things happen to me. One was meeting you and the other is finally finding a disciple before dying."

The old lady was over the moon after listening to the first part, but crinkled her brows in displeasure upon hearing the second and

said, “Everything’s fine, so why are you talking about death. Die on your own if you wish.”

“Heh, heh.” The old man felt a little embarrassed and changed the topic. “I told him how powerful you are. You should’ve seen how big his eyes grew when I said you could control nine hundred and forty-nine elemental energy needles.”

“It’s one thousand sixty-four now!” The old lady spoke proudly, before mumbling,“Looks like I’ll have to show him a little something.”

“Do your best, do as you please, and don’t be afraid of overtraining him. Give him all the work you have, no matter how tiring. This guy eats grass, but sh*ts gems!” the old man said nonchalantly.

The old lady was amused. “How pitiable, being your disciple.”

Ai Hui had no idea he was being sold out by the old man. He had finally threaded the needle and noticed the sweat on his forehead. He was completely convinced by the old man’s rationale that embroidery indeed put one’s elemental energy control to the test. In the past, he had thought quite highly of his ability to control elemental energy, but was proven to be inadequate today.

Only after he tried it himself, did he realize the how difficult it really was.

It was not easy to stabilize the elemental energy needle, but it was even more challenging to open up an eye at the tail of the condensed elemental energy needle. Ai Hui was stuck at this stage for a long time, but he finally created the eye of the needle after some guidance. He then quickly realized how much more difficult, yet necessary, it was to stabilize the eye since it was important for threading the needle.

With the thread in his left hand and needle in his right, he had to split his attention.

The eye of the needle was big sometimes and small at other times, causing Ai Hui to fail repeatedly. The good thing was that he had finally grasped the pattern of this behavior after a whole afternoon and managed to thread his first elemental energy needle.

He failed to suppress a sigh. Embroidery required way too much elemental energy control.

Ai Hui thought about the embroidery master who could control 949 elemental energy needles and found it horrifying.

But, he quickly came to be excited. If he had been half-doubting his teacher's words before, he was now exceptionally certain that embroidery was really a good training method.

He only cared about improving his skills. Shameful or not, he did not care.

“How do you feel?”

His teacher’s voice came from behind.

Ai Hui stood up hastily, wondering how long Teacher Wang had been standing there. Beside him was the embroidery master, a stern-looking lady.

“I feel very good.” He thought for a bit before commenting, “This is a very effective training method that demands great control over elemental energy.”

Visiting this place was really an eye-opening experience. Before coming here, he had mistakenly thought that an embroidery workshop was only for embroidering.

This was more like a factory.

There were piles of cloth, yarn, unfinished leather armors and even knives and swords. The air inside was filled with a herbal medicinal smell. Only after asking Master did he become aware that the ropes and tassels coiled around sword hilts required embroidery. These things were not ornamental; they were made for battles. For example, the coarse ropes around the hilts were made from weaving an uncommon material together with a unique stitching method. High-grade elemental swords were usually formed naturally and they tended to repel and reject other types of materials. Hence, there was simply no way to wound the rope around the sword hilts with ordinary techniques. Special techniques were needed to do it.

Ai Hui even saw a kind of soft grass sword that he had not seen before. Its body was full of embroidered flower patterns. He only found out, that this was a soft grass sword embryo after asking his teacher. The floral patterns allowed elemental energy to better thread together with the weapon body and strengthened it. This sword embryo would be sent to the grass weaponry processing facility to be refined. It would be soaked in chemicals and undergo a special tempering before transforming into a high-grade grass sword.

Basically, anything related to thread or rope would be seen in the embroidery workshop.

Of course, the workshop only received high-grade items.

Furthermore, the embroidery techniques involved were so dazzling that Ai Hui could not contain his amazement.

Chapter 59: Requirement

There was one lady who was about Ai Hui's age. Her elemental needle technique was like a group of active silvery-white fish and her embroidery cloth was like a calm lake. The elemental needles nimbly jumped in and out from the cloth, as if they had a mind of their own.

There was another seamstress whose elemental needle was like a hissing arrow released into the sky,. The embroidery cloth in front of her seemed like it had been woven with silver silk. It was entirely bright, and a very hollow tut-tut sound was made whenever the elemental needle poked through.

Another middle-aged lady had her embroidery cloth pinned beside a weirdly shaped stove. Each time, the elemental needle would sweep across the fire within the stove before carrying a flame with it and piercing through the cloth, leaving beautiful golden marks.

What he witnessed today completely subverted his prior knowledge of embroidery.

The old man was very pleased with Ai Hui's answer, but the lady beside him was not. The old man could say that, but when Ai Hui said it, she became unhappy and snorted coldly, "A bunch of nonsense! Training method? To you, embroidery is a kind of training method?"

The old man knew things had gone awry and that she was truly

angry. To say that embroidery served as an effective practice exercise to a master who had dedicated her whole life to it, how could she not get angry?

Darn! He would have exposed her identity to his disciple earlier if he had known. The old man tried his best to give a hint with his eyes.

Ai Hui saw his gestures, but…what did they mean?

“Mingxiu,” the old lady called coldly.

A sweet-tempered, beautiful lady appeared. “Master!”

The observing ladies had earlier been quiet out of fear. A few timid ones started to slip away from the scene.

The old lady said inhospitably to Ai Hui, “My workshop is not for anyone to come to as they please. Ten days. I’ll let you in if you can weave a light muslin.”

The surrounding ladies inhaled deeply in unison, faces full of sympathy. Ai Hui could barely thread a needle and had not learned how to move the needle. How could he possibly complete such a challenging task?

Ai Hui could tell from their reactions that spinning muslin was definitely difficult and was certain he had said something wrong to offend the owner of the workshop. He was, however, not overly

alarmed since there was no point in panicking.

“Yu Qin!” The old man’s face changed as he said unhappily, “Aren’t you making things difficult for him? He’s new to embroidery. How is he going to weave in ten days?”

“I have my rules,” The old lady responded persistently. “If you’re unhappy, leave with him.”

Ai Hui saw the redness in his teacher’s face and chipped in hurriedly, “I’m willing to accept the test.”

His teacher was angry, but Ai Hui was not at all upset. A small test meant nothing. In the Wilderness, he had to request for a very long time if he wanted to learn something. He even had to trade items for tutelage at times.

No one was obligated to help you. You had to fight for everything yourself. Water, food, money, and sunlight.

The old lady’s requirement was very normal and was considered friendly when compared to those of the master elementalists. No money was needed either.

The old lady was somewhat surprised by Ai Hui’s attitude, but kept a straight face. “Mingxiu, demonstrate the Twin Weaving Technique.”

“Yes.”

Mingxiu smiled courteously at Ai Hui. “I’ve seen you, junior!”

Mingxiu had been observing Ai Hui and had seen that he showed no signs of panic from the beginning. He had been calm all along. She knew, of course, exactly which of Ai Hui’s sentences offended her master, but had no way of reminding him at this point of time.

She decided to demonstrate the technique at a slower speed.

Actually, she knew that it was totally impossible for a newcomer to learn weaving just by looking once. It was usually something that could only be learned after two years of apprenticeship.

Ai Hui’s calm demeanour impressed her. Unlike her master, she did not find that sentence offensive. It would be really weird for a man to take pleasure in embroidering!

The master knew this as well, but could not control her rage anyway when that sentence was spilled.

Mingxiu had a headache too. In a fit of anger, her master was naturally being impolite. The moment her anger dissipated, she would regret and sigh for a long time whenever she thought about how she had angered Grandpa Wang.

Ai Hui immediately returned the gesture, albeit unaccustomed. “I’ve seen you too, Senior.”

He felt as if if he had returned to the ancient times where even greetings sounded weird. In the Induction Ground, addressing one as junior or senior had been out of fashion for a long time. “Seems like the embroidery workshop was a more traditional place,” Ai Hui thought. Plus, from the greetings, Ai Hui could also tell that the relationship between his teacher and the embroidery master was atypical.

He had sensed this the moment he entered. Teacher was very familiar with the workshop and probably frequented this place.

Ai Hui lacked comprehension when it came to women. He did not know how to describe senior Mingxiu, but he felt she was very beautiful, made people feel comfortable, and had a pleasant, friendly attitude.

“Twin Weaving Technique is a basic method used to weave fabric, mainly muslin. It’s unique in that both needles, side by side, will form crisscrosses as the threads move in opposite directions.”

Mingxiu’s voice was soft and soothing. She tried as much as possible to explain slowly in layman terms.

Her delicate hands were unoccupied. Not far away, the spindle and bobbin were spinning rapidly as two muslin threads flew straight toward her. Ai Hui knew not when, but two elemental needles soon floated in front of her, already threaded.

His eyes brightened at the dashing skill. Compared to his previous, laborious attempt, this was much more adroit.

Her control of elemental energy was just right. She was precise and her skill level was adept.

Such precise control would be terrifying on the battlefield. Ai Hui had thought about the frightful attacking methods and combat scenarios that could emerge from this skill alone.

It would be even more menacing if this was used in the dark.

“This is the simplest weaving method. You have to control two elemental needles simultaneously. The key is to coordinate the rhythm of the elemental needles. Are you ready junior? I’m going to start demonstrating. It’s a little tough, so please pay attention.”

“Wait a moment, Senior.”

Ai Hui pointed at some words in the garden that were waiting to be roped and requested, “Can Junior borrow a sword?”

Mingxiu gave the old lady a glance. The old lady did not know why Ai Hui wanted a sword but she was not as angry as before, so she said coolly, “Give it to him.”

Another embroidery lady retrieved a sword and handed it over to Ai Hui. Ai Hui bowed in gratitude. He did not draw the sword out, but held the whole thing close to his waist instead. No one knew the purpose of his absurd action. Even the old man was baffled. Could it be that there was something special about that sword? No,

there shouldn’t be.

Ai Hui held the sheath with his left palm and the hilt with his right.

The hilt was not roped, so it was cold to the touch, but Ai Hui’s palm held it perfectly snug. His world turned peaceful the moment he held onto the sword. All distracting thoughts retreated like the tides.

He looked up, his reserved eyes as bright as the stars.

“Senior, you can start now.”

Chapter 60: The Sword Embryo's Change

Mingxiu couldn't tell what Ai Hui was up to, but she could see that he seemed somewhat self-assured.

And...

When he held the sword, she sensed that Ai Hui's temperament changed for the better. However, she couldn't exactly describe what kind of change it was, and after taking a closer look, she believed that what she just felt was an illusion.

Ai Hui stood motionless before her.

"Then I'll start now."

The elemental needles in front of her started moving, and two rays of light flashed through the air. The lights seemed to interweave as the muslin spindle on the embroidery stand spun swiftly.

The quick movements of Mingxiu's elemental needles reflected brilliant rays like that of running water, and the thin, light muslin cloth gradually grew longer. The muslin threads created friction, making a non-stop hissing sound.

"Senior Mingxiu is so skillful!"

“So quick! How can the [Twin Weaving Technique] have such speed? Oh my god, I’m not even half as fast as Senior Mingxiu!”

“Quick, come and look! It’s a double stream; there are ripples both horizontally and vertically. How amazing!

“As expected from Senior. She’s definitely going to become a master in future!”

……

The surrounding ladies repeatedly exclaimed in admiration. They had been learning embroidery every day and had a greater understanding of it than most people—precisely the reason why they were so shocked. They were completely aware of the difficulty of this step.

The old lady couldn’t help but feel gratified by Mingxiu’s performance. Although there were many embroidery girls in the workshop, only Mingxiu had the capability to continue her legacy.

Unlike the old lady, the old man was feeling quite nervous.

Amongst the continuous hissing sound and the ongoing commentary, Ai Hui’s posture was abnormally strange. He was as still as a statue, and his bright eyes were fixed on the magnificent scene happening before Mingxiu.

The moment Ai Hui had gripped the sword, he had sensed that

something was amiss with his sword embryo.

In the past, his sword embryo was faintly discernible, and although he could sense its presence, it was very difficult to accurately describe it. This time, however, he could really “see” it—it was an infinitesimal wisp of a blue-colored sword gleam.

It was very, very small, to the point where it was uncertain if it could even be considered a sword gleam, but at that moment, Ai Hui was sucked into it. A blue similar to that of Calming Indigo, it was just lonely and proudly existing amidst the chaos between his brows.

The sword in his hands seemed like a part of his body. He had experienced a similar feeling in the past, but it wasn’t as intense as now. Ai Hui could even feel the empowering effect the sword had on his state of mind.

With that, he looked towards Mingxiu.

The ripple-like light reflected off the needles seemed to slow down in Ai Hui’s eyes till he could clearly discern the trajectory of the elemental needles. He could perceive exactly how they moved alternatively, how the muslin threads interweaved, and even how the airflow, which was caused by movement of the elemental needles, steadied the threads.

How intriguing!

Ai Hui watched silently. He knew that the elemental needles did not slow down but that instead, his perception had been enhanced. He admired the splendid scene happening before his eyes—it really was aesthetically pleasing!

Although it seemed like Mingxiu was only controlling the elemental needles, her body muscles were neither completely relaxed nor tensed, but rather somewhere in between. Her extended arms helped her to stabilize and optimize her center of gravity.

It was a picture of strength and beauty.

In this picture, elemental energy was flowing like trickling water streams and was stable like the spinning muslin spindle. Full of well-distributed rhythm, the elemental energy maintained the high operating speed of the elemental needles.

Ai Hui was learning many things; for example, the elemental energy used to control the elemental needles had to be well-distributed, and only then would it expedite the embroidery process.

Yet such a change wasn’t enough to surprise Ai Hui. Even though he had become more intuitive and perceptive, he had already discovered that in the past.

What really shocked him was that this was the first time he had seen something he couldn’t explain.

He did not know what the faint mist curling up from Mingxiu's surroundings was. It was constantly changing shape; a soft light at times, yet foggy and indistinct at times. Sometimes, it would come out in sheets, like fluttering fish scales.

Also, within the ripples created by Senior Mingxiu's elemental needles, there were faint, twinkling spots of light, like stars scattered over the pond's surface.

It was the first time these had appeared.

Even after racking his brains for a long time, Ai Hui was still clueless.

The sword embryo had changed after absorbing the Calming Indigo. Why did it absorb the Calming Indigo in the first place? Ai Hui still did not know the reason. He couldn't find an answer in the sword manuals. Materials of ancient times were completely different from today as their terminologies and characteristics had undergone major changes.

Calming Indigo was a newly developed item and was absent in the Cultivation Era. There definitely would be something similar in the past, but Ai Hui had no idea what it was called.

Parts of the sword manuals that explained methods of the sword embryo's development were severely damaged, so Ai Hui had to fill in most of the missing information himself. He was completely unaware of how things would turn out.

On the bright side, the sword embryo had strengthened after unexpectedly absorbing the Calming Indigo. Ai Hui presumed that the Calming Indigo must have contained some type of substance that assisted the training process.

It was a pity that the Calming Indigo was gone. He couldn't even afford the cheapest kind, or else he could conduct research on the types of substances that were needed for the development of the sword embryo.

This thought flashed through his mind but was gone within seconds, like a small candle flame in a gale.

Calming Indigo, eighty million yuan!

Although Ai Hui was startled by the sword embryo's change, his shock disappeared at the thought that this change had cost eighty million yuan.

If it had been elemental energy development, then what kind of change could eighty million yuan bring?

Ai Hui did not know if the ingredients needed for a lifetime's training would add up to eighty million yuan, but then he thought about how he could at least become a legitimate elementalist.

Meticulous with his calculations, Ai Hui knew the sword embryo was something that cost much but yielded little, whereas elemental energy development was the exact opposite.

The choice was clear.

Ai Hui would not be tempted by the sword embryo. No matter how special it was, Ai Hui was a practical man whose dream was to only become a registered elementalist.

His gaze was firmly fixed onto Mingxiu, not wavering in the slightest.

Her speed was rapidly reducing, and Ai Hui knew that she was doing it on purpose, for his sake.

Ai Hui was grateful for her kindness, but that picture of strength and beauty had become relaxed and no longer seemed as artistic.

He sighed to himself.

Chapter 61: Vigilance

Mingxiu was unaware of the wistful feeling in Ai Hui's heart. Her beautiful eyes swept towards the youth standing upright with a sword in his hand as her flowing sleeves danced in the breeze, shimmering like ripples of water. The needles moved back and forth like a shuttle as the spindle whirled in the air, steadily increasing the length of the cloth.

What a strange posture……

Mingxu couldn't help but wonder how the sword would be of assistance to him. Ai Hui was as still as a statue, without a single sound or movement. During that graceful glance of hers, she saw his eyes flash like a sword being drawn out of its sheath. His eyes gave the 'statue' its only spark of life, appearing much like a star twinkling against the dark night.

The imposing sight inevitably reminded Mingxiu of the ancient swordsmen, leaving her full of admiration.

Her sleeves danced smoothly through the air, the tip of the needle constantly moving with an incessant hissing sound.

Old Wang observed Ai Hui attentively, feeling both vexed and concerned. He began to think that coming to the embroidery workshop today was a mistake after seeing the old lady acting so eccentric. There were many ways to develop elemental energy besides embroidery. Considering how overconfidently Ai Hui had spoken, Teacher Wang was afraid that Ai Hui might suffer a huge

setback should he fail to complete the training.

Ai Hui approached all tasks in an excessively systematic manner, thoroughly planning his every move before taking any action. He behaved in a manner that was akin to a veteran hunter cautiously harvesting his catch—highly mature and very unlike most youths. Old Wang was afraid that Ai Hui was overly reserved and lacked the aggressive drive of the young.

In the prime of his youth, he had been so full of pride and vigor.

He had seen all kinds of gifted individuals during his many years of teaching in the Induction Ground. All of them were full of mettle, each one more passionate than the last.

This was what youths should be like. Although they lacked experience, youths were highly creative, less restrained, dared to challenge authority, and had amazingly bold and imaginative ideas.

Among other young people, Ai Hui's focus on practicality would seem weird and garish. Ai Hui was so mellow that people would find him rather insipid; sometimes, they would even forget his age. Whatever pride he had was hidden deep in the recesses of his soul. Compared to others of the same age, someone so taciturn would likely be more deeply affected by failure.

This was what the old man was more worried about.

Moreover, he knew that the old lady was very petty and may end up disliking something.

It hadn't been easy for him to get this precious disciple of his and he could not bear to see Ai Hui suffer any grievances.

The old man snorted to himself—this practice could have been done anywhere else. Mingxiu's excellent demonstration put him into an even worse mood. Old man Wang was definitely not an open-minded person; he may be amiable when in a good mood, but when in a bad mood, well, hehehe...

His disciple had actually practiced swordplay before?

The old man was pleasantly surprised; Ai Hui was always giving him new surprises. Although Ai Hui's posture looked a bit strange, it somehow seemed to be not awkward at all. In fact, his stance could be said to be aesthetically pleasing in an indescribable way. The old man had an eye for such things, and he knew from Ai Hui's posture that the boy had previously practiced swordplay to quite an extent.

It looked like Ai Hui's attention was much more focused when he held the sword.

One could observe all types of strange training habits in the Induction Ground. Staying in the Induction Ground for an extended time allowed one to become habituated to many odd sights. For instance, some people required absolute silence before they could enter a meditative state while others had better focus in

noisy and crowded areas.

Seeing Ai Hui so deeply invested in the training made the old man feel even more worried. After all, in the event of failure, higher expectations would lead to greater disappointment.

Failure, moreover, was inevitable. No one could possibly weave an entire piece of cloth in a week on their first try. Even Mingxiu, who had been chosen by the old lady as her successor, had not been able to do it.

The old man's brain must have been malfunctioning when he had this idea. Why did he let Ai Hui learn embroidery of all things? He was filled with regret.

"How is it?" Mingxiu asked warmly after finishing her demonstration. "Do you have any doubts, junior?"

Mingxiu had asked the question before her master could say anything. Although she knew there wasn't much use in asking, she still hoped to be able to help her junior in some way.

The old lady glanced at Mingxiu without uttering a single word.

If learning to weave was so easy, then there wouldn't be a need for the embroidery workshop.

Seeing her favorite disciple secretly try to help Ai Hui made the old woman dislike him even more. She felt that he was a

pretentious person, trying to attract attention by holding on to his sword while watching the demonstration. Pretentious!

"I don't really have any questions."

Ai Hui's reply gave Mingxiu a bit of a shock, but she quickly felt relieved. It seemed like Ai Hui had already realized the futility of the task before him. Despite being older than Ai Hui, Mingxiu didn't underestimate him and even admired him. Backing out of an impossible situation wasn't something to be ashamed of. Rather, putting on a false show of bravery wasn't something a wise person would do.

Ai Hui loosened his grip on the hilt.

At this moment, Mingxiu turned her eyes onto Ai Hui and had a strange feeling. The person in front of her was still Ai Hui, but for some reason, he now gave her an entirely different feeling, as if he had become another person. She couldn't quite explain what she was experiencing. Ai Hui had previously exuded the imposing and elegant aura of a powerful swordsman, but the current Ai Hui, however, completely lacked that aura.

What a strange occurrence!

This was the first time she had experienced such an odd feeling, two times in the same day to boot. She involuntarily sniggered to herself—could these irrational feelings be because she was exhausted? After all, how could she possibly know what a swordsman's aura felt like if she had never even met one before?

No one else had noticed Ai Hui's transformation.

Everyone took Ai Hui's "no questions" to mean that he had understood the nature of his task.

The instant his hand left the hilt, the world before him returned to its original state. That feeling of absolute control was now gone. His thoughts became more sluggish, and his sixth sense had instantaneously returned to its normal state.

An intense longing for that state of power welled up inside him, causing Ai Hui to unconsciously reach over for his sword.

Right before he touched the hilt, however, Ai Hui became aware of his actions.

He quickly retracted his hand away from the handle, as if it was highly toxic.

Ai Hui forcefully suppressed the strong urge, as he quietly reminded himself.

From the moment he had planted the seed of the sword embryo, Ai Hui was practically glued to his sword. The sword embryo had given him an especially keen sixth sense with which he soon became infatuated with—it was as if he had become addicted to this enhanced perception and his hand had refused to part with the sword hilt.

It wasn’t long before he eventually ran into a dangerous situation. Although he could sense the danger, his body wasn’t able to react to it in time. He had watched the dire beast’s fangs pierce into his flesh, and because he wasn’t able to let go of his sword, the keen sixth sense bestowed by the sword embryo amplified the pain many times over.

The experience had become one of his most painful memories.

That experience helped Ai Hui realize that the sword embryo was not all-powerful. An over-reliance on the sword embryo would give rise to the illusion of omnipotence, leading to the neglect of physical training as well as the development of elemental energy.

Without a strong, nimble body and well-developed elemental energy, the heightened sixth sense cannot be used to its fullest extent.

“Now, Senior, how long is one piece of cloth? How much yarn would I need to take with me? Could you maybe give me a little more in case I damage the cloth?”

Ai Hui asked shyly.

No one could believe what they just heard; the entire embroidery workshop had momentarily fallen completely silent.

Chapter 62: A Good Person!

"You really want to weave cloth?"

The old man couldn’t help but ask as the two made their way back.

"Is there a problem? You’ve already asked me that three times," Ai Hui replied, feeling that something was amiss. Could it be that Teacher Wang didn’t approve of him learning embroidery? Ever since they left the embroidery workshop, Teacher Wang had repeatedly asked him if he really wanted to weave cloth, as though Teacher Wang couldn’t believe it. But Teacher Wang was the one who had brought him here!

"Did you not see that she was trying to make things difficult for you?" the old man asked.

"She wasn’t exactly trying to, I guess," Ai Hui muttered to himself, piecing his thoughts together. "I feel that her request is entirely reasonable. When I was in the Wilderness, seeking guidance from others always came at a price. All the old lady did was give me a test. Not only did she not ask me for payment, she even provided the materials needed. The old lady is really a nice person, you shouldn’t misunderstand her," he answered resolutely.

Ai Hui shifted the backpack.

The old lady had told him to take as much as he needed, prompting Ai Hui to sweep all the yarn that he could see into a

backpack that was almost as tall as him. His actions had left everyone dumbfounded.

The old man looked at the mound on Ai Hui’s back, remembering the dumbstruck look on Yuqin’s face. He couldn’t help but let out a hearty laugh.

Ai Hui had no idea what he was laughing at.

After laughing for quite a while, the old man finally spoke. He asked, a little out of breath, "What you did back there was pretty brutal. Don’t you find the backpack a bit heavy?"

"What I did?" Ai Hui didn’t quite get what his teacher meant. Was he afraid that Ai Hui wouldn’t be able to carry it by himself? Ai Hui expressed his disagreement, "This isn’t heavy at all. The things that i had to carry in the Wilderness were much heavier. The cotton yarns hardly weighed anything, it’s a pity that the workshop only had so much."

Ai Hui’s voice had a tinge of regret.

The old man tried very hard to restrain his laughter. He pointed at the different colored yarns on Ai Hui’s back and said, "Why did you take these even though you can’t use them?"

Ai Hui was slightly embarrassed, and he replied, "I didn’t actually mean to take them, it’s a habit. Back in the battlefields of the Wilderness, I was expected to sweep up literally everything. These

colorful yarns were right in front of me, so I grabbed them without noticing. Should I return these then?"

Without noticing...

The old man was once again amused by the thought of the old lady's facial expression. This fellow didn't do it on purpose did he? After giving Ai Hui a few glances, Teacher Wang concluded that he most likely didn't.

"This is just a small issue," the old man said, waving his hands. He continued, "Did you fully comprehend Mingxiu's demonstration?"

"I managed to understand some of it," Ai Hui stated honestly.

"Are you really going to weave the cloth?" the old man asked, his expression now serious. "Are you confident?"

"I dare not say for certain," Ai Hui prudently replied. "But I'd like to try."

The old man could hear the persistence in Ai Hui's voice; he really was strong-willed.

"Go ahead and attempt it, then," the old man said, giving up. He quickly added, "It's alright if you can't complete it, there are many other ways to train beside embroidery. Even the most talented people can't possibly be good at everything."

"Don’t worry Teacher, I’m only trying it out." Although he wasn’t sure why the old man was so worried, Ai Hui was moved by his teacher’s concern.

The old man no longer tried to persuade him otherwise.

Noticing Ai Hui, who was carrying such a huge sack back to Vanguard Training Hall, Lou Lan curiously asked, "Ai Hui, are you currently working?"

"Nope," Ai Hui responded, shaking his head. "I’m learning embroidery."

"Embroidery?" Lou Lan asked, clearly surprised. He moved towards Ai Hui in an inquisitive manner and said, "Looks pretty awesome."

"I haven’t even started, Lou Lan," Ai Hui replied, unimpressed. "Speaking of awesome, the Senior that I met today, Mingxiu, was really impressive."

Ai Hui’s thoughts wandered. Despite coming out of his sword embryo state, the image of Mingxiu executing the [Twin Weaving Technique] with maximum effort was still stuck in his mind.

That picture of strength and beauty still left him completely in awe.

Every detail was well-balanced and perfectly harmonized.

Although he was clueless about embroidery, he could still sense the inherent strength in her actions. He knew that achieving such a level was impossible without first accomplishing several milestones. Ai Hui didn't know much about embroidery, but he was well-versed in combat. The elemental energy needs may be small, but they were still terribly deadly; Senior Mingxiu's perfected weaving technique would be highly destructive in battle.

Senior Mingxiu wasn't much older than him, but her level of skill was something that Ai Hui admired and aspired to reach.

"Senior Mingxiu from Jade Embroidery?" Lou Lan asked. Lou Lan's ingredient runs had brought him all over, making him familiar with everything regarding Central Pine City. "Senior Mingxiu is most certainly impressive. She is exceptionally gifted in embroidery and has been a disciple of the embroidery master Han Yuqin since young. Not only that, but she is currently the most outstanding disciple of the Jade Embroidery School. Many people believe that she will ascend to the position of master before she hits thirty, eventually surpassing the achievements of her teacher, Han Yuqin, and ultimately becoming a grandmaster of embroidery."

"That's amazing!" Ai Hui was starstruck. He knew that Senior Mingxiu was impressive, but didn't expect her to be this accomplished. Wait a minute. Yuqin? He suddenly recalled that Teacher Wang had addressed the old lady as "Yuqin." Could that old lady have been the embroidery master Han Yuqin?

He remembered that Teacher Wang had once mentioned that the record for controlling the highest number of elemental energy needles simultaneously was held by a particular master named Han Yuqin.

The old lady was the embroidery master Han Yuqin!

Ai Hui’s eyes grew wide with astonishment. A moment later, he asked, "Lou Lan, a master is someone powerful, right?"

"Of course!" Lou Lan exclaimed confidently. His body dispersed into a pile of sand, reassembling to form the words "master" and "grandmaster".

"Ai Hui, the titles given in the Avalon of Five Elements follow a strict set of criteria. Currently, the grandmaster rank is the highest attainable, given only to the strongest individuals capable of establishing a sect. Masters occupy the rank directly below the grandmasters. Those deemed worthy of being masters are powerful individuals considered to be at the top of their respective fields. Among them are those who have peerless strength as well as those who have made irreplaceable contributions to their fields. Master Han Yuqin has created more than ten weaving techniques."

"That’s amazing!" Ai Hui exclaimed in admiration. He was now even more determined to practice embroidery.

This small test was nothing compared to the precious opportunity of receiving guidance from an esteemed embroidery master!

If not for his teacher's deep friendship with Master Han Yuqin, he wouldn't even have gotten the chance to be tested. Other than himself, Ai Hui did not notice any males in the embroidery workshop.

His teacher's request must have put her on quite the spot, yet all she did was propose a small test. Master Han Yuqin was really a good person—she even gave him so much yarn to work with!

Ai Hui was moved by the master's generosity as he looked at the expensive multi-colored cotton yarns, which were emitting waves of elemental energy.

She even gave him so much!

Ai Hui's gaze fell on the mountain of a backpack, as he revered the old lady in his mind. She was indeed a good person!

Chapter 63: A Lousy Joke

“Ai Hui, you’re learning embroidery from Master Han Yuqin?” Lou Lan continued joyfully, “This is great. Embroidery is a very lucrative trade.”

The remaining sand transformed into a cloud filled with the word “money.” Ai Hui’s eyes caught the sparkling light reflected by the sand clumps as the words danced around in front of him like water ripples.

“Make money!” Upon hearing these two words, all Ai Hui could see was money.

The dense, sparkling cloud of “money” fluttering around in front of him caused blood to rush to Ai Hui’s head.

“How can I make money using embroidery?” Ai Hui instinctively blurted out.

Money was one of his greatest weaknesses. At the mention of money, any determination and rationality of his would fly out the window! He never used to be this much of a money grubber, but the debt of eighty million yuan had become such a huge burden that he would now get a rush with even the slightest mention of money.

“Embroidery has many uses,” Lou Lan answered instructively. “The current form of embroidery has departed greatly from the ancient techniques. In the past, cultivators would weave seals and

spells into special materials, creating infused treasures. Modern embroidery is derived from the same basis. Following the disintegration of spiritual force and the rise of elemental energy, however, the properties of the materials have completely changed. The seals of the Cultivation Era have completely vanished, but it was later found that dire beasts and certain plants have naturally occurring seals. As such, they became the main source of materials. The grass sword that you previously used is one such example, created from sword reeds.

"These naturally occurring seals can be activated by elemental energy and are known as elemental traces. The usefulness of a material can be determined by the presence of these elemental traces. Seals found in nature are often imperfect; some are badly damaged while others are malformed. Perfect elemental traces rarely occur in nature. Most materials thus require further refinement before they can be used, and that's where embroidery comes in."

Ai Hui listened intently, finally understanding why there were other things, like swords, in the embroidery workshop.

Back in the Wilderness, he had heard the elementalists mention 'elemental traces' before, but he had never quite understood what they were. Listening to Lou Lan's lecture today had, however, cleared up all his doubts.

He inadvertently asked, "Elemental traces can be altered through embroidery?"

"Indeed, especially those of plants. It was initially thought that

elemental traces could be altered through drawing, but this method was soon discredited. Regardless of whether it's perfect, every natural trace has its own elemental energy field, which repels all other materials that contain elemental energy. The pigments used in painting were unable to adhere to these natural traces. Speaking of which, there's a joke about this. Would you like to hear it?"

"You can even tell jokes?" Ai Hui was astonished.

Lou Lan's voice rang out from the sand cloud. "I saw it in a book."

"Go ahead."

"In the past, grass weapons were commonly refined using chemical painting methods."

The cloud of "money" reformed into a cluster of yellow sand. One clump of sand transformed into a miniature person while another became a miniature sword. The miniature sand person was immersed in the act of painting on the sword.

Ai Hui was dazed. Was this a live enactment?

Was Lou Lan getting smarter? There must be some kind of misconception!

"The methods of that period were rather backward. After using

special chemicals to restore and improve its elemental traces, a sword would still have to undergo two more processes. The sword was first completely covered with yellow clay, following which a silver mist paste rich in elemental energy would be poured over it. Whenever the elementalists set out for battle, a war chariot carrying two large vats would follow closely behind. The vats separately contained yellow clay and the silver mist paste."

The yellow sand suddenly dispersed, transforming into a group of miniature people charging ahead with swords in their hands. Trailing behind them was a war chariot carrying two large vats.

"When they encountered dire beasts..."

Bang! A clump of yellow sand turned into a group of dire beasts, colliding with the miniature people.

"As the intense battle raged on, the pigments on the blade would eventually fall off. Without any hesitation, the soldier would whip out another grass sword to block the enemy's attacks, seizing the opportunity to fling the grass sword back onto the chariot. The chemist on the chariot would grab the sword, swiftly dipping it into the vat of yellow clay and then into the vat of silver mist paste. He would then throw the sword back out, shouting for the next sword."

The yellow sand brought the entire scene to life, vividly showcasing the entire process. The miniature person on the chariot was frantically busy as the swords rapidly flew through the air.

“They once encountered a huge pack of dire beasts.”

The yellow sand shifted again, this time transforming into many miniature dire beasts. A trail of flying debris fanned out behind the miniature beasts, exhibiting their impressive momentum.

Ai Hui watched the events vividly unfold with relish.

“The situation was intensely fierce.”

As the battle raged on, the weapons were clinging and clanging throughout the battlefield. The small swords were now flying through the air at a much faster rate as the miniature people struggled to keep up with the pace of the battle.

“In the end, the chemist died of exhaustion.”

The miniature person on the chariot collapsed.

Ai Hui was fully engaged in the story when everything suddenly stopped. Subconsciously, he asked, “What happens next?”

“That’s all,” Lou Lan said, as he resumed his normal form. He tilted his head to the side and looked at Ai Hui. “Was it not funny? Why are you not laughing, Ai Hui?”

Ai Hui replied honestly, “It wasn’t very funny.”

Lou Lan was taken aback. “I thought that it would be hilarious! The book said that it was one of the top ten jokes of the year.”

Ai Hui coughed lightly, and changing the topic, he said, “Let’s continue talking about embroidery.”

Ai Hui had noticed that Lou Lan’s morphing abilities seemed to have improved. The miniature people that he had just created were remarkably true to life.

Ai Hui, however, was thinking further than that. Morphing was a technique commonly used by sand puppets and was one of the more effective moves at their disposal. Although practically all sand puppets could morph, sand puppets who could morph at Lou Lan’s exceptional standards were quite rare. Lou Lan’s morphing abilities would be truly formidable in battle.

The standard of a sand puppet’s morphing abilities largely depended on its cognition. Lou Lan’s cognitive abilities should thus be considerably remarkable.

Perhaps he could help Lou Lan improve this aspect of his abilities? With his level of cognition, Lou Lan could definitely further enhance his morphing abilities. In their previous battle together, relying on his morphing alone already had a significant impact.

This idea lingered in Ai Hui’s mind for a moment before swiftly vanishing.

Ai Hui felt that he was overthinking. Lou Lan was a domestic sand puppet and shouldn't be steered towards battling. The battlefield was a cruel place from which he might not even make it out alive.

Ai Hui reminded himself that he was no longer in the Wilderness and that he had started a new life that was completely different to what he had experienced in the past three years.

Life was not all about fighting—for Lou Lan at least. All that mattered was that he could boil soup and clean rooms.

Fighting should be left to people like him who were already used to the violence.

Ai Hui revealed a smile that was as radiant as the sun.

Chapter 64: A Future Paved With Riches

“Embroidery is one of the more lucrative occupations,” Lou Lan said, as he morphed into a book. A voice boomed out as the pages flipped. “For the past twenty-two years, embroidery has consistently had a place in the top ten most lucrative occupations within the Avalon of Five Elements.”

Ai Hui’s eyes lit up like the stars in the night sky.

Even wielding a sword could not captivate him to such an extent.

“This has to do with embroidery being applicable across a large number of fields, especially with regards to the handling of plant and leather materials. Due to the high prices of even basic embroidered goods, the sales volume isn’t all that high. One sheet of elemental cloth costs a hundred times more than normal cloth, with the average price over the past ten years being five hundred thousand yuan.”

Ai Hui sucked in a breath of cold air. Never had he imagined that one sheet of elemental cloth would cost this much.

Five hundred thousand!

Before his debt of eighty million yuan, five hundred thousand yuan was an astronomical figure to Ai Hui. But now, this was the price for only one sheet of elemental cloth!

Huge profits! Such huge profits!

Ai Hui's eyes glowed at the prospect of making so much money. In his mind, he was already running down to his teacher, shouting "Teacher, I want to learn embroidery!" with utmost passion and sincerity.

These profits were really too much!

Ai Hui gritted his teeth, controlling himself.

How could such a lucrative trade possibly exist in this world? Surely it exists so that he may join it!

How much of the [Twin Weaving Technique] did he remember? Ai Hui had initially embraced the task with an attitude of experimentation, but he had now completely changed his mind. Overcoming this test was a must.

My head can be chopped off, my blood can be lost, but don't ask whether or not I would learn embroidery! Let the wind blow, beat the war drums, but I won't be called Ai Hui if I don't learn embroidery!

"What are elemental cloths used for? Why are they worth so much? Is weaving muslin considered as elemental cloth?" Ai Hui asked rapidly.

"Elemental cloths are weaved using elemental energy needles

with threads made of materials rich in elemental energy. Elemental cloths are expensive because it is easy to add elemental traces to them. For instance, embroidery can be used to create these traces. Elemental cloths have many uses, including making weapons. Lian Feier, the vice division leader of the North Sea Division, has a weapon called [Dying Peach] that is created through embroidery. Much protective equipment and many armor linings are also made with such cloths, providing a layer of protection against the dire beasts' elemental energy-charged attacks."

Lou Lan returned to his normal form, appearing in front of the heap of yarn.

"Are you referring to these? These balls of yarn have elemental energy and can be used to make elemental cloths. The use of an elemental energy needle, however, is required. Ai Hui, do you know how to do it? Weaving cloth is one of the more profound techniques in embroidery," Lou Lan said, as he looked at Ai Hui.

"There's no other choice," Ai Hui stated resolutely. There was no room for negotiation.

Hearing about the five hundred thousand yuan had steeled his resolve to learn embroidery. If one piece was worth that much, his debt could be settled with a hundred and sixty-four pieces. This quick calculation left Ai Hui feeling momentarily relieved.

Learning embroidery was suddenly so much more worthwhile.

[Twin Weaving Technique]……

Ai Hui recalled every detail of Senior Mingxiu's weaving demonstration. Without the aid of the sword embryo, his thought processes were much slower, but at least he could still remember everything clearly.

Ai Hui had no intention of borrowing the sword embryo's seed's strength for the task ahead.

He was clear about his stance. The increase in the seed's power brought with it an even greater sense of obsession.

Ai Hui maintained a cautious and restrained approach while tapping on the seed's strength. Regardless of how strong it may be, using power beyond one's control can easily go south. The sword embryo's transformation meant that Ai Hui had to now be even more vigilant than before.

"Do you know about the [Twin Weaving Technique]?" Ai Hui asked.

Lou Lan morphed into a book again, its pages flipping rapidly.

"The [Twin Weaving Technique] was created by Master Han Yuqin when she was nineteen. It is the embodiment of Master Han Yuqin's skills with the needle."

Lou Lan's first sentence deepened Ai Hui's respect for Master Han Yuqin. Creating a whole new weaving technique at just

nineteen years old was no mean feat—she truly was worthy of being a master!

"The [Twin Weaving Technique] revolves around the simultaneous coordination of two needles. It works by having one needle lead the other, tapping on the interaction between two needles that are bound by the same elemental energy. Building on the foundations of the [Twin Weaving Technique], Master Han Yuqin developed many other needlework techniques which ultimately culminated in her creation of the [Fish Waterfall] needlework style. It is so named for the enormous number of needles used. She currently holds the record for the greatest number of needles used simultaneously."

The rapid book-flipping sounds came to an abrupt stop as Lou Lan returned to his original form. "That's all I have, Ai Hui. Master Shao has very few books regarding the embroidery workshop."

Ai Hui did not hear what Lou Lan was saying. He repeated to himself, "Tapping on the interaction between the two needles that are bound by the same elemental energy……"

Thanks to the sword embryo's seed, Senior Mingxiu's actions were seared into his head, down to the smallest details. If he had not relied on the seed during the demonstration, he surely would have been at a loss. Lou Lan's words reminded him of some important details that immediately surfaced in his mind.

So this is how it works……

The sentence had enlightened him, clearing up the fuzzy understanding he had of the concept.

Ai Hui's expression became serious.

Understanding the principles behind the [Twin Weaving Technique] made Ai Hui realize why his teacher wasn't optimistic about the task. Although the technique's concepts weren't exactly complicated, its execution required excellent control of elemental energy.

Ai Hui's control of elemental energy was far below the minimum requirements of the technique.

However, he was not dejected by this revelation; he had no time to lose.

Ai Hui began his attempt at creating elemental needles. His prior experience allowed him to form the needles much faster this time, and the needles also stabilized quicker. Ai Hui's learning ability was decent. Once he succeeded with an attempt, he would quickly get the hang of things.

As he went through all of Senior Mingxiu's actions, he found a huge problem—he wasn't able to control the elemental needles from a distance.

Throughout the entire demonstration, Senior Mingxiu had not

used her palms to directly control the elemental energy needles. The theory behind that was simple enough. The densely packed elemental energy was used to form the needles, which were connected to the user via an “invisible thread” of elemental energy. This “invisible thread” was created using an extremely thin and faint form of elemental energy that was not only invisible but also undetectable.

A high level development of elemental energy was needed to be proficient in the detachment of elemental energy needles. In fact, forming the “invisible thread” was much harder than conjuring the elemental energy needles.

Elemental energy was Ai Hui’s biggest weakness. Having only just opened his natal residence, he didn’t have enough elemental energy to detach the elemental energy needles from his body.

But Ai Hui was not willing to give up just like that.

Five hundred thousand yuan per cloth!

He was excited by this figure.

Ai Hui racked his brains, trying to come up with a solution. The [Twin Weaving Technique] required the two needles to simultaneously move along the horizontal and vertical planes, one needle for each plane. Only when the two needles moved in complete coordination could it be considered as the [Twin Weaving Technique].

He didn’t have to match Senior Mingxiu’s speed; a more achievable pace would be adequate.

While Senior Mingxiu’s demonstration had made the technique look completely effortless and simple, a deeper analysis helped Ai Hui discover its true complexity. The deceptively simple technique actually possessed several intricacies that might leave one feeling at a loss of where to start.

It’s not that easy to earn five hundred thousand yuan after all!

Ai Hui let out a defeated sigh.

Chapter 65: Invisible Thread

When Ai Hui roused from his deep rumination, the sky had already turned dark. Lou Lan was nowhere to be seen.

While the [Twin Weaving Technique] was honestly out of his league, Ai Hui was not discouraged; he was already used to facing all kinds of challenges.

He began his attempt.

The first step was to try to conjure two elemental energy needles. This was the most fundamental aspect of the technique, without which the cloth couldn't even be woven.

He had just learned how to integrate the element force needle in the morning, and the process wasn't exactly easy. An attempt at integrating two elemental energy needles at the same time was going to be difficult.

Ai Hui was, however, surprised that despite several issues, the attempt went relatively smoothly.

Ai Hui smiled, feeling pleased, as he gazed upon the needles on his right and left-hand fingers.

His left and right hands were very balanced, something he had discovered in the Wilderness. He was capable of wielding swords in either hand without much difficulty and was pleased to find out

that such benefits extended to the use of elemental energy as well.

After the elemental energy at his fingertips stabilized, Ai Hui proceeded with his attempt at detaching the needles from his fingers.

He had learned the theory during his teacher's fundamental lessons on training. Teacher Wang's explanation hadn't been very detailed, so Ai Hui had to fumble with the method by himself.

Ai Hui continuously adjusted his breathing. His natal residence was in his lungs and had a direct relationship with his breathing. The human body was truly wondrous, the five residences were very different from one another.

Ai Hui's lungs expanded and contracted to the rhythm of his breathing. When he inhaled, his lungs suffused with a faint silver tint and exerted a pulling force that absorbed the metal elemental energy from the air. The residual air was then expelled through his nose.

Being able to cultivate elemental energy through the mere act of breathing was one of the advantages of opening the natal residence. Even though the elemental energy present in the air was very sparse, the accumulative effect of such absorption was nothing to scoff at in the long run.

Furthermore, every breath taken excited the metal elemental energy within his body, causing fluctuations that shifted with every adjustment to his breathing.

Being able to look into Ai Hui's body would reveal two extremely thin silver threads branching out of his silver-tinted lungs, with one entering his right hand and the other his left. These were formed from elemental energy.

Ai Hui's hand palaces had not been activated, which meant that the path from his natal residence to his palms hadn't been opened yet. According to the conventions of the Cultivation Era, these paths were known as elemental "veins."

Ai Hui's elemental energy was currently circulating via the back of his muscles. If the elemental veins were thought of as a wide torrential river, then the path through the muscles was like a small, convoluted stream in the middle of a forest. Not only was it unable to accommodate large amounts of elemental energy, but the muscles were also much less efficient in circulating elemental energy.

Ai Hui's situation was slightly better.

Opening his natal residence only after having developed his elemental energy to its fullest state had helped drench his muscles in elemental energy, greatly reducing the pathway's resistance to elemental energy.

The elemental energy condensed into needles at Ai Hui's fingertips, connecting to the thin silver threads of elemental energy within his body. Ai Hui was able to control the elemental energy needles because the other end of the silver threads were

connected to his lungs.

Ai Hui tried to move the needles forward.

Under his watchful gaze, the elemental energy needles at his fingertips grew slightly longer.

No! This was not elemental energy detachment.

The principle behind this was not complex at all: keep the elemental energy thread unbroken, and maintain the density of the front of the conjured elemental energy needles while keeping it attached to an “invisible thread” behind it.

In other words, he had to thin the elemental energy further at the back of the needle, but not to the point where it would break away from the elemental energy within his body.

How was he going to make it thinner?

Ai Hui was at a loss. His teacher had not mentioned this before, as it was something that would be taught in the more advanced classes. This was too difficult for a rookie who had just opened his natal palace.

It was now too late in the night to find his teacher. Ai Hui decided to spend the night figuring it out by himself, and he would consult his teacher the next day if there were still no progress.

Ai Hui reflected on how he condensed the elemental energy into needles, thinking of reversing the process to make the elemental energy thread thinner.

He got to work immediately. Compressing the elemental energy at his fingertips was the key factor in manifesting the elemental energy needles. To do the opposite, he would have to make the elemental energy fainter.

The elemental energy needles at his fingertips gradually faded out of sight.

The glow slowly become dimmer, turning transparent, before finally becoming practically invisible. Ai Hui could still feel the elemental energy needles' presence even though he could no longer see it.

He did not stop there. Carefully controlling the elemental energy within his body, Ai Hui continued to weaken it while he strived to maintain its shape.

At this point, the elemental energy needle was so faint that Ai Hui had to consciously feel for it.

Ai Hui's body suddenly trembled; his face lit up with joy.

As the density of the elemental energy continued to drop, the feeling at the tip of his fingers that had almost disappeared

completely became clear once again. He could distinctly feel a very faint elemental energy in front of him that moved according to his will.

The “invisible thread”!

Ai Hui was ecstatic to see the “invisible thread”! He had realized that weakening the elemental energy beyond the critical point was necessary for forming the “invisible thread.”

This was the key!

Crossing this critical point would allow greater control over the elemental energy.

Understanding the “invisible thread” left Ai Hui feeling over the moon. Although he was still far from moving the detached needles, he was off to a great start. How could he not be happy after comprehending such an advanced lesson?

Suddenly, the “invisible thread” shattered into fragments.

Ai Hui was dazed for a moment. A moment later, a wry smile appeared on his face as he realized why this was taught in more advanced classes.

The “invisible thread” was highly flexible and was capable of being manipulated in a number of complex ways. The amount of elemental energy required to sustain it, however, was much

greater than that of the compressed elemental energy. This had depleted Ai Hui's pool of elemental energy, and as he was no longer able to sustain the elemental energy thread within his body, the "invisible thread" quickly disintegrated.

What was the use of this "invisible thread" if it could only be sustained for such a short period of time?

Furthermore, elemental energy detachment wasn't just about the "invisible thread" alone. Combining the "invisible thread" with the elemental energy needle was going to deplete his elemental energy at an even faster rate. If the simplest part of the technique —moving the detached needles—was this tough, how was he going to execute the [Twin Weaving Technique] in its entirety?

Ai Hui sat under the starry sky, feeling empty inside.

He rested for a while and recovered some of his strength. He then stood up resolutely, picked up the backpack, and walked out of the training hall under the sky full of stars.

Chapter 66: Progress

When he saw Mingxiu, Wang Shouchuan gave a snort of contempt. His face looked gloomy.

“Please don’t be angry, Uncle,” Mingxiu said softly with a gentle smile. “You know the temperament of Master. Back then, she was in a rage, and when she calmed down later, she really felt regretful. She knows you must be angry. She even said that your disciple is her disciple and that even if Ai Hui cannot succeed, she will teach him embroidery. She had said those unkind words only because she was angry.”

“So you don’t have high hopes for Ai Hui, right?” Wang Shouchuan looked unhappy.

Mingxiu knew that Wang Shouchuan’s anger was still not mollified, so she said, “Of course we do. Ai Hui’s disposition is incomparable. I’m sure his future is very promising.”

Wang Shouchuan’s face was emotionless. “That means you don’t have hopes for him now, huh?”

“We all trust your foresight, Uncle,” Mingxiu said softly. “Please don’t be angry with Master. You know her bad temper. But she also has a deep affection for you. She knew that she was impulsive and has calmed down now. Master is very remorseful for making you angry. These days she has no appetite and has lost a lot of weight.”

Mingxiu had been the mediator between the two for countless times. Neither of them was good-tempered, so although they loved each other, they began to live apart long ago.

Han Yuqin was an aggressive person. She ran her own embroidery workshop and was ambitious to carry forward and develop her school of thought further. Wang Shouchuan, on the other hand, was addicted to his own doctrine and was indifferent to the outside world. He, too, was stubborn, so every time they met, they quarreled fiercely. At first, Mingxiu had become very worried, but later on, she had gotten used to it; she realized that even though they quarreled a lot, they loved each other very much.

If it weren't so, Master wouldn’t have been running the embroidery workshop in the remote and small Central Pine City for twenty years.

Mingxiu knew that Master was indeed regretful this time. Uncle had never asked Master for any favor, and the first time he had done so had ended up in such chaos. That was why Master was feeling upset and remorseful.

Wang Shouchuan’s face had brightened up a bit.

Mingxiu knew that the iron must be struck when it was still hot, so she quickly said, “I will go to bring Ai Hui here now. The earlier he starts, the more progress he will make. Please rest assured, Uncle. Master will treat Ai Hui as her own disciple. What’s more, I’ll help too. I’ll take good care of him. What do you think, Uncle?”

Wang Shouchuan didn’t answer her question immediately, and instead asked, “That means neither of you thinks Ai Hui can pass the test?”

Mingxiu thought for a while before saying, “Ai Hui is of excellent temperament and composure. Regarding talent, I believe in your judgment, Uncle. The test is only Master’s balderdash in rage. Please don’t take it seriously. No one in this workshop has ever been able to weave a bolt of cloth with the [Twin Weaving Technique] in their first week of embroidery study.”

Wang Shouchuan was acutely aware that Mingxiu was telling the truth, but he still shook his head. “He is my disciple. He said he wanted to try, and I believe him. Let's see when the time is up. No need to be in such a hurry.”

Mingxiu had not expected Wang Shouchuan to refuse. She knew that Uncle was as proud and arrogant as Master, but he seemed to be really angry this time. She started gently, “Uncle....”

Wang Shouchuan waved his hand and interrupted, “Let's wait and see. If he really doesn’t have talent in embroidery, then we don’t need to waste time.”

Seeing that Uncle had made up his mind, Mingxiu didn’t try to persuade him further and returned.

Having heard Mingxiu’s update, Han Yuqin didn’t say a word. Her face was gloomy; she knew she had gone too far this time. Although they used to quarrel before, as long as Mingxiu mediated,

they would always reconcile. She really regretted the fact that she hadn't realized earlier that Wang Shouchuan's hope in Ai Hui was far beyond her expectations.

Now it was clear that he didn't want to bring Ai Hui back at all.

The test could not possibly be accomplished by him.

"Whatever," Han Yuqin said dispiritedly.

Mingxiu was silent. She, too, hadn't expected Uncle to be so determined. Does this mean that Uncle doesn't want Ai Hui to study embroidery anymore? However, when she recalled Uncle's attitude, Mingxiu felt that that wasn't his intention.

Did he really believe that Ai Hui had a chance to pass the test?

Mingxiu was startled by this thought.

That's not possible!

She immediately denied the thought. The [Twin Weaving Technique] was not complicated, but to a novice like Ai Hui who had taken a long time to even thread a needle, it was definitely an insurmountable task.

She believed that this was Uncle showing his favor for Ai Hui, which was actually normal. For all these years, Uncle had never

taken a disciple—Ai Hui was his very first one. She knew Uncle too well; although he was bad-tempered, he was actually a kind person.

She planned to persuade him again after a few days, or maybe ask Ai Hui to help her.

Hmmmm...it suddenly occurred to her that she didn't meet Ai Hui today.

She realized that she could go and help him secretly. To her, Uncle was just in a temper. If Ai Hui passed the test smoothly, it would end happily for everybody. Of course, it was impossible to accomplish this himself, but with her help, it wouldn't be a problem.

...

A bumping sound could be heard from time to time from inside the Suspending Golden Pagoda.

After the metal elemental energy in his body was scattered by the [Arching Fish Back], Ai Hui sat down to absorb the scattered energy. With an opened natal palace, his energy absorption efficiency had been largely improved.

He now knew the benefits of opening up the natal palace—he had seen an overall marked improvement, whether it was in his training efficiency or his energy control.

The time he could hang inside the Suspending Golden Pagoda had also increased. This meant that the metal elemental energy capacity of his body had become far larger than before. However, the absorption speed of his flesh and blood was not at the same level as that of the natal palace at all.

There was no need to mention energy control. Before, Ai Hui could only use elemental energy to perform some basic tricks, but now, he could make an “invisible thread” with his elemental energy. This was indeed great progress.

It was no wonder that opening one’s natal palace was the first milestone in elemental energy training. Its benefits were exceptionally tangible.

With such a high-intensity training, Ai Hui was receiving a much more direct benefit and was progressing by leaps and bounds.

But at this moment Ai Hui had no time to cheer. Since his elemental energy had recovered during the meditative state, he opened his eyes and immediately started to try to manipulate the elemental needle.

Now, concerning the making of an elemental needle, Ai Hui was in no way a green hand anymore. After countless practices, he had become very adept at it.

His hair was disheveled, and his face was dirty; he hadn't slept or rested in the past two days.

Finally, he managed to detach the needle from his body while manipulating it—but it was only within a radius of ten centimeters. Although the scope wasn't large, it was sufficient for him.

Yet it was too early to be happy. He continued to devote himself to learning the next step. Elemental needle detachment was only the beginning.

But this time Ai Hui was filled with confidence!

Chapter 67: Duanmu's Self-Abasement

Duanmu Huanghun was sitting inside the schoolhouse, feeling impatient.

The students around him couldn't help but continuously shoot gazes at him, and many girls hid themselves behind some windows and ardently peeped at him. Duanmu Huanghun, who had shot to fame after the famous fight, had now become the last disciple of the Grandmaster Dai Gang. Yet none of these made him feel pleased or joyful.

With his noble upbringing, amazing talent, and handsome looks, and now as the last disciple of the famous master, he really was a favorite of heaven. He was so perfect that no one could even envy him.

But he was not happy at all!

That bastard didn't come to school again!

Duanmu Huanghun's heart was full of anger. Yes, anger!

Today was the first day he had returned to Central Pine City from meeting his master. With the title of a grandmaster's last disciple, he was shining brilliantly like the sun. The dean had personally came to welcome him again and had even spoken to him obsequiously. The teachers gave him kind and warm greetings, not in the least bit treating him like a student. The male students looked at him with worship and reverence, while the female

students stared at him with passionate love.

But he neither wanted nor cared about any of these!

The only person he wanted to see, the only person he cared about, was not included in these strangers.

He wanted to see the unconcealed envy, jealousy, and self-abasement in Ai Hui's eyes. Yes, he was this practical. He just wanted to see that fellow grovel at his feet under his dazzling fame.

It would feel great!

But damn it! That guy didn't come to school again!

Duanmu Huanghun's face was livid with rage. Although his eyes were as cold as ice, an unimpeded fury was burning beneath them.

It was like a powerful army with a vast host of infantry and cavalry, after planning for a long time, had finally marched directly towards the enemy's camps in the hope of wiping the enemies out, but found out that the camp was empty.

The feeling...sucks!

He wasn't listening to a word of what the teachers were saying in the class. For the whole morning, he was in a rage and was like a volcano that could erupt at any time.

Each minute in the class was similar to torture and made him more and more angry. He felt like he was a foolish clown. The feeling was so intense that he almost couldn’t help but rush out of the classroom.

However, he somehow managed to restrain himself until the end of the class.

As soon as the class was over, he stood up and rushed out of the schoolhouse with great haste.

As he walked outside, he couldn’t help but narrow his eyes in the bright sunlight.

"Excuse me, do you know Ai Hui?"

As he just passed the school gate, Duanmu heard a soft and gentle voice and suddenly stopped. However, he didn’t stop because of how attractive the voice was, but instead, because of the name.

Ai Hui...that damned bastard!

After his eyes adjusted to the sunlight, he could clearly see the person in front of him. His eyes lit up. What a classic beauty!

The girl stood there gracefully with a demure temperament and a warm smile; she looked so gentle and decent. Duanmu Huanghun

had seen countless beauties, but very few of them could be said to be as pleasant-looking as her.

Ai Hui’s girlfriend?

Impossible! Duanmu immediately denied the thought. How can Ai Hui have such a pretty girlfriend? His girlfriend was the plain-looking one. The moment the word "girlfriend" appeared in his mind, Duanmu’s heart trembled, as he remembered the miserable experience of that night. It was a literal nightmare that he was still trying to forget.

He never thought he would remember it here...

Although he was roaring with anger deep inside his heart, Duanmu Huanghun still smiled brightly, and said, "Nice to meet you, I’m Ai Hui’s classmate."

He decided to paralyze his enemies before infiltrating himself into them!

"Wow, that’s great. So glad to meet you. I’m the senior disciple of Ai Hui’s master," Mingxiu said, pleasantly surprised.

Senior disciple of Ai Hui’s master?

Duanmu Huanghun was also a bit surprised. His attention was immediately caught by this relationship. Ai Hui had a master? How could anyone choose such a terrible guy as a disciple? He

began to feel indignant.

Yet he was calm enough to maintain his composure, and he asked with a big smile and appropriate surprise, "Ai Hui has a master? I've never heard of it before. Why didn't he share this wonderful news with us?"

Mingxiu didn't think too much, and she answered, "I presume he didn't have time to tell you. It was just days ago. His master is Wang Shouchuan, a teacher of Central Pine Academy."

"Wang Shouchuan? Teacher in our academy?" Duanmu Huanghun paused for a minute as he quickly searched his memories. "Is he the one teaching the 'Basis for Training' course?"

"Yes." Mingxiu was familiar with Uncle's course.

"I see." Duanmu Huanghun instantly became more relieved. It wasn't surprising; surely no respectable teacher would choose such a terrible disciple. He didn't think that a teacher who taught 'Basis for Training' would be of high status.

Now much happier, Duanmu Huanghun acted impressed and said, "He is a good teacher. Ai Hui is fortunate to have him as his master. "

Hearing his compliment, Mingxiu's positive impression of Duanmu became reinforced. She had learned embroidery from Master ever since she was very young, and just like her master,

Uncle was like kin.

"So you and Ai Hui know each other well?" Mingxiu asked curiously.

"Very!" Duanmu replied. He gnashed his teeth in anger but managed to give a bright smile. "We are on the same mission team."

"Oh, then you must be good friends." Mingxiu was also happy to know this. The members of a mission team generally consisted of very good friends who could closely cooperate.

"Yes, yes." Duanmu's smile became brighter, but in his heart, he wished to stab Ai Hui to death.

Oops, no. Stab? How could he be so cruel to his "good friend"?

He should hack him into pieces to resolve his hatred!

"Oh, I don't know your name yet," Mingxiu said.

Duanmu thought furiously to himself. Should he tell her his real name? No! He was too famous these days, and as a celebrity, he would be recognized if she knew his true name. Then she would know that he was lying because Ai Hui must have bad-mouthed him in front of her.

Why not give her a pseudonym?

Without thinking, Duanmu Huanghun blurted out, "Just call me Bangwan."

The next moment he realized what he said, and he felt like killing himself.

He almost cried out. Just what did he do?

"Oh, hello, Bangwan!" Mingxiu said heartily.

Hearing the familiar yet horrifying name again, tears welled up in Duanmu’s eyes.

"Yes, yes," he replied torpidly.

This self-abasement was just too harsh.

Chapter 68: Reveal

“By the way, Bangwan, do you know where Ai Hui lives?” Mingxiu asked. “I tried to find him in many places but failed.”

When Duanmu Huanghun, whose heart was weeping silently, heard this, he almost burst into laughter—so he was not the only one who couldn’t find Ai Hui after all.

Wait. Okay, this was nothing to be happy for.

Duanmu Huanghun felt that he was almost being driven insane by himself. What the hell happened to him? Why was he always making mistakes like this?

After making a series of stupid mistakes for no reason, he really wanted to cry.

“I don’t know either. He seldom comes to class.” Managing to calm himself down, Duanmu decided to say something bad about Ai Hui first. He then added, “He used to live in Vanguard Training Hall. You can try to find him there.”

“Great. Then I’ll go to the training hall now.” Mingxiu was happy, but then she frowned when she thought of Ai Hui’s bad habit of skipping classes. She should definitely remind him when she sees him later.

Duanmu Huanghun was lost in thought as he watched Mingxiu

walk away. Her name sounded familiar to him. He felt as if he had heard of her name somewhere before, but now he couldn't remember clearly.

As he had met countless ladies, Duanmu was very experienced in this aspect. It was impossible for that girl, who was gentle, respectable, and had such an outstanding temperament, to be a nobody. Suddenly he recalled some details, such as her clothing, which was simple, plain and not resplendent at all. But the texture was clearly of high quality, and it was all made of elemental fabrics. Moreover, the embroidery of the clothing was clearly a masterpiece.

As a member of an honored family who had lived an extravagant life since childhood, Duanmu Huanghun could tell this from just a glance. Mingxiu's clothes were not conspicuous, but in terms of price, it was even higher than what he was wearing.

Ai Hui was poor and weak. How could his senior Mingxiu be so rich?

Embroidery...

Duanmu Huanghun finally realized who Mingxiu was—she was the favorite disciple of Master Han Yuqin! Central Pine City was small without many notable big shots, which was why Duanmu was able to quickly remember her. Since he had decided to study in Central Pine Academy, his family had already collected all the information about the city.

The first person one could not offend here in Central Pine Academy was Master Han Yuqin.

No matter where she went, the embroidery master would always be an honored guest. Even his teacher, the Grandmaster Dai Gang, would keep a low profile in front of her.

Duanmu Huanghun knew much more than others. Han Yuqin's embroidery workshop was remote and very few people knew where it was, and if it wasn't specially investigated by his family, he wouldn't have known that this ordinary workshop was owned by such a personality.

And no one was stupid enough to go and offend an embroidery master.

Workshops like this had business with the Thirteen Division. Many clients came to purchase high-end elemental fabrics, and these clients were either wealthy or powerful.

The interpersonal connections behind it formed a huge, invisible network.

Then Mingxiu should be the disciple of Master Han Yuqin. How could she be Teacher Wang's disciple? No! It suddenly occurred to him that Han Yuqin's husband was said to be a teacher in Central Pine Academy. That must be Teacher Wang!

Duanmu Huanghun was greatly surprised at this conclusion.

Teacher Wang was a person to whom very few people would pay attention, and Duanmu didn't have the slightest impression of him. Judging from the class he taught, his level should not be very high.

Duanmu quickly calmed down—this was not surprising at all.

All of a sudden, he felt curious; why was Mingxiu searching for Ai Hui?

Why not go and have a look?

Once he had such an idea, Duanmu couldn't sit still. Yes, he should go and have a look! That damned fellow was already very weak, and he skipped school almost every day. What on earth was he doing?

Duanmu Huanghun told himself that since they were now teammates, if Ai Hui was too weak, the team would lag behind, which would directly influence himself.

He set out immediately.

The Vanguard Training Hall was remote and it wouldn't be easy for Mingxiu to find it, so it wasn't too late for Duanmu to start now.

Yet he didn’t go to the training hall directly; instead, he went back to where he lived and wore an elemental mask.

This was the inconvenience his fame brought him—he would be recognized far too often. He didn’t want to be interrupted by some crazy female students on the way.

He made up his mind to find out what the hell the bastard was doing.

The face in the mirror was strange, and the eyes were cold.

As he had expected, by the time he made it to the alley to Vanguard Training Hall, Mingxiu hadn’t arrived. So he bought a stick of candied fruits, hid himself somewhere covert, and waited like a patient hunter.

“Be more careful if you come here alone next time.”

A boy was speaking to the girl beside him as they walked by.

“Why? It’s not safe here?” The girl was curious.

The boy said seriously, “You don’t know? This is where the streaking case took place some time ago.”

“Really?” The girl was greatly surprised. “The insane naked guy?”

“Yes, I was here that night and saw it myself. The psycho also had strong fighting skills.” The boy continued, “Do take care of yourself.”

Duanmu was eating the candied haws, and when he heard their conversation, he froze, and his face burned as if he had been slapped harshly. He felt like finding somewhere to hide himself. What happened that day inadvertently reappeared in his mind. Although it had already passed, he still felt humiliated.

Immersed in the unbearable memory, Duanmu didn’t notice the boy’s unintentional glimpse towards him.

The boy’s body froze.

Noticing this abnormality, the girl asked, “What happened?”

“Nothing,” he answered in a low voice, and he pulled her hand quietly as a hint that they need to leave as soon as possible.

The girl didn’t understand what he meant, but she still quickly followed him and left.

Having walked some distance away, the boy, still a bit scared, looked back and sighed with relief when he confirmed that Duanmu was looking down at the ground and hadn’t seen them.

“What happened to you just now?” the girl asked, concerned.

The boy was about to answer when he noticed two guards on patrol. He quickly took the girl’s hand and ran to them.

Duanmu Huanghun on the other side of the street, however, was still thinking about the shameful scene, and therefore didn’t notice the nervousness of the guards after they heard what the boy said.

The guards took it very seriously, because the reason why they were on patrol there every day was precisely the streaking case that Central Pine Academy was trying to investigate.

Due to the rise of Duanmu Huanghun, the fame of the academy had been enhanced and was recently in a steady increase. So how could they put up with such a scandal?

Every guard clearly knew that the naked miscreant had strong fighting skills.

One of them opened the mini grass cage on his shoulder, from which a gray signal bee flew out and buzzed away.

They looked at each other and simultaneously drew their own weapons from their waists, and from two separate directions, they started closing in on the male who was eating the candied fruits.

Chapter 69: Cunning Fox

"Excuse me, which academy are you from?"

Suddenly, a voice interrupted Duanmu Huanghun's thoughts and pulled him back from his shameful and resentful memories. He looked up and saw two guards staring at him like they were facing a formidable enemy.

"Central Pine Academy." Duanmu Huanghun, who was not in a good mood, answered unconsciously.

"What's your name? Where's your pine badge? Which class are you in?" the guard then asked. A pine badge was a nameplate for each student of Central Pine Academy to prove their identity.

"Leave me alone!" Duanmu Huanghun said impatiently.

He knew his distinguished status differentiated himself from ordinary students and was therefore not nervous at all when facing the guards. As a result, when they asked him to show his pine badge, his first reaction was one of reproach.

"Pine badge check." The guard softened his tone. "Thank you for your cooperation."

Instinctively, Duanmu Huanghun reached for his pine badge, but then he stopped. Pine badge? There was no pine badge for his current disguised identity. Of course, he wouldn't show the badge

with Duanmu Huanghun’s name to them.

After acting silly for the whole day, Duanmu Huanghun finally sobered down.

"Didn’t take it with me." Duanmu snorted. "I’ve been to Central Pine City for so many times. Never heard of such a check before."

Having been born in a noble and honored family, Duanmu had never known what it meant to keep a low profile. As for the two guards of Central Pine Academy, well, he didn’t even bother to pay attention to them.

The guards became more nervous when Duanmu Huanghun’s hand stopped moving. At first, they weren’t sure if the information the boy had provided was accurate, but now, judging from the reaction of the target, he was definitely a suspicious character.

The danger level of the suspect largely increased!

"New rules, published days ago." The guards stared at him and said, "If you didn’t take your pine badge with you, please come with us to Central Pine Academy to apply for a temporary one."

Central Pine Academy?

Duanmu was a bit apprehensive, as he was afraid that his false identity would be exposed.

"No. Why do I have to do as you say? Who bears the consequence if my mission is delayed?" Duanmu Huanghun seemed arrogant, but in his heart, he was getting worried that they had already figured out his intention.

But that was weird. He hadn't done anything wicked. He was only wearing an elemental mask...wait!

Duanmu Huanghun's eyes almost popped out. He finally knew the problem—it was his mask...the damned mask!

He quickly turned to look at the other side of the street, and as expected, he saw the two people who had just walked by.

"...I was here that night..."

What the boy had said had now occurred to him. Damn it! Why did he pick up this particular mask today? He started to panic and totally forgot this was the only elemental mask he took with him.

If his real identity was found out...

Even if he had one hundred mouths to defend himself, he could hardly clear his name.

Duanmu Huanghun was the naked pervert!

No overstatement was needed. This fact alone could become the headline of Central Pine Academy and spread to the whole Induction Ground by tomorrow. He would consequently be deprived of his fame as a genius and be kicked out by his teacher. He would also disgrace the Duanmu family and become a joke in the Avalon of Five Elements.

His face turned pale. Any one of these results touched his deepest fear and left him trembling with horror.

No!

He must not be caught!

As long as he was not caught, no one would suspect him, and after his successful escape, as long as there was no death, no exposure of his elemental energy, and no evidence, this incident would end. He could not care less about whether anyone would be injured.

After calming down, Duanmu was thinking fast. His eyes narrowed, resembling a crescent moon.

The two guards felt the suspect suddenly become a different person. After his eyes narrowed, the originally featureless face transformed into that of a cunning and cold-blooded fox.

A strong sense of danger filled their hearts at the same time.

But their reactions were too slow. The figure of the dangerous guy blurred, and something flashed across their eyes.

Bang! Bang!

They were pounded on the stomach at the same time, and their back arched with severe pain like a shrimp.

How dare he take the initiative to attack them...

That was their last thought before they lost consciousness.

An evil smile appeared on the otherwise ordinary face, suddenly giving it a vivid and bright look. The crescent-shaped eyes were like those of a fox, and along with the evil smile, they revealed a hint of bloodthirsty cruelty and grimness.

What slow reactions. Having got the upper hand with just one move, Duanmu Huanghun snorted. Although he had never thought much of the ability of the guards of Central Pine Academy, he was a bit surprised to get away with it so easily.

Central Pine City was a small place, and the ranking of Central Pine Academy in the Induction Ground was among the lowest. Therefore, the guards here were not highly skilled. Moreover, as a typical small town, it was generally peaceful, so the guards were usually at leisure and not vigilant. They had never thought that Duanmu Huanghun would initiate the attack.

Duanmu Huanghun was just about to leave when he heard the sharp sound of sirens pierce the air.

His pupils constricted, and he murmured, "Troublesome!"

Although the guards were easy to deal with, they had called for backup in advance, which was the last thing Duanmu wanted to see.

Without any hesitation, he rushed to a street nearby like a lightning bolt.

Thanks to Ai Hui, whom he had been recently looking for for a long time, Duanmu had become very familiar with the layout of Central Pine City. He didn’t go too high because then he would be easily spotted.

Two guards rushed into the street rapidly, weapons drawn.

No one noticed the figure hiding in the shadow at the entrance of the street.

Where is he? The two guards slowed down to search for the suspect.

Like a ghost, a figure with a stick of candied fruits in its mouth appeared silently behind them. The narrowed eyes made it look like a fox taking a nap in the sunlight.

The figure hit hard on the nape of their necks at the same time, causing the two guards to lose consciousness and fall down to the ground.

The passers-by on the street were astonished. They were stuck dumb and didn't know how to respond.

Amidst the gaze of all the pedestrians, Duanmu Huanghun ate up the last candied fruit and unhurriedly threw away the stick. He did not seem panicked at all.

Chewing the candied fruit, he was strolling leisurely—he was as idle as an ordinary passerby.

Incessant screams threw the deadly silent street into chaos.

With his eyes still narrowed, Duanmu appeared to be enjoying himself.

He randomly chose a tea house whose door was open and walked in.

The people in the tea house were chatting and drinking tea. When the screams had started coming from outside, they didn't know what had happened, and since Duanmu Huanghun walked in at just this moment, he immediately caught everyone's attention. Yet he didn't pay any heed to them and walked to the seat near the door, before sitting down as if nobody was present.

"A pot of your best tea, please."

His voice sounded lazy. The waiter, as if just awakened from a dream, replied promptly, "No problem. Please wait a minute."

The ringing sirens outside became the topic of discussion for the people inside the tea house.

"What’s happening? An accident?"

"What exactly is going on out there?"

...

Duanmu Huanghun was at ease. He picked up the teacup and took a sip.

The taste was ordinary. He put the tea cup down in disappointment.

No one noticed a bamboo whistle suddenly appear in his hand. He put it to his mouth.

All of a sudden, a sharp whistle unexpectedly pierced through the tea house, causing all the other noises to rapidly die down.

In the dead silence, Duanmu Huanghun put down his bamboo whistle, and with a note of apology in his voice, he said, "Sorry to interrupt."

Chapter 70: Mingxiu

Duanmu Huanghun strolled out of the tea house, leaving the unconscious guards inside lying on the ground in disarray.

He was in a good mood now.

The gloom that Ai Hui had brought him these past days was all gone. The pleasant feeling after releasing all his depression at once was simply fantastic. Yes, instead of blaming Mingxiu, Duanmu regarded Ai Hui as the troublemaker, the one to be blamed, and the cause of all wickedness.

Now that Duanmu Huanghun had calmed down, he suddenly realized how crazy he had been just now.

He had been obedient, intelligent and aspirant ever since he was very young, and he was a role model for all other kids; no one was comparable to him. He was recognized as the perfect young man by all adults.

But he had just attacked the guards after specifically setting up an ambush to trap them.

Before today, he had never thought he would ever do something as crazy as this; but now he had, and it was the hatred in his heart that had pushed him to do so.

The unprecedented thrill actually made him feel somewhat

excited.

But when he saw the pretty figure standing not far away from him in the sunlight, his eyes narrowed again.

“Are you the one who attacked the guards just now? I haven’t seen anyone as bold as you in Central Pine City for a long time.”

Mingxiu spoke lightly. Her face used to be as delightful as a breath of fresh air, but now there was no pleasant expression or smile on it. Her beautiful eyes were calm, and the solemn and respectable aura surrounding her seemed to indicate a sense of inviolability.

She unwrapped her plain-colored shawl from around her shoulders.

Duanmu hadn’t noticed before that the shawl was actually much longer than what it seemed to be.

Raising her wrist, Mingxiu unfolded the shawl to its full length in the wind.

Duanmu Huanghun’s pupils constricted.

In the sunshine, bright streaks of light appeared on the shawl, making it appear glorious and resplendent.

“Troublesome.”

The word was squeezed out of his clenched teeth. His eyes were cold, and the evil yet defiant smile appeared on his face once again.

He fled without hesitation.

Half an hour later, Duanmu Huanghun was still being chased to the outskirts of the city. He really wanted to cry; his bearing had become extremely awkward, and all his clothes were tattered.

Anything related to Ai Hui would end up in his own disaster. Senior Mingxiu, who had appeared to be so amiable, was actually skilled and relentless in her attacks. Duanmu was totally unable to defend himself, and the only thing he could do was run away.

It was only now he understood why the first fact in the information collected by his family had said not to provoke the Jade Embroidery Workshop. It was not because of the interpersonal connections behind it, but rather, because of Senior Mingxiu!

He still couldn’t figure out why, as the heir of Master Han Yuqin and a genius regarded as a future grandmaster of embroidery who may even surpass her master, Mingxiu could have such strong fighting skills.

He even began to doubt whether his ranking in the Induction Ground was only a figment of his imagination.

Worse still, Senior Mingxiu was closely pursuing him, and if he stopped for even a second, she would catch up and attack him. The plain-colored shawl must have been made by Master Han Yuqin!

Every time it unfolded to its full length, the floating lights on its surface would cause him to feel intoxicated. He was not a green and inexperienced clodhopper, but he still couldn’t tear his eyes away from it.

It was the embroidery of an embroidery master!

This was the first time in his life that Duanmu had lost to his opponent in each and every aspect. Not only was he inferior to Mingxiu in combat skills, but also in terms of wealth!

Even for powerful families, like that of Duanmu, the embroidery that Mingxiu wore as her shawl was a rare treasure, and such treasures were all very precious to the highly respected elders of the family. No one would ever give it to kids like Duanmu, even if he were the most talented of his family's generation.

He was desperate.

What bad luck!

Without any sense of direction, Duanmu Huanghun hobbled through the woods, trying to get rid of Mingxiu.

Duanmu's elemental energy and physical strength had been almost entirely depleted after continuously fighting and desperately fleeing from Senior Mingxiu. Although he now believed that he had gotten rid of Mingxiu, he still didn't dare to stop running.

Suddenly, he noticed a spire in the distance.

That was...the Suspending Golden Pagoda!

He thought for a while and realized that he could pretend that he had been training in the pagoda. Yes! All he needed to do was get rid of Mingxiu, enter the Suspending Golden Pagoda, throw away his mask, and pretend to be training.

As for the naked pervert.....no no no, the man without clothes, as long as he doesn't admit it, then who would suspect him? Who would dare to suspect him?

The entire academy was relying on him now, and they obviously would not destroy the genius they had just created.

Besides, there were many non-native students in Central Pine City these days. The academy couldn't be sure that it was its own student just because the miscreant claimed so himself.

The whole incident would come to an end once he throws away the mask and pretends to be training in the Suspending Golden Pagoda.

It was not important even if Mingxiu knew the truth. As long as he didn't openly admit it, Mingxiu would not take action against him. Although Jade Embroidery Workshop wasn't easy to deal with, Duanmu's family wasn't either.

He warily waited for a while and didn't see Mingxiu, so was therefore somewhat relieved. It seemed that he was off the hook for now. He had run helter-skelter in the woods like a directionless headless chicken, doing whatever he could to elude Mingxiu.

He removed his mask and buried it carefully in a hole to remove any traces.

Then, with his last bit of energy, he stumbled towards the Suspending Golden Pagoda.

He had made up his mind. When he reached the pagoda, he would lie down, pretending to be exhausted after training. As for the bruises all over his body—they were because of the crazy training he had just gone through. How could he be a genius without hard work?

He was pleased with himself.

But soon his complacency faded away. His legs were as heavy as lead. A few moments ago he was in a state of emergency; when he was being closely chased and attacked by Mingxiu, he was highly concentrated and his potential had been forced out, and therefore he didn't feel tired. Now, after finding a way out, his nervousness

was alleviated, and fatigue and tiredness overwhelmed him like a flood.

Each step was really heavy.

Although the Suspending Golden Pagoda was merely a short distance away, to Duanmu, it felt poles apart.

His elemental energy, which used to be plentiful, had been drained. During his daily training, he hardly spared time to exercise his body and was hence not physically strong. Now, without the support of elemental energy, his muscles were trembling.

His face was pale and he was breathing heavily. His throat was burning.

He slowly dragged himself to the Suspending Golden Pagoda.

Awful...

It felt terrible; he could not even move one finger...

This was how it felt to be totally exhausted...

His sight gradually became blurry, but he struggled to hold on. He had to do whatever it took to make it to the Suspending Golden Pagoda.

The image of the pagoda before him was also gradually becoming less clear.

The last moment before he lost consciousness, he finally reached the pagoda. Everything transformed into a blur as he strenuously climbed the stairs with both his hands and feet.

Suddenly, he felt as if he touched something.

Chapter 71: Simplifying The [Twin Weaving Technique]

The [Twin Weaving Technique] was created by Master Han Yuqin when she was nineteen years old.

Rome was not built in a day, and she did not become a master overnight. Without in-depth knowledge and innate talent, one would not be able to become a master. All the historical masters had displayed exceptional innate abilities and had stood out from the masses when they were young.

Nineteen years was an age at which most people were still studying in the Induction Ground, yet at this age, Master Han Yuqin had already created her own unique weaving technique. Such talent was indeed jaw-dropping.

During this period of time, Ai Hui had a deep impression of her. He had displayed great admiration for her on more than one occasion.

In theory, the [Twin Weaving Technique] was not really complicated. Its design was simple yet ingenious, which brought about an aesthetic balance to it.

Of course, the word "simple" was relative to different individuals; this technique far surpassed Ai Hui’s current powers and knowledge.

The process of trying to understand the [Twin Weaving Technique] had broadened Ai Hui's perspective. To him, there were countless obstacles present in the simple steps of the [Twin Weaving Technique].

However, he did not give up.

Whenever he encountered an obstacle, he would think about how to solve the problem. No one guided him; he needed to solve every obstacle he encountered himself. Moreover, he had a weak foundation and did not have much knowledge on elemental energy. If it were another person in his position, they would not know what to do at all.

Luckily, Ai Hui had used the powers of the sword embryo to view Senior Mingxiu's demonstration that day.

Every movement of Senior Mingxiu and all the details of the flow of the elemental energy had been firmly engraved in his mind, and this played a significant role in helping him comprehend the [Twin Weaving Technique].

When Ai Hui truly understood and digested the principles behind the [Twin Weaving Technique], he benefitted greatly from it. Master Han Yuqin's masterwork contained techniques and ideas on elemental energy that were extremely new to Ai Hui, who previously knew nothing at all.

The benefits of such spontaneous thoughts were extremely precious.

Ai Hui, who was in deep thought, was not thrilled at the benefits he received; instead, he was filled with endless agony. He had finally solved a problem with great difficulty, but before he could even rejoice, a tougher problem arose.

When he fully comprehended the principles behind the [Twin Weaving Technique], he realized that he could not even use it. His current base level was far below the basic base level requirement for this skill; he calculated that the minimum elemental energy level that was needed for this technique was the fourth palace.

He had not even activated a single palace.

However, he did not intend to give up just like this. He was a practical individual and did not forget what his goal was. That goal was to successfully weave elemental cloths!

In fact, this was not the first time he had encountered such a situation.

When he was in the Wilderness, he had been placed in many similar circumstances. When he did not have a grass sword, he would make a wooden sword; he was fine with anything as long as it could be used. When he was in the swordsman school, he did not have any bookshelves to place and arrange the swordplay manuals, so he had picked up scrap wood and had made them himself.

Due to having a pathetic amount of resources, poor people would always encounter various difficulties in their lives. It was a case of

robbing Peter to pay Paul—using worthless materials flexibly to create something usable.

One could say that this was the poor person's wisdom. Even though it was not efficient, it was still usable.

In Ai Hui's hands, the [Twin Weaving Technique] changed beyond recognition.

When an elemental energy needle left one's body, their elemental energy would quickly deplete, so Ai Hui attempted to reduce the distance between the elemental energy needle and his finger. Eventually, the distance between the elemental energy needle and his finger had shrunk to only two centimeters. Although it did not appear graceful and elegant, it could still be used, and for a rookie like Ai Hui, it was instead much easier to control.

For someone like Ai Hui, who had little mastery over elemental energy, it was impossible to make two elemental energy needles react to each other. Hence, Ai Hui thought of another method, which was to coordinate his hands and eyes. Even though elemental energy may be sensitive, it was still easier for Ai Hui to control his muscles and coordinate his hands instead.

Of course, it was impossible for Ai Hui to harmonize his elemental energy like what Senior Mingxiu had done.

If Senior Mingxiu's [Twin Weaving Technique] could be compared to an agile hummingbird, then Ai Hui's [Twin Weaving Technique] would be compared to a slow-moving snail. However,

the hardest part was the movements of the hands.

Each of Ai Hui's hands controlled an elemental energy needle. His two fingers were poking forward alternatively, and it appeared that Ai Hui was weaving a sweater. The aesthetic beauty of the [Twin Weaving Technique] had completely disappeared in his hands.

Fine. It still could be considered weaving, because, in the end, he actually did manage to weave some elemental cloths. However, even though they looked crumpled and ugly, Ai Hui still needed to put in an all-out effort to produce such quality of work.

It was truly an all-out effort.

Ai Hui's elemental energy could only last for five minutes.

And he needed to be extremely focused during these five minutes. Any slight mistake would waste his elemental energy.

Once his elemental energy was depleted, he would need to enter the Suspending Golden Pagoda to recollect the metal elemental energy. After that, he would have to use the [Arching Fish Back] to scatter the energy for absorption. This repetitive process would take up to an hour.

In other words, he needed to train for one hour before he could weave for five minutes.

The difference between Ai Hui's base level and Senior Mingxiu's base level was quite obvious. Ai Hui would need an unknown number of days to weave the same amount of elemental cloths that Senior Mingxiu could weave in ten minutes.

Ai Hui did not have a moment of rest. He trained crazily, and then weaved crazily.

Previously, he had some prejudice towards embroidery, but when he had clearly comprehended the [Twin Weaving Technique], he changed his stance. No matter what, he had to learn embroidery.

If such dazzling and elaborate control could be utilized in combat, how frightening would it be!

For example, if the twin needles were to be used during combat, his enemies would find it hard to guard against its unpredictability.

Furthermore, one bolt of cloth was worth five hundred thousand yuan!

Ai Hui did not know how long he would take to weave one bolt of cloth; however, he knew that as long as he persisted, he could definitely weave it. If he could make a breakthrough to the fourth palace, he could then utilize the [Twin Weaving Technique].

The [Twin Weaving Technique] was merely a basic weaving technique, yet it was so powerful and so valuable.

Without any distractions, Ai Hui continued to train day and night.

For someone who had survived the Wilderness, Ai Hui understood the importance of opportunity. When you see an opportunity, you have to make an all-out effort to pursue it. Before you succeed or fail, you should stop complaining about how much hard work you have put in.

He continued for three days without any sleep. For these three days, he engaged in high-intensity training, with the intention of not wasting any time.

His body gradually became exhausted from the continuous high-intensity training. Even a maniac like Ai Hui found such training to be intolerable; if it were done for a prolonged period, it would even cause injuries to his body.

This time around, Ai Hui spent a bit more time training in the Suspending Golden Pagoda, enduring the explosive effect of the metal elemental energy to his body. He was trying his best to climb the steel chain for the way out. Elemental energy could constantly be replenished during continuous training; however, this did not apply to his physical strength, which had constantly been drained. He was somewhat dispirited by the process of climbing out. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was too weak.

He really needed a rest today.

He planned to have a good sleep later.

Before Ai Hui could even heave a sigh of relief after using all his strength to climb up to the entrance, a staggering figure suddenly came out from the dark and collapsed onto his body.

Ai Hui subconsciously reached out his hands and tried to catch the figure.

That figure lost control of its body. Its swinging arms desperately tried to hold on to Ai Hui, resembling someone who was drowning.

Both of them collided with each other, lost their balance, and fell into the Suspending Golden Pagoda at the same time.

Chapter 72: Danger

The unforeseen event startled Ai Hui. Before he could even see who collided with him, he was flooded with a whizzing metal wind.

Damn it!

Usually, when Ai Hui was alone in the Suspending Golden Pagoda, he would tread everywhere with care. However, he was now carrying a person, and his physical strength had been thoroughly depleted. How could he possibly move?

The most annoying thing was that the other party was holding him tightly by his waist. He tried to break free a few times but failed.

Ai Hui was obviously furious. Ruthless thoughts rose in his mind. Once he’s out of here, he would bash this bastard up until he’s unrecognizable.

With this area being so large and the steel chain so noticeable, how could he not see it?

What kind of eyesight did he have?

Just as Ai Hui was about to explode with anger, his hands gave way. A shiver went down his spine. The steel chain broke!

The steel chain could not bear the weight of two people! Ai Hui's expression changed slightly.

Both of them were like kites that were out of control. Bang! His body slammed heavily against the wall, and even with the protection of the armor, he could not help but let out a pained groan.

Although the armor protected him from the metal wind, it was still very cumbersome. Furthermore, there was a person on his back. Even if Ai Hui's strength was at its peak, he would still not be confident of walking out of the Suspending Golden Pagoda alive.

Bang!

This time around, it was the person on his back that hit the wall.

An involuntary groan came from behind him.

Ai Hui's rage, which had just simmered down, erupted once more.

Duanmu Bangwan!

He could identify the other party with just the voice.

Previously, both of them had borne grudges against each other, but now, the two enemies had come face to face as their eyes blazed

with hatred! It was not surprising at all to see this bastard come here to stir trouble! Ai Hui didn't know where his strength came from as he tried to grab Duanmu Huanghun, who was latched onto his back. However, the armor on his body was too bulky, and his movements were limited.

He simply removed his armor. Clang! Cling! Clang! It crashed onto the metal fence below.

However, before he could do anything, Duanmu Huanghun seemed to discover an opportunity to strike and used all his limbs to cling on to Ai Hui's back like an octopus.

After removing the armor's restriction, Ai Hui felt his movements regain their freedom. However, at the same time, he became much lighter, and the wind now had a greater impact on him. Yet when he realized it, it was already too late.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Both of them were like rubber balls, as they bounced off each other and flew around the pagoda uncontrollably.

At this point of time, Ai Hui could do nothing else except protect his head. However, as an experienced individual, he was able to react in time. He knew that he would only waste his energy by bouncing around recklessly, and the best thing to do now was to protect himself, save his energy, and wait for an opportunity.

Ai Hui, who had calmed down, knew what he was doing.

He was very familiar with the first level of the Suspending Golden Pagoda. As long as he was blown somewhere near the entrance, he could successfully escape.

He no longer cared about Duanmu Huanghun and recovered from his fury—it was as if nothing had even happened. In such a dangerous situation, acting on his emotions would not benefit him in any way. The only thing he could do was remain calm and help himself get out of this situation.

The stabbing pain from the metal wind had started to become increasingly intense. Previously, he had already felt that he was at his limit, but the metal wind was now steadily penetrating his body. The feeling self-explosion was quickly growing stronger.

However, it did not affect Ai Hui's composure. He remained cool and calm.

But after the subsequent collision, he finally lost his composure.

This time around, the collision took place at his back. The moment the unconscious Duanmu Huanghun collided against the wall, they involuntarily flew back like a spring.

Ai Hui could only look on helplessly as he bounced off the ground like a rubber ball. With a slight push from the metal wind, they flew towards the second level.

Calm down, calm down, calm down…

Ai Hui kept on repeating to himself; however, he eventually could stand it no longer and swung his head backward.

Pow!

Like an iron hammer, the back of Ai Hui's head slammed directly into Duanmu Huanghun's nose.

The unconscious Duanmu Huanghun's body twitched but still remained clung on to Ai Hui, not showing even a single sign of loosening its grip. However, Ai Hui's rage had simmered down, and he knew that it wouldn't be possible to make Duanmu Huanghun let go of him. He had seen this before in the Wilderness—it was a human's survival instinct. A person who was drowning would cling on to anything they could get a hold on and would never let go. This effect also applied to people who had lost their consciousnesses.

And right now, Duanmu Huang was in this exact state.

Ai Hui could not care about Duanmu Huanghun anymore as he was now facing an even grimmer problem.

He could feel his speed increasing. This was a terrible situation, as it implied that the wind was getting stronger. After training in the Suspending Golden Pagoda for so long, he was very familiar

with the place. There was a total of seven levels in the Suspending Golden Pagoda, and the top part of the pagoda was narrow while the bottom part was wide. The air vent in the first level was the closest to them, yet the wind coming out of it was the weakest. The higher they would go up, the stronger the wind would get.

Their bodies whirled along with the metal wind.

Ai Hui's premonition was getting increasingly stronger, but right now, he was in mid-air with nothing to hold on.

The wind was spiraling upward!

The sound of the wind in his ear started to become peculiar and frightening. A sharp noise that could burst his eardrums prevented Ai Hui from hearing anything else. The wind had become so strong that he now had difficulty breathing.

The pain from the metal wind was akin to that of being slashed with a sword. Ai Hui could feel his skin being ripped apart by the intense metal gales.

A faint light suddenly shone from behind him.

It was the clothes that Duanmu Huanghun was wearing. They were emitting a faint glow, resisting the metal wind.

The pair spiraled upward out of control as the metal wind blew stronger and stronger. Ai Hui's clothes had already been shredded

by the slicing wind, leaving numerous lacerations on his skin.

Ai Hui was getting anxious. He had been observing his surroundings, and they had already reached the fifth level.

Pop!

After an explosion that sounded like a popped balloon, the glow around Duanmu Huanghun disappeared. Countless shreds of cloth dispersed in all directions; even Duanmu Huanghun's special clothes could not withstand the metal wind.

Psss!

Blood spurted onto Ai Hui's face. The faint smell of blood seemed to calm the anxious Ai Hui down.

The blood belonged to Duanmu Huanghun.

Even though Ai Hui's [Copper Skin] was almost fully developed, he could still feel the slashing pain from the metal wind. This showed how powerful the metal wind was. Last time, Ai Hui had cured Duanmu Huanghun's flu; therefore, he knew everything about the fellow's body.

Duanmu Huanghun's body definitely could not endure the metal wind.

The reality was just what Ai Hui had expected it to be. Fine, red streaks appeared on Duanmu Huanghun's body, staining his shredded clothes with fresh blood.

The bloodstained shreds were being pulverized, bit by bit.

Such a lucky fellow. Ai Hui laughed bitterly. This fellow fell into a coma and had yet to know the precarious situation he was in now.

The faint smell of blood awakened the long since dormant valor in Ai Hui.

A fierce look flashed across his face. Without any hesitation, he started to directly absorb the metal elemental energy that was fiercely stabbing his body.

This metal elemental energy had not been scattered, and hence wasn't suitable for absorption; however, at this point in time, Ai Hui couldn't care less.

He must save himself; otherwise, he would die here today!

The higher he went, the purer and stronger the metal elemental energy became. Ai Hui forcibly activated his natal residence, and the metal elemental energy channeled throughout his body, traveling within like countless steel needles. The needle-piercing pain turned Ai Hui's face pale-white.

Yet he did not stop. However, if this situation continued, without any physical strength or elemental energy, he would be literally heading towards death.

Life was more important. Without his life, he would have nothing left. If his natal residence was injured, he could still find a way to heal it.

The metal elemental energy gushed into Ai Hui’s natal residence like a group of vicious sharks.

Chapter 73: Seeking Survival

Nowadays, the “five residences and eight palaces” was the most popular and developed training system. Although everyone had their own style of training, none had left out the five residences and eight palaces.

The five residence and eight palaces had various functions and uses; however, the most important aspect was the natal residence.

One could see its importance simply from the word “natal.” Fire was associated with the heart, wood with the liver, earth with the spleen, metal with the lungs, and water with the kidney. They collectively constituted the source of elemental energy. The natal residence was able to store a huge amount of elemental energy, but its most important use was to absorb elemental energy and channel it elsewhere.

During combat, the natal residence was responsible for channeling one’s elemental energy.

During the process of training, elemental energy needed to make a Circulatory Cycle Revolution. The purpose of the Circulatory Circle Revolution was to purify and compress elemental energy. The purification of elemental energy was to get rid of its impurities, allowing one to obtain a purer form of elemental energy. Meanwhile, the compression of elemental energy allowed one to store a greater amount of elemental energy.

No matter how weak or strong a person was, the natal residence

would have to transfer and bear the weight of an abundant amount of elemental energy. However, it would need only a small amount of elemental energy to injure the natal residence.

Those high-level elementalists all had a high concentration of elemental energy in their bodies, making them extremely strong. Those who specialized in body-tempering had bodies that were comparable to the bodies of dire beasts.

When one's base level was low, their body would be very weak, so during the initial stages of their training, many people tended to choose training grounds with elemental energy that was mild in nature. When such elemental energy was purified and compressed, it would not inflict any injury on one's body.

No one would joke around with their natal residence because once the natal residence became injured, it would be very troublesome.

When the sharp elemental energy gushed into Ai Hui's natal residence, his natal residence was immediately injured.

Along with indescribable piercing pain, countless fine lacerations appeared all over his lungs.

However, he did not stop. Even though the process was painful and torturous, he was reenergized by the influx of elemental energy into his lungs. Yet this was not enough, as he still had to direct the elemental energy to complete a Circulatory Cycle.

As the elemental energy endlessly gushed into his lungs, Ai Hui quickly discovered that he could not channel so much elemental energy.

His base level was too low, and since the capacity of his natal residence was not high enough, its ability to channel energy was limited. Furthermore, the elemental energy that surged through his body was not only pure in nature, but its amount was tremendous as well.

As the elemental energy continued to gush into his natal residence, the number of wounds in his lungs increased rapidly.

It was a very precarious situation!

If he could not quickly come up with a plan, his natal residence would be ripped to pieces by the sharp, slashing elemental energy. The wounds in his lungs were becoming increasingly wider, and it began bleeding more and more.

The blood foamed up from his lungs and entered Ai Hui's mouth as he breathed. The familiar, sweet scent of blood brought Ai Hui back to his time in the Wilderness, a place where dangers lurked everywhere, and death could follow any moment.

How many times had he encountered death?

Live or die? It would all depend on what he would do next.

His hair stood on end as a shiver went down his spine.

He could not remember anything, but he soon felt a familiar presence. Like a veteran warrior that stepped onto the battleground once more, a peculiar flame lit up in his previously ice-cold eyes.

His attention became unusually focused, and his brain began working extremely fast. His surroundings slowed down and became silent.

The surging elemental energy in his body was like a group of sharks, destroying his vitality.

It was sharper, purer, and more congealed than the metal elemental energy on the first level. It was like...elemental energy needles...

Elemental energy needles...

Ai Hui seemed to catch on to something.

They were indeed similar to elemental energy needles; in fact, from their shape and nature, their intrinsic qualities seemed to be exactly the same as that of elemental energy needles. The only difference was that they were not conjured by Ai Hui himself.

He thought about how difficult it was for him to conjure elemental energy needles, and how hard it was to sustain them.

After spending so much time and effort, he could still only weave a meager amount. Yet right now, there were so many elemental energy needles, making him feel embarrassed of his incapability.

Wait, there were so many elemental energy needles…

As if a light bulb suddenly lit up in his mind, Ai Hui suddenly thought of the [Twin Weaving Technique]!

In the [Twin Weaving Technique], Ai Hui had never been able to understand how the elements energy needles reacted to each other. All the details of Senior Mingxiu's demonstration emerged in his mind as he clearly remembered that there was only one "invisible string" when Senior Ming Hui was controlling two elemental energy needles.

She must have used the reaction between the two elemental energy needles to control the other needle.

Yes, it must be!

He finally figured out what was going on.

Was it possible for him to control a few elemental energy needles, and then use their reactions to channel this elemental energy?

Ai Hui's simplified version of the [Twin Weaving Technique] skipped this step by using muscle control to coordinate between the twin needles. He did not have enough elemental energy for

such complicated coordination of the needles.

However, right now, his body was filled with a large amount of elemental energy, and hence, he did not have to worry about the depletion of elemental energy. Another fortunate fact was that the part of the body that controlled the elemental energy needles was the natal residence.

If the difficulty level of controlling elemental energy from the outside of his body was “difficult,” the difficulty level of controlling elemental energy in the natal residence would be “amateur.” He was a master in the aspect of his natal residence.

At this moment, Ai Hui’s state of mind was clear and bright. He did not know if this plan would work, but he had no other choice. Other people might find it very difficult to fight for their lives when encountering death, but to Ai Hui, this was an experience that he was used to.

He locked onto one of the densely packed elemental energy needles and started to experiment with it.

It started off smoothly as the elemental energy needle floated in the air. However, he could not control it to interact with the other elemental energy needles.

What surprised him was that there did exist a reaction between the elemental energy needles. However, this reaction was very weak. It was so weak that it could not even make the other needle tremble.

He was not discouraged, though. To him, this was a very high-level technique, and even if he understood the principles behind the technique, it would still be very difficult for him to actually execute it.

It appeared that the reaction field between the elemental energy needles was not responsible for the intensification of the reaction between them, but rather, it was due to some type of unique technique.

Could it be that he had overlooked something by mistake?

He carefully recalled every single detail in Senior Mingxiu's demonstration, before suddenly remembering something that he had neglected.

At that time, when Senior Mingxiu had stretched her body, she had formed an alluring image. Faint mist had appeared and lingered around her, continuously changed its shape, while numerous specks of light had appeared in the water ripples that she had created. These light specks would randomly illuminate and extinguish themselves, resembling a lake that was filled with twinkling stars.

These were the two things that he had yet to understand.

Even now, he did not know what it was, but he still decided to give it a try.

He decided to start by mimicking Senior Mingxiu's movements. That image was incomparably harmonized and filled with strength and beauty. It had left an extremely deep impression on Ai Hui.

Senior Mingxiu did not have a muscular body, but Ai Hui saw strength and power in her movements.

Ai Hui did not care that his body was hovering in the air. His arms stretched forward comfortably, and each of his fingers was spread wide open. All the muscles in his body were slightly tensed, and his legs were curled up, shifting his body's center of gravity to a perfect position.

Ai Hui had remarkable control over his muscles. Furthermore, he had a very accurate impression of Senior Mingxiu's movements, so his posture was exactly the same as hers.

Exactly the same!

The moment he assumed that posture, he could feel a transformation begin to take place in his body.

Chapter 74: An Unforeseen Event

The elemental energy in his body suddenly turned vigorous.

No—it was surging. Ai Hui had never seen so many elemental energy needles simultaneously jump before.

Previously, they were similar to numerous iron nails, but now, they resembled magnets; some were attracted to each other while some repelled each other, creating a huge mess. There were simply too many elemental energy needles in his body. These innumerable needles surged into his natal residence, creating a storm of destructive force. And after being wrecked by such a storm, the natal residence's past wounds were ripped back open.

Ai Hui spat out another mouthful of blood.

Instead of feeling surprised, however, he felt happy—as long as his theory worked, he was fine with anything. He was most worried that the elemental energy needles would stay unmoved in his body; as long as there were changes, there would be an opportunity for him to live. Right now, he was in the worst possible scenario, and any changes would be a good thing—at least he had a chance to make a difference.

Ai Hui could presently not care about anything. Perhaps even Senior Mingxiu could not explain what was going on with him now.

No one had ever done such a thing before. Even brave individuals

would not dare to fool around with their natal residences like him.

However, Ai Hui had no other choice, and a tremendous amount of elemental energy had gushed into his natal residence, far exceeding the limit his body could take. It had long been a hopeless situation for him.

He would not hesitate to try any method he could think of.

The storm in the natal residence not only started abruptly but ended abruptly as well.

The surging elemental energy needles began to align themselves with each other in an organized fashion. If these needles could be previously compared to vicious sharks filled with destructive force, then they could now be compared to a magnetic molehill made up of countless magnets.

Yes, they were now extremely quiet and stable.

After the elemental energy needles had gotten attracted to each other, their sharpness decreased significantly. The needles themselves also soothed down by a reasonable amount. What surprised Ai Hui, however, was that the wounds of his natal residence had started to heal. The magnet-like mass of metal elemental energy was of a higher base level than Ai Hui's, and as such, he could not absorb them. Nevertheless, Ai Hui's natal residence was acutely sensitive to this metal elemental energy. His natal residence also benefitted greatly from this pure and high-level metal energy, and his wounds were rapidly healing.

Ai Hui finally heaved a sigh of relief.

He had not expected events to unfold this way.

He had initially intended to use the reaction between the elemental energy needles to direct the needles into completing one Circulatory Cycle, hence obtaining a temporary short burst of power that could help him escape.

This hope of his had been completely shattered.

Even though he found a way to increase the reaction, he had still not expected the elemental energy needles to be attracted to each other like magnets.

He now knew what the problem was—there were too many elemental energy needles.

Senior Mingxiu could use one elemental energy needle to control another; however, if there were too many, Senior Mingxiu could do nothing as well. Furthermore, the reaction between the needles on Senior Mingxiu's hands was not as clumsy as his.

Ai Hui guessed that it could be due to the natal residence.

Senior Mingxiu had controlled the two elemental energy needles from outside of her body, weakening the reaction between the

needles. Alright, what he did was wrong and what Senior Mingxiu had done was correct and normal. Who would anyone do such thing like him?

His natal residence had the strongest control over his element energy, making it very likely that the reaction between the elemental energy needles would become stronger in the natal residence.

After roughly figuring out the reason, Ai Hui was not happy at all.

The elemental energy in the metal wind gushed into his body in an endless stream. Right now, the “mass of elemental energy needles” in his natal residence was like a huge magnet, generating a powerful attractive force. Ai Hui did not need to channel the elemental energy in his body as it was being automatically pulled to the mass of elemental energy needles.

As more and more needles pulled towards it, the previously dispersed mass of elemental energy needles started to collapse to the center, becoming denser. From a small and fragile snowball, it eventually became an enormous solid ball of ice.

There were too many elemental energy needles being added to the mass.

Ai Hui trembled with fear when he saw the mass of elemental energy needles that was continuously expanding. No matter how hard he tried to channel his natal residence, he could not absorb

the slightest bit of the mass of needles.

Ai Hui's natal residence simply did not have the capacity to absorb such high-level metal elemental energy.

As Ai Hui saw his natal residence being filled up bit by bit, he started to feel uncertain. He would soon implode and die while his natal residence would be stuffed to death.

The only thing that comforted him was that the mass of elemental energy needles was currently not actually harmful.

When Ai Hui saw that his natal residence was completely stuffed, his heart sank. Previously, he could at least control one or two elemental energy needles, but this mass of elemental energy needles was totally out of his control. No matter how hard he tried to move it with his natal residence, it just wouldn't bulge.

Bang! He slammed heavily against a wall. Wait...he had been blown upward; how could he have possibly slammed against a wall?

A look of ecstasy suddenly appeared on his face!

The top level of the pagoda—they had been blown all the way up to the top level of the pagoda!.

Indeed, the metal wind was pressing the both of them to the ceiling of the pagoda, all the while making them feel as if they were

being slashed by many sharp swords.

Yet it was currently a chance for Ai Hui to escape from this seemingly impossible situation. The metal wind was so fierce that he could not open his eyes; however, he could still feel the direction of the wind. There were five air vents in the top level of the pagoda, and they could escape out of any one.

At this point of time, he recovered some of his physical strength.

He followed the direction of the wind and inched sideways while sticking to the ceiling of the pagoda. The wind was incredibly powerful, making him feel as if there was a giant hand pressing firmly against his body.

Meanwhile, behind him, Duanmu Huanghun remained unconscious and covered with blood. This fellow had an affinity with the wood attribute, and since Metal chopped Wood, being ravaged by the metal wind for such a long time was akin to receiving a torture; even if he were conscious, he would still be injured severely.

At this point of time, Ai Hui had stopped complaining about Duanmu Huanghun and merely hoped that he would survive. He had developed this mentality after braving through such a catastrophe together. He did not care about anything but surviving.

Carrying the wretched Duanmu Huanghun, Ai Hui tried his best to move towards the air vent.

After a while, he established that he was moving in the right direction. He no longer needed to move by himself as the strong wind was pushing him towards the air vent.

This was because the wind became stronger as he drew closer to the air vent.

Ai Hui protected his head from smashing into the edges of the air vent by curling his body into a ball. Even if he had a big and robust physique, it would still be extremely dangerous to crash into the edges of the air vent because of the fierce winds.

“Classmate Bangwan, I’m afraid you’ll have to fend for yourself,” Ai Hui muttered to himself.

Finally! They were about to be out!

Ai Hui was filled with joy as he had gained a new lease of life. Even though he could not open his eyes, he could feel the light grow increasingly bright.

This meant that he was gradually approaching the air vent.

At this point of time, he completely lost control of his body, and it was as if he was going to be extruded out of the air vent by a powerful stream of air.

Bang!

He felt his arm slam into something, and he was engulfed in a world of darkness.

The last thought he had before he lost consciousness was…

I can’t be that unlucky, right?

Chapter 75: An Old Friend

Mingxiu was lost.

Not long after she left the city, she had become lost in the woods of the countryside. Ever since she was young, she had led a simple and straightforward life in the embroidery workshop. Other than looking after the embroidery business, she basically did not engage in other activities. The teachers had doted on her as well, and even when she went out to collect debts, she would be accompanied by professional bodyguards.

She did not have any experience traveling solo in the countryside.

However, she was not really worried. The Induction Ground's countryside had long been purged a few times. Those fearsome monsters that could threaten the students had been repeatedly annihilated by the older generations.

The Induction Ground was the safest place in the Avalon of Five Elements. This was a fact.

Other than the injuries that occurred during duels or competitions in various training halls, there were not many fatal incidents. The Induction Ground even encouraged competition among students, and the schools would not look into accidental injuries that occurred during duels and contests. Another source of injuries would be school missions. Although there were many dangerous missions, the Induction Ground encouraged students to

engage frequently in such missions.

This had always been a custom of the Induction Ground. It was built upon smoke and ashes and had never withdrawn from danger before.

The threat of the Wilderness had still not been resolved. The Avalon of Five Elements needed valiant warriors, not sheltered babies, and the Induction Ground could never forget this principle.

A lot of customs in the Induction Ground followed this principle.

The Society of Excellence was also a product of this principle and the custom of bringing the frontline troops back to the Induction Ground as instructors had been established by the Induction Ground since early times.

Li Wei and Zhou Xiaoxi regarded their stints as instructors in the Society of Excellence as a holiday. However, when both of them heard the siren, their old habits kicked in, making them the first ones to respond to the situation.

Compared to them, the other teachers had a much slower response time.

When both of them saw the unconscious guard and learned that the suspect had escaped to the countryside, they started the chase. After reaching the city gate, they split up. Li Wei spread the azure wings on his back.

Azure wings had first appeared after the Avalon of Five Elements had been established. They were made of refined clouds, which were harvested in Palette Cloud Village and then refined by water elementalists using a special technique. Before the appearance of azure wings, the sky was the territory of dire beasts. Mankind could not easily defend themselves from the dire beasts that could fly, and it was not until the creation of azure wings that they could go head to head with those dire beasts in the sky.

Currently, the azure wings were the most widely-used single flying equipment. After thousands of years of development, the Palette Cloud Village was able to export a larger variety of the types of clouds, allowing it to live up to its name. As such, there was now a rich collection of types of azure wings available.

Initially, only water elementalists were able to use azure wings. However, after generations of hard work, water elementalists had developed various azure wings that were suitable for other types of elementalists.

With a wingspan of seven meters, Li Wei's azure wings were copper-red and had a sturdy body speckled with a metal elemental glow. It was known as Copper Bone Bird and was suitable for metal elementalists. Copper Bone Bird did not have a high flying speed; however, it could bear a hefty load. Li Wei was from the infantry division, and his body had already developed copper skin and metallic bones; therefore, standard azure wings would not be able to carry his heavy weight.

Furthermore, Copper Bone Bird had a rather powerful defensive

capability, making it difficult to get damaged.

He flapped his azure wings, stirring up a huge gust of wind, before soaring into the sky.

He hovered above, scanning through the woods with his eagle-like vision. If he were in the Wilderness, he would definitely not do such a thing—he specialized in land battles, not air battles.

But he did not have such worries in the Induction Ground.

After a while, he discovered a girl. He remembered that the guard had mentioned that some girl was pursuing the suspect.

He leaped from the air and landed nearby the girl. He introduced himself, “I’m Li Wei from the infantry division. I’m an instructor from the Society of Excellence in Central Pine City. Pleased to meet you!”

“I’m Lu Mingxiu from the Jade Embroidery Workshop.” Mingxiu returned the greeting politely.

“Lu Mingxiu from the Jade Embroidery Workshop,” Li Wei thought silently, as he carefully analyzed her face. She indeed looked familiar. He quickly asked, “Is your Elder Brother called Mr. Lu Chen?”

“Brother Li knows my brother?” Mingxiu was astonished.

Li Wei did not expect his guess to be right. He grinned. “Mr. Lu saved my life before! That time when I was injured, I stayed at his place for a month. He mentioned that Miss Mingxiu was training in embroidery. Then, now that I saw that Miss Mingxiu and Brother Lu looked very much alike, I took the liberty of asking Miss Mingxiu this question. I really didn’t expect it to be Miss Mingxiu! Is Miss Mingxiu chasing the suspect?”

“He has escaped. The woods are too large; after making a turn, I became lost, and I can’t find which direction he went,” Mingxiu replied, distressed.

“Miss Mingxiu can return to the city first. I shall take care of the rest,” Li Wei said.

“We will go together.” Mingxiu shook her head and continued, “And Brother Li can just call me Mingxiu. Miss Mingxiu sounds too formal.”

When Li Wei saw how resolute she was, he decided not to persuade her anymore. The Induction Ground was anyways supposed to be very safe. Furthermore, that guard had merely fainted, and no one was injured. This should be some kind of prank. During his school days, he had done many unruly things as well.

He felt that the school authority had somewhat overreacted. However, they could not be at fault, since Central Pine Academy’s reputation had finally risen after great difficulty. The school

authority did not want the school's reputation to now be affected in any way.

Besides, he was now here taking care of this incident.

Li Wei was very confident in his capability. With him around, it was impossible for anyone to harm Miss Mingxiu.

Instead, he had hesitated when Miss Mingxiu had asked him to call her by her name. Mr. Lu was someone whom he respected very much.

Mingxiu could sense Li Wei's hesitation. She assured him with a gentle voice. "Since Brother Li is my elder brother's friend, you're naturally my friend too. Unless Brother Li does not wish to be Mingxiu's friend?"

Li Wei was a no-nonsense man who was used to coquettishness. Upon hearing these words, he smiled. "I shall respect your decision, then."

Mingxiu revealed a pleasant smile before quickly becoming distressed. "What should we do now?"

When Li Wei saw Mingxiu's gentle and graceful smile, he was slightly struck dumb. He quickly returned to his senses and withdrew his gaze. With confidence, he replied, "Mingxiu, follow me."

To Li Wei, pursuing a trail in the countryside was nothing out of the ordinary.

He quickly found traces and started to follow them.

Mingxiu was impressed by Li Wei's efficiency and skill. "Brother Li is indeed skilled. You can identify the trail even in such a large woods."

Li Wei replied shyly, "My skill level is considered average; there are people with higher skill level than me in my division."

When Mingxiu saw the tough and fierce man behaving shyly, she laughed softly, as she found it extremely funny.

This time around, Li Wei's face blushed. When he realized his own reaction, he suddenly wished that he could go hide somewhere. To conceal his awkwardness, he looked around with a feigned composure and gave a sudden exclamation of surprise.

"Has Brother Li discovered anything?" Mingxiu asked with her eyes wide open.

"That person has gone to the Suspending Golden Pagoda," Li Wei explained.

He could immediately identify the correct direction as he was very familiar with the terrain around the Suspending Golden Pagoda.

“Let us go then!” Mingxiu said excitedly. Although she had a gentle nature, she was, after all, a girl. Having spent most of her time in the embroidery workshop, she had seldom encountered such a situation and felt that this was something new and exciting.

Li Wei was infected by Mingxiu’s liveliness and chuckled heartily. “Let’s go and find that lad who caused so much trouble!”

Chapter 76: Discovery and Astonishment

When the two of them rushed to the Suspending Golden Pagoda, they did not see anyone. Instead, their gazes were immediately attracted to something beneath the pagoda.

A huge stone was tied by a thick metal chain, and a part of that metal chain was snapped off.

Li Wei had previously trained at the Suspending Golden Pagoda and could figure out the purpose of the metal chain after some slight thinking. He couldn't help but feel that it was much more brilliant than his method in the past.

When he had trained at the Suspending Golden Pagoda, he had sustained countless sufferings; but in exchange, he had managed to achieve a body of copper skin and iron bones. There were very few students who managed to reach the state of achieving a body of copper skin and iron bones in the Induction Ground, and due to the quality of his body, he was chosen to be part of the Infantry Division, one of the Thirteen Divisions, much to the surprise of numerous people.

He couldn't believe that there was someone who was walking down the same path as him. His interest tremendously increased.

The Suspending Golden Pagoda was not only one of the most neglected training grounds to the people of Central Pine City, but also to those from the neighbouring cities. It could be said to be almost deserted due to a single reason—training there was simply

too unbearable. It was much tougher than the average training, and furthermore, it took a long time to achieve the desired effect, which also made it a test of determination and willpower. There were very little who could endure it.

Come to think of it, the Infantry Division was similarly not favorably seen upon.

The Infantry Division was also known as the laborer division. Despite being an elite division like the Infantry Division, the Sky Edge Division was more glorified and was more popular amongst girls. Li Wei was more than envious. The number of students who turned up for the Thirteen Divisions' yearly recruitment was lesser than those that turned up at the Sky Edge Division's by a huge margin. In fact, there was even a year where they did not manage to hit the recruitment target, which became a joke that spread throughout the Thirteen Divisions.

Li Wei's heart beat faster after he saw the metal chain.

It would really be a huge benefit for the Infantry Division if he could find a good seedling.

The metal chain broke...

Did an accident occur? Li Wei's heart jumped in alarm.

At that moment, he heard Mingxiu's surprised shout. "It is Junior Ai Hui!"

Li Wei looked up and realized that other things were lying near the steps below the pagoda. He hurried over.

There was a knapsack filled to the brim with yarn and a few threads of yarn scattered on the floor.

Mingxiu's face was filled with alarm. When she saw the knapsack filled with yarn, she had a slight feeling that it was Junior Ai Hui, but it was only after checking all the yarn and identifying the logo of the embroidery workshop that she confirmed that it was indeed Junior Ai Hui.

She had searched for Junior Ai Hui in countless places but to no avail. Mingxiu had not expected Junior Ai Hui to train at the Suspending Golden Pagoda alone as it was such a deserted area.

She started to feel nervous.

Junior Ai Hui was definitely not the suspect. She had exchanged hands with the suspect, and the suspect's base level was much higher than Junior Ai Hui's. She was worried that the suspect had harmed Junior Ai Hui, especially after seeing the broken metal chain.

However, there were no traces of blood or a fight.

Li Wei was more experienced. He gazed around and noticed a small piece of cloth on the ground. He hurriedly picked it up, and

said, "There’s a piece of muslin here!"

Mingxiu, who was initially flustered, had slightly calmed down. But when her gaze fell upon the piece of cloth on Li Wei’s hand, she could not stop her body from trembling—she was in a state of disbelief.

Li Wei noticed Mingxiu’s expression and passed the small piece of cloth to her.

It was only a small piece of muslin, which was evidently incomplete as it was still connected to two strings of yarn. The muslin was also creased, of inferior quality, and had many uneven parts. If someone produced such a product at the embroidery workshop, she would definitely return it back.

However, it caused Mingxiu to be very shocked.

Despite its inferior quality and ugly appearance, it was a piece of elemental cloth that had been weaved with the [Twin Weaving Technique].

Junior Ai Hui was a novice who did not have any prior experience in embroidery and had spent half a day to thread a single needle, but he could actually produce an elemental cloth after seeing her demonstration just once. How could she not be astonished?

She had grown up in the embroidery workshop but had never

heard of such a thing before, let alone see it happen. The embroidery experts that she had met, including herself, could definitely not achieve such a feat. She clearly remembered that she weaved her first muslin cloth with the [Twin Weaving Technique] only seven months after entering the embroidery workshop.

She could still remember the admiring and pleased gaze of her teacher.

But Junior Ai Hui only saw it once....

Apart from shock, countless doubts started to rise in her mind involuntarily. Since Junior's base level was so low, how could he manage to use the [Twin Weaving Technique]? Could it be that he saw the demonstration once and understood the [Twin Weaving Technique]? Were there really people with photographic memory in this world?

She could see that Junior Ai Hui had a difficult time weaving from the creases on the muslin cloth.

However, this was not a question of how tough it was, but rather of how it was even possible.

He was able to weave the cloth with just his natal residence opened. If not for the special logo of the embroidery workshop on the cloth, she would have assumed that it was accomplished with the help of others.

Mingxiu felt that the knowledge she had accumulated over the years from learning weaving had been completely undermined.

Li Wei saw that Mingxiu was out of sorts, seemingly deep in thought, so he did not disturb her. Instead, he started to survey the surroundings. When his gaze fell on the pagoda's wall, which was not far away, his pupils suddenly constricted.

There was a distinct row of dents in the pagoda's wall.

He suddenly thought of his previous trip to the pagoda. He had already seen the dents in the wall, but those previous dents were not distinct and weren't easily noticed by the naked eye. He had only discovered their existence by accident. At that point in time, he had assumed that the dents were caused by a beast, but now, after looking at the row of distinct dents, he realized that they were actually created by a human.

Someone had been training and had rammed into the wall of the pagoda.

Looking at the different shapes and magnitudes of the dents, Li Wei made a sudden decision. He approached a dent and turned around, leaning his back against the pagoda's wall.

His back and the dent made a good fit.

Indeed. It was a dent that was created by someone ramming their back into the wall.

If Li Wei's emotions could be said to have been stirred after seeing the mental chain a moment ago, then when he now looked at the row of dents, his eyes could be said to be practically emitting rays of light.

What a ferocious person!

Other than Li Wei, nobody had a better understanding of how solid the wall of the Suspending Golden Pagoda was. Creating a dent in the wall required a horrifying amount of strength. The different types of killer moves that used the power of one's back flashed through his mind. Which move was able to produce such power?

Such tremendous strength also required at least four palaces.

Also, it was evident that the person was improving—the dents were getting deeper.

Given Li Wei's current strength, it would be easy for him to achieve similar strength; but for someone to be training here, it was definitely a student. It was an incredible feat for a student to attain such a standard.

However, the primary factor that contributed to the spark in Li Wei's eyes was the method used. This person was a perfect fit for the Infantry Division!

This won't do! No matter what, he had to bring that person into the Infantry Division!

Li Wei had already made the decision in his mind.

Suddenly, his thoughts returned to the broken metal chain, and his eyelids twitched. Could it be that that fellow was training inside and had met a mishap after the metal chain snapped?

He decided to rush in to find them. Given his current power, the Suspending Golden Pagoda was no longer a threat.

However, just when he turned around, he heard a loud bang from the top of the pagoda.

The two of them started in unison, before subconsciously raising their heads to look for the source.

Mingxiu recognized Ai Hui at a glance, but the next moment, she became even more shocked.

More than half of Ai Hui's clothes were torn, exposing his well-defined muscles. He was carrying someone, whose clothes were in bits and pieces, and the snow-white skin of that person could be seen stained dark red. They streaked across the air, leaving a splatter of fresh blood in their wake.

Mingxiu's first thought was that the person on Ai Hui's back was a woman, but when she saw the face, she couldn't help but halt in

her tracks.

Hey, isn't that Student Bangwan?

Chapter 77: The Awakening

Ai Hui woke up in a daze. He had a bad dream, in which he was struggling in the middle of a gale and was unable to grasp ahold of anything. He had also dreamt of Fatty, who was carrying his corpse and sitting in a pool of mud, crying, his tears lost to the brutal winds.

He had dreamt of Boss, who had made him burn all the swordplay manuals. He had stood in the empty training hall for ages, feeling helpless and lost.

Ai Hui woke up.

His eyes were unfocused and dull; but after a moment, his gaze started to focus, and a feeble ray of light was lit up in the midst of an endless sea of gray and bleakness. It lit up the cold, engraved face of the metal and stone wall, akin to a spring breeze that vigorously blows and revitalizes the wintry landscape of the wilderness, delivering a fresh breath of life.

He had not experienced a nightmare for a long time.

He rested on the bed and stared at the ceiling, lost in thought.

How was Fatty doing now? Was he still going around as a swindler and not training?

Do not consume so much sugar, you are already so fat. If

someone bullies you, remember the name but do not tell me. Even if you tell me, at least wait till I have higher skills than now. Or else if I am unable to curb the urge to avenge you, both of us would be in a terrible situation. Do not worry, I will train properly. If I am unable to defeat them, I will beat you instead, for provoking such a highly skilled enemy.

He wondered how Boss's life was in the heavens. He guessed that there was no more swordsmanship in heaven.

Boss, you must do as the natives do. As a human, no, as a ghost, you must be more realistic and not be so stubborn. Do not conduct business as you are not suitable. Find a stable job and do it well instead. There should be dozens of jobs like that in the heavens. It would not be qualified to be called 'heaven' if there were no stable jobs there.

Ai Hui, you must work hard.

After telling himself that last sentence, he let out a long breath. The nightmare and the negative emotions were also exhaled out with the air.

He went back to his usual self. The dull and dark state, the fearfulness, and the feeling of being a coward had all vanished as if nothing had even happened.

His gaze was steady and calm. He was still the formidable Ai Hui who was scared of nothing.

He struggled to get out of bed but was met with a sharp pain in his left arm.

He expertly ascertained that his bone was fractured; this was not the first time he had met with such an injury. Recalling the last moment when he rushed out of the Suspending Golden Pagoda, he seemed to have knocked into something and had evidently injured himself. He did not realize that it was his left arm.

As long as it was bound up properly and treated with medication, Ai Hui would recover in no time. He had ample experience—external injuries such as fractures seemed to be serious on the surface, but in reality, they were not a big issue. As long as they would be treated properly and on time, there would be a rapid recovery. An internal injury, on the other hand, was a real nuisance. It would be very troublesome if there were injuries to the five residences and eight palaces.

He reckoned that he was in big trouble. Ai Hui laughed bitterly.

He was in a bit of a mess.

He still did not know the condition within his body.

Suddenly, he heard sounds of squabbling come from outside.

"Shouchuan, he truly is a genius! He just opened his natal residence and could use the [Twin Weaving Technique] to weave the elemental cloth. Till now, I am unable to comprehend how he

did it. This is simply too unfathomable!"

The voice of the old lady was filled with admiration.

Ai Hui secretly felt pleased. Being praised by others was indeed a happy thing, not to mention that he had sacrificed a lot.

"He is a genius! A weaving genius! Shouchuan, it was my fault previously. His talent is simply amazing, you must let him come to the embroidery workshop. I will educate him personally, and I want to take him as a closed-door disciple!" The old lady was evidently very agitated.

Ai Hui was struck dumb. Please don’t. Although weaving was a profitable job and offered a bright future, he was, after all, a man. It would be very awkward to always be dealing with weaving for the rest of his life.

The old man was initially pleased, but once he heard that the old lady wanted to fight over Ai Hui, he could not care less anymore. "This is out of the question! He is my disciple! I have only one disciple, and he is going to be carrying my legacy in the future."

"You are wasting his talent! You are being irresponsible!" The old lady coldly remarked, "Given your insubstantial theories, he could still follow and learn."

"Whatever you say, my answer shall still be definitely no!" The old man rejected her bluntly.

The old lady immediately became angry. "Wang Shouchuan, what do you mean by this? I have already apologized to you. What more do you want me to do? I have been following you for so many years, and this is how you treat me? It was my fault previously. When did I ever benefit from any good fortune after being with you for so long? When did I beg you for anything? If you are at the Induction Ground, I will follow you to the Induction ground. I let you squander whatever you want, and this is how you treat me? Wang Shouchuan, you better explain things to me clearly today! Boo hoo hoo....."

Looking at his old partner reduced to tears, Wang Shouchuan became terrified. He softened his tone. "I did not say anything. Why are you crying?" My disciple is also your disciple. If he does not learn properly, you can break his legs."

Li Wei and Mingxiu were at the side, looking down at the floor and standing still like statues. Li Wei felt weak and inwardly regretted that he rushed over. The spectacle unfolding did not seem like it was supposed to be seen by an outsider like him.

Teacher, oh Teacher, please do not hold this against me, Li Wei thought to himself.

Mingxiu had seen many such spectacles and did not feel too awkward. However, she also knew not to cut in at this moment.

Seeing that his old partner had stifled her sobs, Wang Shouchuan continued, "But we have to consider Ai Hui’s opinion as well."

Having heard that, the old lady stopped crying and raised her voice. "He has objections?"

Ai Hui, who was in the nearby room, felt his heart tremble.

"Of course, he would not have objections." Wang Shouchuan coughed lightly. "Look at how much he wanted to enter the embroidery workshop. But we have to think over this properly. If he were a girl, I would give him to you without a second thought. But he is a boy, and you are more familiar with weaving than me. When was there a male weaving master? I am also clear of his temperament—he loves to fight. Learning to weave is one thing, but to let him weave for the rest of his life might be difficult for him."

The old lady became silent.

Wang Shouchuan’s sentence was straight to the point. In fact, before she came, she too had felt that it was a pity that Ai Hui wasn’t a girl. While it wasn’t to say that there were no males who learned to weave, they were incredibly rare. Not to mention that there were no male weavers who had managed to achieve any accomplishments.

Seeing that he was winning the argument, Wang Shouchuan quickly continued, "My point is, let him go to the embroidery workshop when he has recovered. Let him learn first, and we will decide from there. We should not be anxious about whether he has good skills or whether he is interested in weaving. His future

should still be decided by him."

The old lady’s face was not as black as before, and she gave a snort and said, "Finally there is a humane sentence coming from you, after wasting so many of my tears. Mingxiu, let us go back to the embroidery workshop."

With that, she left haughtily, without a trace of that tearful grandmother of a few moments ago.

"Uncle, we are leaving." Mingxiu hurriedly bowed to Wang Shouchuan, waved to Li Wei, and ran after her master.

Wang Shouchuan looked at his old departing partner and let out a sigh of relief. The battle that he had just fought had given him a huge shock. He grabbed the teapot that was on the table and started to take big gulps of water.

Putting down the teapot, he asked Li Wei, who was at the side, "What happened to you again?"

Chapter 78: The Teacher's Faith

"I want to invite Student Ai Hui to join the Society of Excellence."

Li Wei carefully said. Although Teacher Wang wasn't that well-known, Li Wei did not dare to display any signs of negligence. He had attended school at the Induction Ground and knew that the teachers were all hidden talents. He hadn't sensed it as a student; it was only after leaving the school that he realized that the teachers were all very remarkable individuals.

Furthermore, as a student, Li Wei had attended Teacher Wang's lessons before.

He was glad that he had come to Teacher Wang's place.

After hearing that Ai Hui had a teacher, he didn't dare raise the invitation to Ai Hui without permission.

"We should talk about this next time." The old man's tone to Li Wei was not that courteous. He waved his hand and stopped Li Wei from speaking.

Li Wei retreated tactfully. However, in his heart, he had become even more determined in his resolution to bring Ai Hui into the Society of Excellence. The teachers in the Induction Ground had very high standards. To get into his good graces, Ai Hui's talent was definitely thought highly of. The recent debate had further proved his point—even Master Han Yuqin wanted to take Ai Hui as a disciple. What other thoughts could he have?

Such a fine young talent! He would regret if he just let him pass by!

The wheels were turning in Li Wei’s head, as he thought of how he could kidnap—no—invite Ai Hui into the Society of Excellence. And afterward, ignite his interest in the infantry division.

After the old man had driven Li Wei away, he entered the room and saw Ai Hui, whose eyes were already opened. He laughed. "You heard everything right? What do you think? Are you interested in weaving?"

Ai Hui shook his head. "While Disciple might get an income through weaving, Disciple is unwilling to weave for the rest of his life."

"See, I know you like the back of my own hand!" The old man was very pleased, and he clicked his tongue in wonder. "You could actually weave the muslin cloth. Even I received a shock."

However, the old man immediately turned stern, and said, "Anyway, you should not be going to the embroidery workshop for some time. Your injuries are quite serious, and it would be troublesome."

Ai Hui recalled the big piece of "magnet" in his body and suddenly had an ominous premonition. "Is it very severe?"

The old man did not answer his question, but instead, replied, "Tell me the specific details of what exactly happened."

Ai Hui started to recount his experience—how he managed to train and weave simultaneously in the Suspending Golden Pagoda, how he was knocked back when he wanted to come out, and how he was subsequently swept up to the top of the Suspending Golden Pagoda. He had only been trying to save himself when he had injected the elemental energy into his natal residence.

The old man listened till his eyes formed a straight line. Not only was he was shocked by his own disciple's fierce resolution, but he was also full of admiration for Ai Hui's courage and insight.

He could not help but ask, "How did you think of the mutual attraction of the elemental energy needles?"

"[The Twin Weaving Technique]! Didn't Senior Mingxiu demonstrate it once?" Ai Hui said matter-of-factly.

The old man stared blankly at Ai Hui, and after a long while, he finally replied, "I am starting to believe the old woman's words that you are a weaving genius."

His wife was an embroidery master, and he naturally understood the embroidery process more than others. Especially that old woman's [Twin Weaving Technique]. Very few people knew that there was actually a connection between him and the [Twin Weaving Technique].

People only knew about Han Yuqin, the embroidery master, while Wang Shouchuan was comparatively unknown. There were very few that knew that they were childhood sweethearts. It was widely known that Master Han Yuqin had invented the [Twin Weaving Technique] at the age of nineteen, but no one knew that it was Wang Shouchuan who had initially discovered the induction effect of the elemental energy needles.

As a result, the old man was even more impressed by Ai Hui's talent.

To be able to understand the complexity of the [Twin Weaving Technique] after seeing it merely once—such talent was truly unheard of.

It was both a good and a bad thing that his disciple was this talented. This was because a talented disciple would create much more trouble than an average person.

Just like this time.

Ai Hui thought of Duanmu Huanghun, and he could not help but ask curiously, "Teacher, how's that fellow now?"

The old man knew that Ai Hui was referring to Duanmu Huanghun, and he replied huffily, " His teacher is Dai Gang. Why are you even worried about him?"

"I am not worried." Ai Hui fumed with rage, "I am awaiting my

compensation from him! That hypocritical chap got me into so much trouble. This matter shall not rest until I destroy him!"

"Teacher will support you!" The old man was very much in favor of Ai Hui’s declaration.

"How about my injuries?" Ai Hui’s eyes widened as he looked at his teacher with an innocent face.

"Very troublesome," his teacher muttered. "The base level of the metal elemental energy in the Suspending Golden Pagoda is much higher than your natal residence. Your body is too weak for the strong metal elemental energy, and your natal residence is unable to absorb and digest it. Furthermore, as you are unable to train these days, it will be devoured straight by your body once the metal elemental energy enters. If you have opened four palaces, then this elemental energy mass would be very nourishing for you, and you would be able to slowly absorb it."

Ai Hui was anxious. "What should I do?"

"There’s always a solution." The old man continued haughtily, "While your teacher might not be Dai Gang, he is still capable of doing something."

Ai Hui let out a breath in relief. As long as there was a solution, all was good.

"This matter still needs the help of your mistress." The old man

thought for a while before warning him, "Your mistress does not have a good temper. You should agree with whatever she says and should not offend her. Once she is offended, I will be unable to do anything as well. I owe her too much."

The old man said the last sentence with slight guilt and regret.

...

Ai Hui's fracture recovered speedily. His body was inherently strong, and his recovery ability was much better than that of the average students.

He did not idle around while recuperating. Although he was unable to train, he had no qualms about attending lessons. When he went to class, his classmates noticed the injuries on his hand and some even asked about it concernedly.

Duanmu Bangwan did not appear. Ai Hui presumed that he had still not recovered, and when he asked his classmates, nobody knew when Duanmu Bangwan would come. It seemed like the mishap which led to the injury on himself and Bangwan had not circulated.

Ai Hui laughed coldly. Wait till he sees that fellow again. He would definitely get his revenge.

He had wasted a lot of days without training and had delayed a few matters. He did not know if there would be any repercussions.

He was so unlucky.

In the middle of his recuperation, he also made a trip to the Vanguard Training Hall. Lou Lan examined him and also said that his condition was incurable. There was still no news from that lady from the noodle shop—it was like she had disappeared into thin air, making Ai Hui feel flabbergasted.

Ai Hui had always regarded injuries as a common occurrence, and he kept a balanced mindset and lived his life to the fullest.

The old man was always busy from dawn till dusk and his eyes were filled with red veins. Ai Hui knew that his teacher was busy with helping him in his recovery and was secretly very touched.

Finally, the day came where the old man asked, "How're your injuries?"

"They have all recovered!" Ai Hui waved his arm, proving that it was almost as good as new.

"Then let us solve your problem of that mass of elemental energy!"

As the old man expressed what Ai Hui had long been expecting to hear, Ai Hui continuously nodded his head, only one step away from exclaiming that his teacher was brilliant. Although this lifestyle was enriching, Ai Hui felt that his body was becoming

rusty from being unable to train.

"Are we going to the embroidery workshop?"

Ai Hui thought of his teacher's words that he needed his mistress' help and could not help but ask aloud.

"Why should we go to the embroidery workshop?" The old man had a weird expression and continued, "Follow me."

Ai Hui followed the old man to a familiar place. The courtyard, which seemed to be made for collecting rubbish, was filled to the brim with junk. He definitely did not have any good memories of this place.

However, after seeing what was in the middle of the courtyard, Ai Hui's expression changed.

Chapter 79: Teacher's Instructions

The junkyard contained memories that Ai Hui did not wish to recollect.

However, while walking in, he realized that there had been drastic changes to the junkyard, which led him to believe that he had arrived at a different place. Five luxuriant pine trees practically occupied the whole junkyard, yet he clearly remembered that previously there were no trees.

All the pine trees were taller than ten meters as if they had been growing there for a few decades.

Ai Hui knew that this was done by wood elementalists. Back in the Wilderness, whenever they had stopped to set up camp, they would plant various strange vegetations near their campsite. If they wanted to stay in a treehouse, then within half an hour, wood elementalists could grow a Zeikowa Acuminata tree with a height of more than twenty meters, They could also manage to grow poisonous grass that had neither fragrance nor color. Fields of thistles and thorns, along with wind-chime grass, could act as warning signals as well.

If earth elementalists were said to have eccentric dispositions and strange skills, then every wood elementalist was said to be a botanical expert. The dispositions of wood elementalists were usually on two opposite ends of the spectrum. There were those who were kind, extremely kind, and would not bear to kill even an ant. And then there were also those who were twisted, extremely twisted, and would even use otherworldly techniques to murder;

they would not let anything, even a corpse, remain.

The five pine trees were coincidentally arranged in the shape of a ring. Between each tree, there were many colorful vines, forming something similar to a brightly-coloured rattan wall.

An ice-cold copper armor was placed in the middle of the five pine trees.

Upon seeing the armor, Ai Hui's expression changed.

The memories of the Thousand Prajna still gave him nightmares.

Moreover, the volume of this armor was much larger than the Thousand Prajna. There were also many colorful vines that dropped from the pine tree and pierced through the armor.

Ai Hui swallowed hard. The scene before his eyes reminded him of the Blood-Sucking Rattan, one of the evilest plants used by wood elementalists. Many kind wood elementalists themselves loathed the blood-sucking rattan as well. It was very frightening. In the Wilderness, he had experienced first-hand how a wood elementalist made use of the blood-sucking rattan to reduce an elephant to just skin and bones within a minute.

For a long period, that scary scenario had kept repeating itself in Ai Hui's nightmares.

"How about this? Pretty good right?" The old man was quite

proud. “I had to get a few wood elementalist masters to do this for me. The metal elemental energy in your body is simply too stable. It would not be an easy feat to move it. But you don’t have to worry; Master has years of experience in the interaction between the different types of elemental energy. Furthermore, it would definitely not be a problem with the participation of your Mistress.”

Ai Hui felt more assured after that. After all, Mistress’ nickname(Master) was quite intimidating.

“Your situation is relatively serious. In fact, it’s more serious than I had previously thought.” The old man’s expression became stern. “There is simply too much regarding quantity. Perhaps you would be able to understand if I explain it in another way. If you had opened four palaces, then to completely absorb and digest the mass of elemental energy, you would need approximately eight years. And if you had opened five palaces, the time frame would be shortened to four years.”

Ai Hui jumped in alarm. “Not...Not such a long period of time, right? I did not stay inside the pagoda for so long.”

“It is much longer than you imagined.” The old man looked at Ai Hui with a face of pity and continued mockingly, “Come to think of it, you were ignorant and had no fear. I am very impressed by the fact that you dared to go to the Suspending Golden Pagoda when you had just opened your natal residence. Do you know who would usually dare to go? Four palaces, only the students who opened four palaces would dare to. This is because the elemental energy of the metal wind is very pure and the base level

requirement is very high. Without the support of four palaces, it would be very difficult to absorb and digest this energy."

Ai Hui opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"And this is only the first level. Someone had previously conducted research. With each increasing level, the purity of the elemental energy would increase by approximately three times. You, my disciple, took a walk around the seventh level." The old man clicked his tongue and continued, "For many years, nobody has dared to do such a thing. If this spreads, you might even become famous."

Ai Hui was dumbstruck.

It was evident that the old man was not going to let him off the hook easily. "If that were the only thing that happened, you would not have absorbed so much metal elemental energy. However, you, my disciple, are a genius. You thought of using the [Twin Weaving Technique] to circulate your elemental energy. What an exquisite and brilliant idea! Thereafter, you had lost control, and the elemental energy became uncontrollable. The elemental energy mass compressed itself continuously while the attractive force kept on increasing, absorbing the elemental energy steadily. I was bored while doing my business in the toilet yesterday and did some calculations for you. Approximately eighty percent of the elemental energy in your body was absorbed by itself."

"What's worse is that you, my disciple, used such a brilliant inspiration on your own natal residence. This is not just difficult, this is creating extreme difficulty for yourself. If it were just in the

palace and not the residence, the difficulty level would be much smaller," the old man said, with a face full of ridicule. He suddenly realized something, and continued, "Oh, I forgot that you, my disciple, had only managed to open your natal residence."

It was only after seeing Ai Hui's pale face that the old man slowed down his speech. With a serious expression, he said, "The reason why Master is saying so much is to give you a shock."

Ai Hui helplessly looked at his harsh Master.

"You might be able to win unexpectedly, sometimes due to luck and taking risks, but it is not sustainable. You have more real-life experiences than Master, and you should know that success is mostly based on capability, and intelligence would be effective occasionally. Training is a long battle, and training to be strong to defeat the weak is the right way to go. If you are to rely on luck and you meet with any mishaps, you would be consigned to eternal damnation."

There was a rare note of seriousness to the old man's tone.

Ai Hui jolted and replied courteously, "Disciple will bear this in mind."

The old man was satisfied with Ai Hui's attitude and continued slowly, "Okay, we are done with the negatives. Let's talk about the benefits now."

When Ai Hui initially heard the word “benefits,” he paused for a moment, before asking excitedly, “Don’t tell me there are benefits too?”

“Of course.” The old man continued, “You have to think of it this way. There is so much elemental energy in your body. How could there not be any benefits? Do you usually have so much elemental energy? Furthermore, it is such pure elemental energy.”

“But it is of no use,” Ai Hui said, his face filled with confusion.

The old man said impatiently, “Where did your intelligence go? You can always think of something!”

“Has Teacher thought of a solution?” Ai Hui rushed forward and looked at his teacher with a fawning face.

“How could I be your teacher otherwise?” The old man said with a smug face, “Your body’s internal elemental energy is simply too compressed. If we break it up completely, your natal residence would explode. Do you know about the spirit stone in the Cultivation Era?

“Yes, I have heard of it,” Ai Hui said truthfully.

“Inherently, the spirit stone is actually the spiritual force being compressed to the maximum point, before being solidified into a crystal. The elemental energy mass in your body now is slightly similar to the spirit stone. Many people have tried to create the

elemental stone but to no avail. On the contrary, you managed to do it by a stroke of luck. Just imagine that mass of elemental energy as an elemental stone with a high base level. Do you feel a little more awesome about yourself if you think about it that way?“

Ai Hui replied honestly, “Nope.”

“No?” The old man widened his eyes. “At your current level, that mass of elemental energy can never be used up and can self-replenish. Isn’t that awesome?”

“But I am unable to use it,” Ai Hui said matter-of-factly.

“Who said that you are unable to use it?” The old man almost went crazy with rage, and he countered, “Then what have I been doing?”

Ai Hui was surprised, and with a shocked face, he asked, “Didn’t Teacher say it was a treatment? I thought it would be a removal or something along the same lines.”

“That is too easy,” the old man said loftily.

Ai Hui gulped.

Why did he suddenly feel guilty?

Chapter 80: Gloves and Blood Bandage

"This is something that can’t be helped." The old man coughed softly.

Hearing these words, Ai Hui suddenly felt at ease.

"The elemental energy has been compressed to an extreme degree, and once it collapses, your natal residence will be destroyed—this is why we are trying to prevent it from caving in on itself. Or you can treat it as an iceberg that we are trying to melt bit by bit. Since its base level is extremely high, a small portion of the melted energy can be used for a long time. However, the thawing process will not be easy. We’ll have to use certain specialized equipment such as this one. Oh... I can’t remember the name of it." The old man had a strange expression.

"The elemental energy in your body contains a powerful attractive force that behaves like a magnet. This will be our greatest hurdle as it’s extremely difficult to overcome this kind of attraction. However, if we only need to influence a small portion, then it’s still possible to do so. Have you noticed these rattans? They are able to generate powerful wood elemental energy, and since metal chops wood, the wood elemental energy will induce a strong attractive effect on the metal elemental energy, thereby controlling a small portion of it from the energy mass. This is the portion of metal elemental energy that you will be able to control."

After listening to the old man, Ai Hui vaguely understood what was going on. "So, we’re using the wood elemental energy as bait? To pull out a portion of metal elemental energy from the mass?"

"Yes! You got it!" The old man briskly nodded his head. "Shall we begin then?"

Without any hesitation, Ai Hui nodded. "Okay!"

Though the past few days had been enriching, his inability to train made him feel as though something was missing. His life was dedicated to becoming an elementalist, and training had become an inseparable part of it.

After equipping the copper armor, he placed the massive copper helmet on his head, narrowing his field of vision as the world around him became hushed.

He could hear his own heartbeats, which were steady and vigorous.

The rattans on the copper armor lit up on by one, illuminating the courtyard with its bright, enchanting glow.

The old man’s gaze sharpened, and from time to time, he glanced at the control panel in his hands.

The elemental energy mass in Ai Hui’s body started channeling, making him uncomfortable. To him, it was like a huge monster living inside his body that was comparatively far too inferior. When the monster was calm and quiet, he did not feel anything; but when it began to get agitated, Ai Hui felt as though his body

was going to be ripped apart at any time.

Lacerations began to appear in his natal residence.

It was at this moment that Ai Hui realized the terrifying amount of elemental energy in his body. The slightest movement from the mass was enough to inflict injuries on him.

It was as if Ai Hui was in a stormy sea, undulating along with the choppy tidal waves.

His world spinning and his vision turning dark, Ai Hui's consciousness flickered.

Outside, the old man became anxious as well. The rattans on the copper armor dimmed one by one, and in the blink of an eye, one-third of them were extinguished. With each extinguished rattan, the old man quickly plucked it off.

"Persevere!" he muttered to himself.

As time passed, the glow of the rattans diminished one at a time, the old man continuing to remove them in succession.

Half an hour later, when the last rattan dimmed, the old man opened the armor as quick as possible. Boiling steam surged out from within the armor. Ai Hui had already lost his consciousness and his face was pale-white. When the old man pulled Ai Hui out of the armor, the latter's body was drenched in sweat, looking as if he

was being out of a pool of water.

The old man observed the elemental energy mass in Ai Hui's body. When the old man saw the elemental energy mass was stabilizing gradually, he then felt at ease.

When the old man removed the last extinguished rattan, he looked somewhat surprised.

The ashen green rattan was nondescript without any particular design except that it was soft and smooth, as though it had been polished by sandpaper.

It was a sword rattan.

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Three days later.

Ai Hui was playing with the sword rattan.

After spending one day in a coma, he woke up only to have the old man immediately throw this at him. Sword rattans had a soft texture, yet they were highly durable and resistant to wear. Once polished, they had a pleasing texture. Sword rattans were called so for their use as the material for top-quality sword hilts with natural grips.

Master said that this was the rattan that suited him the most.

Ai Hui felt that his fate was tightly linked with swords. So far in his life, there were swordplay manuals, swordsmanship, and a sword embryo. Now there was the addition of a sword rattan. Could it be that he was born to be a swordsman?

He was playing idly with the sword rattan when he spotted the sudden entrance of his mistress and Senior Mingxiu. He hastily stood up and greeted them, "Mistress! Senior Mingxiu!"

Han Yuqin did not expect Ai Hui to call her Mistress; as such, she could not help but smile. "Good boy."

The bit of animosity from their previous tiff disappeared into thin air.

Mingxiu smiled gently at Ai Hui.

Seeing the old man enter, Han Yuqin’s smile disappeared, and she harrumphed.

Long used to his wife’s antics, he merely said, "Have you finished making it?"

"Take it out," Han Yuqin ordered Mingxiu.

Mingxiu took out a pair of ashen green, fingerless gloves and

passed them to Ai Hui. "Junior, try them on. These are the Sword Rattan Gloves that Mistress made without sleep for three days."

Mingxiu

Only now did Ai Hui notice the the fatigue in Mistress' face and her bloodshot eyes. "Thank you, Mistress!" he said emotionally.

"Such a good boy!" Han Yuqin praised Ai Hui amicably. Following which, her tone changed and she crooned coldly, "The disciple is so much better than the master; at least he still cares about his mistress, unlike someone who doesn't concern himself with me!"

Slightly embarrassed, the old man coughed softly. "I didn't manage to say it in time. Thank you for your hard work."

Han Yuqin uncaringly turned her face away with a humph.

Just as Ai Hui was about to put on the gloves, he was stopped by Han Yuqin. "Wait, put on this bandage first!"

"Bandage?" Ai Hui was stunned.

Han Yuqin took out an archaic bronze box and passed it to Ai Hui.

When the old man saw the bronze box, his eyes widened. "That piece of blood-refined cloth?"

Han Yuqin gave a soft sound of acknowledgement, but her face was covered by an unconcealable smirk.

Ai Hui opened the bronze box, releasing a bolt of killer intent that slammed into his face. The scent of blood overwhelmed him, but upon a second sniff, it had disappeared, as if the smell from earlier had been a hallucination. The cloth was obviously an antique, but the blood stains appeared to have dried up not too long ago.

"I incidentally came across this piece of blood-refined cloth in the past. It should be an artifact from the Cultivation Era. I don't know which blood sect it belongs to; it is certainly not an orthodox artifact. However, even after thousands of years, it has not rotted, proving it to be a good item. I'm unsure whose blood is on the cloth, but it exudes a strong killer intent. It's too demonic for me or Mingxiu to use; as such, we have never touched it.

"Your master hasn't given you a single welcome gift since accepting you as a disciple. I have cut this piece of blood-refined cloth into two, making them two pieces of bandaging. While they're not suitable for treating wounds, they are useful for protection, especially since your body is weak. With these two Blood Bandages, it will be very difficult for any weapon to harm you. They can help you withstand a portion of any attack, preventing your body from giving way or collapsing. Later, Mingxiu will teach you how to wrap the bandage," Han Yuqin explained with a gentle voice.

A wide grin appeared on the old man's face and he yelled, "What

are you waiting for? Quickly thank your mistress!"

Ai Hui was touched and gave a sincere bow. "Thank you, Mistress!"

An unfamiliar feeling of warmth, like sunlight, shined upon him.

Chapter 81: Three-minute Hero

Senior Mingxiu's bandaging technique surprised Ai Hui. She had said before that her limited medical knowledge came from her brother who was an exceptional doctor.

However, the way he saw it, her medical knowledge was not little at all, but rather, quite detailed.

She started by wrapping the bandage diagonally across the top half of his body, then down his shoulders and arms to his wrists. Lastly, the blood bandage was tied to a knot on each of the Sword Rattan Gloves; this way, the bandage wrappings on both left and right arms were symmetrical to each other.

The blood bandage was surprisingly long, enough to wrap around the necessary body parts.

Ai Hui became acutely aware of his clumsiness after taking more than ten tries to get it done.

Finishing, he felt a change had taken place.

Chilly killing intent from the bandage entered his body, exerting a calming influence on the elemental energy mass. Ai Hui immediately felt his body relax, and the feeling of being as lithe as a swallow returned to his body once more. It seemed the blood bandage's tight wrapping did not limit his body's movements but made him more agile instead.

"Now try untying the knots on the gloves," Mingxiu encouraged.

All eyes were trained on Ai Hui, especially the old man's who looked on somewhat nervously.

Taking a deep breath, Ai Hui untied the knot on his right wrist.

The elemental energy mass in his natal residence shuddered before a strand of elemental energy swam out from it and rapidly entered his right palm.

Despite the elemental energy strand's weak nature, it was extremely pure. It swam through his body with lightning speed, reaching Ai Hui's right palm in no time. Just as it was about to penetrate through the Sword Rattan Gloves, it unexpectedly stopped in its tracks, blocked by an invisible wall.

The gloves woven by a master weaver were indeed extraordinary!

Joy coursed through Ai Hui, and realizing he could control this strand of metal elemental energy, he became even more excited. With a jolt of his body, he appeared like a phantom before the trunk of a large pine tree in the corner of the courtyard.

It had been a while since he last practiced [Arching Fish Back], but now it activated instinctively, ferociously slamming him backwards.

Crack!

The pine tree, as wide as two men together, shattered, the point of impact spraying countless wooden shavings. The top half of the tree snapped and flew through the air.

Rumble!

It smashed into the courtyard wall, filling the air with dust and dirt. The wall remained standing, thickly dotted with numerous wooden fragments.

Everyone was dumbstruck with terror after witnessing such a ferocious strike from Ai Hui.

"Is this guy a bear?" the old man muttered.

Ai Hui stared with similar astonishment at the tree stump, unable to believe the sight before his eyes. Was this truly the [Arching Fish Back]?

"Now you can feel the power of it, right?" The old man returned to his senses and spoke with excitement, "Even though it’s just a small strand, the high-quality elemental energy can generate far greater power than what is generated by low quality elemental energy. This is also one of the reasons for training. The elemental energy you are able to wield now far surpasses your base level. The benefits are already quite obvious. Your fighting capabilities will improve immensely, and you will gain a stronger tempered body.

"So why, then, do we need the Sword Rattan Gloves? With these, you'll be able to direct the elemental energy to your palms. This will be useful in activating the palaces in your left and right hands. It feels good to be an expert, right? Now since we've finished talking about the benefits, let's talk about the drawbacks."

Ai Hui pricked up his ears.

Seeing Ai Hui's calm countenance, rather than ecstasy, after obtaining stronger powers, the old man subtly nodded.

Ai Hui truly deserved to be his disciple. His maturity at such a young age was rarely seen!

"The problem is that there will be a heavy strain on your body. Does this sound confusing? There's actually nothing complicated about this. When this strand of elemental energy slowly revolves in your body, it will help in your training. However, in combat, the elemental energy will revolve very quickly around your body—the higher the level of elemental energy, the faster its revolution speed. This is what will strain your body greatly. When the pressure gets too great, your body will sustain irreversible damages."

"How long can I fight?" Ai Hui asked calmly.

The old man held out three fingers and answered, "Given your current physical status, it is considered safe to fight for no more than three minutes."

"That’s quite good; at least I can be a three-minute hero," Ai Hui quipped.

When Han Yuqin and Ming Xiu heard the phrase "three-minute hero", they broke out in laughter.

"You’re right. However, during this period of time, as your body becomes stronger, the duration will increase as well. Your main objective is to activate the palaces in your left and right hands; once you do, not only will you be able to use more elemental energy, it will be much safer for you as well. You have to keep in mind that although you have the blood bandage, that mass of elemental energy remains in your body as a ticking time bomb. If anything goes wrong, your body will explode into countless pieces with a bang," the old man chimed in.

This result was within Ai Hui’s expectations. He remained unperturbed as he knew that this was inevitable. He was not someone born under a lucky star. You win some, you lose some, there was nothing to be surprised about.

Everyone present thought Ai Hui was joking when he mentioned the phrase "three-minute hero," but that was not the case, and he was fine with it. Although three minutes were short, it was still enough for him to accomplish many things. A real battle could be decided in an instant. With a whole three minutes of immense powers, Ai Hui would not waste a single second. With a straight face, he asked, "How should I train?"

"You won’t need to go to the Suspending Golden Pagoda for very long," the old man teased before a solemn look overtook his face and he continued, "There’s a crucial problem with your training—the strand of elemental energy cannot return to the natal residence. If it does, it will only be absorbed back into the elemental energy mass once more."

Hearing these words, the previously calm Ai Hui lost his composure, and he asked, "How should I train then?"

The basis of training was to direct elemental energy using the Circulatory Cycle Revolution of which the natal residence was both the starting and ending point. If the elemental energy could not return to the natal residence, how could he train?

The old man revealed a smirk, replying, "I have already come up with a solution for this problem. It’s simple—we won’t use the Circulatory Cycle Revolution."

"Not using the Circulatory Cycle Revolution?" Ai Hui thought he misheard.

Han Yuqin and Mingxiu revealed surprised expressions as well.

"That’s right! No Circulatory Cycle Revolution!" the old man replied without hesitation. "What’s the purpose of the Circulatory Cycle Revolution? To purify and absorb elemental energy. Currently, the elemental energy in your body does not need to be purified since it is already extremely pure in nature. Furthermore, there is an abundance of it. What you need to do now is toughen

your body, especially your palms.

"To activate the palaces in your left and right hands, there are two conditions. The first is to make sure your hands are sensitive to elemental energy. The second condition is to make sure there is enough elemental energy. The elemental energy you have is pure in nature, but the amount you control is far too little; it is far from enough to activate the palaces in your hands."

Ai Hui felt that what his master had said made sense, and he could not help but ask, "What do I need to do specifically?

"For this, you will have to depend on your mistress." The old man smirked.

"Depend on me?" Han Yuqin was baffled. Suddenly, her eyes lit up as she thought of something. "Are you talking about..."

Chapter 82: Lou Lan's Medical Care

"Ai Hui, how are you feeling?"

Lou Lan, who was standing on one side, asked with sincere concern.

Ai Hui had actually wanted to start training as soon as possible. However, Mistress had said that she needed to prepare for a few days and that she still lacked certain items. At the same time, Master was putting on a mysterious front—it appeared that the training this time around would be quite special. However, as compared to his prideful Master and temperamental Mistress, the training made Ai Hui felt more at ease.

How could he think of such things? How could he not have confidence in his master?

When Ai Hui realized that he was having such thoughts, he felt ashamed and guilty. He reflected upon himself for a long time. Why was he thinking like that?

For the next few days, Ai Hui attended classes as per usual since he could not train. He was filled with enthusiasm towards all his classes. The only regret he had was that he wasn't able to encounter his fellow classmate Bangwan and claim the compensation for the damages the latter had caused.

After the lessons had ended, Ai Hui returned to the training hall. Lou Lan, who had been anxiously waiting for Ai Hui, scurried over.

It just so happened that Ai Hui had wanted to find out the current status of his body. With Lou Lan, who specialized in healing, by his side, Ai Hui did not have to worry about any accidents happening.

“Three and a half minutes.”

Ai Hui, who was laying on the ground, felt rather happy. He had lasted a whole half minute longer than what Master had anticipated. To other people, an additional thirty seconds would be equivalent to an extra few breaths of air; however, to Ai Hui, the additional thirty seconds would allow him to execute quite a few attacks.

“Your attacks are rather powerful,” Lou Lan analyzed, as the yellow light in his eyes flickered. “Your normal attacks have roughly reached the level of two palaces. Your [Arching Fish Back] is your most powerful attack. With a conservative estimate, it has a killing power of three palaces. I do not have enough information and could not make an accurate comparison. Your body is outstanding, and this can provide a significant boost to your fighting capabilities.”

Lou Lan’s assessment was very accurate—almost identical to Ai Hui’s own assessment of himself.

During the three and a half minutes, although Ai Hui’s base level was around two palaces, his fighting strength exceeded that level. Other than his remarkable fighting techniques and experience, his

excellent body also played a major role in improving his fighting capabilities.

The high-level elemental energy allowed him to successfully develop the [Copper Skin].

[Copper Skin] contributed an important upgrade to his body.

His strength and reaction time had also increased onefold, and his body had become much tougher. Non-refined sword reeds would not be able to inflict any cuts on his skin.

This meant that even if he didn't have elemental energy, his base power was at the level of two palaces.

Developing a tempered body was a difficult process; however, if one were to succeed, it would provide a comprehensive boost to their fighting capabilities.

Similarly, the power of [Arching Fish Back] had exhilarated Ai Hui.

[Arching Fish Back] was an escaping technique and was usually used to escape from body locks; it was incapable of inflicting any damage. Ai Hui had ingeniously used it during battles and had discovered that it was a rather good technique to be used during fighting. He then subsequently mastered this technique to the point of perfection during his training in the Suspending Golden Pagoda.

Other than Ai Hui, no one would waste so much time on an escaping technique that had limited uses.

This could, however, be linked to Ai Hui's past experiences. He was extremely meticulous and sensitive to every detail that was related to fighting. He could accurately sense the increase in his powers.

If it were in the past, he would have to find loopholes in his opponent's defense before executing the [Arching Fish Back]. However, now, if an opponent tried to block his [Arching Fish Back] head-on, they would indeed suffer.

The densely packed wood shavings that were deeply embedded into the wall of his Master's courtyard was the best display of his [Arching Fish Back]'s might.

Combat was very complicated; however, strength was still what mattered the most. When a person who had a base level of four palaces fought against another who had a base level of two palaces, the former might not necessarily win, yet the probability of them winning would definitely be higher. The stronger one was, the more trump cards they had. This would ensure that they would obtain an advantageous position in combat.

Right now, if Ai Hui were to fight against any student in the Induction Ground, he would win easily as he had rich fighting experience. However, when he would step out of the Induction Ground and enter the Wilderness in the future, it might not be the

same case. That was a place where everyone knew how to fight and those who did not would be eliminated.

Strength was everything.

And only strength could bring a sense of security to Ai Hui.

“Lou Lan, I can’t move,” Ai Hui groaned, as he lay on the floor.

Although the three and a half minutes were exhilarating, the strain it put on Ai Hui’s body had far exceeded what he had expected. Currently, his body was sore and aching, and his fighting capabilities were totally crippled. His muscles were involuntarily trembling as well.

“Lou Lan is coming!”

With a loud cheer, Lou Lan transformed into a massive hammer of sand.

“Bang! Bang! Bang!”

The huge sand hammer struck Ai Hui’s body. Ai Hui felt so comfortable that he was grasping for cold air while moaning, “Ah! Ah! Correct, correct, you’re right on the spot! Harder, please!”

After enjoying for quite awhile, Ai Hui felt that it was enough, and he yelled, “Lou Lan, change to another form!”

“No problem!”

Lou Lan yelled happily as he transformed into two huge sand palms and began to massage Ai Hui’s body as if he was kneading dough.

“There’s the right amount of force! There’s the right amount of pressure! Everything is the right amount…”

Ai Hui felt that his body was as soft as a dough, not belonging to him anymore.

After a while, Lou Lan transformed into numerous little sand wheels that rolled around Ai Hui’s body.

“Hahaha, ahh…Lou Lan, you really know a thing or two about massage…Hahaha, it’s ticklish…”

With a bang, Lou Lan transformed back to his original form. When he saw that Ai Hui had fallen asleep, he pulled him to the hot spring at the back of the courtyard and tossed him inside.

Ai Hui woke up with a start. At that moment, his pupils dilated as he scanned his surroundings, and he finally heaved a sigh of relief only after he noticed Lou Lan.

“I actually fell asleep…”

Ai Hui felt somewhat embarrassed. Lou Lan had put in so much effort to massage him, and he had fallen asleep instead. Good job!

"It's okay, Ai Hui," Lou Lan replied casually. Then, he asked, "Ai Hui, what shall we do next?"

"Next up..." Ai Hui had wanted to suggest taking a nap, but when he saw Lou Lan staring anticipatively at him, he changed his mind. "Is there any news from the young lady of the noodle house?"

"No." Lou Lan shook his head.

When Ai Hui felt that his strength was recovering rapidly, his spirits were raised. "We shall go to the training hall now."

Ai Hui wanted to fulfill his promise to the lady at the noodle house despite the fact that he did not carry much hope of successfully finding that person.

"Okay, Ai Hui!" Lou Lan replied enthusiastically.

A smile appeared on Ai Hui's face when he saw Lou Lan's happy reaction. Lou Lan reminded him of Fatty; however, in this case, Lou Lan's character was far better.

Such a nice sand puppet!

Fatty, that bum—he did not even know how to massage.

The hot spring was able to help him regain his strength quickly, and after a while, he had regained most of his strength.

In summary, he could only fight for three and a half minutes—that was his limit. After the time was up, he would lose all means to defend himself. Hence, it seemed reasonable for his master to set three minutes as a time limit for him. It was much easier to recover from exhaustion that was derived from the revolution of elemental energy.

“Lou Lan, is there anything that can regain my strength after what happened just now?” Ai Hui suddenly asked.

Lou Lan slanted his head for a moment before nodding his head. “Yes, you can drink the Energy Replenishing Soup.”

“Is there anything that can be carried along with me?” Ai Hui carried on.

Lou Lan nodded again. “I can make biscuits.”

“Are they expensive?” Ai Hui asked.

“They’re not expensive.” Lou Lan shook his head, as he continued, “Any ingredient that’s related to elemental energy will be costly. Any ingredient that’s related to just energy will be cheap. A lot of biscuits can be made with just fifty thousand yuan.

However, you will know how well they work only after you eat them.”

“I can come up with the money. Lou Lan, please help me make the biscuits.” Ai Hui clenched his teeth.

“No problem, Ai Hui.” Lou Lan felt very pleased that he could help Ai Hui again.

When Ai Hui felt that his strength had recovered, he yelled with vigor, “Let’s go! To the training hall!”

Chapter 83: Zu Yan And The Young Girl

"Actually, you don’t have to care so much about your previous loss."

The young girl continued to comfort the masked young man beside her. When she saw the banners that advertised "Blind Battle!" along the streets, she became very excited. The girl was average-looking, and her eyes were flickering, displaying traces of wittiness.

"Master had once said that you must pick yourself up from where you had fallen."

The voice that came from behind the mask contained a hint of chilliness; one could sense that the words were being spoken through clenched teeth.

"The other party did not respond to your challenge." The young girl continued to persuade him, "The Induction Ground is so big, and there are so many students. If the other party doesn’t reveal himself, how are you going to find him?"

"Master had said that you must pick yourself up from where you had fallen!"

The masked youth continued to repeat these words through his gritted teeth.

The young girl shook her head. Being stubborn was not a good thing. She spread out her hands and asked, "So are we now going to the training hall that you went to last time?"

"You're right!" The masked youth's eyes were blazing with vigor. "Master had said that you must pick yourself up from where you had fallen!"

The young girl put a hand on her forehead and gave a helpless look.

He used to be a high-spirited teenager in the past, but look at him now! This only proved a point—be careful when choosing someone as your master!

Without even taking a glance at the young girl, Zu Yan entered Central Pine City. However, when he stepped onto the street of Central Pine City, he immediately almost went insane.

Those painful memories seemed to have occurred just yesterday.

Seclusion, tough trainings—didn't he do all of them just to prepare for today?

He had to defeat that fellow this time around!

Unable to restrain his emotions, Zu Yan clenched his fists tightly. Master had said that you must pick yourself up from where you had fallen!

"Aren’t you worried that he won’t be there?" the young girl asked casually. However, before Zu Yan could reply, she changed the topic and asked, "Do you know which class Duanmu Huanghun is in?"

Although Zu Yan was brooding over his loss, he was still clear about what was going on in his surroundings.

He suddenly came to a realization. "I had been wondering why you wanted to follow me. So you’re following me for the sake of Duanmu Huanghun?"

"Of course!" the young girl replied, filled with confidence. "If it wasn’t for Duanmu Huanghun, why would I come to this lousy place? Duanmu Huanghun...my new idol...do you know how handsome he is? He’s ten thousand times more handsome than you!"

Zu Yan humphed and yelled, "Childish!"

"Don’t be jealous of him." The young girl appeared to be completely smitten. "Do you know how popular he is? In school, if I shout out for people to come with me to take a look at Duanmu Huanghun, half the girls in the school would follow me! The most important thing is that he’s not taken yet!"

Zu Yan ignored her. "Love-struck fool!"

"Later on, if you can’t find the person you’re looking for, can you accompany me to look for Duanmu Huanghun?" The young girl grabbed Zu Yan’s elbow and pleaded coquettishly.

"No. I will definitely find him." Zu Yan shook his head resolutely.

"People might be busy. Who will be so free to come here and take part in the blind battle?" the young girl retorted. However, when she saw Zu Yan’s murderous eyes, she quickly changed her tone. "Might be! I’m saying that he might be busy, okay?"

"I will definitely find him." Zu Yan had a determined look on his face. "I have a feeling that he’s waiting for me!"

"It’s over, it’s over. This guy is hopeless!" A look of despair appeared on the young girl’s face.

"You don’t understand!" Zu Yan gave the young girl a look of disdain.

Zu Yan stopped at a training hall and looked at the familiar words on the banner beside the door. The memories of that day flooded into his mind—his previous loss was still vivid. He clenched his fists and entered the building with a determined expression.

"This is the place?" The young girl understood and quickly entered.

The moment they entered the training hall, the young girl was overwhelmed by the unceasing cacophony of clamor, but she soon became excited. It was so lively! This place was far more lively than the training hall in her school. No wonder so many people liked to come here.

Zu Yan steadily walked into the crowd.

The young girl secretly stuck out her tongue. The moment Brother Yan had arrived at this place, his attitude had changed completely. Right now, his body was surging with a fervor for battle, blazing like an actual fireball. She had never seen Brother Yan behave like this before.

It appeared that the loss Brother Yan had suffered last time had had an enormous impact on him. In her eyes, Brother Yan used to be no different from most of the younger generation of those aristocratic families. However, after that loss, he seemed to have become another person.

The current Brother Yan was no longer the same person that she knew.

She hoped that Brother Yan could find the opponent that had defeated him. She was rather curious about how that person looked like.

While the young girl was looking around, Zu Yan directly walked towards the employee and said with a deep voice, "I want to take part in the next round."

After receiving a number tag, Zu Yan turned towards the young girl. "Find a place and wait."

Zu Yan promptly walked straight to the resting area to mentally and physically prepare himself while he waited for the next round to start.

The young girl was left dumbfounded, but after a while, she returned to her senses. She stomped after Zu Yan and yelled angrily at him, "How can you leave me alone like this! You will definitely lose!"

"No. I will win!" Zu Yan answered back with a resolute tone. "Master had said that you must pick yourself up from where you had fallen!"

"....." The young girl was speechless.

Meanwhile, on the street, Ai Hui walked out of the last training hall and shook his head. "There's nothing again."

Lou Lan assured him, "Ai Hui, don't panic."

"I'm not panicking." He shook his head again. He wasn't disappointed with this result; after all, it took more than just luck to find a needle in a haystack.

"Ai Hui, what shall we do next?" Lou Lan asked.

Next....

Ai Hui recalled Lou Lan’s anticipative look and immediately felt guilty. Recently, he had been busy with training and had not bothered about Lou Lan at all, but Lou Lan had still put in so much of effort to help clean the training hall. He was such a nice sand puppet.

"Lou Lan, do you still remember that training hall?" Ai Hui suddenly asked.

"The one where we won the fight?" Lou Lan’s eyes lit up. That was the first time he had taken part in a fight. Even though he was at a loss in the beginning, he had eventually managed to help Ai Hui. To Lou Lan, it constituted a beautiful memory.

"Yes, that’s the one. That training hall offers more prize money. That time we won fifty thousand yuan, right?" Ai Hui’s eyes were blazing as he spoke with extreme confidence. "Since my powers have increased so much, no matter what I have to earn back the money for the biscuits!"

"Okay! Okay!" Lou Lan cheered.

Lou Lan thought to himself, "During this period of time, Lou Lan has not been slacking off. Later, Lou Lan will certainly shock Ai Hui."

Ai Hui clearly knew that the last victory was due to luck. This time around, he wanted to win with his own capability. True power can only be revealed in a real fight.

The reason why he chose that training hall was that he could bring Lou Lan along.

Ever since he had promised the girl from the noodle house to search for that person, Ai Hui had become very familiar with the training halls of Central Pine City. Without spending much effort, he was able to easily find that training hall.

Before Ai Hui opened the door to enter, he put on a mask, turned around, and asked, "Lou Lan, are you ready?"

"Lou Lan is ready!" Lou Lan spoke with an indescribable excitement.

Ai Hui felt rather excited too. Could it be that he had not fought for a long time?

When he opened the door and entered, a rowdy din blasted him in the face. Ai Hui felt his body become exuberant and his blood boil.

"We will take part in the next round!" Ai Hui said as he walked towards the employee.

The employee stared at Lou Lan.

"He’s my sand puppet!" Ai Hui yelled with conviction.

"Have you come before?" The employee returned to his senses and handed over a strand of soul-fogging grass. "Do you know how to use it?"

"We know!" Without any hesitation, Lou Lan took the soul-fogging grass and put it on his head with peerless confidence.

On Lou Lan’s head, there was a strand of grass standing by itself, swaying in the wind.

Chapter 84: Le Buleng

Honestly speaking, humans were strange and contradictory creatures.

When they were fighting every day in the Wilderness, they looked forward to a peaceful life. But when they were in the Induction Ground, where they could actually lead comfortable lives, they instead looked forward to taking part in battles.

Ai Hui felt somewhat emotional as he stepped onto the blind battle arena.

Life in the Induction Ground was not as boring as he had expected it to be. Although his life here may not be as intense and exhausting as the one he had led in the Wilderness, there were still many twists and turns that made his days colorful.

He thought of the people he had met and the events he had encountered. Lou Lan, Master, Mistress and Senior Mingxiu were all friendly and kind-hearted individuals. There were peace and comfort in every aspect of his life. His powers had increased significantly as well—he was indeed leading a beautiful life.

The arena was pitch-black and nothing could be seen.

Ai Hui could not help but feel astonished. It seemed that the arena had been upgraded. Last time, the training hall had used Ink Night Fumes and had required contestants to wear masks. All those were not needed anymore. He raised his head and looked at

the elemental energy shield above, and guessed that the shield was responsible for this upgrade.

Ai Hui's guess was right. Ever since the concept of blind battles was created, it had undergone many changes. Training halls now depended on blind battles to earn money, and all of them had racked their brains to improve the concept. By doing so, all of them wished to distinguish themselves from the rest.

Nothing was more motivating than that.

This training hall had adopted an original approach to blind battles. They designed a type of elemental energy shield called the Light Absorption Dome. The dome was able to absorb light, causing just darkness to remain within; however, the audience seated outside the dome could still clearly observe the battles happening inside. Furthermore, to ensure that the audience obtained a good view, seats had been set up in mid-air around the arena.

Of course, these seats, which granted an excellent view of the battle, needed to be purchased.

Zu Qiuni was seated on one of those seats; in fact, she had purchased one of the best seats available. She was very curious about how much progress Brother Yan had made after his seclusion. Although she was tired of hearing Brother Yan's master's favorite saying "pick yourself up from where you had fallen," she understood that his master was a training fanatic.

Le Buleng was not really famous in the Avalon of Five Elements; compared to Duanmu Huanghun's master, Dai Gang, Le Buleng had a much lower reputation.

He had always been single, leading a solitary life, without many accomplishments as well. His most impressive accolade was that he took up the position of Division Leader of the Icy Flames Division for three years. However, due to his addiction to training, he had completely ignored the affairs of the division, resulting in a boycott of all his subordinates. He had also felt that the duties of a division leader hindered the progress of his training, and hence, he left the division.

Le Buleng was most famous for his tough training.

Reportedly, Dai Gang had once said that if he had put in half the amount of effort Le Buleng had put in training, he would have become a grandmaster at the age of thirty. This clearly showed how much hard work Le Buleng put into his training.

However, Dai Gang eventually became a grandmaster at the age of forty, and Le Buleng was not even a master now.

In the past, when Brother Yan had just comprehended the [Flaming Heavenly Spider Transformation], he was viewed by many as the most outstanding talent among his generation. That was when he was at his peak; no one had expected the clan leader to make Le Buleng as Brother Yan's master. During that time, there was a unanimous objection to this decision from everyone else in the clan. Given the clan's wide connections and affluence, although it wasn't possible for Zu Yan to become the disciple of a

grandmaster, it was definitely more than possible for him to become the disciple of a master.

The clan leader had finally convinced everyone.

However, beyond everyone's expectations, Le Buleng had rejected Zu Yan. The reason he had given was that Zu Yan's character was too weak and he was hence not suitable to become his disciple. It was only after the clan leader had implored him that he eventually decided to accept Zu Yan as his disciple. But even after taking Zu Yan as his disciple, Lu Buleng did not really like Zu Yan and seldom cared about him, letting him do whatever he wanted.

Zu Qiuni could not understand why the clan leader wanted Zu Yan to be Le Buleng's disciple even though there were so many other qualified experts in the Avalon of Five Elements.

She also naturally felt that Le Buleng's assessment of Zu Yan was right. But now, Brother Yan had totally become another person as compared to the past. To Zu Qiuni, the most interesting thing was Brother Yan's seclusion; by a slip of the tongue, Zu Yan had accidentally revealed that his seclusion plan was drawn up by his master.

When Zu Qiuni heard about this, she was dumbstruck. She really did not expect that person to draw up a seclusion plan for Brother Yan; however, she also did not expect Brother Yan to agree to this plan and subsequently complete the seclusion.

In the past, Brother Yan had always complained to them about how crazy Le Buleng's training sessions were. He felt that ordinary people would absolutely not able to keep up with his training system.

She silently prayed in her heart.

I hope that Brother Yan doesn't become like Le Buleng. Le Buleng is not considered a role model for success at all...

Right now, Brother Yan seemed to show signs of going insane.

Zu Yan stood silently in the arena with both his eyes closed. He was like a statue, not even breathing at all.

It was only when the bell rang, which marked the start of the blind battle, that Zu Yan opened his eyes.

Without any hesitation, he immediately activated the [Hellfire Spider Web]. His mind took note of every single detail in the arena as he recalled what his master had told him. The reason he had failed was not the disparity in base level, but rather, it was due to his lack of understanding of combat techniques. He wasn't able to identify the right fighting techniques to use in various situations.

During this period of time, he had been frantically trying to improve his combat techniques.

With a sway of his body, he appeared beside a contestant like a

phantom. Even though this contestant had been on high alert, he did not react when Zu Yan approached close to him. Zu Yan's figure seemed to soundlessly appear out of thin air.

Like a viper in the darkness, his right leg struck out silently.

It was only until Zu Yan was three inches away from the other party that the sound of his kick could be heard.

The opponent's facial expression changed drastically. However, before he could react, his body had already flown upwards. He lost consciousness while he was in mid-air. The referee of the training hall threw out a lasso with his whip and caught the already fainted contestant. The two referees looked at each other and saw traces of fear in each other's eyes.

Even the referees were stunned, let alone the audience. The kick was extremely vicious and efficient, making everyone gasp aloud in horror.

After a moment of shock and silence, the audience erupted with enthusiasm.

Weren't these experts the main reason why everyone came here to watch the blind battles? This person was indeed powerful! There was going to a good show!

Zu Qiuni stared blankly at the arena with her mouth wide open. Was that ferocious kick from Brother Yan?

Nearby, in the arena, Ai Hui heard a sudden yet brief explosion and felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

Expert!

Ai Hui had a different definition of the word “expert” from ordinary people. He did not classify someone as an expert based on his base level, but rather on the level of his combat techniques. The sound of that kick was like an explosion, abnormally powerful yet brief. The kicker had excellent control over his elemental energy as he did not put too much elemental energy into this kick. One could see that he had a remarkable understanding of combat and was skilled in concealing the sound of his attacks.

Only a combat veteran could produce such a kick.

Ai Hui realized that the upcoming onerous battle was unavoidable.

However, for some reason, even though he knew that it was going to be a tough fight, he was not scared at all and was excited instead.

It'd be nice if he had a stalk of grass to chew on now. Suddenly, he thought of the stalk of soul-fogging grass on Lou Lan’s head. Nah, forget it—the soul-fogging grass does not taste nice anyway.

Ai Hui grinned as a ghastly look appeared on his face.

Chapter 85: Reunion

Within an extremely short period of time, several contestants had been attacked and thrown off the stage consecutively.

Since he had perceived weak elemental energy ripples on the ground's surface, Ai Hui did not move. He felt that they were familiar, and suddenly, that fellow whom he had defeated in the previous competition came to mind. Could it be a coincidence?

Ai Hui was a little taken aback, but soon, he became even more surprised by something else.

Significant progress!

His opponent's skills had improved so greatly that it was as if he had become a different person. Compared to the tenderness and immaturity from the past, he was now much more shrewd and ruthless in his attacks.

But when Ai Hui thought about his own improvement, he immediately felt relieved. He had progressed tremendously, so why couldn't his opponent do so too? That fellow had a higher aptitude and only used absolute arts—he was definitely from an influential family clan. There was simply no reason for that fellow to improve any slower than himself.

Ai Hui, who assumed this to be a coincidence, was utterly unaware that the fellow had been searching high and low for him. He had heard about Zu Yan's written challenge but had no idea

that it had something to do with himself.

After all, Zu Yan had been searching for an earth elementalist!

He was even more unaware of the hard work Zu Yan had invested in order to defeat him. Ai Hui treated that previous battle as an ordinary one—other than his injuries, there was nothing worth remembering.

However, Ai Hui was more than glad that they got to meet again.

Fighting against the same opponent allowed him to measure his own progress.

Without any warning or hesitation, Ai Hui suddenly dodged to the side.

Clap!

A crisp, whip-like explosion sounded out from where he had just stood a moment ago. Like a solid axe, a heavy leg flitted next to Ai Hui's body, causing a cutting, sharp stream of air to blow past.

Zu Yan wasn't alarmed by his miss, but instead, he seemed to enjoy it. When his leg was about to hit the ground, he made a strange, sudden turn and redirected his kick.

At the same time, Ai Hui struck with his fist.

Bang!

A deep, low boom reverberated throughout the whole hall. It was as if two colossal monsters had just collided head-on. Such a wild and violent force was being compressed into a small, tight space.

The enormous power caused Ai Hui to take two steps back. Zu Yan was the same; he sprung back by five steps.

During the split second their fist and leg had crossed, Zu Yan's eyes had lit up. His previous failure was etched into his memory, every single detail unforgotten.

"You're here indeed!" he hissed, evidently agitated.

Ai Hui could feel his opponent's progress. Not only had his heavy leg become more powerful and concentrated, but it had also become much more formidable and threatening in battle. Moreover, he had definitely gained a lot more combat experience, or he wouldn't have been able to execute the previous move so naturally.

This, however, made Ai Hui so excited that his blood boiled.

Although his opponent had become much more skilled, he, too, had taken a qualitative leap in strength. Previously, he could only dodge that fellow's leg until he was all battered and exhausted; but this time, he could actually face the attacks head-on without falling

into a disadvantageous position.

As Ai Hui's battlelust surged, his eyes turned increasingly cold and unfeeling.

Ai Hui knew that the opponent had recognized him, but he had no intention of reminiscing. He didn't even say a word—it was as if a ghost had possessed him. He had previously suffered greatly from his opponent's [Hellfire Spider Web] and had also thoroughly analyzed the incident.

This was a habit he had developed in the Wilderness. As he had been very weak at the time, it was quite easy for him to lose his life, and the only thing he could do was spend more time reflecting on his fights. Every time he had met a dire beast, he would consult the master elementalists whenever he could and gain information about the monster in exchange for labor. Also, upon seeing that he was a sensible fellow, the master elementalists were usually willing to provide an opinion or two.

He had never looked down on any enemy, as he had no right to.

Being cautious and prudent had long been a part of his nature.

Zu Qiuni opened her eyes wide as she observed the stage. Sweat started pouring out of her body when she heard Brother Yan's hiss—that fellow in the mask was the mystery expert who had previously defeated Brother Yan!

Although the others were not aware of this fact, they nevertheless steadily watched on. The interaction between the two parties was very sudden and fierce!

Ai Hui's actions immediately calmed Zu Yan down. Seeing his opponent charge towards him, Zu Yan shut his eyes. He was highly focused; every corner of the elevated stage was enveloped by his [Hellfire Spider Web] and within his control.

A series of rippling waves simultaneously emerged on the web, rushing straight towards him with shocking speed.

Meeting force with force?

His opponent did not hide his intention and charged straight towards him. The previous collision must have given him confidence.

Zu Yan was actually surprised; Ai Hui's improvement was far beyond his imagination. Although Ai Hui had previously been reduced to a pathetic state because of Zu Yan's heavy leg, he had now tried to retaliate head-on.

What a good rival!

Zu Yan's eyes were blazing with fire; Ai Hui's significant progress further fed his battlelust.

The stronger his competitor was, the stronger he could prove

himself to be after claiming victory!

His concentration level was incomparably high as the undulating spots on the web were reflected clearly in his mind. Akin to a spider who'd found its prey, he kept silent, waiting for the right moment to strike a fatal blow.

You're not the only one who improved.

His eyelids lowered, Zu Yan became one with the web. He felt the world turn silent, while only weak ripples remained. His calm face carried a dash of confidence, which was derived from the endless hard work and training that he had undergone.

That trick from the previous match no longer had an effect on him.

It was as if the web was a part of him. After completing the isolated training that was planned for him by his teacher, he could locate his target immediately even in the midst of twenty chaotic ripples.

Before, he would misjudge as long as there were more than three ripples.

The quietness and nothingness of the world gradually spread as he accurately identified and captured every single movement in his vicinity.

That last movement was more violent than those before. His opponent wanted to mislead him by jumping? Zu Yan smirked as he counted the seconds in his mind.

Now!

Zu Yan's eyes suddenly opened as the light exploded.

Nobody noticed when his right leg, which had been on standby, had suddenly enveloped itself in flames. He sprung up from the ground, revolved his whole body, and drove his right leg—it was as if a heavy axe had been flung upwards.

All other sounds seemed to have been muted by this leg; the whole place had become silent.

All the light upstage was absorbed by the Light Absorption Dome, but everyone in the audience was bedazzled and left speechless by this powerful kick. Although there was no sound at all, it made them feel a sense of burning bitterness.

They couldn't help but hold their breaths and open their eyes wide for fear that they would miss something.

Zu Qiuni was astonished; she couldn't believe her own eyes. Brother Yan had actually executed such a terrifying kick.

Wasn't this....wasn't this the guy who had complained about tough training, showed off in front of girls, and enjoyed making

friends?

Brother Yan was so powerful...this Brother Yan was so different...

No one could block this kick directly—no one in Central Pine City at least!

However, the scene that was about the unfold made Zu Qiuni suddenly stand up. Her expression had completely changed.

“Look out, Brother Yan!”

Chapter 86: A Familiar Feeling

Before the battle had begun, Ai Hui had thought to use it as a test of his abilities. However, once it started, he immediately tossed these thoughts out the window.

Every fight in the Wilderness had been a matter of life and death.

There were no retries, undos, or extra time for preparation. Nobody would tell him that he could always try again next time because...

...there was simply no next time.

Losing meant death, and death meant becoming food for the dire beasts and adding to the piles of bones that already littered the Wilderness.

The prize for winning was the chance to continue standing in that blood-soaked battlefield, taking breaths amongst the ice cold corpses, being able to feel the warmth of life and the beating of your own heart while gasping greedily for the piercing, bitter-cold air.

Since Ai Hui never knew when the next test would be, he never knew whether he would manage to get through it.

He had to squeeze out every last ounce of his potential because he was weak and could die at any moment. He would remind himself

every day that there wasn’t going to be a second chance—he had to give it his all.

Would there be a tomorrow? He had no idea.

Even if he gave his all, it still might not even be enough to make it to the next day, but he knew that any mistakes would spell certain death. There was no room for errors or luck; death was absolute.

Every single day was filled with fear and trepidation. He would often be too afraid to sleep, and even the shelters provided no reprieve from danger. When living in such conditions, where death lurked at every corner, merely being able to stay sane was a blessing. Many laborers had even experienced mental breakdowns, running out of the camp in the middle of the night as they howled like wild beasts, never to return.

It was the Wilderness, a place respected by the strong, and a place where the weak struggled to survive.

His teacher had told him that his all-out approach wasn’t a long term solution, but he already knew that. However, it had been completely uncertain if he would even make it till tomorrow, and if he didn’t give it his best shot, he might not have the chance to do so anymore.

Being able to take things one firm step at a time was a privilege that was not given to everyone.

Ai Hui had lost count of the number of times he had faced death. He had no wish to remember either, lest he lose himself to fear. All he could do was make use of his abilities to the fullest and steel his heart. In such an extreme environment, having any sort of sentiment could easily result in death.

The three years he spent in the Wilderness still clung onto him like a shadow. It was a large part of the person he was today.

He tried very hard to adapt to life in the Induction Ground, constantly reminding himself that this was not the Wilderness. What's important now was that he should refrain from killing others in battle.

Other than that, he wasn't going to hold back.

He never once believed that fate was something that could be controlled. He was never able to shape his destiny. It was just like the Wilderness, always fighting against him. The only thing that made him happy was the brief reprieve he had after each victory.

Fighting was the only weapon he could use to resist his destiny. It was the only means by which he could win; he was nothing without it.

To him, fighting was never to be taken lightly.

He didn't even have the chance to mock his silly thoughts before the battle started and he entered a fighting state.

His eyes were stone cold, and his soul was equally icy. Ai Hui felt that he was more like a sand puppet, a killing machine created solely for the purpose of fighting. He didn't find anything wrong with that—the only thing he lamented was his lack of power.

He never intended to meet force with force; that first blow was just to test the waters.

Ai Hui's keen perception allowed him to detect the subtle changes in Zu Yan's state of mind despite the latter concealing his abilities well.

Fighting habits that resulted from tireless training in seclusion were indeed entirely different from those bred through struggles of life and death.

Ai Hui didn't understand his opponent's sudden shift in mental state, but being able to sense it allowed him to exploit the moment.

Compared to his compatriots from the Induction Ground, Ai Hui could be said to be a whole other life form altogether.

The huge disparity between the two combatants were vividly demonstrated at that very moment.

Zu Qiuni, who had screamed her lungs out, watched as Ai Hui leaped into the air. Like a bat in the night, his body noiselessly traced through the air in an arc, heading towards Zu Yan's side.

She woke with a start, fear written all over her face.

She understood Ai Hui's intention—he had discovered the [Hellfire Spider Web]'s weakness!

Ai Hui had indeed found the [Hellfire Spider Web]'s weakness.

He had conscientiously analyzed their previous battle and had easily found the limitations of the [Hellfire Spider Web]. In essence, the skill was simply an elemental energy web spread out over the ground. Its natural weakness was thus aerial attacks.

This weakness was due to Zu Yan's inadequate base level—an absolute art would most certainly not have such a glaring weakness. Raising his base level would change the nature of the web.

This weakness, however, was not much of a concern in the Induction Ground, since most students did not have aerial combat abilities until they became full-fledged elementalists.

Ai Hui didn't either, but he had managed to come up with three different methods to deal with the web.

This was his habit. Even though he wasn't expecting to face Zu Yan again, Ai Hui had prepared well for this scenario.

Meeting him once more was rather unexpected, but it wasn't frightening to Ai Hui at all.

He unfastened the Blood Bandage from his Sword Rattan Gloves, infusing elemental energy that was many times purer than his own into his arm.

Zu Qiuni's hunch was right. The technique that Ai Hui was executing had something to do with bats. It was a very shallow form of swordplay known as the Gale Bat Blade.

The technique imitates the movement of the fast-flying gale bat, which, according to notes in the margins of the swordplay manual, had become extinct.

Ai Hui had run many simulations in his mind before he had finally found this technique, which would allow him to execute aerial maneuvers, in a swordplay manual.

Although he was unable to fully utilize the technique without a sword, he could still perform its aerial maneuvers to change his direction in mid-air. As he had previously practiced, Ai Hui straightened his arm and channeled elemental energy through it in an arc.

He immediately felt a surge of air pushing his body, causing him to circle around Zu Yan in a clearly-defined arc.

Ai Hui had thought through every last detail of the plan, but

appeared to have missed out one thing. Ai Hui had thought through every last detail of the plan, but he appeared to have missed out one thing. His elemental energy was now much purer than before.

Thus, things did not go according to plan.

Ai Hui's plan was to attack his opponent from the side, but he soon realized that he had overshot and landed behind him.

Zu Yan's body was slightly suspended in the air, ready to unleash his next attack.

Any other student might have been fazed by this, but not Ai Hui. He always expected the unexpected and believed that nothing was ever certain in battle.

Ai Hui braced himself, taking a powerful driving step as he launched himself backward.

Zu Yan was shocked when he sensed a disturbance behind him. How was it possible that his opponent was there...

Bang!

Ai Hui rammed his back into Zu Yan with the force of a trampling dire beast.

The [Arching Fish Back] was still a reliable formula. It gave him a familiar feeling.

Chapter 87: Silver Hair

Everyone was shocked by how quick the battle ended.

The boss of the training ground, however, found this sight to be vaguely familiar.

Lou Lan morphed into a giant hand and dashed towards the training ground's boss, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together. When he saw this, the boss abruptly realized that Zu Yan's opponent was that earth elementalist from before.

The boss became excited as he realized that the unknown expert had returned. This unknown expert was a walking advertisement for the training hall. Zu Yan's previous defeat at the hands of that mysterious earth elementalist had caused a sensation, drumming up his business for quite an extended period of time.

He was so excited that his hands began trembling, but he did not give even a cent more.

At this moment, a voice full of worry came from behind him. "Brother Yan! Brother Yan!"

Brother Yan……Zu Yan?

The training ground's boss couldn't believe his luck. Was this actually happening?

At this point, he was so excited he almost couldn't breathe. Faltering, he turned around and saw the referee heading towards him. Having just checked out Zu Yan's injuries, the cheerful referee lowered his voice and said, "It's Zu Yan. He's unconscious, but it's nothing major."

What luck! The boss let out a whimper of a cheer; he was so agitated that he almost fainted.

The rivalry between Zu Yan and the mysterious earth elementalist was the talk of the town. Zu Yan had distributed his written challenge to every single institution in the Induction Ground. Was this second encounter merely a coincidence? And more importantly, it resulted in Zu Yan's second defeat!

"Movie bean?" The boss suddenly remembered something important. He had regretted the fact that he had not recorded any footage of the two opponents' previous fight. A movie bean of that fight would surely have been worth a lot of money!

The referee nodded his head vigorously as he stretched out and opened his palm, revealing a brilliant, multi-colored seed.

The boss howled with laughter. He was going to be rich!

The mirage bean pod was a plant cultivated by wood elementalists. It was capable of recording images and storing them in its seeds, which were called movie beans.

Mirage bean pods have been considered to be the wood elementalists' greatest achievement of the century. Upon its release, the plant had quickly become extremely popular throughout the entire Avalon of Five Elements.

Like the message tree, the mirage bean pods were further bred and optimized by the wood elementalists of the Jadeite Forest. There was now a wide variety of mirage bean pods, some of which were large enough to store more than twenty movie beans. The most popular type among girls was the Meitu Bean, which was capable of beautifying one's image.

With the movie bean in his hand, all the boss could see was money dancing before his eyes.

Zu Yan had been eliminated, losing the grudge match and suffering defeat for the second time. Just who was this mysterious earth elementalist?

Are you curious? Are you unconvinced? Do you want to find out more? Then buy the movie bean! Buy it and watch this fearsome battle! Buy it to see the Zu family's absolute art! Buy it to find clues about the mysterious earth elementalist!

Money, money, money...

The boss looked behind himself when he finally calmed down, trying to search for the mysterious earth elementalist. Where was he? He felt terribly vexed—why hadn't he asked the earth elementalist for his contact details? If only the mysterious earth

elementalist could stay here in the long term...

There would be even more money to be made!

The boss felt much less excited after he realized that he missed a golden opportunity.

Ai Hui was still reflecting on the battle as he walked out of the arena. The battle had been short, and he couldn't care less about that opponent whom he had faced for the second time. His focus was solely on the main factor of this victory: how he changed his direction in mid-air.

Although it seemed useful, changing direction in mid-air was a technique that didn't actually have much use. Furthermore, effective flying equipment like the azure wings was available to most elementalists, and consequently, very few people would bother to study such a shallow technique that was accessible before they reached the Initial Completion.

His opponent was caught off-guard; he had not expected him to be able to perform such a maneuver.

Ai Hui was actually surprised at his own performance as well. This time, the curvature of his movement through the air was much greater than those of his previous attempts.

The larger the arc of motion, the greater the surprise and effectiveness of the maneuver.

Ai Hui impulsively took a few steps before leaping into the air. His body suddenly shifted from its initial trajectory as if an invisible hand was tugging him to the side.

How interesting!

Ai Hui's keen battle intuition promptly kicked in as he realized its potential applications in combat.

He ran forward a few steps again, lightly tapping the ground with his toes to propel himself upwards. Just as he was about to hit a wall on the side of the road, Ai Hui lightly pointed his toes and soared even higher. This time around, the angle and speed at which his direction changed had been decreased.

Giving in to his childish whims, Ai Hui started jumping around, gliding through the air like a giant bat in flight.

Lou Lan found this fascinating, and he spontaneously morphed into a bat and joined Ai Hui in the air.

Ai Hui stopped after messing around for three whole minutes to avoid having to be dragged home by Lou Lan. Flying was indeed an amazing experience—even gliding for a brief moment was so enjoyable. Ai Hui had heard stories from elementalists about people who refused to stop flying after learning how to use the azure wings.

As Lou Lan also returned to the ground, he noticed something off about Ai Hui's appearance. "Ai Hui, your hair!" he shouted.

"What's wrong with my hair?" Ai Hui asked, astonished.

"Your hair has turned white," Lou Lan informed him.

Turned white? Ai Hui was deeply shocked. He picked up a well-polished steel dagger from a nearby weapon store and used it as a mirror.

His hair had indeed turned a silver-white. It was suffused with a metallic glow and resembled strands of silver threads.

Recovering from his shock, Ai Hui took off his mask.

The face he saw in the blade looked unfamiliar.

A silver glow outlined his entire face, enhancing its contours and sharpening his features. His gaze was as sharp as a newly ground edge, and his entire demeanor had become far more menacing.

Pedestrians subconsciously avoided him as they walked past.

As he snapped out of his daze, Ai Hui jovially said, "I can now make money with my looks."

His appearance contrasted sharply with his simple and reserved self. The silver strands of hair made his appearance even more striking, like a well-polished sword unsheathed from its scabbard.

This shiny exterior was definitely not suitable for battle; he would be detected too easily.

“Ai Hui, your hopes are dashed. The silver glow is fading,” Lou Lan said, as his eyes flickered with a yellow light. “I understand now. The metal elemental energy within your body is of such a high grade that using it places a huge load on your body. Tiny amounts of this elemental energy thus permeated your entire body, including your hair. When you’re not utilizing it, the load will gradually lighten as the metal elemental energy throughout your body slowly retreats, returning your appearance back to normal.”

“What a waste! My dream of making money has ended so soon,” Ai Hui lamented, feigning disappointment. He continued, “Lou Lan, how did you find the battle just now?”

Lou Lan replied, “Ai Hui’s battle was too fast; Lou Lan needs to work harder.”

Ai Hui was slightly embarrassed upon hearing this response. He was originally supposed to bring Lou Lan out to play, but he ended up dragging him into a fight.

He quickly changed the subject, shouting, “Split the cash, split the cash!”

With a bang, Lou Lan transformed into a cloud of money as he followed suit, shouting, “Split the cash, split the cash!”

Ai Hui burst into merry laughter.

Chapter 88: Silk Extraction and the Grass Hollow

“Master is very disappointed that you’ve gotten injured.”

The person speaking was Hai Qing, who had been Dai Gang’s attendant since before he had become a master. Practically all of Dai Gang’s matters were handled by Hai Qing, who was serious and inflexible.

A spark of jealousy flashed in his eyes as he looked at Duanmu Huanghun, but it disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. He had been a faithful attendant to the master for more than thirty years, yet he was still not qualified to be his disciple.

Although he was jealous of Duanmu Huanghun’s good fortune, he did not utter a single complaint. Even though Master Dai Gang had not taken him in as a disciple, he had never shortchanged Hai Qing. The guidance Dai Gang had given him was no less than that provided to his own disciples. He was extremely grateful to the master and had always been completely loyal to him.

Hai Qing couldn’t understand how this wretched looking fellow was worthy of Dai Gang’s notice. When Duanmu Huanghun, who was riddled with injuries, was brought before him, Hai Qing’s first reaction wasn’t to laugh at his plight; rather, it was one of anger.

Yes, anger.

It was an honor to be one of Dai Gang's disciples. Hai Qing felt that Duanmu Huanghun's first duty after becoming Dai Gang's disciple was to uphold this honor and not disgrace his new status.

He did not like Duanmu Huanghun.

The other two disciples of the master were brilliant and accomplished. Lu Chen was one of the top three physicians of his generation. He was known as the Divine Physician and was revered by many. Yu Mingqiu was the youngest person to ever become a vice-division leader. His progress in recent years has been phenomenal, and he was a popular candidate for the next division leader of the Deathgrass Division.

This Duanmu Huanghun, however, was such an embarrassment.

Hai Qing spared no effort to protect the reputation of his master, and hence, he did not like Duanmu Huanghun one bit.

Due to his longstanding service to Dai Gang, Hai Qing was regarded as a part of his family. Hai Qing had taken charge of both Lu Chen and Yu Mingqiu's initial training, but he would most certainly not extend the same courtesy to Duanmu Huanghun.

"A grandmaster's disciple needing to be rescued by a student who had just activated his natal residence; oh boy, I sure hope I heard wrong. What's worse is, of course, being found naked and covered in injuries. Remember this, it doesn't matter if you prefer men or women or whether you're a good or a bad person. You're free to do as you please but as a disciple of Master Dai Gang, the greatest sin

that you can possibly commit is being weak.”

Hai Qing delivered his speech coldly, his sentences carefully crafted to provoke.

Duanmu Huanghun’s face revealed hints of a cruel expression as he glared ferociously at Hai Qing.

“Not happy? Hehe! Very well, remember this expression of yours! You still think you’re gifted and don’t need to respect anyone here? Let me tell you what it means to be a genius. Only those who are much stronger than others deserve to be labeled as geniuses—pathetic wimps like you are nothing more than maggots.”

Hai Qing remained expressionless as he ripped Duanmu Huanghun’s wound open.

“To be honest, I couldn’t care less about what happens to you, you pathetic maggot. As far as I’m concerned, you have no business being in this sacred place. Regretfully, I do, however, have to honor my duty. This is the key to the Grass Hollow. Come find me when you manage to get out of it. Although, I’d be very pleased if you end up dying inside instead.”

Hai Qing tossed an emerald green leaf on the ground as he left.

Duanmu Huanghun’s anger soon subsided and he became completely calm.

Without any hesitation, he picked up the leaf and started walking towards the Grass Hollow under the cover of night.

Hai Qing returned home.

His wife was rather worried, and asked, “Huanghun is still so young, isn’t it a bit early for him to be in the Grass Hollow?”

“He is talented but needs to be polished. Otherwise, he’ll not amount to anything,” Hai Qing explained.

“But he’s too young. Lu Chen was seventeen when he entered the Grass Hollow; Mingqiu a little earlier at sixteen,” his wife responded, clearly still worried.

“He is the last disciple,” Hai Qing replied flatly. “He is different from the others.”

“But if some mishap were to befall him……”

“That only means that he isn’t talented enough and doesn’t deserve to be part of master’s plans. We still have time to find another one.” Hai Qing continued, “The last disciple has a different significance to the master.”

His wife was silent for a moment before she asked, “Do we really still have time?”

Hai Qing, who was packing his things, sluggishly replied, “We do.”

Ai Hui didn’t place much significance to the current blind battle; both Lou Lan and he did not seem to care about it at all.

The next day, Ai Hui was summoned to the embroidery workshop.

The young ladies of the embroidery workshop noticed a different air about him, and none of them dared to tease him anymore. After all, he must be incredibly talented to be able to learn the [Twin Weaving Technique] after seeing it just once, and it was said that the owner of the workshop even wanted to take him in as her last disciple.

Perhaps because it wasn’t his first visit, Ai Hui felt less constrained this time.

Mingxiu, who was standing in front of a door, waved at Ai Hui as she said, “Junior, come over here.”

Ai Hui promptly went over.

“Master and Mistress are both inside,” Mingxiu said while she pushed the door open.

A wave of heat gushed out of the room as the door opened.

Ai Hui was startled. Just what was inside?

“What are you waiting for? Come in quickly,” his teacher snapped impatiently from within the room.

Ai Hui hurriedly entered.

Upon entering, he realized that the temperature inside was even higher—it was as if he was a piece of dim sum being steamed. Both Teacher Wang and the Mistress were here, but they appeared to be completely unaffected by the intense heat.

Ai Hui noticed an enormous boiler in the center emitting waves of heat. This must be what was causing the workshop to be so hot.

Ai Hui was curious about what the boiler was used for.

“Master, Mistress,” Ai Hui greeted.

Han Yuqin addressed him as well. “Let me check the gloves for any damage.”

She was pleased to see that the gloves remained in good condition. After her examination, she said, “Some irresponsible old man has left your training to me. It seems I have no choice but to take up the job.”

Old Wang chuckled. Not only was he not embarrassed, but he also appeared to be very pleased with himself.

Mingxiu sniggered.

“Your circumstances are rarely seen,” the old lady said, before continuing solemnly, “Since you are unable to carry out Circulatory Cycle Revolution, our aim is to activate your two hand palaces. After much discussion with your teacher, we have decided on silk extraction as a method of training.”

“Silk extraction?” Ai Hui asked, his face blank. He wasn’t expecting something like that. Can silk extraction even be considered a training method?

“Yes, indeed, the training method suitable for you now is different from what is usually done. You need to circulate your elemental energy in as slow a manner as possible. The elemental energy within your body is extremely pure, and circulating it at a fast pace would place a huge burden on your body. When done slowly, the burden is much lighter and will allow your body to gradually become more accustomed to elemental energy. The slower circulation will thus result in a greater stimulative effect of the elemental energy in your body, helping it absorb elemental energy more effectively.”

“In the field of embroidery, silk extraction requires the slowest circulation of elemental energy!”

Chapter 89: Twilight Silk

Zu Yan's second defeat caused a much bigger sensation than his previous loss.

That was because movie beans of the battle were available this time around.

Although people were curious about his earlier defeat, the lack of footage meant that most people were unable to watch the battle. The students of Central Pine Academy were also not that familiar with Zu Yan, which further contributed to the more muted reaction. Zu Yan's publicly issued challenge was what triggered greater interest in this talented member of the Zu family.

Yet he was once again defeated by the same opponent.

Many people even suspected that the two of them were secretly colluding to put up a show.

Nevertheless, quite a number people still rushed to purchase the movie bean, tempted by the chance to witness an absolute art. The students' eagerness to improve and their need for exposure were the main reasons that drove the training ground's sales. While the Induction Ground imparted the basics and did indeed provide some opportunities for further learning, information regarding more powerful skills often required one to reach a certain level or contribute to the Induction Ground in some way.

The things that ordinary students could learn in the Induction

Ground were pretty much fixed. Daily training was not an issue, but it could be difficult to attain more powerful techniques.

The Induction Ground also had several absolute arts in their possession. It was, however, extremely challenging to be deemed worthy of receiving one, as evident from the small number of successful cases.

Aristocratic families had an absolute advantage when it came to absolute arts. Any family with more than a hundred years of history would definitely have some form of inheritance. The Avalon of Five Elements was constituted of a culture steeped in innovation, and as such, each new generation would further research and develop their family's unique legacy. This continued advancement resulted in a more profound understanding of elemental energy, allowing the gradual formation of many different styles.

The appearance of a genius would lead to the culmination of all the knowledge that was accumulated prior to his generation, resulting in the creation of an absolute art out of the family's legacy.

The saying, "Absolute arts are created through accumulation," was, indeed, an apt one.

The older the family, the greater their accumulation of knowledge. The emergence of an individual with monstrous talent would also tend to vastly benefit a family's prowess.

Passing on a legacy was the nature of those families, not the Induction Ground. It wasn't easy for teachers to find suitable successors. The teachers themselves were likely to contribute to this environment since they usually preferred to study what interested them rather than follow others' paths.

The Induction Ground may be an incubator for all sorts of brilliant ideas, but rarely did it produce absolute arts.

The teachers' most obvious weakness was their lack of combat experience. They lived relatively simple lives in the Induction Ground, which was the safest place in the Avalon of Five Elements. The teachers were only exposed to combat during their students' practical training or while accompanying them on missions.

Absolute arts were mainly used in combat and were often born out of rich combat experience.

Families that sought to get ahead of others would send successive generations of members to the frontline. These members would proudly enlist into the Thirteen Divisions, the unit that was positioned in the forefront of battle and held combat abilities in the highest regard.

In the long run, they would get a deeper understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of their inherited teachings. And this understanding was necessary for further improvement.

The members of aristocratic families were exposed to absolute arts from a young age. To ordinary students, however, absolute

arts were an elusive and unattainable goal. All families shared a similar zeal in protecting their own absolute arts from the prying eyes of the outside world—even accumulated knowledge was not divulged to outsiders. These were the fruits of their ancestors' labor and were also the core of their strength.

In the eyes of ordinary students, absolute arts were shrouded in mystery.

Upon finding out that there were movie beans with footage of an absolute art, many students quickly rushed to get one. Even though the beans were not cheap, being able to see an absolute art made them worth it in the end. This was particularly true in a remote place like Central Pine Academy where such opportunities were hard to come by.

"Only twenty-odd beans left?"

The boss froze for a moment before roaring, "Why are you still standing here? Quickly plant more beans!"

"We've already planted them all, but we only have three wood elementalists," the assistant effortfully explained.

Wood elementalists had to be specialists in order to grow movie beans. While a single bean was capable of producing twenty beans after one night's worth of growth, it wasn't sufficient to just throw the beans into some random soil. A wood elementalist would have to expend elemental energy to control the bean's growth and ensure that they would become exact replicas of the seed bean. A

typical wood elementalist was capable of attending to approximately twenty mirage bean pods at a time.

“Hire more! Raise the pay! Double the pay!” the boss shouted, his heart aching. “Raise the price, we’re going to increase the price!”

He had expected the movie beans to sell quite well, but he would never have imagined them to become this popular.

More wood elementalists rushed over to the training ground, working tirelessly to grow more movie beans. The entire training ground was covered by pot after pot of mirage bean pods—even the fighting stage was not left empty. The sound of bean pods popping open could be heard the whole night.

Little did the training ground’s boss know that this was only the beginning of the ruckus that was to ensue.

A strong herbal scent pervaded the entire embroidery workshop. Ai Hui stared intently at the translucent piece of silk in his hands, his actions the speed of a snail. His heart trembled with each quiver of the extremely fine strand of silk.

The twilight cocoon was a very rare type of silkworm cocoon that was especially difficult to handle. The cocoon, which was produced by the twilight silkworm, was as hard as steel and completely resistant to fire and water.

Ai Hui was dumbstruck by the amount of work involved in the

handling process. A wood elementalist would first prepare a massive vat of a herbal concoction that was used to soak only a single twilight cocoon. Next, a fire elementalist would enhance the intensity of the fire, boiling the cocoon in the herbal concoction for two hours.

The concoction became clear while the twilight cocoon turned into a black gelatinous substance.

This was where Ai Hui's training began. His task was to slowly extract the silk from the gelatinous substance. The difficulty lay in ensuring that the silk, which had melted into a gelatinous state, would not break; even the slightest increase in speed would cause the silk to snap.

Moreover, he had to steadily infuse his elemental energy into the silk.

The infusion of elemental energy into the gelatinous silk made it solidify back into its usual state.

Even the slightest oversight could ruin the entire process. A tiny tremor or a marginal quickening of his elemental energy could cause the gelatinous silk to break.

The heat in the workshop was of a shocking amount, but Ai Hui was too focused on his task to notice. He probably didn't realize how much he was sweating either.

The value of twilight silk was dependent on its length.

The longest thread of twilight silk that Ai Hui had extracted up till now was only one meter. twilight silk of this length had no value and could only be regarded as scraps.

Ai Hui was under immense pressure to perform. He was no fool. Taking the cocoon, the herbal concoction, and the services of the elementalists into consideration, he knew that the production cost of the Twilight Silk was immense, even though Mistress did not reveal it.

It would be a complete waste of resources if he couldn’t extract good silk.

His finger trembled, causing the other end of the thread to break. Unable to persist any longer, AI Hui plopped himself onto the ground, panting. He was drenched in sweat.

Silk scraps littered the floor around him.

Chapter 90: Movie Bean

Zhou Xiaoxi barged in excitedly and exclaimed, “Old Li, come and watch this movie bean!”

Li Wei was lying on his bed, deep in thought. His brow furrowed as he answered flippantly, “Watch it on your own.”

“It’s useless to think about it since there’s nothing you can do if his teacher doesn’t agree. You’d better not offend the teachers of the Induction Ground,” Zhou Xiaoxi replied from outside. “Recruiting soldiers was never an easy task to begin with, so don’t make things difficult for yourself. It’ll be too late to regret if you end up getting backstabbed.”

“Don’t spout nonsense. Teacher Wang is not like that!” Li Wei quickly retorted. “I’ve attended his lessons before, and I am confident of his character.”

“In any case, don’t push too hard. You’ve been disadvantaged quite a few times because of such issues already.” Zhou Xiaoxi was still worried as he continued to warn Li Wei. “You should stop feeling so miserable; your luck is already good enough. Although your potential successor’s teacher refuses to let him go, you just need to gradually wear him down. I, for one, haven’t even seen anyone worthy.”

Li Wei asked lazily, “Isn’t it easy for the North Sea Auxiliary Division to recruit members? Do you really need to compete with us bitter folks”

“Bitter? More like sweet,” Zhou Xiaoxi teased. “Someone has been distracted ever since he returned that day. I sense some stirrings of love, oh, glorious spring!”

Li Wei immediately jumped out of bed in embarrassment and dashed out of his room, shouting, “Today seems like a good day for us to exchange blows! You can make fun of me, but it’s simply unbearable if you tarnish a fair lady’s reputation like that!”

Acting all innocent, Zhou Xiaoxi protested, “Did I say something wrong? Tarnished her reputation?”

“You……” Li Wei was at a loss for words. His embarrassment quickly turned to anger as he taunted, “Come over here right now. I’m gonna beat your North Sea dog face into the ground.”

Zhou Xiaoxi was not one bit angry. He joked loudly, “I am a North Sea dog, and you are a blooming sago tree—I mean—a blossoming metal man. Alright, alright, I’m only teasing. Such things are part of human nature. Next time, I’ll introduce you to the ladies of the North Sea who are as stunning as the ocean. Do you know why the women of the North Sea are called the daughters of the sea?”

Li Wei was veered off course. “Because they’re as stunning as the ocean?”

Zhou Xiaoxi replied innocently, “Yes, they’re stunning, but what’s the main feature of the ocean? It’s extremely

temperamental! When it's happy, all is calm and well. If it's unhappy, prepare to feel the wrath of its storms! Do you know why I'm still single? I am a man who has braved these storms and lived to tell the tale! I heard that the ladies in the Infantry are blessed with good figures?"

Li Wei nodded his head in response to Zhou Xiaoxi's curiosity. "Definitely. Every one of them has amazingly well-proportioned figures. They are well-toned and have abs—not even a single one of them has the slightest bit of flab. To top it off, they are most certainly not temperamental."

"That's great!" Zhou Xiaoxi said, as his eyes lit up with joy. "I leave my future happiness in your hands!"

"As long as you can satisfy their three needs, your relationship will be very blissful," Li Wei said while he casually lifted three fingers.

"Money? Not a problem! Looks? I have that as well! My figure is not too shabby either!" Zhou Xiaoxi announced, brimming with confidence.

Li Wei let out a chuckle. "The ladies in our Infantry Division do not look out for these things. Their three needs refer to the need for blood when killing, the need to violently vent their anger, and the need to rip things out of sorrow."

Zhou Xiaoxi shivered momentarily in fear. He muttered, "I think I'll just remain single, then."

“Forget it, let’s move on from this sad topic. Come, let’s watch the movie bean,” Zhou Xiaoxi said, back to his usual self. “You have no idea how hard it was to buy this. I queued really long for this bestseller.”

“What movie bean is this?” Li Wei casually asked.

“Have you heard of Zu Yan? The one who was defeated by an earth elementalist a while back? He’s a pretty arrogant chap, openly distributing his written challenge for all to see. He’s really landed himself in an embarrassing situation this time.” Zhou Xiaoxi was clearly gloating at Zu Yan’s misfortune.

Between the aristocratic families and the commoners lay an uncrossable chasm. This disparity was apparent everywhere, even on the front line.

Aristocratic families often had long and illustrious histories, leading all the way back to the battle that had founded the Avalon of Five Elements.

After the Avalon of Five Elements had gradually stabilized, a protracted period of expansion had begun. Talented individuals from the Old Territory were brought into the Avalon of Five Elements as new residents to fill the space created by the continued expansion.

Most of the commoners of the Avalon of Five Elements could trace their roots back to the migrants from the Old Territory.

Despite the declining influence of these families and the rise of several outstanding commoners, the allocation of resources was still vastly skewed in favor of the aristocratic families. They controlled almost eighty percent of high-grade resources.

Conflicts between the commoners and aristocratic families were everywhere but were especially prevalent on the front line, where such clashes were almost an everyday occurrence.

“I’ve heard of this before,” Li Wei said, nodding. He suddenly felt curious. “How did he lose so badly if he could execute an absolute art?”

“Yeah, I’d like to see this ferocious earth elementalist for myself.”

Zhou Xiaoxi took out the movie bean, tossing it into the light-swallowing, shadow-spitting nepenthes set on the table. This particular type of bonsai had a broad range of uses and was compatible with many media products made by wood elementalists.

In the dark brown-colored pot stood a twenty-centimeter tall nepenthes with a large pitcher. The pitcher was decorated with a wood elementalist’s signature, and a red ring encircled its opening.

After being tossed into the nepenthes, the movie bean was quickly dissolved by digestive fluids. Within moments, a beam of light sprang out of the pitcher’s opening.

The faint light converged into a rather blurry image.

“Why is it so unclear?” Zhou Xiaoxi said, visibly upset. “Unscrupulous businessmen! How dare they sell such low-quality beans at such exorbitant prices! This is crazy!”

“Don’t expect too much from this small region,” Li Wei said in an understanding manner. He was familiar with how things were like in the area. Watching the projection, he continued, “Observe carefully, or you’ll lose out even more.”

Upon hearing Li Wei’s advice, Zhou Xiaoxi ceased his complaints and watched every detail attentively.

It was evident that the mirage bean pod was focused on Zu Yan from the get-go; he was simply too eye-catching. His heavy legs were like hatchets, and his attacks were cleanly executed. His moves were not the least bit sloppy.

“He’s pretty powerful,” Zhou Xiaoxi muttered to himself. “That’s a rather well executed [Hellfire Spider Web].” His condescending manner from before had disappeared.

He had initially thought that Zu Yan’s defeat was the result of insufficient combat experience. Judging from the footage, however, Zu Yan appeared to be highly seasoned and had not made any mistakes. Besides having a higher base level, Zhou Xiaoxi himself probably couldn’t have done any better.

Li Wei did not utter a single word; he just stared at the footage.

There wasn't a single opponent on the ground who could match Zu Yan. He took down a handful of contestants without breaking a sweat.

Everything changed when he attacked a participant that had a mask on.

That seemingly innocuous contestant suddenly made a move, punching Zu Yan's heavy leg.

Zhou Xiaoxi subconsciously shook his head. Considering that legs were much more powerful than fists, the most viable options against the heavy leg were to either dodge and find an opening, or to fight fire with fire and return with a kick.

What happened next gave him a shock. Zu Yan was knocked back a good couple of steps while his opponent only needed two to stabilize himself.

"Impressive strength," Li Wei commented objectively.

"Zu Yan seemed a little stirred up—he must have recognized the other party," Zhou Xiaoxi observed. His vast experience with actual combat allowed him to deduce this fairly quickly.

However, the sight of the mysterious earth elementalist suddenly changing direction in mid-air as he rushed towards Zu Yan made them both stand up spontaneously in shock.

Love and relationships are sometimes referred to as spring. Zhou Xiaoxi is trying to make it more dramatic as he teases Li Wei.

A blooming sago tree refers to a rare occurrence.

A nepenthes is basically a tropical pitcher plant.

Chapter 91: Discussion

Changing direction mid-air!

Between the shades of light and shadow of the bean pod's image, the fuzzy figure of the earth elementalist could be seen charging towards Zu Yan. He flew into the sky and made a major turn halfway. The deflection was very large, like a bat gliding in low altitude.

Zu Yan accumulated all the strength in his body and directed it to his heavy leg, but he still missed.

The earth elementalist made a bizarre arc and appeared behind Zu Yan.

The moment he landed, Zu Yan's muscles seemed to have tensed. Both of them watching were seasoned battlers, and upon seeing Zu Yan's slight movement, they knew it was getting serious.

The earth elementalist sprung up from the ground, and his back struck Zu Yan.

They promptly saw Zu Yan turn into an afterimage as he flew out of their field of vision like a rubber ball shooting upwards from a seesaw. The wood elementalist controlling the mirage bean pod was obviously shocked by this scene. The scene was frozen still for a good few seconds before the wood elementalist regained control of his senses and redirected the mirage bean pod.

In between the light and shadow of the mirage bean pod, Zu Yan's body could be seen stuck to the light cover like a baked flatbread.

"Must be painful," Zhou Xiaoxi commented, as he looked lifelessly at the flatbread man in the image and swallowed his saliva with a little bit of difficulty.

"Don't worry, it doesn't hurt." Li Wei shook his head with a similar dull expression. "He's unconscious; he can't feel a thing."

Snap! The light and shadow image disappeared from the nepenthes cage.

"That's.... that's it?" Zhou Xiaoxi, who had just regained his senses, fell into a daze once again. Two seconds later, a mournful shriek loud enough to tear the roof apart sounded out. "Not one minute's up and it's already over? Where's the absolute art? I can't even see his face clearly! Earth elementalist? Where's the sand puppet? Where are the other people? That's all? How dare you sell the tickets at a hundred thousand yuan for this kind of show? Ahhhhhh...I'm gonna kill somebody! Don't stop me!"

"A hundred thousand?" Li Wei looked disdainfully at Zhou Xiaoxi and did not forget to rub it in. "I don't know if you have assets in terms of face and body, but money? I know you do! And brains? None for sure!"

Pfff. A puff of mist exited the nepenthes, releasing a burp-like

sound that seemed to give an affirmation to Li Wei's words. "Light-swallowing, shadow-spitting" nepenthes sounded like a mighty name but it was actually a very simple type of plant—its most unique trait was that it wasn't picky about food.

When the wood elementalists first bred the mirage bean pod, they found an awkward fact—the smell of the bean was rejected by all flora and fauna.

The initial test subject was a colorful chameleon. Its skin could spray out multicolored light, creating an illusion around its surroundings to protect itself. But the experiment had quickly failed because the chameleon was badly poisoned after eating the bean.

Images stored inside the movie bean were screened successfully only after the wood elementalists had discovered a special kind of nepenthes. This was how it was given such an imperious name.

The two of them briefly stood in silence, digesting the scene from earlier.

"There's finally a powerful fellow but he turns out to be an earth elementalist. How unexpected." Zhou Xiaoxi was disappointed as the North Sea was recruiting water elementalists.

"It's a pity there's no sand puppet." Li Wei was curious. "An earth elementalist good at battling close-range...I really wonder how his sand puppet would be like."

Seasoned fighters like them knew that in order to evaluate an earth elementalist, they would have to understand his sand puppet. The sand puppet was the real trump card.

One must not judge a wood elementalist's battling abilities before assessing his sand puppet.

"That was a mid-air direction switch, eh?" Zhou Xioaxi was slightly uncertain. "Recognize the move yet?"

Between the two of them, although Li Wei looked a little more forthright, their personalities were completely opposite. Zhou Xiaoxi had a carefree personality while Li Wei was more meticulous in nature.

"No." Li Wei shook his head. "Doing a mid-air switch is possible, albeit difficult. Don't forget that he's an earth elementalist. He has a sand puppet."

"Reasonable." Zhou Xiaoxi lightly touched his chin before asking, "Don't you feel that the back leaning move was similar to [Arching Fish Back]?"

Actually, when he had first seen that move, Li Wei had immediately thought about the series of dents on the wall of the Suspending Golden Pagoda. Could it be Ai Hui? This idea flashed through his mind before he quickly shook it off. Although his build matched the dents, he had just activated his natal residence. It was impossible for him to possess such combat strength.

Plus, this was an earth elementalist. Ai Hui, on the other hand, was definitely of the metal attribute.

“I’m more willing to believe that it’s [Back to the Mountain],” Li Wei said.

Zhou Xiaoxi understood; although the earth elementalist’s move seemed to be similar to [Arching Fish Back], the power released far exceeded that of it.

[Arching Fish Back] was a technique that was used for struggling free instead of attacking.

“There are all kinds of freaks this year. How can an earth elementalist be an earth elementalist if he doesn’t engage his sand puppet when fighting?” Zhou Xiaoxi mumbled to himself.

“Youngsters nowadays are fierce!” Li Wei sighed. Zu Yan’s performance was already pretty solid but that earth elementalist’s abilities were even more outstanding. The disparity between levels could be made up with time but a gap between talent wasn’t something that could be easily filled.

Li Wei did not know why, but after viewing the movie bean, he all the more yearned to urgently recruit Ai Hui.

He felt that Ai Hui was undoubtedly the most suitable fellow for the Infantry Division!

What should he do?

Li Wei decided that no matter what, he had to meet Ai Hui personally before thinking further.

The embroidery workshop.

As usual, Mingxiu was reporting to her teacher. The workshop had received many orders of different priorities; some were urgent while others could wait. Some required her teacher to attend to personally while others could be taken care of by Mingxiu. She organized and handled the tasks well; Han Yuqin was extremely reassured and satisfied with this beloved disciple of hers.

After listening to Mingxiu's report, Han Yuqin asked about Ai Hui. "How's your junior doing recently?"

"Not much progress." Mingxiu shook her head, and she hesitated a little before continuing, "I'm afraid that Twilight Silk's too difficult for him. It's not easy even for me. Should we change it to something else?"

Han Yuqin hesitated as well. Mingxiu didn't seem to be exaggerating.

Unlike what Ai Hui thought, Twilight Silk was not sold in the market at an extremely high price because of the rarity of twilight silkworm cocoons. In fact, twilight silkworm cocoons were really cheap. They were resistant to water and fire, as solid as iron, and

not many insects liked nibbling on them. Herbal medicine used to treat the cocoons were not worth much either.

Actually, it was so pricey because it was too difficult to collect.

The silk spinner had to have sufficiently pure elemental energy to solidify the gluey natural silk. Furthermore, a very stable and precise control of elemental energy was needed. Any slight disturbance in concentration would cause the silk to break.

Once the silk was broken, it couldn't be joined back—this meant that it was impossible to make a long silk strand from many short ones.

And the whole process was time consuming and produced little output. Whenever Han Yuqin needed it, she would purchase it directly instead of producing it on her own.

To be fair, Han Yuqin also felt that Twilight Silk was too difficult for Ai Hui.

But to change it?

Thinking about this, she couldn't help but ask, "How does Ai Hui feel about it?"

After all, she was someone who had already taken in disciples. She knew that when it came to youngsters, difficult tasks would dampen their zeal.

As an afterthought, Han Yuqin added, “Discuss it with him first.”

Chapter 92: Experience

Ai Hui sat on the ground of the workshop, gasping heavily.

The rising fog carried a herbal medicinal odor as it squirted out from the window from time to time. The workshop was like a monster, spewing poisonous gas at random intervals.

The embroidery ladies didn't dare to go close and rather took more steps to walk around it instead. Many of them had come to a sudden realization—no wonder the workshop never produced any Twilight Silk. But there were still bolder ladies who stole glances at Ai Hui from afar.

It was seriously hot inside the workshop, and Ai Hui was working half-naked, displaying his well-proportioned, robust, and fit body. His skin was emitting a golden glow as if he'd been smeared with a layer of grease. The steam within the workshop carried an unpleasant odor, which prevented the women from approaching—but it did not stop them from admiring from a distance.

Ai Hui wasn't aware that people were secretly watching him. All his focus was placed on that damned Twilight Silk.

So far, the silk that he had extracted had never exceeded one meter in length.

The elemental energy within his body was abnormally smooth and fast like lightning. It was easy to make it quick; with just a thought, his elemental energy would gain speed. To slow it down,

however, was exponentially harder. Moreover, not only did he have to slow it down, he had to ensure that it had a uniform velocity, free from fluctuations.

Ai Hui had been thinking about a lot of things these past few days.

What he pondered most about was the fact that although the elemental energy within his body was pure, it was very different from the energy that he developed himself. He could induce elemental energy with help from the Sword Rattan Gloves, but he could only exercise simple control over it.

The elemental energy he had developed through self-training wasn't as pure and was little in quantity, but it could easily be controlled and engaged during more complicated operations.

Ai Hui had gotten out of the excitement from his previous victory and had become much more clear-minded.

No matter how much strength he had, it was useless if it was untamed. And on the contrary, no matter how little strength he had, it could still be used during crucial moments as long as he had perfect control over it.

Slow and steady should be the way to go, Ai Hui told himself.

The nature of a three minute hero was no different from the sword embryo. What he needed was reliable strength. Reliable

strength and reliable abilities.

"How is it, Junior?" Mingxiu walked into the workshop.

Ai Hui stood up. "Not bad, Senior. It's actually quite rewarding."

Mingxiu was slightly surprised. She expected her junior to be somewhat dispirited, but he actually had a very optimistic attitude. She observed attentively and caught no signs of disappointment in Ai Hui's expression.

But then again, her junior had attempted the [Twin Weaving Technique] just after activating his natal residence, so why would he be discouraged by the difficulty of the Twilight Silk?

"That's good. Don't be anxious, Junior, try slowly." Mingxiu consoled him, "Twilight Silk is so expensive precisely because it is very challenging to extract."

On hearing the word "expensive," light flashed within Ai Hui's eyes, but the words behind captured his attention even more. "Senior, are you saying that the raw material isn't expensive?"

Mingxiu nodded. "It is inexpensive. A silkworm cocoon costs about two hundred thousand yuan now."

Ai Hui opened his eyes wide. "Two hundred thousand isn't considered expensive?"

Mingxiu laughed briefly. “Indeed, it is considered inexpensive. An elemental cloth costs fifty thousand yuan.”

“What about Twilight Silk?” Ai Hui asked, unable to believe what he was hearing.

“Depends on its specifications.” After taking a few moments to remember, she said, “Anything below five meters isn’t worth much. Ten meters or so can be bought at two hundred thousand. The price doubles every five meters.”

Ai Hui gulped. A Twilight Silk silkworm cocoon looked small but the silk within was extremely fine. Theoretically, it was possible to extract over a hundred meters of silk.

How much money is that!

Twenty meters for eight hundred thousand yuan. Thirty meters for three million and two hundred thousand yuan. Forty meters for twelve million and eight hundred thousand yuan! And fifty meters would cost over fifty million yuan!

Come to think of it, the noodle shop girl’s eighty million yuan…it could be paid off with just two fifty-meter-long strands of Twilight Silk and there would still be a lot to spare!

He was about to drool.

Ai Hui felt resentful. Why was it that whenever the topic of embroidery came up, it always involved a lot of money?

But from his previous experience with the [Twin Weaving Technique], Ai Hui was aware that while money from embroidery seemed to be plenty, it was actually extremely challenging to earn.

Ai Hui had calculated the Twilight Silk's best solidifying speed. One day and one night for a length of about two meters. There was no mistake.

Twilight Silk of fifty meters required twenty-five consecutive days of operating elemental energy non-stop at a consistent speed, without even the slightest error.

This was not only incredibly challenging, but it was also terrifying. Not to mention the elemental energy, just maintaining focus for twenty-five days straight was almost impossible.

Anything below five meters wasn't worth much money, yet Ai Hui already had trouble in producing five meters.

Wow, money isn't easy to earn!

As if she'd noticed Ai Hui's dejected expression, Mingxiu comforted him. "Don't be discouraged, Junior. Manufacturing Twilight Silk is bitter work; even those who are able to aren't willing to do it too. Thirty-meter-long Twilight Silk can't be easily found in today's market. Plus, you're doing this to train. When

your skills improve, spinning silk will become second nature to you.”

Ai Hui regained his spirit; although he had failed to spin silk, it was still a pretty effective training method.

Silk spinning forced the operation of elemental energy to slow down. Having such pure elemental energy circulating at such a slow speed within his body was intensely stimulating.

In the past, whenever his elemental energy circulation would reach his hand palace, it would feel no different from any other parts of his body. Now, however, he could feel that a region of his palm was more sensitive to the energy.

He knew that this region, which felt more sensitive and intense, was his hand palace.

Elemental energy within Ai Hui’s body had never operated so slowly before. Over the past few days, he had been immersed in many fresh experiences; for example, he had recently found out that operating his elemental energy slowly had a body tempering effect.

The world was so big—Ai Hui always carried an inquisitive attitude towards many things.

Seeing the improvement in Ai Hui’s mood, Mingxiu advised him, “Go home and rest for a few days. You need to strike a balance

between work and rest; alternating between tension and relaxation is the key to training. You've been without rest for a few days, and it's detrimental to your body. Go back. I'll tell Teacher."

Truth be told, Ai Hui's non-stop training had scared her. He must have been this hard-working when he was trying to figure out the [Twin Weaving Technique] in the Suspending Golden Pagoda. No wonder he could simulate the technique even though he had just activated his natal residence. How amazingly determined!

Ai Hui felt that his senior was right—focusing had started to become increasingly difficult. He knew that this was the sign of exhaustion.

"Then I'll get going, Senior!"

Ai Hui bid Senior Mingxiu goodbye before promptly leaving the embroidery workshop.

On the street, Ai Hui felt like he was in another world. All the fog and smell of the herbal medicine within the workshop had disappeared, leaving only a faint herbal smell on his body to remind himself how he had passed these last few days.

Under the sunlight, Ai Hui smiled and had a good stretch. He decided that once he reached back, he would have a good bath and sleep.

Just then, he heard someone call his name.

Chapter 93: Li Wei's Treat

Ai Hui looked attentively towards Li Wei as he found him somewhat familiar.

"I'm Li Wei, an instructor of the Society of Excellence. I'm also Mingxiu's friend. I'm the one who carried you and Duanmu Huanghun back from the Suspending Golden Pagoda." The veteran Li Wei introduced himself to Ai Hui.

"Brother Li Wei! Thank you very much, Brother Li Wei!" Ai Hui felt embarrassed and quickly thanked him.

"You haven't eaten anything yet, right? Let's go and eat now; we will talk over the meal." Li Wei appeared to be extremely amicable.

The moment Ai Hui heard that there was going to be food, his eyes lit up, and he immediately agreed to Li Wei's invitation.

When Ai Hui learned that Li Wei was the one who had written the strategy to tackle the Suspending Golden Pagoda, his respect for him grew significantly. And after he heard that Brother Li Wei was going to treat him to a meal, he quickly brought Li Wei to the noodle house. He decided to order a few extra bowls of noodles later to show his respect for Li Wei.

"The Society of Excellence?"

Li Wei was surprised when Ai Hui shook his head and rejected his

invitation. “Brother Li Wei, I really have no time. Until now, I haven’t even completed the training assignments that the teachers in school have given me.”

Deep down, Li Wei was disappointed. However, he could tell that Ai Hui was not lying. Fatigue was written all over Ai Hui’s face; he looked extremely tired.

“When’s the last time you had a rest?” Li Wei asked with great concern, “It’s important to pace your training. Don’t be too impatient. You’re still young and there’s plenty of time.”

Li Wei was someone who valued and cared for talents. And in his eyes, Ai Hui was a prodigy.

“Compared to other students, I’m quite old.” Ai Hui shook his head.

Li Wei oohed. Yes, Ai Hui was not young anymore. It was only now that he realized that he had only noticed Ai Hui’s talents and not his age. Compared to other students, it was indeed quite late.

Those exceptional prodigies were all able to graduate from the Induction Ground at the mere age of sixteen. However, at this age, Ai Hui had barely started training. Li Wei felt great pity for him. Yet such situations were common occurrences in both the Old Territory and the Avalon of Five Elements.

By the time many people discovered that they were gifted, they

had already missed their best window of time to train.

"Even though you started off late, I still believe you can do it!" Li Wei sincerely encouraged Ai Wei. He could sense Ai Hui's impatience.

"Thank you, Brother Li Wei!" Ai Hui was touched by Li Wei's words. He felt that he should do something to reciprocate Brother Li Wei's concern for him, so he turned around and yelled to the boss, "Boss, give me one more bowl of noodles! No, two more!"

Li Wei did not expect to succeed on his first try. He merely wanted to leave an impression on Ai Hui and try again in the future. There was no need for him to be impatient. And after the short interaction with Ai Hui, he felt that the trip he made today was not in vain and was rather rewarding.

Ai Hui left a deep impression on him.

He was a reserved person with a determined gaze and a maturity that far surpassed his age. From their conversation, Li Wei could sense the determination and willpower of the young man seated in front of him.

Whenever Ai Hui was unsure of something, he would ask a lot of questions. Some questions even left Li Wei in a daze.

Were the youngsters nowadays really that hard to deal with? When he himself was at such an age, he was as innocent and stupid

as a pig.

Prudence, foresight, and determination.

Li Wei sighed in his heart once more. He was becoming increasingly convinced that Ai Hui was a legitimate prodigy. Even though he started off late, Li Wei still believed that he could overcome such an obstacle.

It was both simple and difficult to convince this kind of person. The difficult part was that they would not be easily persuaded by flowery words, and the easy part was that they would agree to anything without a second of hesitation if they found it to be beneficial to themselves.

And it was also because of this that Li Wei was so confident that he could persuade Ai Hui. Although the Infantry Division was not as popular as other divisions, it was very suitable for Ai Hui's character and physical traits. He believed that Ai Hui could see this as well.

Right now, he decided to just become friends with Ai Hui. There would be plenty of time and chances in the future. Teacher Wang may be knowledgeable, but his knowledge of body tempering and combat techniques paled in comparison with that of the Infantry Division.

For some reasons, Li Wei could sense an aura from Ai Hui that was similar to his.

Li Wei was a veteran. He knew that his intuition was not baseless. However, at the same time, his mind was filled with doubts. It was rather incredible to see such traits in a sixteen-year-old boy.

Even those prodigies that graduated from the Induction Ground at this age reeked of rookie's aura, which could be sensed from two kilometers away.

In the front line, even if a rookie were a prodigy, they would be considered as one of the most undesirable people to be around.

The most undesirable group of people, however, were those rookie commanders.

When the younger generations from those aristocratic families entered the front line, they seldom worked their way up from being a soldier.

Li Wei had no prejudice against the younger generations of those influential, aristocratic families. In fact, he had seen many outstanding youths come from aristocratic families; however, he bitterly detested rookie commanders.

"Have you ever stayed in the Wilderness before?" Li Wei asked curiously.

Ai Hui, who was busy eating the food, stopped and raised his head. With his mouth stuffed with noodles, he replied

unintelligibly, “Yes, I stayed there for three years. I used to be a laborer.”

When he heard Ai Hui’s response, Li Wei became thoroughly dumbfounded, and he only returned to his senses after a few seconds. With an incredulous look on his face, he asked again, “Are you saying that you used to be a laborer? And that you stayed in the Wilderness for three years?”

“That’s right,” Ai Hui nodded as he kept stuffing his mouth with noodles.

Li Wei was shocked by this information.

Of course he knew what a laborer was.

In the Wilderness, there was a unique group of people that were collectively called laborers. These laborers were hired from the Old Territory, and most of them were desperate, pitiful souls. Laborers had almost zero fighting capabilities and were the fastest and earliest group of people to be eliminated and killed in the Wilderness.

When Li Wei first learned about laborers, he did not understand why they were hired. From his perspective, laborers were frail and had low stamina. They were also mentally weak and were easily killed. But after staying in the Wilderness for some time, he had finally understood the reason.

The Avalon of Five Elements' current training system was developed from and based on dire beasts. Elementalists were much more sensitive toward elemental energy fluctuations in dire beasts, and vice versa.

If a detachment had too many powerful elementalists, it would only result in two possibilities. The first was that they would scare away the dire beasts. The second was that they would encourage the dire beasts to gang up against them.

A division like the Infantry Division did not enter the Wilderness to hunt the dire beasts, and hence, they would not have such worries.

However, for those who entered the Wilderness to hunt for the dire beasts, these two results were not something they wanted to encounter.

Hence, recruiting laborers was their best option. But compared to the benefits of hunting the dire beasts, the compensations for the laborers were worth nothing.

Laborer recruitment had a long history that could be dated back to seven hundred years ago.

Ever since the concept of recruiting laborers had been initiated, there had been huge debates over it. As such, there was a strict regulation on the compensation payments for laborers. However, the number of "new citizens" in the Avalon of Five Elements was getting increasingly larger, and their objections for laborer

recruitment were getting louder and louder.

The so-called “new citizens” referred to the people who had migrated from the Old Territory to the Avalon of Five Elements after the latter had been established. They had deep sentiments towards the Old Territory, and the higher-ups held their voices in high regard. Many signs also indicated that the abolishment of laborer recruitment was near.

Li Wei had never expected the youth who was heartily eating the noodles in front of him to be a laborer!

Chapter 94: Midnight

Li Wei did not know how long he had been in shock for. In any case, the empty bowls in front of Ai Hui seemed to have stacked higher and higher.

For a moment, he did not know what to say.

After a long silence, he opened his mouth. “Being a laborer, it’s not easy to return alive.”

At this point, Ai Hui was nearly done eating, and his actions had slowed down. He raised his head and gave a sunny smile. “That’s right. Only two out of two thousand laborers survived.”

A cold shiver ran down Li Wei’s spine. He had spent a long time at the front line and was used to death; however, this was the first time he had ever heard of such a terrifying mortality rate. He finally realized what laborers being “easily killed” meant.

He became silent and observed the young man seated across him.

Ai Hui’s face did not show any signs of vengeance, self-pity, sadness or suffering. He was just sitting there looking calm and earnest, his gaze limpid.

Unknowingly, Li Wei became somewhat emotional. “Why did you want to come to the Induction Ground?”

“I want to become an elementalist.” Ai Hui laughed as he idly stirred the empty bowl with his chopsticks. “There’s no future in being a laborer; it’s better to become an elementalist.”

For some unknown reason, Li Wei could sense that these straightforward and casual words contained much more than what they actually meant.

This was the first time that Li Wei did not know what to say to a young man. He finally understood how Ai Hui had developed a maturity that far surpassed his young age.

The number of deaths that Ai Hui had witnessed far exceeded what he had. Ai Hui had survived the harshest and cruelest of environments, and the situations he had faced were far more dangerous than what Li Wei had ever faced. Yet the three years of extreme hardship still did not destroy the young man’s courage and will to live.

Other than age and strength, Ai Hui’s experience and character were not inferior to his.

This was a young man who did not need consolation and encouragement. He knew what he was doing and what he was working hard for. There was no uncertainty and hesitation—only a strong and determined heart.

Unwittingly, Li Wei started to treat Ai Hui as someone who was of the same age as himself.

He took out a roll of thumb-sized golden leaf. “This contains some of my usual training tips, but it doesn’t include any secret techniques. I’m giving it to you in the hope that it will be of some help! I am metal-attributed, and I have also stayed in the Suspending Golden Pagoda for a long time. That place will suit you well.”

“Thank you, Brother Li Wei!” Ai Hui thanked him sincerely. This was something that he needed the most right now, and he did not act hypocritically.

Such a nice senior. If he didn’t do anything to repay him, he would feel guilty! Ai Hui turned his head around and was about to order another bowl of noodles to show his respect for Brother Li Wei. Ow…he could not eat anymore…

Sadness and regret rose in Ai Hui’s heart. This ending was not perfect at all.

Seeing that it was getting late, Li Wei stood up and patted Ai Hui’s shoulder. “Let’s go back and have a good rest.”

Ai Hui quickly nodded.

“Boss! Bill, please!”

The boss arrived as swift as the wind. “That will be one thousand and five hundred yuan!”

Li Wei was momentarily stunned. “Boss, you must have miscounted.”

How could they have eaten one thousand and five hundred yuan worth of noodles? Ten bowls?

“Sir, look at the table.” The boss pointed at the table.

When Li Wei turned around and saw the high stack of bowls on the table, he was dumbfounded.

To the side, Ai Hui put on an innocent face.

After bidding farewell to Brother Li Wei, the stuffed Ai Hui dragged himself back to the training hall. Lou Lan wasn’t there. Ai Hui, who was already tired and incredibly full, immediately went straight to bed.

Before his body could even warm up the bed, he had already fallen asleep.

On the other side of the wall, there was a room that was dimly lit under the glow of a yellowish-orange light.

“How do you feel? I have made many improvements to the new sand core. The problems that it faced in the past have already been rectified. This is the sand core that I’m most satisfied with for the last fifty years, and I have put in most of my knowledge into this. Lou Lan, you have a matchless sand core. It’s a pity that I don’t

know much about combat and I can’t make too many improvements in that aspect.”

An old man with ash-grey hair looked directly at Lou Lan, who was comfortably stretching his body. The old man’s gaze was tender—it was as if he was looking at his own child.

“It’s okay, Master Shao,” Lou Lan replied as he touched and felt his own body. “Lou Lan can learn by himself.”

“That’s right!” Master Shao became excited. “You’re very smart. I’m sure there are not many sand puppets in this world that are smarter than you. As long as you keep on learning, you will become stronger. Combat is not a problem for you. You have such a matchless sand core, it’s a pity that I don't have enough money to replace your body. If your body’s material can be replaced with Yellow Sand Corner’s high-grade sand, you will be nearly invincible.”

Master Shao’s tone was filled with pride.

“Is it because Lou Lan’s body can become fluid-like?” Lou Lan asked curiously.

Master Shao laughed out loud. After a while, however, he stopped. “Lou Lan is a good boy!”

Lou Lan did not quite understand what Master Shao meant, but he knew that the latter was praising him and so he was delighted.

“Lou Lan, what do you think of Ai Hui?” Master Shao suddenly asked.

“Ai Hui is Lou Lan’s best friend,” Lou Lan replied without any hesitation.

“How do you feel when you’re together with him?”

“Very happy,” Lou Lan replied. “Ai Hui is a good guy, a very good guy.”

Master Shao treated and understood Lou Lan like his own child. His face was filled with warmth as he deeply looked at Lou Lan.

“Good boy. Even though your sand core has become so powerful, it’s still considered an incomplete product. Yes, I have spent fifty years on your sand core, but there’s a limit to my talents. I’m afraid I don’t have the capability to perfect it. My child, what I’m going to say next is very important. You have to remember these words. Store them in the deepest part of your sand core.”

Master Shao’s facial expression became solemn.

“Okay, Lou Lan will start recording now.” Lou Lan became serious.

Master Shao went into a deep silence and was somewhat

entranced, as if he was thinking of something.

After a long while, he finally returned to his senses and laughed to himself. “I’m indeed old.”

“Master Shao, do I need to remember this line?” Lou Lan asked with his eyes wide open.

“No need, no need.” Master Shao chuckled.

“Lou Lan, your current sand core is in an incomplete state. That’s because your body can’t handle all the powers of the sand core, and so I have to seal a portion of the core. Before your body becomes stronger, you are not allowed to remove the seal. As for the information on how to remove the seal and how to transform your body, I have already saved them in your sand core. You need to spend some time studying this information. And the last thing is that if Master Shao is not around in the future, you must follow Ai Hui. He’s a rather good guy,” Master Shao told Lou Lan with a stern tone.

Lou Lan abruptly asked, “Master Shao, are you leaving Lou Lan?”

“Lou Lan, my life is coming to an end. Before I die, I have to have to go and settle an issue that I have regretted most of my life.”

Master Shao suddenly spoke after being lost in thought for a long while.

“Lou Lan, remember this……your sand core is called Midnight.”

Chapter 95: Changes To The Blood Bandage

After a good night's sleep, Ai Hui felt an indescribable sense of happiness and satisfaction. All his previous tiredness was now gone.

Looking at the time, the traces of sleepiness that Ai Hui felt immediately disappeared. He had actually slept for one entire day. Given that he had just woken up, Ai Hui decided to take a bath directly.

While soaking in the hot spring, he began playing with the Blood Bandage.

The Blood Bandage had a very unusual texture; it was neither cloth nor silk, and there were still intact traces of blood as if it had just dried up. Mistress had said that it had existed for an extremely long period of time—more than ten thousand years.

Every time he looked at the Blood Bandage, his thoughts couldn't help but wander to the Cultivation Era. It was such a bustling and diversified period with a vast world. There were different oddities of techniques and innumerable magic-infused treasures. Cultivators soared through the skies and combed through the earth to explore the unknown, dominating the era for thousands of years.

The Blood Bandage was really sturdy; even with all his strength, Ai Hui was unable to tear even a bit. When Mistress had split the Blood Bandage into two, she had used tremendous strength as well.

She had said that the silk yarn was bound up by a special force, seamlessly blending them together. The Blood Bandage had many loose threads on its sides due to Mistress' attempt to tear it.

Thanks to the swordplay manual, Ai Hui's had a much better understanding of the Cultivation Era than before.

During the Cultivation Era, blood sects were never the mainstream sects; instead, the mainstream sects were those that revolved around swordsmanship and weapon-training. Now, though, along with all their magic-infused treasures, those prestigious and orthodox schools that had hundreds and thousands of years of history had all decayed and disappeared. However, an object from a small blood sect had been able to escape the fate of becoming decayed throughout the millennia. Life was indeed filled with variables.

Just by hearing the name "blood-refinement," one could figure out that it was related to fresh blood. That mysterious strength should be related to fresh blood as well.

The Blood Bandage had a faintly discernible bone-chilling smell. In the beginning, Ai Hui was not accustomed to wearing the bandage as it would suddenly erupt with a killing intent. Ai Hui's pores would abruptly constrict, and it would feel like the bandages had become two bands of ice.

Nevertheless, it was fortunate that the killing intent did not erupt frequently and that each episode was short-lived.

What a strange object.

To be related to blood...

Should he perhaps try to drip a few drops of blood onto the bandage?

That sudden inspiration filled Ai Hui with energy; he had always been curious about the Blood Bandage. The Blood Bandage was a blood-refined object, and he did not have any clue as to what was blood refinement. As for those few drops of blood, it was not a matter of concern for Ai Hui; he was not a pampered and spoilt rich brat, and injuries were a common occurrence back in the Wilderness.

Unable to contain his curiosity, which had firmly rooted in his heart like a weed, he did not hesitate and immediately bit his finger. He dripped a few drops of blood on the two pieces of the Blood Bandage.

The fresh blood dripped onto the Blood Bandage. The drops resembled water droplets on a lotus leaf, round and dark red.

The next moment, the blood droplets were absorbed into the Blood Bandage, as if it were yellow sand. Only a few abnormally bright blood stains were left on the bandage.

The next scene, however, led Ai Hui to widen his eyes in shock. The Blood Bandage suddenly came to life—the part that was torn

by Mistress had loose threads, which started to wriggle and grow.

In just a few moments, the edge of the Blood Bandage lost all signs of being torn. The two pieces showed no evidence of damage and were perfectly intact.

Ai Hui was dumbfounded.

This blood refinement was indeed unconventional.

Previously, the Blood Bandage had looked rather dull and low; but now, it looked as good as new and had become brighter and whiter. The earlier dried blood stains had become more faint, except the stain due to his blood—that was still unusually bright red.

The texture of the bandage had also become soft, unlike the hard and heavy texture of before.

Ai Hui examined it over and over again, but he was unable to come up with any plausible reasons, except the confirmation that his fresh blood was pivotal to such a change.

"You indeed live up to your name," Ai Hui muttered. Yet, he did not plan to continue wasting his own blood. An average person would have some fear when faced with the strange situations of the Blood Bandage. Ai Hui, however, did not experience any fear; he had seen many situations which were similar to hell. How could he be frightened by a few drops of blood?

He finished his bath and came out of the hot spring. After wiping his body dry, he prepared to bind the Blood Bandage to himself.

When it came into contact with his body, the bandage came to life. Like an agile snake, it wound nimbly around Ai Hui's body, and in a flash, it was bound properly and was similar to how Ai Hui usually did it. The fit was just right. It did not have the usual bone-chilling feel, but instead, it was warm and soft—extremely comfortable. Ai Hui widened his eyes. Was this the same Blood Bandage?

This is kind of awesome....

He could never have believed his unexpected action to bring about such a pretty good result. He felt that he was quite lucky. It was a complicated process to bind the Blood Bandage, and it usually took Ai Hui quite a long time. Now that the bandage could bind by itself, it saved him a lot of hassle.

After wearing his clothes, he randomly plucked a blade of grass and chewed on it. Walking into the training hall, he saw Lou Lan sitting in the courtyard. He noticed that Lou Lan did not seem to be in a good mood. Ai Hui was puzzled. If sand puppets had personalities, then Lou Lan was definitely an optimistic and happy-go-lucky sand puppet.

"Lou Lan, what happened?"

Ai Hui sat next to Lou Lan.

"Ai Hui, Master Shao left," Lou Lan said, his head downcast.

Ai Hui paused. "Master Shao left? Did he go on a journey or did he meet with some mishaps?"

Ai Hui had always been mystified by his neighbor. It was said that one could see an earth elementalist's character through his sand puppet. However, he could not think of any kind of earth elementalist who would create a sand puppet like Lou Lan.

Ai Hui had encountered many sand puppets. All those sand puppets had shocking war capabilities, but compared to Lou Lan, they were many times more foolish.

"He left on a journey," Lou Lan said softly. "He said he has almost reached the end of his life and he wanted to complete something that he has always regretted. Ai Hui, what kind of matters could make Master Shao feel regretful his whole life?"

Ai Hui exhaled in relief. It was fine as long as he hadn't met with any mishaps. He thought for a while. "It could be anything; relationships, diplomatic matters...there are important events for each and every one of us."

"But if that's the case, then why didn't he do it then?" Lou Lan said with a face of confusion.

Ai Hui was struck dumb. He did not know how to answer such a

profound question. He thought quickly and spread out his arms. "For example, he had no money!"

"No money?" Lou Lan tilted his head and pondered. "Yes, Master Shao always used his money on Lou Lan."

Ai Hui let out a breath. "Now that Lou Lan has grown up and Master Shao does not need to watch over Lou Lan, he can complete his unfulfilled desires."

Ai Hui felt as if he was an old creep that was going to kidnap a child.

"But why didn't Master Shao bring Lou Lan along? Lou Lan could help Master Shao." Lou Lan looked at Ai Hui with wide eyes.

Ai Hui racked his brain. "A lot of things should be solved by oneself. Look at my Master and Mistress, can I help in their relationship? I definitely can't! If Master wants to have a date with Mistress, would he bring me along? Definitely not."

"Master Shao has gone to find Mistress Shao?" Realization dawned upon Lou Lan. "I see."

"It must be!" Ai Hui wondered how many of his brain cells had died; he was starting to believe his own lies. His voice expressed heartfelt emotion as he said, "Although Master Shao is of a certain age, he still has the right to chase after his happiness. To be able to figure this out at such an old age is not easy. We must give him our

blessings!"

Lou Lan nodded. "Lou Lan also wanted to wish Master Shao."

Bang! Lou Lan transformed into five words.

"All the best, Master Shao!"

Ai Hui let out a loud laugh.

Chapter 96: The Discussion Between the Old and the Young

He didn't know if it was because he had been hanging out with Lou Lan for an extended period of time, but Ai Hui felt that he had become a much more cheerful person.

Alright. Perhaps these were his true colors?

Ai Hui pondered over it. At the swordsman school, he was mostly alone and did not have any playmates of the same age. He had usually read through the sword manuals in silence alone. When he was in the Wilderness, everyone was always filled with tension as they lived on the edge, and as a result, he did not have any playmates in the Wilderness as well. However, there was Fatty; but he wasn't really reliable.

Luckily, Lou Lan was a good person—no, good sand—wait, that didn't sound right either…

Lou Lan had already transformed back. "Ai Hui, Master Shao said for Lou Lan to follow you in the future. Can I?"

"Of course! We are the best partners!" Ai Hui said without hesitation. He was over the moon—he had made it! He laughed till his eyes couldn't be seen, and he exclaimed in high-spirits, "Let's go around the world with our swords and make money! I will dominate the Elemental Era and Lou Lan, you'll reign the kitchen!"

Lou Lan simmering soup, Lou Lan cleaning the training hall, Lou Lan, the multi-purpose helper…

As long as you could think of it, Lou Lan was able to do it.

Lou Lan also became elated, and with a bang, he transformed into countless instances of the word ‘money,’ in numerous different sizes. These words danced around Ai Hui like a school of fishes.

After going wild with Lou Lan, Ai Hui had to leave for his training.

He didn’t know if it was because of his good mood—although he could only extract bits and pieces, Ai Hui was no longer so anxious now. He was in a more stable state.

It was important to have a peaceful mind while extracting the Twilight Silk. That was why Ai Hui managed to surpass one meter in one fell swoop.

His life had also started to become more substantial; he did not spend all his time extracting the Twilight Silk. He realized that extracting the Twilight Silk needed a high amount of concentration, and if he was tired, it would reduce the effectiveness of his training. And on the other hand, resting could actually be beneficial for his training.

He started to adjust his lifestyle. He still attended lessons and

would find the old man to discuss about elemental energy afterward. After teaching for decades, the old man had profound theories and knowledge. His discussions with the old man were all eye-openers for Ai Hui.

He did not know that Wang Shouchuan was even more amazed by his own disciple.

He had wanted to give a reminder to Ai Hui when he saw him train day and night, but he really couldn't believe that Ai Hui himself had quickly realized that something was wrong and had adjusted his habits on his own accord.

Wang Shouchuan wondered if his disciple had lied about his age. He was so seasoned and mature till the point that it could be called formidable. He had seen many different talents in the Induction Ground. While Ai Hui's aptitude was nothing worth speaking of, his temperament and determination could definitely place him in one of the top three.

What a formidable chap.

However, Ai Hui's capability was never written on his face; underneath his common appearance, there lay an enigmatic ocean.

At the start, Wang Shouchuan had explained and imparted knowledge of elemental energy to Ai Hui, but as time went by, he was shocked to realize that it had started to become more like a discussion between them.

His disciple had an unusually sharp intuition towards strength. What was even more unfathomable was that Ai Hui had a profound understanding of ancient swordsmanship. Ai Hui often used swordsmanship as a source of reference and research, often coming up with theories and conjectures that repeatedly shocked Wang Shouchuan.

Ai Hui was like an insatiable sponge, desperately trying to absorb all sort of knowledge.

He was a different person while he was training. He could be calmly engaged in some form of training, but once he thought of an idea, he would not hesitate to try it out.

Wang Shouchuan was not used to this. He was a cautious and conservative man, or else he wouldn't have stayed in the Induction Ground for so long.

In that aspect, Ai Hui displayed his courageous spirit and was abnormally brave. Wang Shouchuan always had an illusion—he felt that his own disciple would not hesitate to gamble his life if there was a need to.

The risks he had taken at the Suspending Golden Pagoda had already illustrated this point.

Wang Shouchuan hoped that Ai Hui could be more cautious; on the contrary, Han Yuqin was more than appreciative of Ai Hui's personality. She felt that this displayed his masculinity, and she would take every chance to mock Wang Shouchuan whenever Ai

Hui showed any signs of such.

That woman could really hold a grudge!

Wang Shouchuan was somewhat helpless, but two sentences from that woman really moved him: “Don’t tell me you want your disciple to be like you? To stay in the Induction Ground for a few decades?”

That particular sentence led him to become distracted for a long period of time.

Ai Hui did not know about all this; he was totally immersed in the sea of knowledge. His greatest gain was from his daily discussions with his teacher. Compared to the average classes, such mutual discussions were much more profound.

Through these intense discussions, Ai Hui’s understanding towards training and elemental energy increased day by day.

His next gain was that he discovered that there were many things in the sword manual that were of use. Compared to the system of five residences and eight palaces, the system for swordsmanship was many times more tremendous and vast.

Few people would pour through so many swordplay manuals and spend so much time browsing through a system that was not of use. Furthermore, it was such a vast, complicated system to comprehend. Nowadays, that was why those who were obsessed

with swordsmanship held no interest in training their elemental energy.

After recognizing such a vast and rigorous training system, Ai Hui realized that he now had an entirely different understanding of the five palaces and eight residences upon revisiting it.

What made him happier was that he realized that some concepts pertaining to swordsmanship may even be applicable elsewhere.

For example, the Twilight Silk required the concentration of elemental energy; however, from another point of view, wasn't this just using elemental energy as a thrust from a sword?

It was just that this sword had to be extremely stable and slow.

A slow sword?

Within the vast and tremendous amount of swordplay manuals that all held various odd things, Ai Hui managed to find a similar manual.

Perhaps he could use this technique or school of thought as a reference?

Ai Hui's eyes sparkled.

Wang Shouchuan also approved of such a theory.

The present atmosphere was highly practical for discussion since few students were interested in the principles of training of elemental energy. During lessons, teachers would make a half-hearted attempt to explain about elemental energy training, and they would instead emphasize more about describing the moves and potential problems that would occur during elemental energy training.

The old and the young were immersed in the discussion of the theory.

Initially, Old Man Wang had the intention to teach, but pretty soon he was immersed in the discussion and couldn't extricate himself. Ai Hui was very familiar with the swordplay system, and he had many interesting questions pertaining to swordplay.

The old man was very much inspired, and his gains were plentiful.

For example, Ai Hui had asked that if both swordplay and spirit energy had a separation between the yin and the yang, then why didn't elemental energy have such a differentiation?

This question had stumped the old man. He pondered over it for a few days and finally gained a few vague ideas. He wanted to discuss it with Ai Hui and widen his train of thoughts. However, much to his surprise, a few days had passed, and Ai Hui did not show up.

The old man felt uneasy. Where did this youngster go?

He could not stop himself from running straight to the embroidery workshop.

Upon rushing into the workshop, he was prepared to shout his head off when he suddenly saw something out of the corner of his eyes. His woman and Mingxiu were standing outside the workshop's window in rapt attention.

The old man forcefully refrained himself from yelling, tiptoed to the side of the old woman, and looked through the window.

His eyes widened.

Chapter 97: Embroidery Genius

The workshop was filled with rising mist. Ai Hui, who was wrapped with the Blood Bandage, was fully focused. His actions were extremely slow—slow to the point that it was unable to detect his movements with the naked eye. However, his body had seamless coordination, as if he was a statue of a mummy that exuded strength and beauty.

The silk was as fine as hair. It was wrapped around the tip of his finger while the other end was immersed in the hot boiler.

Behind Ai Hui was a chunk of completed silk. However, the mist kept rising, and the old man couldn't discern it clearly. But judging from the number of bundles, it was definitely of considerable length.

What the old man's eye could see was that its length was already more than three meters.

The old man swallowed hard. With a heart filled with anticipation, he lowered his voice and asked, "How long is it?"

"No idea." Han Yuqin did not spare him a glance. Her gaze was filled with passion as her gaze never left Ai Hui.

Embroidery genius!

If anyone were to tell her now that Ai Hui was not an embroidery

genius, she would use the word "Master" and bash that person's face till it was filled with blood without a second thought. Even if it were the old man who dared to argue—she would still bash his face!

How difficult was it to create Twilight Silk? Even Han Yuqin did not wish to torment herself with this problem. It was a time-consuming, arduous, and thankless task. Ai Hui the novice, who had just opened his natal residence, could actually extract such a long strand of silk. If this wasn't considered a genius, then what was?

Both comprehending the [Twin Weaving Technique] and extracting Twilight Silk were not things a newcomer who had just opened his natal residence could achieve.

Han Yuqin's primary motive for Ai Hui to try his hand in peeling the silk cocoons was to use it as a form of training. From the start, she did not think that Ai Hui would be able to extract Twilight Silk that was of value.

However, Ai Hui had done it.

She did not know how Ai Hui had managed to do it, just like how she didn't know how he had managed to comprehend the [Twin Weaving Technique].

She spared the old man a glance. Alright, while the old man was so-so in other aspects, his taste in choosing a disciple was good! She should think of ways to pry Ai Hui over from the old man's hand.

This wasn’t the time to talk about the relationship between a husband and wife—they could not waste the young chap’s talent.

The old man was still relatively easy to appease—she just needed to weep and act coquettishly. With that, she presumed that the old man would find it hard to escape from her clutches. Ai Hui, however, would be more difficult.

What a headache. Hmph. It was all the old man’s fault! He had taken a disciple, but he was such a difficult chap! This pair of old and young had no good points to them!

The old man did not notice that his partner was looking at him weirdly. He suddenly thought of Ai Hui’s disappearance over the past few days and reacted with a face of shock. "He was here for the past few days?"

"If not here, then where else would he be? Do you look down on my workshop so much?" The old lady narrowed her eyes; she was ready to counter-attack.

The old man had abundant experience in such debates, and he immediately praised the old woman. "How could I? Your workshop must be a gem of feng shui, or else how could this chap have such fast improvements? The credit must go to you!"

The old woman saw that the old man was not caught in her trap and said unwillingly, "I saw that Xiao Hui was rather interested in embroidery. Otherwise, he would not stay as well."

The old man gave a silent cheer and continued with a poised expression, "Everything is dependent on his interests. Embroidery is a respectable profession, and the money flow is very large. Back then, I was supportive of your profession as well."

The old man said these sentences smoothly, and old woman could only glare at him.

Wang Shouchuan was secretly pleased. Over this period, he had had many in-depth discussions with Ai Hui over training. He had already made out that Ai Hui belonged to actual combat. Ai Hui's interest towards those theories was not because he liked the theories of elemental energy—it was because understanding these principles would benefit his training. Once he understood the principle, Ai Hui's next move was always to think of how to use those special traits in battle.

This chap was simply too shocking.

Wang Shouchuan had finally become clear of something, and that was that Ai Hui's learning about elemental energy and training revolved around a common theme: how to achieve success in battle.

To tell the truth, the idealistic Wang Shouchuan did not really like the fact that his disciple had such a purpose to learning, but he could only sigh when he thought of what Ai Hui had been through.

As such, he was confident that Ai Hui would not make embroidery his own profession. Ai Hui would learn embroidery for

the sake of earning money and to enrich himself. Ai Hui would also learn embroidery to create outstanding equipment, but he would definitely not be like his own partner and view embroidery as his own life.

Wang Shouchuan was extremely clear on this point. As such, he was not concerned over his partner's thoughts.

Suddenly, Wang Shouchuan noticed Ai Hui's position and became surprised. "Was he always in this position?"

Ai Hui's position was very unique. His left leg was in front while his right leg was at the back, forming a bow-like stance. His left hand was clenched around his waist, and his right arm was stretched straight, while his forefinger and middle finger were pinched together like a sword.

Wang Shouchuan was a knowledgeable teacher. At one glance, he could see that Ai Hui was using his hand as an invisible sword.

Using the hand as an invisible sword was a common technique used by ancient swordsmen. However, there was no swordsman now, and thus, it was seldom seen. While elementalists would also use swords and some form of swordplay, it was completely different to that of ancient swordsmen.

"Nope, he hasn't moved." Only then did Han Yuqin realize that Ai Hui was in a unique posture, and she couldn't help but ask, "Is there any reasoning behind this posture?"

The five residences and eight palaces did not have a history of thousands of years, and the existence of embroidery was even shorter. As for extracting silk, it was even more unknown, and there weren't any mature and established techniques. Everyone practiced a myriad of techniques.

But Han Yuqin knew her man well. The old man had definitely observed something, and she had the utmost faith in his scholarly knowledge. It was because of this essential point that led to her falling into his clutches when they were young. She really was young and naive then.

"Invisible sword." The old man explained, "Sword training in the past made use of this invisible sword technique when they are expediting their spiritual sword."

Han Yuqin paused for a moment. She would not have thought that it was actually an ancient and unfamiliar technique like the invisible sword.

"Could the invisible sword technique still be used now?"

"It would be useless to others, but it might not be totally useless to this chap." The old man's tone was laced with smugness.

Mingxiu, who was at the side, suddenly said, "Master and Uncle-Master, Junior has finished!"

The two of them hurriedly looked over. Indeed, Ai Hui, who was

in the workshop, had stood up and was rotating his shoulder.

The three of them rushed in.

The door to the workshop was suddenly slammed open and Ai Hui, who was exercising his limbs, jumped in shock. But he soon recognized the intruders and quickly greeted, "Teacher, Mistress, Senior Mingxiu."

After maintaining the same posture for a few days, Ai Hui was experiencing an indescribable ache. The profit from the Twilight Silk was indeed hard-earned. He wondered the extent of aches for those who had to extract the silk continuously for over ten days.

With an appreciative expression, the old man said, "Not bad, your improvement is drastic."

Han Yuqin picked up the Twilight Silk and gently shook it. Her gaze was accurate as she immediately concluded, "About ten meters."

Ai Hui’s spirit suddenly rose. He clearly remembered that a ten-meter-long strand of Twilight Silk was worth two hundred thousand yuan.

There was a flicker of astonishment in Mingxiu’s gaze, "This isn’t quite right. Junior managed to extract ten meters of Twilight Silk in just three days and three nights."

Han Yuqin caught the reminder and reacted. To extract ten meters in three days and three nights suggested that he would have extracted slightly more than three meters worth of Twilight Silk daily. Han Yuqin had conducted her business with a few elementalists who extracted Twilight Silk, and their fastest speed was only two meters in one whole day.

If Ai Hui's statistics were indeed accurate, it implied that there was a fifty percent increase in efficiency. For any business, it would be considered a remarkable feat.

Embroidery genius!

It was as if those two words floated in front of Han Yuqin, dazzling and shining in gold.

Her gaze towards Ai Hui suddenly became very passionate.

Chapter 98: Bold And Imaginative

Ai Hui’s body was still filled with aches. The last time he was in such a sorry state was when he had been in the Wilderness. At that time, the troops were under attack, and he had gotten separated; however, based on his capability at that time, being alone in the Wilderness was only a road to disaster. His only option was to wait at the exact same spot, as that was also where the troop would get their replenishments.

In order to reunite with the troops, he had covered himself in mud and had lain in the sludge without moving.

Well, at that time, too, it had been three days and three nights.

In the depths of the night after three long days, his body was drenched in perspiration

Ai Hui silently wiped his beads of perspiration, and soon, his aches also started to quickly subside. A trace of joy flickered in his eyes, reflecting a confirmation of some ideas in his mind.

"Disciple, you used the invisible sword technique, right?" The old man was evidently very curious. "How did you think of using that? What was the reasoning?"

Han Yuqin and Mingxiu’s gaze turned towards him as they were filled with curiosity too.

"Yes, Teacher, that was the invisible sword technique." Ai Hui was already used to the old man's questions which were usually asked in rapid succession. The old man has displayed this trait more than once throughout those previous days of discussions.

Ai Hui organized his flow of thoughts before beginning to elaborate. "During the discussion with Teacher a few days ago, Disciple suddenly thought of the fact that the Twilight Silk needed the full concentration of the elemental energy. This process is very similar to the thrusting of a sword. It's just that this sword would be the elemental energy and it would be thrusted out at a slow and uniform speed."

The old man muttered to himself, "Seems reasonable."

Ai Hui continued, "Disciple thought whether there were any slow swords during sword training in the past? And how did they control the speed of the sword? Disciple recalled looking through the swordplay manuals and discovering the existence of the slow sword."

"Slow sword? What use does it have if the sword is slow?" Han Yuqin blurted with a face of confusion.

At present, movements and attacks were all about speed, and this was understandable, as one would not be easily defeated if they were fast. Moves or traditions that pursued slow speeds had never been heard of.

"To say it precisely, the so-called slow sword is not seeking to be

slow, but instead, it is to not be fast. If you want to hasten the process, you would not be able to achieve it. The ancient swordsmen pursued to do it steadily and achieve a better result." Ai Hui was like another person when he started to talk about the topic of swordsmanship. He continued composedly and smoothly, "So, the supposed ‘slow’ is relative but not absolute. For example, during a storm, their sword moves would be the wind. The wind would gather unceasingly which resulted in the storm. No matter how fast the speed of the wind was, its power would not be comparable to a storm. Is it that the faster the wind, the better it is to form a storm? It is not the case. In order to create a storm, you need a particular type of wind, and it is not that the faster the speed, the better it is."

The advantage of discussing with Teacher was that Ai Hui was getting better at explaining his complicated viewpoints in simpler terms.

Mingxiu’s eyes flashed. "I understand now. The slow sword that Junior is talking about is very similar to extracting the Twilight Silk. While slow elemental energy is needed to extract the Twilight Silk, in reality, it is not about being as slow as possible but instead the uniformity. The emphasis on being slow for extracting silk was to actually control the even distribution of the elemental energy in a better manner. How did Junior solve the problem of uniform velocity?"

Wang Shouchuan and Han Yuqin also nodded.

"Senior is so clever!" Ai Hui praised Mingxiu. Presently, Ai Hui seemed to be emitting a dazzling glow which was blinding to the

eyes. His usual reserved gaze was now as bright as the stars at night. "I referenced many similar swordplay manuals and discovered an unusual phenomenon. Almost all of the styles that were similar to the slow sword made use of a spiral. The styles were enlightened by how storms and whirlpools worked. After that, I discovered that when elemental energy was employed in the form of a spiral, it did not increase the speed, but instead, it caused it to lose a part of its initial speed. However, its stability increased, and the elemental energy became more concentrated and did not disperse."

Everyone in the embroidery workshop was shocked into silence.

After a moment, Ai Hui started to feel slightly uncomfortable, and he broke the silence by asking, "Did I say something wrong?"

Han Yuqin suddenly asked, "You thought of all of this by yourself?"

"Yes." Ai Hui felt somewhat embarrassed. "Disciple was just guessing."

Han Yuqin ignored him and immediately turned to the old man and shouted, "He is an embroidery genius! We should not neglect his talent!"

The old man corrected, "He is a genius in training!"

Wang Shouchuan had always felt that it was a pity that his

disciple had a slower start. However, now, he was glad that he had started late. If Ai Hui had been exposed to training and had become familiar with the five residences and eight palaces when he was young, would he still have such unorthodox, bold, and imaginative ideas?

Ai Hui's diligence and determination had given him a formidable body, while his ideas that were not confined to restrictions gave him an additional pair of wings.

Wang Shouchuan did not know the extent of Ai Hui's future success.

It was as if he saw a towering and formidable figure enveloping the sky of the future.

"Exactly, embroidery can be used in training and also in combat!" exclaimed the old lady.

"Embroidery Grandmaster, do you think you have enough fighting capabilities?"

"Wang Shouchuan! What do you mean? Do you want to fight? I will let you make a move first!"

"You are too boring. Look at our juniors; they are watching us make fools of ourselves. You can bash me up after my discussion with Ai Hui. I still have a few doubts to clarify..."

Looking at the couple, who were both flushed with anger, Ai Hui was flabbergasted. He asked uncertainly, "I.....I have a question."

The two of them immediately stopped and turned to face Ai Hui.

Ai Hui waved the Twilight Silk in his arms and asked weakly, "Can this be sold for money?"

The couple spoke in unison. "Money?"

Ai Hui eyes widened, "Don’t tell me you were lying when you said this can be sold for two hundred thousand yuan?"

"..."

The two of them suddenly stopped quarreling.

In the end, Ai Hui managed to get one hundred thousand yuan as his wages. After all, the venue and the materials used had belonged to the embroidery workshop. Ai Hui was more than happy. To be able to earn one hundred thousand yuan in just three days and three nights! Although it was hard-earned money, it was still not a small amount. And he was confident that he would be able to extract an even longer strand of silk the next time.

Most importantly, he had finally obtained a steady source of income.

He had turned to his mistress and asked if extracting silk was a form of craftsmanship.

Mistress's expression had not been very pleasant, and she had reluctantly nodded her head. Mistress had even warned him that in the embroidery workshop, extracting silk was only considered a minor task and it was not something grand.

As long as it made money, Ai Hui did not care if it was grand or not. Just wait till he could extract fifty meters worth of Twilight Silk. Hmph. He would throw out two strands of silk and hire the little girl from the noodle shop. She could learn to cook noodles from the boss of the noodles shop and then she would be able to serve him over ten bowls of noodles a day.

He would be able to get Lou Lan to simmer soup for him daily and also prepare lots of elemental energy food for him.

His mouth started watering. Ai Hui had the sudden urge to splurge. Should he get Lou Lan to boil a pot of soup today?

With this thought, Ai Hui started to increase his pace.

At the mouth of the alley, he suddenly stopped in his tracks. He looked at the silhouette of the figure near the mouth of the alley in surprise.

Hey, wasn't that Student Bangwan?

Heh heh! There are escape routes in heaven, but you refused to walk through them! There are no doors in hell, but here you are!

Ai Hui’s expression turned cold and murderous.

Chapter 99: That Expression

Hai Qing was standing respectfully outside the grass hut.

The fence was built with dried branches, and it carried an atmosphere that seemed to ward people away. The shadow cast when the sun shone upon the hut always captured Hai Qing's attention. The fence had been weaved personally by his master, who, at his cultivation level, had a profound understanding towards elemental energy. Each and every one of his movements contained deep significance.

The obscure grass hut was built by his master from scratch.

Hai Qing couldn't help but feel respectful every time he saw the grass hut.

Forty years ago, he followed his master to a barren land in the Wilderness after leaving the Avalon of Five Elements. His master had pointed at the barren ground, saying that it would be his new home and that he was going to build a grass hut at that very spot.

That year, his master, who was still not considered a grandmaster, had picked up the first dried twig, threw out the first seed, and shoveled the first shovel of earth.

For a solid five years, Master had only done that. Sometimes, he would be lost in thought while sitting on the cliff like a statue, regardless of the weather. At times, he would wander far away to find a suitable dried twig. He would also use his hands as a shovel.

His master then was slightly deranged and was as dirty as a beggar.

Hai Qing would never forget the day the grass hut was completed.

At that point, Master had hung a piece of grass curtain at the grass hut's entrance. He had then suddenly turned around and told Hai Qing with a clear gaze, "Hai Qing, I am a grandmaster now."

While Hai Qing was still caught off guard, the wood elemental energy had erupted like a volcano.

Countless of sprouts had emerged from the barren, deserted hill. The glaring sun was also replaced by dark clouds and drizzle. Grass started to grow and rapidly fill up the initially bare and tan mountain peak.

Amidst the drizzle, trees began to grow, and flowers started to bloom as if it were spring. A ray of sunlight penetrated through the dense clouds and enveloped the grass hut. Under the warm glow of the sunlight, the grass hut was not affected by the drizzle in the slightest.

At that time, Hai Qing could not control his body and had kneeled down in respect.

The initial barren mountain had become a formidable sea of green.

The grass curtain was thin, and he could vaguely make out that Master was trimming and watering the plants. His actions were smooth and leisurely, and watching him warmed Hai Qing's heart.

"Huanghun came out of the Grass Hollow so quickly?"

A voice that was as warm as jade yet without any trace of liveliness came from the back of the grass curtain.

"Yes." Hai Qing was also surprised. "When I had seen Huanghun's injuries due to the metal wind, I thought he would need a period of time to recover. I didn't expect him to come out of the Grass Hollow so quickly." Hai Qing continued respectfully, "Throughout my entire life, his innate talent is one of the best—even better than Big Chen and Mingqiu. The only person who can defeat him is probably Master. What is even rarer is that he has a competitive temperament. He is the most competitive amongst the three of them. Big Chen's character is too mild while Mingqiu is slightly playful."

Dai Gang laughed lightly. "Looks like the Duanmu family produced a mythical being, to be able to receive such high praise from our Hai Qing."

Hai Qing replied courteously, "Huanghun insisted on going back to the Induction Ground. Hai Qing will get someone to send him back."

Dai Gang replied gently, "Indeed, he should go back. At this age, the Induction Ground is the most suitable place for him. It could be

a period of wonderful memories for him in the future as well."

"Yes." Hai Qing's tone remained respectful as he continued, "The Duanmu Family's belongings have arrived."

"Put it aside first. The stone is finally going to bloom." Dai Gang's voice was as warm as spring.

Hai Qing couldn't help but expose a hint of pleasure on his face. "Congratulations, Master."

...

In Central Pine City, Duanmu Huanghun was standing hesitantly at the mouth of the alley, feeling extremely vexed. How did he manage to owe a favor to that scoundrel? Whenever he thought of it, he felt agitated to the point that he felt like killing someone.

He even made a trip to Instructor Li Wei to clarify the situation.

At that point, he was still puzzled over Instructor Li Wei's peculiar gaze towards him. However, after hearing the entire story, he had turned green.

He was lying on Ai Hui's back?

And their clothes were shattered?

He stared at Li Wei unwaveringly for a full five to six minutes, eventually giving him goosebumps.

Duanmu Huanghun stood at the mouth of the alley, hesitating for a long period of time. His mind was a mess. His pride prevented him from pretending that nothing had happened. Hai Qing had even told him that the longer he stayed in the Suspending Golden Pagoda, the harder it would have been to rescue him. Although it was not life-threatening, it would have brought about long-term harm to his body.

He clearly remembered how he had run to the Suspending Golden Pagoda.

But damn it!

Why was it the scoundrel who saved him?

He could accept it if anyone from the Induction Ground had saved him—but not Ai Hui.

Damn it!

He had been looking for an opportunity to bash that fellow up, but how could he bear to do that now? That damned fellow! Ai Hui must be very pleased now, thinking that he was a big joke.

"Isn’t this Student Bangwan?"

A familiar voice that was like a nightmare suddenly rang out from behind him. Duanmu Huanghun was like a cat whose tail had gotten stepped on, and he almost jumped out in shock.

Duanmu Huanghun, who was still in a panicked state, pretended to be calm as he turned around. Looking at that hateful face, he lifted his chin and asked haughtily, "Oh it’s you. Why are you looking for me?"

"Looking for you?" Ai Hui exaggeratedly looked around. "Hearing you say this, I thought I walked into the wrong alley for a moment. But nope, Student Bangwan is indeed unique. You are here at my house, but you're asking me why I’m looking for you?"

It was only then that Duanmu Huang reacted. His face was burning, and he couldn’t wait to dig a hole and hide. How could he make such a basic mistake?

Ai Hui was not planning on letting him off. He finally managed to get hold of Duanmu Huanghun with much difficulty. How could he let him leave before tormenting him?

"Seems like Student Bangwan did not forget that he’s indebted to me. Okay, just say it. How are you planning to repay me?" Ai Hui did not waste any time and got straight to the point. "We have to make things clear. The first is when I rescued you from the Suspending Golden Pagoda. And the second would be the compensation for my injuries."

Where did Duanmu Huanghun hear of such a compensation request before?

That’s right! It was this expression!

He was even more disgusted now. "You are indeed not a good person!"

"Not a good person? How can you say this to your savior?" Ai Hui laughed coldly and displayed some impatience. "Of course, that isn't important. I want something more practical, Student Bangwan."

Duanmu Huanghun had finally regained his composure, and he said gravely, "I owe you a favor. No matter what and when, as long as you need me to fulfill it, I will do my best."

Duanmu Huanghun gave an inward sigh of relief after making that serious promise. Although he felt that Ai Hui was loathsome, he was indeed saved by Ai Hui. His pride did not allow him to repay Ai Hui half-heartedly.

He would only have a clear conscience by making such a promise that was worth millions.

His expression was proud but dignified. This was a promise to himself.

"Just like this?"

Ai Hui stared at Duanmu Huanghun dumbly, as if he had seen a ghost.

Duanmu Huanghun, who was initially calm, became flustered and somewhat guilty under the scrutiny of Ai Hui’s gaze. He unconsciously blurted out, "Then....then two favors?"

Chapter 100: God Damn It!

Seriously, god damn it!

Ai Hui inwardly roared with anger, as if there were several wild beasts trampling about.

He seldom had such a tenuous grasp over his self-control, but today, he truly wanted to use a brick and pound it into Duanmu Huanghun's face.

He controlled his urges, but only by forcibly restraining himself.

He told himself that if Duanmu Huanghun were to sustain injuries, he wouldn't be able to receive compensation. If he could have killed him, he would have already taken action. If he could not kill him, then there was no point in beating him up. Hence, he restrained himself.

In the Wilderness, telling someone, "Since you saved me, I owe you a favor" would result only in impending death. No one knew if you would live to see the next day. By saying "I owe you a favor," not only would nobody rescue you in the future, you could also be killed that very night. In such an environment, a favor was very much worthless.

Trying to reap more than you sow?

What an ingrate!

Ai Hui's impression of Duanmu Huanghun was already set in stone. Without batting an eyelid, he continued, "Is a favor worth fifty million yuan?"

"Of course!" Duanmu Huanghun said with pride shining on his face, "How could you compare my favor to a mere fifty million?"

Indeed, he had the background to prove his worth. As the future heir of the Duanmu family and his discipleship to Dai Gang, it was not excessive of him to say that his favor was worth more than fifty million yuan.

Ai Hui restrained himself from murdering the boy, but his patience was wearing thin. "All right, I don't need anything else, just two favors. When combined, that totals one hundred million yuan."

Now Duanmu Huanghun had been rendered speechless. How could he have calculated it like this? Didn't he realize the potential usefulness of his favors? Didn't he want to be a part of the Thirteen Divisions in the future?

Fifty million yuan? Was this chap insulting him on purpose? How could his favor only be worth fifty million yuan?

No matter how stupid he was, shouldn't he at least think before speaking?

Duanmu Huanghun regarded Ai Hui with a look of despise, his gaze increasingly hateful. This chap was such a lowborn. It was already repulsive that Ai Hui was vulgar enough to desire compensation for a good deed.

An indescribable rage rose up from within Duanmu Huanghun. He felt as though a precious item he had gifted to a recipient had just been thrown to the dogs without a second thought. And he actually had the gall to ask the dog if he would like to eat such a good item.

Duanmu Huanghun's face paled, his gaze practically shooting flames.

But instead of cowering, Ai Hui only laughed. "Let's stop with the brainless crap. Do you have one hundred million yuan?"

Looking at him, Duanmu Huanghun's anger intensified. He almost blurted out a "yes," but at the last moment, a thought occurred to him and his expression changed.

Since young, he had lived a life of luxury, never lacking in money. His family invested heavily in his daily needs such as food, housing and training. Whatever he needed, his family bought for him without a second thought.

In terms of cash, however, he did not have much on hand, and neither would his family be willing to give him such a large amount like one hundred million as allowance.

Even if he wanted to, he was clueless on how to approach such a topic.

Borrow from a friend? He shook his head inwardly. If he didn't have such a hefty allowance, then neither would his friends. Furthermore, he knew them well; unlike him, who obsessed over training with no desire to chase after an extravagant lifestyle, they indulged in life's pleasures by overspending with no savings left over. He would rather rely on himself to come up with the one hundred million yuan.

Seeing the change in Duanmu Huanghun's expression, Ai Hui felt that this guy was despicable. He continued, "You don't have it, right? You're really good at blowing your own trumpet, but it's only empty talk. My judgment of you was correct. It's all right, I'll just take it as if I had rescued a dog."

In Ai Hui's mind, Duanmu Huanghun had been labeled as a hypocrite and an ingrate.

Ai Hui could not be bothered with him and swagged off without a second thought. He was a person who clearly distinguished between love and hate. If he felt that Duanmu Huanghun was not worth it, speaking more than a sentence to him was a waste of his time; and time was precious.

Duanmu Huanghun's expression alternated between green and red. He bit down on his lips viciously.

Insulting, extremely insulting! Since young, he had never felt so

insulted. Yet, he could not utter a single word of rebuttal. If the other party desired jewels or heirlooms, he would've been able to think of ways to procure them. But Ai Hui wanted cash, his achilles heel.

What a humiliation. The humiliation was indescribable. His porcelain skin flushed red as if it was burning up.

He clenched his fists until his bones crackled, and his gaze was shadowed.

All right, he'd been too optimistic. How could a lowly chap like Ai Hui be worthy of his favors?

Wasn't it just one hundred million yuan? Just you wait!

"To a useless person like you," he thought, "earning money is a difficult thing. But pretty soon, you'll come to see that earning one hundred million is an insignificant matter for a genius like me!"

Making up his mind, Duanmu Huanghun swore to himself that he would earn more money in the next few days. He would earn one hundred million yuan—No! One hundred million yuan was still not enough to match his worth.

Two hundred million! No, five hundred million!

He was going to bring five hundred million in cash and throw it into the chap's face.

His mind conjured up an image of Ai Hui, with a fawning face, kneeling like a dog next to a mountain of cash.

Abruptly, a bewitching, red flush emerged on his face. He felt his body surge with energy. That's right! This was the feeling!

"Ha ha ha ha...."

Duanmu Huanghun howled with laughter.

As Ai Hui entered the training hall, he spotted Lou Lan. The dark clouds in his heart momentarily cleared. To hell with the hypocritical ingrate. He had Lou Lan, a good sand puppet.

At that moment, a howl of maniacal laughter erupted from the direction of the alley entrance.

Lou Lan tilted his head and listened. The yellow light flashed in his eyes and after a moment, he said, "Ai Hui, this person's laughter is not very healthy. It is resounding, empty, and lacking in vital energy. There seems to be an unhealthy internal heat attacking his heart as well. He might faint. Eh, the laughter seems familiar? Where could Lou Lan have heard it?"

Plop.

Duanmu Huanghun, who stood at the mouth of the alley,

stiffened before falling face-down with a strange flush on his face.

Ai Hui snorted and said, “Who cares about him? It’s best that he fainted. Saves me the hassle of beating him up....”

Before completing his sentence, he could no longer see any trace of Lou Lan.

Where did he go?

Ai Hui looked around, then stared blankly when he saw Lou Lan standing at the entrance with Duanmu Huanghun slung over his back.

“Ai Hui, it is Student Bangwan. Luckily, Lou Lan went down to take a look,” Lou Lan happily said.

Ai Hui was on the verge of saying, “Trash like Duanmu Huanghun should be fed to the dogs.”

But seeing the passionate Lou Lan, he could not bring himself to say such words. He internally sighed, thinking, “My Lou Lan is good at everything, just that he’s too helpful.”

Ai Hui did not wish to change this trait of Lou Lan’s. In fact, he was delighted with this particular characteristic. To him, it differentiated Lou Lan from the other sand puppets who were relentless in executing their masters’ orders but indifferent towards matters unrelated to them.

Lou Lan was different, filled with curiosity and a burning passion for this world.

Lou Lan should remain as he was, yet Ai Hui's downcast eyes were as dark as the night sky.

But why did it have to be this ingrate? Looking at the unconscious Duanmu Huanghun, Ai Hui felt resentful yet conflicted.