

A Record 211

Chapter 211: Reversal

Xiong Shan slowly released the silver flying sword, which had already been completely stripped of its sword essence and spiritual nature at this point, and the sword came plummeting out of the sky before being torn to shreds by the sword qi surging throughout the sword tomb before it even had a chance to land on the ground.

Xiong Shan didn't even bother to take a glance at the destroyed flying sword, and he had already turned his attention to another curved longsword that resembled a snake.

He then extended a hand forward once again to repeat the same process.

Han Li only took a quick glance in that direction before turning his focus back to the sword array up above.

In the past, he had studied the myriad sword artwork in order to cultivate the Sword Observation Art, so he hadn't focused much of his efforts on studying the permutations of sword arrays through the artwork.

However, as he observed the sword array on this occasion, he found that he was filling in many of the gaps in his knowledge in this regard.

At its core, this sword array was constructed through the utilization of sword qi.

All arrays had a core and certain key points, and as long as one could find those key points, there would be a way to destroy or tamper with the array.

Time slowly passed by, and close to a day flew by in the blink of an eye.

Through his observation, Han Li had already found many important points on the array, but it was still impossible for him to disable the array without detection.

If he were to forcibly disable the array, that would be no different from taking his flying swords by force, so he had no choice but to continue to observe and bide his time.

During this time, Xiong Shan had already extracted the sword essence out of several hundred flying swords from several areas in the east and in the south.

At this moment, half of the sky above the grassland was riddled with flying swords that had been converted into a spiritual form.

Right at this moment, Xiong Shan flew toward an area in the western part of the grassland, then reached out and made a grabbing motion toward a giant sword with a wide blade.

At this point, his complexion was looking a little pale, indicating that this refinement process had been quite taxing on him, but his expression was glowing with elation, and there was a look of excitement in his eyes.

Meanwhile, Han Li's gaze was still fixed intently on the array up above as he carefully observed the countless sword visages in the sky.

All of a sudden, he noticed that something seemed to have changed in the sword array compared with its starting point, but he was unable to put his finger on exactly what had changed.

However, he had a feeling that this point of difference was quite possibly the only opportunity that he had to alter the array and recover his Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords.

However, the more he tried to concentrate, the more elusive that point of difference proved to be, and he was starting to feel a little agitated.

It didn't take long before Xiong Shan wiped away the marks of the original owners of all of the flying swords in the area around him

Up to this point, the majority of the flying swords on the grassland had already been converted into pure sword essence.

After converting all of the flying swords in one area into sword essence, Xiong Shan didn't immediately move onto the next area. Instead, he flipped a hand over to prepare a pair of pills that he promptly devoured before turning in Han Li's direction.

He then shifted his gaze toward the area that Zhu Feng was in, and his gaze alternated between the two areas a couple of times, as if he were deliberating which area to move onto next.

At this point, Han Li was feeling so agitated that sweat was already beginning to bead up on his forehead, but he still hadn't found a way out of this predicament.

He took a deep breath as he came to a decision. Instead of continuing to observe the sword array, he closed his eyes and forcibly infiltrated it with his spiritual sense.

As soon as his spiritual sense entered the array, Han Li instantly felt a burst of sharp pain spearing through his soul, as if there were hundreds of swords piercing into his soul at once, producing a sensation of indescribable agony.

However, he refused to back down, and he gritted his teeth as he forcibly withstood the assault with his immense spiritual sense.

Meanwhile, Xiong Shan's attention was focused entirely on the task at hand, while the other elders didn't dare to release their spiritual sense to examine the sword array for fear of incurring spiritual harm, so no one noticed what Han Li was doing.

After taking a moment to digest the two pills, Xiong Shan's complexion recovered a little, and in the end, his gaze settled on the northwestern area before he set off in that direction.

He reached out with one hand to conjure up a golden palm projection in the air, which grabbed toward one of the Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords.

The flying sword seemed to have detected the impending peril, and it began to tremble while screeching incessantly, producing a sound much like the sobs of a woman.

To Han Li, it sounded as if the sword were expressing its despair and displeasure at Han Li's inaction in its hour of need.

Right at this moment, Han Li's eyes abruptly sprang open, while a barely detectable smile appeared on his face.

In the next instant, the flying sword that was caught within the grasp of the golden palm projection abruptly ceased in its trembling and screeching, hovering in mid-air without any further movement.

The other 71 flying swords that were originally flying in all directions also fell still at once, as if they had received some type of instruction. All of them were highly focused soldiers preparing for battle, remaining completely still to conserve their energy.

Zhu Feng was initially quite glad to see that all of these unruly flying swords had suddenly settled down, but for some reason, a hint of foreboding then suddenly welled up in his heart.

Sure enough, his intuition proved to be correct.

Right as the golden palm projection was about to completely close itself around the Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Sword, a loud thunderclap suddenly rang out as it released a massive halo of golden lightning that forced the golden palm projection open.

At the same time, the other 71 Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords also began to flash with golden lightning as they struggled free from their restraints in unison before flying toward the remaining flying sword.

Bursts of rumbling thunderclaps rang out as the 71 flying sword tore the golden palm projection apart with formidable golden lightning to reunite with the trapped flying sword.

"What are you doing, you idiots? Restrain the other swords!" Xiong Shan roared in a furious voice.

He thought that this was yet another wave of instinctive resistance that the flying swords were putting up, and he began to reprimand Zhu Feng and the others for their incompetence. Unbeknownst to him, it wasn't that Zhu Feng was unwilling to restrain the flying swords. Instead, he was physically unable to.

Right as Xiong Shan's voice trailed off, dazzling arcs of golden lightning erupted out of the 71 Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords in unison, and they transformed into 72 streaks of golden light that shot forth through the air, escaping Zhu Feng's control before flying toward the eastern region of the sword tomb.

Zhu Feng was greatly alarmed to see this, and he hurriedly tried to make amends, but the flying swords were extremely fast, reaching the eastern part of the grassland before he or Xiong Shan had a chance to react.

After reaching their destination, the 72 flying swords suddenly dispersed in different directions rather than breaking out of the array, and they flew through the air in a series of profound trajectories, forming a small sword array within the Thousand Edge Spirit Gathering Sword Array.

The newly formed sword array began to radiate dazzling light that illuminating the sword array up above, converting all of the golden lines of the sword array in the sky into sword qi that surged toward the Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords.

Almost in the exact same instant, all of the sword qi in the entire sword tomb was stirred up into a frenzy, and the entire Thousand Edge Spirit Gathering Sword Array also underwent an astonishing change.

It was as if the entire array had suddenly undergone a reversal in this instant.

Xiong Shan immediately flew onto the scene, and he was just about to intervene when he suddenly threw up a mouthful of blood and began to plummet out of the sky. His aura was closely tied to the sword array, so he had suffered backlash from the array's reversal.

By the time he steadied himself, it was already too late.

The other elders were also quite alarmed by this turn of events, and everyone was at a loss for what to do. As for the Grand Ascension and Body Integration Stage disciples, they couldn't have done anything even if they wanted to.

Meanwhile, Mo Xie was observing the unfolding situation from outside the array, and he did notice some abnormalities in advance, but he had only brushed it off as natural changes to be expected within the sword array and didn't plan on doing anything.

Hence, the only person who knew what to expect was Han Li.

Earlier, he had forcibly withstood the resistance from the sword array to inspect the array's internal condition, and he had noticed that the circulation and distribution of sword qi within the array had changed.

He noticed that after Xiong Shan had converted most of the flying swords into sword essence, the concentration of sword qi in the areas that those flying swords were situated in had increased significantly, resulting in some degree of imbalance.

Hence, he had rapidly enhanced this imbalanced state using the sword array created by the Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords, resulting in a complete reversal of the Thousand Edge Spirit Gathering Sword Array.

The process sounded simple enough, but it was actually extremely difficult to execute.

Firstly, it required an extremely high level of sensitivity toward changes in the existing sword array, thereby allowing one to sense minute changes in sword qi.

Secondly, precise timing was required to reverse the array. Otherwise, the reversal attempt would most likely end in failure.

Finally, the small sword array used to exacerbate the imbalance in sword qi came from the existing sword array, so the two were closely connected and could resonate with one another.

Not even the slightest mistake could be made in this entire process, and only then could the sword array be reversed. Otherwise, the sword array would merely be destroyed instead.

The hundreds of streaks of sword essence that were hanging in the air suddenly seemed to have been summoned by something, and they began to fly through the sky along a series of strange trajectories.

Looking on from afar, a thought suddenly occurred to Mo Xie, and he looked up at the sword array in the sky to find that the trajectories followed by the streaks of sword essence perfectly matched the lines of the array.

At this point, a giant funnel-shaped purple vortex had already taken shape at the sword array formed by the Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords, and sword qi was surging incessantly within the vortex alongside flashes of golden lightning.

Hundreds of streaks of pure sword essence were converging toward the azure vortex, accompanied by countless streaks of peerlessly sharp swordlight, presenting a marvelous visual spectacle to behold.

Chapter 212: Escape

This type of pure sword essence that was devoid of the marks of the former owners was like the best type of supplement that existed for flying swords, being both extremely nutritious and very easy to digest.

In the blink of an eye, the majority of the sword essence had been absorbed by the 72 Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords.

All of the flying swords began to vibrate violently while screeching in unison, as if they were crying out in elation.

At this point, the sword array that had been completely reversed by the Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords had also completely spiraled out of control, and the remaining flying swords that were yet to have their marks erased seemed to have been encouraged as they began struggling frantically once again.

Xiong Shan was barely able to contain his fury upon seeing this, and he roared in an enraged voice, "Restrain those flying swords, you fools! What are you all waiting for?"

Aside from the elders that were still overseeing the remaining areas, all of the other elders immediately unleashed their abilities in unison, trying to stop the wave of swords that was surging incessantly toward the vortex.

However, these arrays had only been designed to counteract resistance from a small number of flying swords at a time, yet at this point, virtually all of the flying swords on the grassland had gone on a collective rampage, and it was impossible to stop them all.

"Please assist me, Fellow Daoist Mo Xie. I'll be sure to reward you handsomely after the event!" Xiong Shan yelled, then gritted his teeth as he made a hand seal before raising his palms to the heavens.

A loud clang rang out as the golden longsword that was plunged into the altar rose up from the ground while radiating bright golden light, then immediately sped toward him.

As soon as the sword left the sword offering platform, the entire array ceased to function any longer, and the sword array in the sky also vanished as a result.

After a brief moment of hesitation, Mo Xie reached out with both hands, and a string of buzzing rang out as around a dozen black longswords flew out of his sleeves.

All of the swords had black lightning flashing around them, and they began to fly into the wave of swords.

At this point, the Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords were already lapping up the final bits of sword essence in the air.

All of a sudden, a resounding boom rang out as a massive golden pillar of lightning that was over 100 feet thick and in excess of 10,000 feet in height rose up from the azure vortex, piercing straight into the heavens like the spear of a lightning god.

A burst of earth-shattering rumbling rang out up above, and the layers of restrictions encompassing the entire grassland were torn apart one after another to produce an enormous hole in the sky.

Meanwhile, the lightning spear only appeared for an instant before disintegrating into countless specks of golden light.

Lightning continued to flash over the Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords as countless arcs of golden lightning connected together, intertwining to form a massive azure sword that was over 100 feet in length.

As soon as the giant sword took shape, it immediately aimed its own tip at the enormous hole in the sky, and azure light flashed over its blade as it prepared to fly toward the hole while a burst of spatial ripples proliferated outward around it.

Right at this moment, an extremely sharp screeching sound suddenly rang out, striking sharp pain into everyone's eardrums, and some of the Body Integration Stage disciples instantly fell unconscious on the spot with blood seeping out of their ears.

"Come back!" Xiong Shan roared, and in the next instant, a massive golden sword projection abruptly appeared out of thin air before slashing down upon the giant azure sword.

A resounding clang rang out as the sword projection clashed against the azure sword, sending powerful shockwaves erupting in all directions.

A golden halo surged through the air from the point where the two swords clashed, spreading in all directions.

Everyone felt a burst of shockwaves sweep through the air overhead, and as they looked up, they were greeted by the sight of a clear chasm in the sky. It wasn't that the space itself had been torn apart. Instead, the shreds of clouds and sword qi in the sky, and even the dust particles in the air, had been sliced apart by the golden halo.

Immediately following Xiong Shan's bonded flying swords were the dozen or so black lightning longswords unleashed by Mo Xie. Unfortunately, they were struck by the expanding golden halo along the way, and all of them were sent flying back with tremendous force.

As the owner of the swords, Mo Xie was naturally dealt a heavy blow as well, and he hurriedly made a beckoning motion to withdraw the flying swords, following he took no further action and began to watch from the sidelines.

Right at this moment, an extremely clear crack rang out in everyone's ears.

The golden sword projection was abruptly split down the middle before shattering into countless pieces, and two halves of a golden flying sword came falling out of the sky, having been completely robbed of its former luster.

At the same time, the giant azure sword plunged straight through the hole in the sky before flying away, vanishing in the blink of an eye.

Xiong Shan threw up a large mouthful of blood as he caught the two halves of his bonded flying swords, and he was livid with fury.

All of the elders and disciples immediately converged around him, but no one dared to say anything, and even Mo Xie remained silent with his brows slightly furrowed.

Han Li was standing slightly back from the crowd, stabilizing his own churning aura in secret. That golden sword projection just now had been an extremely mighty attack, and although most of its force had been nullified by the enormous amount of sword essence absorbed by the Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords, Han Li was still inevitably somewhat impacted by the attack.

"The swords have gone in the northeastern direction! Hurry up and get them back!" Xiong Shan spat through gritted teeth with a furious look on his face.

Having sustained such severe damage to his bonded flying sword, he had to go into seclusion to address his own injuries as soon as possible. Otherwise, there was a very good chance that he would suffer a severe decline in his cultivation base.

Everyone immediately set off to give chase upon hearing this, only for Xiong Shan to stop them. "Hold on, they're in the northwest now... Wait, no, the southwest..."

"What's going on, Fellow Daoist Xiong?" Mo Xie asked, and the other elders were also looking on with perplexed expressions.

"I've lost track of the swords. My final connection with them has been completely severed," Xiong Shan said in a cold voice.

He then turned to look at the severely ravaged sword tomb, as well as the remaining flying swords on the grassland, of which there were fewer than 300, and his eyes were burning with fury.

He raised an arm, and his sleeve was billowing audibly despite the lack of wind as he swung his arm down in a forceful motion.

All of the remaining flying swords were instantly struck by a burst of tremendous force that sent them plunging straight into the ground.

A string of loud thumps rang out as all of the flying swords landed on the ground, plunging so deep into the earth that only their hilts were visible above the surface.

Everyone could clearly sense Xiong Shan's fury, and no one dared to do or say anything without further instructions.

Zhu Feng was the one that had been assigned to oversee the Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords, and his face had turned deathly pale, while his body was trembling uncontrollably from fear.

He was nothing more than an inner sect elder, so if Xiong Shan were to turn on him in a fit of rage, then his death would've been sealed. Even if the sect were going to punish Xiong Shan after the event, that would hardly matter to Zhu Feng when he was already dead.

Xiong Shan slowly swept his gaze over everyone's faces, and despite his fury, he still hadn't lost his rationality.

He knew that there was no way that such a reversal would've taken place in the Thousand Edge Spirit Gathering Sword Array for no reason. Someone had to have tampered with it, and there was a very good chance that the culprit was one of the 10 elders standing before him.

As the one overseeing the 72 Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords, Zhu Feng was the most suspicious one, but he wasn't the one that Xiong Shan viewed as the primary suspect.

Instead, in his eyes, the most suspicious one was Mo Xie, who had requested to be present.

Such a complex sword array was impossible to completely control, even for Xiong Shan himself, and if anyone present had the ability to reverse the array, then it could've only been Mo Xie, whose cultivation base was extremely close to his own.

Mo Xie seemed to have noticed the hint of suspicion in Xiong Shan's eyes, and he immediately protested, "You're not suspecting me, are you, Deputy Dao Lord Xiong? I didn't do a single thing aside from when you asked for my help at the end, and I didn't even release my aura at all. If I had tampered with the array, how is it possible that I managed to do so while completely bypassing your detection?"

"There's no need to get so worked up, Fellow Daoist Mo. I haven't said anything," XIONG Shan harrumphed coldly.

Despite his suspicions, he had no proof, so he couldn't pursue the matter. He wasn't a rash person. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to reach his current position.

"It looks like you still have many things to take care of today, so I won't keep you any longer. I'll come back some other time to take back what you borrowed from me. Farewell!" Mo Xie said.

Xiong Shan offered no response as he raised a hand to cast a few incantation seals in a certain direction, and the space there rippled as a ball of white light that was several dozen feet in size appeared.

Mo Xie cupped his fist in a parting salute toward Xiong Shan, then flew into the ball of white light in a flash.

Xiong Shan watched as Mo Xie departed from the sword tomb, then withdrew his gaze and began to inspect the faces of the 10 elders standing before him with a frosty look on his face.

It was as if the atmosphere had completely congealed, and no one dared to utter even a single sound.

Just like everyone else, Han Li's head was slightly lowered to avoid Xiong Shan's gaze.

After a long silence, Xiong Shan's gaze ultimately settled on Zhu Feng. "Do you not have anything to say, Elder Zhu Feng?"

Zhu Feng's heart jolted violently upon hearing this, and he began stuttering in a fearful manner. "No... I... But..."

Xiong Shan scoured the entire sword tomb with his spiritual sense in secret once again, but was still unable to find any clues, and he continued, "I already warned all of you earlier. Anyone who drops the ball will not be granted mercy! You were the one who made this grave error, so I can't just let you get away with this without some form of compensation."

"H, how do you want me to compensate you, Deputy Dao Lord Xiong?" Zhu Feng asked as cold sweat poured profusely down his face.

"Given the massive losses I've incurred, you wouldn't be able to cover everything even if you sold everything in your possession. I'm not a cruel and heartless person, so I'll only ask for 6,000 merit points and 300 Immortal Origin Stones as compensation," Xiong Shan declared in a cold and implacable voice.

Zhu Feng almost slumped down onto the ground upon hearing this.

This was more than everything that he currently owned, and forcing him to fork out such enormous compensation hurt worse than killing him.

However, he had no choice but to accept this outcome.

Everyone else present was grimacing internally, denouncing Xiong Shan for his cruel demands while also celebrating the fact that they weren't in Zhu Feng's shoes.

Chapter 213: Finally Back

"D, Deputy Dao Lord Xiong, I've managed to gather 6,000 merit points during my many years in the sect, but I don't have 300 Immortal Origin Stones in my possession... Would I be able to use top-grade spirit stones instead?" Zhu Feng asked in a careful manner.

"I can give you some time. Gather everything for me in 10 years, and I'll let this matter slide," Xiong Shan said in a cold voice.

"But... Alright," Zhu Feng replied with a sullen expression.

Even after extorting Zhu Feng, Xiong Shan's mood didn't improve much, and he declared, "Do not speak a single word of this to anyone after you leave this place. Otherwise, you'll have to answer directly to me. Piss off now!"

Everyone hurriedly vowed not to speak of this matter to anyone, then sheepishly departed, not daring to say anything despite not receiving any merit points for their efforts.

After emerging from the Heavenly Sword Tomb, Han Li and Qi Liang traveled alongside one another in silence. Upon reaching the teleportation hall, the two of them exchanged farewells with wry smiles before returning to their respective mountains.

After returning to his cave abode on the Crimson Dawn Peak, Han Li immediately examined his own body to ensure that no mark had been planted in him by Xiong Shan, following which he entered his secret chamber to recuperate.

Several days later.

In the northeastern region of the Bell Toll Mountain Range, there was a thin elderly man in a white robe with his hair arranged into a Daoist bun. He was standing on a bare rock on the summit of a lone mountain near the edge of the mountain range, looking out toward the sky in the southwest.

There was nothing in the pristine sky in that direction, but the elderly man's eyes were glowing with excitement, while his face was also alight with anticipation.

Moments later, a hint of azure light suddenly appeared in the distant sky.

Over the course of several seconds, the hint of azure light gradually expanded, revealing itself to be a massive azure sword.

"There they are!"

The elderly man's eyes lit up as a faint smile appeared on his face.

In the next instant, the elderly man released his aura without any further concealment, revealing his early-True Immortal Stage cultivation base in its full glory.

He was originally an itinerant cultivator residing on an island outside of the Ancient Cloud Continent, and he had only recently arrived near the Bell Toll Mountain Range. His plan was to rest for a few days on this lone mountain, but while meditating, he detected a peculiar flying sword with an aura comparable to that of an immortal treasure flying rapidly toward him.

As a proficient sword cultivator himself, the elderly man could sense that the flying sword seemed to have no owner, and he was immediately driven by his greed to try and intercept the sword.

As the flying sword continued to approach, the elderly man rose up into the air as a streak of dazzling white light, hurtling directly toward the sword.

Even though the giant sword formed by the Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords wasn't being controlled by Han Li, it still put up instinctive resistance as lightning began to crackle over its surface.

The elderly man paid no heed to this as he reached out toward the hilt of the giant sword with both hands enveloped in spiritual light.

All of a sudden, a burst of piercing golden light erupted from the giant azure sword alongside a thunderous boom, and countless serpentine arcs of golden lightning sprang forth in a frenzy, encompassing the entire area in a radius of several hundred feet. An airtight ball of golden lightning instantly took shape, and a blood-curdling howl rang out from within.

Immediately thereafter, the ball of golden lightning vanished, and a charred black corpse that was releasing a plume of white smoke fell out of the sky.

Even before it had a chance to land on the ground, it was blown into black dust by the wind and scattered in all directions.

As for the giant azure sword, it split up again into 72 flying swords amid a flash of light before descending into a valley down below, seemingly having overexerted itself.

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Two months later, an azure-robed young man appeared above an extremely secluded snow-covered valley on the northeastern outskirts of the Bell Toll Mountain Range.

The man slowly descended into the valley, and it was none other than Han Li, who had tracked the Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords all the way here thanks to his spiritual connection with them.

He was concerned about Xiong Shan conducting surveillance on him, so he had spent the entire first month after returning to his cave abode cultivating in his secret chamber.

Sure enough, Xiong Shan didn't gloss over any potential suspects, and he had even sent people to Han Li's territory in secret, presumably to conduct surveillance on him.

It was most likely the case that all of the other elders, including Mo Xie, had received the same treatment, and all of them had no choice but to turn a blind eye to this in order to avoid arousing further suspicions.

Only after verifying that he was no longer under Xiong Shan's scrutiny did Han Li leave the Crimson Dawn Peak in secret before arriving here.

Following his descent into the valley, he immediately flew over to a green pond at the end of the valley before drawing to a halt.

He swept his gaze over the pond to find that its surface appeared to have been quite tranquil, but in reality, there were countless tiny streaks of sword qi surging within it. As a result, any rocks, leaves, or pieces of wood that fell into the pond were instantly shredded into countless pieces.

Han Li knew that the Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords were in this pond, and he immediately summoned them to come out.

A string of splashes rang out as the originally tranquil surface of the pond instantly began to churn like boiling water, following which the 72 flying swords flew out one after another, then circled around in the air momentarily before flying toward Han Li.

A faint smile appeared on Han Li's face upon seeing this.

The flying swords were all glowing with azure light as they danced joyfully around him like elated children while ringing incessantly.

"You're all finally back!"

Han Li exhaled as he raised a hand to stroke the flying swords one by one, as if they were the shoulders of old friends, and countless emotions welled up in his heart as he felt their familiar yet also slightly unfamiliar auras.

Due to the fact that the flying swords had absorbed the pure sword essence of several hundred powerful flying swords, their auras had naturally been significantly elevated. However, as a safety precaution, Han Li unleashed a secret technique to conceal their auras rather than testing out their powers right away.

After making sure that no one else would be able to detect the flying swords, he carefully stowed them into his own body one by one.

Back in the Mortal Realm, he only had two flying swords taken from him by an elder devil, and he was already ecstatic upon recovering them, so he was naturally even more elated to have recovered a whole set of 72 lost flying swords.

As for the significant increase in power experienced by the flying swords, that was just an added bonus.

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Shortly thereafter, Han Li returned to the Crimson Dawn Peak without alerting anyone, and as soon as he returned, he immediately instructed Meng Yungui to gather everyone.

Inside a certain hall in the courtyard, the 10 servants bowed in unison as they greeted, "We pay our respects to Elder Li."

"Over these past years, all of you have kept my cave abode in good order and haven't fallen behind in your cultivation, either, and that's quite commendable. Yungui, take these pills and split them with everyone," Han Li said with his hands clasped behind his back.

As soon as his voice trailed off, he swept a sleeve through the air, and a burst of azure light flew into Meng Yungui's grasp in a flash, containing a small storage bracelet.

Meng Yungui and the others were ecstatic to see this, and they immediately extended another collective bow of gratitude. "Thank you, Elder Li!"

Han Li didn't often appear before them, but whenever he did, he would always bestow upon them some pills that were extremely beneficial for the cultivation of Core Formation cultivators, for which they were extremely grateful.

In particular, Meng Yungui had successfully manifested a nascent soul during this time and became a Nascent Soul cultivator.

"From this day forth, I'm going into seclusion, and the Crimson Dawn Peak will be shut off for some time. I'm going to be activating all of the restrictions, and I won't be seeing any guests," Han Li instructed.

Meng Yungui and the others hurriedly gave affirmative responses upon hearing this.

"Sun Buzheng, you'll be responsible for overseeing matters in the cave abode during my seclusion," Han Li said.

"Rest assured, Elder Li, I'll be sure to perform my duties diligently," Sun Buzheng immediately said.

"Yungui, you possess the highest cultivation base out of everyone, so I'm going to give you a mission. Go out and search for rare and exotic spirit plants and seeds or seedlings for me. The more types you find, the better, and don't worry about the costs too much," Han Li instructed.

Meng Yungui faltered slightly upon hearing this, then immediately accepted the order.

Han Li flipped a hand over to produce a storage treasure that he handed to Meng Yungui as he continued, "There are some spirit stones in here, as well as two treasures for your protection. If you do a good job, you can keep those two treasures as a reward."

Meng Yungui injected his spiritual sense into the storage treasure, and an elated look immediately appeared in his eyes as he said, "Thank you, Elder Li! I'll be sure to do my best!"

Envious looks appeared in everyone's eyes upon seeing this.

The treasures inside the storage treasure had to have been quite powerful. Otherwise, they wouldn't have gotten such an excited reaction out of Meng Yungui.

In particular, Sun Buzheng was feeling both envious and regretful.

His cultivation base had originally been slightly higher than Meng Yungui's, but during these past years, Meng Yungui had made a series of consecutive breakthroughs, reaching the Nascent Soul Stage before him.

If he had known that this would happen, he would've worked even harder in his cultivation, and perhaps he would've been the one to receive such a reward then.

Meng Qianqian was staring directly at Han Li with an unblinking gaze, and there was a hint of anticipation glowing in her eyes. She had changed into a pristine white dress, giving her a pure and gorgeous appearance.

"Alright, you can all go now," Han Li said to everyone with a smile before turning and making his way back into his cave abode.

Everyone immediately extended a collective bow once again. "Farewell, Elder Li."

However, Meng Qianqian didn't bow with everyone else, and her face was gradually growing paler and paler.

A faint thump rang out as the gate of the cave abode swung shut.

After speaking to Meng Yungui for a moment, Sun Buzheng picked out a few people to accompany him, and before long, they were busy at work.

Meanwhile, Meng Qianqian was staring at the shut stone gate while biting down on her own lower lip with a sense of melancholy in her heart.

Meng Yungui could tell that she was feeling very dejected, and he approached her before asking, "What's wrong, Qianqian?"

"Nothing," Meng Qianqian replied as she lowered her head, and a film of tears had already appeared over her eyes.

That entire time, Han Li hadn't even taken a single glance at her.

Meng Yungui was aware of his sister's thoughts, and he sighed, "Elder Li is not from the same world as us. You should be well aware of this..."

Meng Qianqian shuddered slightly upon hearing this, but she then raised her head with a determined look in her eyes.

Meng Yungui could only shake his head and heave a faint sigh upon seeing this.

On the outside, Meng Qianqian had a very delicate appearance, but she was actually very stubborn and unyielding on the inside, and he was powerless to dissuade her once she had her mind set on something.

In any case, perhaps this wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

Meng Yungui set these thoughts aside with a faint smile and began to ponder how he was going to complete the task assigned to him by Han Li.

Chapter 214: Six Time Dao Runes

A short while later, one restriction after another was activated on the Crimson Dawn Peak, producing a series of light barriers of different colors over the entire mountain.

After doing all of that, Han Li made his way into the secret chamber of his cave abode before taking a seat with his legs crossed.

At this moment, the 72 recovered Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords were enveloped by pure immortal spiritual power inside his body, and were being slowly refined by his nascent flame.

They had been separated from him for many years, and even though their power had significantly increased from absorbing so much sword essence in the Heavenly Sword Tomb, their spiritual nature had become quite chaotic, so it would've been unwise to use them right away. Hence, he had to carefully refine them first.

After a brief moment of contemplation, he flipped a hand over to produce his Heaven Controlling Vial before inspecting it closely right in front of his eyes.

At this point, it had been confirmed to him beyond a reasonable doubt that the Heaven Controlling Vial contained the laws of time.

Back in the Spirit Realm, he had obtained a replica vial from Ma Liang, and by combining the two, he was able to activate the Heaven Controlling Vial to a slight degree to unleash attacks. However, something had to have changed during the 300 years that were missing from his memory, and he found that he was no longer able to use the vial in such a manner.

After a brief pause, Han Li summoned his Mantra Treasured Axis behind him amid a flash of golden light.

With a wave of his hand, the Mantra Treasured Axis flew to his side before beginning to rapidly revolve on the spot.

Golden ripples spread through the air to completely encompass the Heaven Controlling Vial, and there were barely detectable hints of time law powers surging into the vial.

Meanwhile, Han Li continued to scrutinize the Heaven Controlling Vial intently, but the vial displayed no reaction whatsoever.

After some contemplation, Han Li switched to a different hand seal, and the Mantra Treasured Axis began to glow far brighter than before, but it also shrank down into a small golden ball in the blink of an eye before flying into the vial at his behest.

A layer of translucent light flashed over the surface of the Heaven Controlling Vial, and several faint runes appeared on its surface, only to immediately vanish without a trace in the next instant.

Han Li's brows furrowed slightly as he heaved a faint sigh.

Seeing as the Mantra Axis Scripture was a cultivation art that concerned the laws of time and he had already manifested a Mantra Treasured Axis, he had thought that perhaps he would be able to use it to control the vial to some degree or trigger some type of change in the vial.

However, it appeared that this was not the case, or perhaps this was because he simply hadn't yet reached a sufficiently advanced level in the cultivation art.

Han Li shook his head as he abandoned this endeavor, then summoned that giant ape puppet before instructing it to continue to harvest green liquid and water his spirit plants with the liquid while he was in seclusion.

As for the crystals required for his Earthly Deity Avatar's cultivation, he would create those during the breaks in his seclusion to ensure that his avatar could continue to refine heavy water at an enhanced rate.

Another thought then suddenly occurred to him, and he made his way into another stone chamber before setting up a small spirit gathering array. After that, he placed the giant egg that he had obtained from Fang Pan at the center of the array, hoping that the slow and steady nourishment of spiritual qi would be enough to hatch the egg.

After making all of these arrangements, Han Li returned to his secret chamber to meditate once again.

This meditation lasted three days and three nights, and once he had completely settled his mental state and primed himself into the best condition, faint golden light began to radiate from his skin, instantly illuminating the entire secret chamber.

Over three years passed by in the blink of an eye.

On this day, countless dark clouds suddenly appeared in the sky above the Crimson Dawn Peak, and the world's origin qi was churning violently as it converged toward the cave abode.

Inside the cave abode, Han Li's entire body was radiating dazzling golden light, and three incredibly bright specks of golden light had appeared on his lower abdomen, greedily devouring the abundant world's origin qi in the surrounding area.

He had opened up yet another immortal acupoint, and there were currently six Time Dao Runes on the Mantra Treasured Axis behind him.

Powerful time law fluctuations were emanating from the Mantra Treasured Axis, and these fluctuations were far more potent than the ones released by the axis back when it only had four Time Dao Runes.

Han Li's eyes sprang open as an elated look appeared on his face.

He was naturally quite glad that he had opened up another immortal acupoint, but what he was even more ecstatic about was that he had finally manifested six Time Dao Runes.

This was a stage that cultivators of the Mantra Axis Scripture normally only reached after opening 12 immortal acupoints!

According to the cultivation art's description, the Mantra Treasured Axis would receive a significant increase in power with each set of six Time Dao Runes that it manifested, and Han Li couldn't wait to test out the power of this ability.

The Mantra Treasured Axis began to rapidly revolve at his behest, and countless golden ripples spread through the air in all directions, but were only able to reach about 100 feet away from him.

It seems like as long as I'm still on the first level of the cultivation art, no matter how many Time Dao Runes I attain, the effective range of the Mantra Treasured Axis will only be 100 feet. Perhaps the range will only increase once I reach the second level, Han Li thought to himself.

Inside the area encompassed within the golden ripples, everything had slowed down significantly, including the flow of air and the world's origin qi.

A layer of blue light appeared in Han Li's eyes, allowing him to see this slowing effect even more clearly.

The colorful world's origin qi was clashing against itself like waves before dispersing in different directions.

Everything was clearly visible, and it was quite a mystifying experience.

Even though everything around him had slowed down, he remained completely unaffected himself, so in a way, it was as if his speed had increased by twofold.

In the next instant, he appeared several dozen feet away in a flash, and the changes in the surrounding air and the world's origin qi around him triggered by his movement were all clearly visible to him.

A faint smile appeared on his face as he flipped a hand over to produce a small ball of heavy water.

With a flick of his finger, the heavy water instantly exploded into countless drops that erupted in all directions.

The speed at which these drops of heavy water was traveling had also been halved, making every single one of them clearly visible to Han Li.

With a sweep of his sleeve, Han Li was able to easily intercept all of the drops of heavy water before recombining them into a ball and stowing it away again.

Even though the effects of the Mantra Treasured Axis were very clearly laid out in the Mantra Axis Scripture, he would still have to do a lot more experimentation before he could completely master this ability.

In the next instant, Han Li raised a hand, and countless arcs of silver lightning appeared over the center of his palm.

These arcs of lightning were also completely unaffected by the Mantra Treasured Axis.

He spread his fingers open, and several arcs of silver lightning sprang forth, crashing into a wall of the secret chamber.

A layer of translucent white light instantly appeared on the wall before flashing sluggishly a few times, and the arcs of silver lightning extended in all directions over the wall before vanishing.

The sluggishness of the white light and the rapid movement of the silver lightning presented a stark contrast.

Han Li nodded to himself even upon seeing this. Even after the silver lightning had left his hand, it still remained completely unaffected.

If the Mantra Treasured Axis were to slow down his own attacks as well, then it would've been an entirely pointless ability.

He then experimented with his spiritual sense and attacks from his treasures, only ceasing the experiments once he confirmed that none of those things were adversely affected, either.

Han Li then summoned the giant ape puppet into the secret chamber, and as a result of the Mantra Treasured Axis's influence, the sound of the puppet's footsteps was elongated by twofold, producing a very strange sound.

Before long, the giant puppet had drawn to a halt outside the area encompassed within the golden ripples.

"Attack me," Han Li instructed.

The giant ape puppet immediately opened its mouth to blast forth a thick pillar of blue lightning. At the same time, it raised a hand to send five arcs of blue lightning hurtling toward Han Li from its fingertips.

The attacks were quite weak, but the speed of lightning was still nothing to be scoffed at.

However, as soon as the lightning came into contact with the golden ripples, its speed was instantly halved.

This didn't sound like much, but in reality, it was an enormous difference.

Han Li sidestepped the attacks without using any movement techniques, and the arcs of lightning flew right past him without even brushing his clothes.

Han Li was very excited to see this, and he instructed the giant ape puppet to unleash some other types of attacks, all of which also had their speed halved.

After this string of experiments, he had ascertained most of the properties of the Mantra Treasured Axis. He had also thought of multiple ways to use the Mantra Treasured Axis, and the more he thought about it, the more excited he became.

If he could use this ability appropriately, then he would stand a chance at defeating even late-True Immortal cultivators.

However, he then suddenly noticed something a little disheartening. He hadn't been using his Mantra Treasured Axis for very long at all, yet a large chunk of his immortal spiritual power had already disappeared. It seemed that this ability was extremely taxing to use.

However, given how incredible its effects were, it made sense that it would be so taxing on the user's immortal spiritual power.

The Mantra Treasured Axis vanished in a flash at Han Li's behest, and he sat down with his legs crossed, planning to continue to cultivate.

However, before that, he instructed the giant ape puppet to fetch him his Heaven Controlling Vial, and he attempted to activate it with his Mantra Treasured Axis once again, but the outcome was still the same as last time.

A wry smile appeared on Han Li's face upon seeing this, but he quickly emptied his mind before returning to his seclusion.

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Over 20 years flew by in the blink of an eye.

The Crimson Dawn Peak remained as peaceful as ever, far removed from the lively and bustling scenes one would expect to see on some other peaks in the sect.

The red fire miasma near the mountain had already completely vanished, so the climate had returned to normal, and everywhere that wasn't encompassed under a restriction was covered in a thick layer of snow.

The boundless expanse of pristine snow presented a stunning sight to behold.

Unfortunately, there was no one on the Crimson Dawn Peak to appreciate this beautiful scenery. Everyone was busy at work, either looking after the cave abode or cultivating themselves.

On a plot of empty land at the back of the Crimson Dawn Peak, there was a crimson array that was over 100 feet in size engraved onto the ground. Numerous crimson crystals were embedded into the array, and the crystals were flashing with a fiery glow.

At the center of the array sat Meng Qianqian in a white dress.

Streaks of crimson light were rising up from the crystals before converging around her, making it appear as if she were seated within a crimson flame.

A faint sheen of sweat could be seen on her forehead, and her cheeks were a little red. She seemed to have been cultivating some type of secret technique.

Over the past two decades, her appearance hadn't changed much, but her cultivation base had already reached the late-Core Formation Stage, displaying a rate of progress that was quite extraordinary among the outer sect disciples of the Blaze Dragon Dao.

Of course, the pills bestowed upon her by Han Li and the spirit stones left to her by Meng Yungui prior to his departure played extremely important roles in this, but her resolve in her pursuit of the Great Dao was also an integral factor.

Without these mental qualities, there was no way that she wouldn't have been able to bear the loneliness and mind-numbing monotony of cultivation.

Chapter 215: Monkeys Worshiping an Immortal

Right as Meng Qianqian was cultivating, a resounding boom suddenly rang out in the distance over the entire Crimson Dawn Peak.

A thick blanket of dark clouds instantly appeared in the sky above Han Li's cave abode, and the world's origin qi converged in a frenzy, forming a spiritual qi vortex that was visible even to the naked eye.

Meng Qianqian's eyes sprang open as she turned her gaze toward Han Li's cave abode with an elated look on her face.

During the past 30 or so years, phenomena like this would appear every once in a while. At her current cultivation base, she still didn't know exactly what this entailed, but everyone speculated in private that this was a sign that Han Li was making some type of breakthrough in his cultivation.

Everyone was already accustomed to this.

Of course, this type of speculation was something that Meng Yungui expressly forbade, and he also warned everyone not to speak a single word of what they had seen here to anyone.

The interior of the secret chamber was illuminated by dazzling golden radiance, and there were seven specks of golden light shining on Han Li's lower abdomen.

They resembled seven giant mouths that were guzzling down the tremendous amount of world's origin qi nearby before gradually converting it into pure immortal spiritual power.

This rate of world's origin qi absorption was countless times faster than before, and 14 Time Dao Runes had appeared on the Mantra Treasured Axis that was slowly revolving behind Han Li.

A long while later, Han Li slowly opened his eyes, and a hint of elation appeared on his face.

Over the past two decades of arduous cultivation, he had made rapid progress, opening four immortal acupoints in rapid succession.

Over the course of just a few decades, he had opened seven immortal acupoints, and this rate of progress would've shocked even the Golden Immortal Stage dao lords.

He rose to his feet as bright golden light radiated from his body, and the 14 Time Dao Runes on the Mantra Treasured Axis behind him immediately began to release powerful time law fluctuations.

Sensing the immense law powers imbued within the Mantra Treasured Axis, Han Li was once again struck by the urge to test out its power, and he immediately flew out of his secret chamber as a streak of azure light.

As the phenomenon in the sky faded, Meng Qianqian took a deep breath, then closed her eyes as she continued in her cultivation.

Streaks of fiery light surged into her body, and her face took on a bright red complexion again while her brows furrowed slightly in pain.

Right at this moment, Han Li appeared beside her array without any warning, then released a burst of light out of his fingertip, which surged straight into Meng Qianqian's glabella.

Meng Qianqian shuddered as the redness of her face quickly faded, and she opened her eyes.

Upon spotting Han Li, she hurriedly rose to her feet before extending a curtsy. "Elder Li."

"Working hard in your cultivation is a good thing, but you can't be too ambitious. Otherwise, you'll put too much strain on your body. Too much of a good thing becomes a bad thing, understood?"

Not long after he left his cave abode, he noticed that Meng Qianqian was on the verge of qi deviation, so he decided to give her a hand.

A faint blush appeared on Meng Qianqian's face, and she forcibly composed herself as she replied, "Yes. Thank you for your guidance, Elder Li."

"Barring any mishaps, it looks like you'll also be able to manifest a nascent soul in a few years. When that time comes, I'll have other missions to assign to you," Han Li remarked before vanishing on the spot once again.

Meng Qianqian hurriedly raised her head to say something, but Han Li was already nowhere to be seen, leaving her looking around in a daze.

In a certain valley within the territory of the Crimson Dawn Peak, a streak of azure light descended out of the sky before fading to reveal Han Li.

The valley was surrounded by a ring of mountains that kept out the cold wind, so it was quite warm inside. There wasn't any snow in the valley, and instead, it was filled with grass that was interspersed with vibrant flowers.

A waterfall that resembled a white jade belt was crashing down rock that was jutting out of the stone face, sending countless water droplets splashing in all directions and making the area also rather humid.

There were several fruit trees that were laden with yellow peaches growing near the waterfall, and some monkeys chattering incessantly as they swung from tree to tree. There were dozens of these monkeys here, and they weren't afraid of Han Li at all.

Han Li paid no heed to these monkeys as he summoned his Mantra Treasured Axis amid a flash of golden light, and a layer of golden ripples spread through the air, encompassing an area with a radius of 100 feet around him, within which was half of the waterfall.

Everyone encompassed within the golden ripples instantly became significantly slower, having been reduced to a third of their original speed now that the Mantra Treasured Axis had over 12 Time Dao Runes.

One half of the waterfall continued to tumble down as normal, while the other half had been slowed down significantly, presenting a stunning sight to behold.

The nearby monkeys immediately erupted into a panic upon seeing this, and some of them were screeching in horror, while some others appeared to have been quite excited, dancing around as they yelled in excitement.

Right at this moment, a crimson monkey that was close to twice the size of the other monkeys let loose a long howl, then waved an arm through the air and began springing away.

This seemed to have been the monkey king, and all of the other monkeys immediately followed it, fleeing away into the distance.

Han Li raised an eyebrow as he made a beckoning motion with one hand, and one of the monkeys was immediately drawn to him.

A panicked look appeared on the monkey's face as it flew involuntarily toward Han Li while screeching urgently, as if it were asking its companions for help.

All of the other monkeys immediately stopped in their tracks and turned to the monkey king.

There was a bright gleam in the monkey king's eyes, indicating that it was an extremely intelligent creature, and it hesitated momentarily before slowly making its way toward Han Li.

All of the other monkeys also slowly followed along upon seeing this.

The monkey that was drawn to Han Li quickly entered the area encompassed within the golden ripples, and its flailing arms were instantly slowed to a third of their original speed, while its panicked screeches also became elongated, producing an extremely strange sound.

The monkey still had a panicked look on its face, but it was also looking quite shocked as well, clearly alarmed by the slowing of time around it.

Han Li gave a slight nod upon seeing this.

He hadn't captured the monkey for fun. Instead, he simply wanted to observe the Mantra Treasured Axis's effect on living beings.

The monkeys approached Han Li, led by their king, then fell to their knees and kowtowed to him before looking up at him with imploring expressions.

"You're quite an intelligent monkey, I see. Rest assured, I have no intention of harming your brethren," Han Li said as he gave the monkey king a slight nod, and with a sweep of his sleeve, the monkey was returned to the pack, drifting onto the ground completely unharmed.

At the same time, Han Li pointed a finger forward to release a burst of azure light, which split up into several dozen bursts, each of which surged into a monkey's body.

The azure light instantly transformed into a surge of warmth that flowed through the monkeys' bodies, providing a sense of indescribable comfort.

All of a sudden, a layer of crimson light appeared over the monkey king's body, and the light flashed a few times before fading.

A dazed look appeared in the monkey king's eyes, but it then immediately returned to its senses, and its eyes were looking even more intelligent than before as it led all of the monkeys to kowtow to Han Li once again.

It was quite a poetic scene, with the monkeys worshiping an immortal in front of a scenic waterfall.

Han Li paid no heed to the monkeys as he tested out the Mantra Treasured Axis's power for a while longer, and a pleased look appeared on his face.

If he were to face Fang Pan again in his current form, there was no way that he would've struggled anywhere near as much. In fact, he would've been able to easily defeat him.

Now that he had this Mantra Treasured Axis, he finally possessed a powerful self-preservation tool in the Immortal Realm.

After pondering something for a while, he suddenly flew back toward the summit of the Crimson Dawn Peak as a streak of azure light.

The monkey king looked on at Han Li's departing figure with a dazed expression, while the other monkeys were looking around, at a slight loss for what to do.

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Han Li quickly returned to his cave abode to continue his seclusion, and several more years passed by in the blink of an eye.

Inside the cave abode, Han Li was seated with his legs crossed, and golden light was surging over his entire body, while the seven immortal acupoints on his abdomen were flashing incessantly as they absorbed the world's origin qi that was constantly flowing into the room.

A long while later, he slowly opened his eyes, and the golden light radiating from his body faded as he furrowed his brows slightly.

Ever since he opened his seventh immortal acupoint, his rate of cultivation progression had declined quite sharply.

He wasn't actually progressing all that slowly. When compared with other True Immortals of the same cultivation base, he was still making far quicker progress, but having gotten used to the rapid progress that he was making before, this was a slightly disheartening turn of events.

Han Li rose to his feet as clasped his hands behind his back and began to pace back and forth in his cave abode, seemingly pondering something.

Moments later, he stopped in his tracks, seemingly having made some type of decision, and he made his way out of the cave abode.

Under normal circumstances, this rate of cultivation wouldn't have been an issue, but the problem was that he was still far from safe.

Fang Pan was dead, but the mysterious figure behind him still existed, and no one knew when he was going to appear.

He had recovered his Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords and refined them over the course of several years. Furthermore, his cultivation base had progressed significantly, and he now possessed the Mantra Treasured Axis, but he still didn't have much confidence in being able to take on that person.

This wasn't the time to be resting on his laurels. He still had to attain more power as quickly as possible.

The best way to enhance one's rate of cultivation was naturally through consuming pills.

Due to the rapid progression that he had been making thus far, he hadn't put much thought into acquiring pills. However, it was now time to go out and search for some pills that were suitable for him. During these decades of seclusion, he had matured a batch of 10,000-year-old ordinary spirit medicines, and it was also about time that he completed the three missions that he had to complete per 100 years in the sect.

A burst of dull rumbling rang out as the restrictions on the Crimson Dawn Peak slowly receded, producing a vibrant and colorful show of lights.

Sun Buzheng and the others immediately converged in front of the entrance of Han Li's cave abode upon seeing this.

The gate of the cave abode slowly opened, and Han Li emerged from inside.

"Welcome, Elder Li!" the group of nine servants greeted in unison.

"Has Meng Yungui still not returned?" Han Li asked.

Out of the nine servants, both Sun Buzheng and Meng Qianqian had already reached the Nascent Soul Stage, while most of the rest of them had also reached the late-Core Formation Stage.

Three of the 10 servants had successfully manifested nascent souls during the past few decades, and that was quite a remarkable rate of progress, even in the Blaze Dragon Dao. In particular, Meng Qianqian's cultivation aptitude seemed to have been slightly superior even to her brother's.

"Meng Yungui is still yet to return from the mission that you assigned to him, Elder Li," Sun Buzheng informed.

A hint of concern appeared on Meng Qianqian's face at the mention of her brother, and Han Li's brows also furrowed slightly upon hearing this.

Meng Yungui's cultivation base wasn't very advanced, and Han Li could only hope that he hadn't encountered any mishaps.

With the two treasures that Han Li had bestowed upon him for protection and his status as Han Li's servant, he should've been fine as long as he didn't venture out of the Blaze Dragon Dao's territory.

"You've all worked quite hard looking after the cave abode for all these years. Take these pills as a reward."

With a wave of his hand, a pill vial descended in front of each of the nine servants.

"Thank you, Elder Li!"

Sun Buzheng and the others were ecstatic, and they immediately stowed the vials away before extending grateful bows.

Chapter 216: Bell Toll

"Today marks the end of my seclusion. The spirit fields in the territory of the Crimson Dawn Peak have been left uncultivated this entire time. Sun Buzheng, take some people with you to prepare these spirit fields for plantation," Han Li Instructed.

"Yes, Elder Li. May I ask what types of spirit plants you would like us to plant in those fields?" Sun Buzheng asked.

"Just focus on preparing the fields for now, I'll make further arrangements after that," Han Li replied.

Everyone immediately gave affirmative responses before turning to leave.

"Qianqian, come with me," Han Li suddenly instructed, then turned and made his way back toward his cave abode.

Meng Qianqian faltered slightly upon hearing this, following which a hint of elation flashed through her eyes as she joyfully followed along behind Han Li, and before long, they had entered a stone chamber in Han Li's cave abode.

At the center of the stone chamber was a small spirit gathering array that was roughly 30 feet in size, filling the entire chamber with abundant spiritual qi, and at the center of the array laid a huge white egg.

As Meng Qianqian entered the stone chamber, she was initially quite excited and curious, but her gaze was then drawn to the giant white egg.

Following the past three decades of nourishment, the vitality contained within the egg was becoming more and more potent, but it still showed no signs of hatching at all.

Meng Qianqian opened her mouth, seemingly to ask something, but she then recalled what her brother had told her, and she hurriedly closed her mouth and stood off to the side in silence, awaiting further instructions from Han Li.

Han Li looked at the egg in silence for a moment, then said, "Qianqian, your mission from now on is to find a way to hatch this egg for me. You're using a fire-attribute cultivation art, and you've manifested a nascent soul, so perhaps you'll be able to assist the egg in its hatching process. During this time, you can freely enter this cave abode and this stone chamber, but make sure you don't mention this to anyone, not even your brother, understood?"

He flipped a hand over to produce a jade badge and a storage bracelet as he spoke, then handed them both to Meng Qianqian.

"Yes, Elder Li! I'll be sure to keep this a secret and do my best to complete this mission!" Meng Qianqian hurriedly replied.

Han Li nodded in response, then departed from the cave abode and made his way down the mountain.

Shortly thereafter, he appeared in the underground cavern where the fire vein was situated.

Compared with several decades ago, the fire-attribute spiritual power in the air was a lot more stable, but it was still extremely hot, as if the very space itself were on fire.

Above the churning lake of lava was a massive fiery red cocoon, which was expanding and shrinking in a rhythmic fashion as it continued to devour the surrounding fire-attribute spiritual power.

Han Li released his spiritual sense to check on the Essence Fire Raven within the cocoon, and an elated look immediately appeared on his face.

Having absorbed so much of the pure fire-attribute spiritual power released by the fire vein, the Essence Fire Raven was well on its way to a full recovery, and it was entirely possible that it could even reach greater heights than its former peak.

The fire raven seemed to have sensed Han Li's presence, and the giant cocoon wobbled slightly as a string of crisp chirps rang out from within.

"Keep focusing on your recovery here, there's no need to come out anytime soon," Han Li said with a faint smile.

His words of reassurance seemed to have worked, and the giant cocoon settled down again.

Han Li watched the cocoon for a moment longer, yet right as he was about to depart, the entire underground cavern suddenly shuddered violently.

A burst of indescribably enormous power erupted forth from underground like a ferocious wave, and the roof of the cavern trembled as countless crimson rock fragments came raining down from above.

Even with Han Li's current cultivation base, he was still quite alarmed by this burst of tremendous power.

In the next instant, a deafening sound that resembled the toll of a giant bell rang out from deep under the earth.

The underground cavern quaked violently once again, and a giant wave that was several hundred feet tall rose up from the lake of lava, sending molten lava splattering in all directions.

The giant cocoon hovering in mid-air also wobbled a few times before setting down again.

Han Li's heart stirred slightly as a rumor pertaining to the Bell Toll Mountain Range sprang into his mind.

It was said that this place had been given its name due to the strange bell-toll-like sound that would ring out from underground in the region every once in a while.

In all of his years at the Blaze Dragon Dao, Han Li had never heard this so-called bell toll, and he was only hearing it for the first time now.

However, the burst of power that had erupted forth from underground didn't seem to have come from tectonic plate movement.

Han Li pondered this for a moment before shaking his head to rid himself of that train of thought.

Regardless of what the underlying reason was, this didn't have anything to do with him, and he had plenty of other things to worry about.

He took another glance at the giant cocoon before turning to depart, but all of a sudden, he abruptly turned back around like lightning as a hint of blue light flashed through his eyes.

He had turned around so quickly that a loud snap had rung out in the air, and he was staring intently at the surface of the lake of lava.

It was only for an instant, but out of the corner of his eye, he had spotted a massive red shadow flashing past at the bottom of the lake of lava.

The red shadow resembled a creature's tail, and it had flashed past at an extraordinary speed.

As soon as Han Li noticed this, he had already released his spiritual sense, but he was unable to track down the red shadow.

There were all types of chaotic auras underground that were severely limiting his spiritual sensory range.

What was that thing? LiETH

Han Li remained standing on the spot in silence for a long while, then raised his head to inspect his surroundings with a faint smile on his face.

It seemed that this Bell Toll Mountain Range was far more complex than he had imagined. However, even if there were some type of mysterious creature lurking in here, it most likely didn't pose a threat to the Essence Fire Raven.

With that in mind, Han Li turned and made his way out of the underground cavern.

Several hours later, in the High Profound Palace of the Cloud Piercing Peak.

There were many elders and disciples gathered in front of the white and azure stone walls in the palace, and all of them were scouring the walls for missions that were suitable for them.

As for the golden stone wall at the rear of the hall, that was nowhere near as lively and bustling. There were only a few True Immortal cultivators standing in front of it, sighing incessantly with tightly furrowed brows.

"Why is it so hard to find a mission that pays well, but doesn't require much work?" a white-haired elder sighed before departing.

Right as he was exiting the hall, he passed by Han Li, who strode directly to the golden stone wall.

He raised his head to look up at the stone wall, looking at the missions from the top, and as his gaze roamed downward, his brows also began to furrow.

The missions on the stone wall were either ones where the reward didn't match the difficulty, or required an extremely long time to complete, so it was no wonder that all of the other elders were feeling so dismayed.

The most eye-catching mission on the stone wall was naturally still the one that required one to cultivate the Mantra Axis Scripture to the second level.

Right at this moment, a voice rang out from behind Han Li.

"Is that you, Brother Li?"

Han Li turned around to discover a pair of familiar figures, and the one who had spoken was a man with a coarse beard. He was none other than the inner sect elder with the Nan surname who had participated in the mission released by Xiong Shan alongside Han Li.

"Long time no see, Brother Nan, Brother Lu," Han Li greeted as he cupped his fist in a salute.

"Indeed. I heard from Brother Qi some time ago that you were in seclusion, and I didn't think you would come out so soon," Elder Nan chuckled as he returned Han Li's salute.

"Aren't you a little too conscientious, Brother Li? You've only just come out of seclusion, and you're already here checking out the missions," Elder Lu jibed as he also cupped his fist in a salute.

"The deadline for the sect's regular elder mission completion is about to arrive soon, so I thought I'd take on some missions to get the job done as soon as possible," Han Li explained.

The two elders exchanged a glance upon hearing this, and peculiar looks appeared on both of their faces.

Elder Nan cleared his throat, then asked, "Brother Li, are you really going to complete three regular elder missions to fulfill your obligations?"

Their reactions naturally didn't evade Han Li's notice, and he replied, "I am. This was the option that I chose when I first entered the sect. Is there something wrong?"

"Well... The regular elder missions released by the sect have always offered great rewards, but they've also always been quite difficult to complete, either requiring extensive investment of time and effort, or requiring one to take great risks," Elder Nan explained.

"Indeed. In contrast, it's far easier to serve at a palace for 100 out of every 1,000 years. There's always been an element of luck in the regular elder missions as those missions are assigned to you, and you don't have the option of picking and choosing missions as you please. If you ask me, it would be a better idea to take on a few missions here and earn sufficient merit points to fulfill your obligations," Elder Lu added.

"I see. Thank you for your advice. At the moment, I can't see any suitable missions on this wall, so I'll go and see what regular elder missions are assigned to me before making a decision. Where do I go to receive those missions?" Han Li asked.

"In that case, we won't try to dissuade you any further. To the left of the High Profound Palace's rear hall is a side hall, and you'll be assigned your missions there," Elder Nan replied.

"Thank you, Brother Nan. I'll be going now."

Han Li cupped his fist in a salute toward the two elders before departing.

He made his way around the golden stone wall, then made his way into the rear hall of the High Profound Palace, and sure enough, there was an entrance to a side hall on the left.

The entrance was slightly ajar, and he made his way toward it before pushing it open and entering the side hall, which wasn't very large, only around the same size as Han Li's guest room.

On the ceiling was a skylight, through which a beam of sunlight was shining directly down upon a potted plant sitting on the upper right corner of a redwood table in the room.

The plant was only around half a foot tall, and it resembled an ancient pine tree. It had a glittering and translucent appearance under the light of the sun, and a series of faint golden veins were extending all the way from its roots to every single branch, giving off specks of starry light.

Han Li was immediately able to tell from the abundant spiritual qi contained within the plant that it was a precious spirit medicine.

However, he didn't recognize this spirit medicine, nor had he ever seen this type of planting method, and he found himself unable to look away.

Chapter 217: Sloppy Old Man

"You like it?"

Right as Han Li was growing rather transfixed by what he was seeing, a rather enigmatic voice rang out from behind the redwood table.

Han Li hurriedly turned in that direction to find an elderly man reclining lazily in a large taishi chair behind the table.

He wore a lotus crown and an old gray daoist robe. His gray hair was quite disheveled, while the tip of his nose was slightly red, giving him a very sloppy appearance.

Furthermore, there was a gourd strapped to his belt on either side of his waist.

One gourd was silver, while the other was red, and there were complex runes engraved on both of them, indicating that they were clearly no ordinary gourds.

"I do," Han Li replied.

"You like it more than those women with big tits and arses?" the elderly man asked as he sat up a little straighter.

Han Li was completely taken aback by this question and didn't know how to respond.

The elderly man sitting on the chair seemed to have been a very enigmatic person.

The fact that he was sitting here indicated that he was the attendant elder overseeing this, but not only was he not wearing an inner sect elder robe, the potted spirit plant on the table and the two gourds strapped to his waist didn't appear to have been things that the average person could've owned.

What was most perplexing to him was that the elderly man's aura was extremely strange, and even with his spiritual sense, he was unable to ascertain the man's cultivation base.

"Please don't fool around with me any longer, Senior. I've come here to accept my regular elder missions," Han Li said as he cupped his fist in a salute.

Seeing as he was unable to glean the man's cultivation base, it was best to play it safe and refer to him as senior.

The elderly man seemed to have not heard Han Li at all as he grumbled to himself, "What a terrible job this is! I'm about to get bored to death! It's much more fun tending to my plants..."

He then leaned forward slightly and removed the silver gourd from his belt before pulling out the stopper with a quiet "pop", and the entire side hall was instantly filled with the sweet and fragrant aroma of honey.

As soon as Han Li caught a whiff of this aroma, his eyes immediately lit up. It seemed that the silver gourd contained some type of mixed spirit liquid.

A slightly smug smile appeared on the elderly man's face at the sight of Han Li's reaction.

He raised the gourd before slowly tipping it forward, gently pouring a drop of golden liquid out from within onto the soil at the foot of the potted plant on the table.

The potted plant immediately began to glow with golden radiance, which slowly flowed up along the plant like water until it reached all the way to the very tips of its branches and pine-needle-like leaves.

Only after this process had repeated itself several times did the golden light gradually fade away.

The elderly man gave a pleased nod upon seeing this, then strapped the silver gourd back to his belt before pulling out the red gourd on the other side.

Han Li thought that this gourd contained another type of spirit liquid that he was going to pour onto the plant, but to his surprise, the elderly man removed the stopper before chugging down the contents of the gourd.

An even stronger aroma instantly permeated throughout the entire hall, completely overriding the aroma of the spirit liquid from before.

It was clear that this gourd contained an extremely fragrant wine, rather than another type of spirit liquid.

Han Li was rendered speechless upon seeing this, and he turned to examine the potted plant once again.

After having his fill of wine, the elderly man wiped his lips with the back of his hand, and the tip of his nose had turned an even brighter shade of red.

He took a glance at Han Li, and was very pleased to see Han Li displaying such keen interest in his potted plant.

Unbeknownst to him, Han Li was pondering how to learn this type of planting method so that he could use it for himself. If he could do that, then he would be able to plant precious spirit medicines directly in his secret chamber, rather than in the medicine fields.

"Looking at the sequence of missions, the mission that you have to take on is to go to an island by the Cloud Lake Island in the eastern sea of the Ancient Cloud Continent. There, you have to find the lair of an Origin Mirage Beast and bring back one of its spirit husks."

The elderly man had pulled out a thick azure book from somewhere, and he had flipped to a certain page before assigning Han Li his mission.

Han Li was rather taken aback to hear this. "The mission only requires me to bring back a spirit husk?"

"Don't underestimate this Origin Mirage Beast. According to my knowledge, it's already reached the mid-True Immortal Stage, and it's not an easy task to sneak into its lair to steal its spirit husk," the elderly man cautioned.

"That's a very valid piece of advice, Senior. I was too quick to jump to conclusions. Would you happen to have any other information on this beast, Senior?" Han Li asked.

"I can tell you've got decent taste, and you've been quite polite to me, so I'll give you this piece of information. The Origin Mirage Beast is constantly in seclusion, but for seven days out of every decade, it'll leave its lair to wreak havoc wherever it pleases, and that gives you a window of opportunity to steal its spirit husk. If you're not in luck, then you'll just have to wait for a few years. Don't go rushing in recklessly and losing your life," the elderly man said.

"Thank you for this information, Senior," Han Li replied.

"This mission can be both difficult or easy, depending on how you approach it. As long as you're patient, there's not much risk involved, and the reward is 200 merit points, which you can come back here to collect after you've completed the mission," the elderly man continued.

Han Li gave an affirmative response, then handed over his elder badge to the elderly man.

After accepting the mission and securing the relevant map and information, Han Li bade farewell to the elderly man before departing.

In the air above the High Profound Palace, Han Li contemplated his options for a moment before deciding to head straight to Cloud Lake Island.

This wasn't because he was confident that he would be able to slay the Origin Mirage Beast, or because he was in a hurry to complete the mission. Instead, it was because he had no idea when the Origin Mirage Beast was going to leave its lair, and if he were to delay for too long, only to just so happen to

miss that seven-day window, then he would have to wait a decade before he could complete the mission.

Hence, the safest course of action was to get there as early as possible.

With that in mind, Han Li immediately made his way to the teleportation hall on the plaza, then teleported to the Seaview Peak, which was situated in the eastern part of the Bell Toll Mountain Range.

This mountain was near the eastern border of the Bell Toll Mountain Range, and it was currently the furthest area that Han Li could reach through teleportation array.

Standing on the mountain summit and casting his gaze toward the east, even with his exceptional eyesight, he was only able to see a black line as thin as a strand of hair in the distance, and that was the eastern sea next to the Bell Toll Mountain Range.

Han Li's destination, Cloud Lake Island, was one of the countless islands in that region of the sea.

He pulled out a map of that region of the sea that he had obtained from the sloppy old man, and after carefully inspecting it for a long while, he rose up into the air before flying in a certain direction as a streak of azure light.

.....

Several months later.

In the region of the sea to the east of the Bell Toll Mountain Range was a massive island shaped like a lotus leaf.

There was a lake on the island that took up around a tenth of the island's entire area, and it sat at the center of the island like a bright green jewel. The bodies of water branching off from the lake spread in all directions over the island, much like the veins of the figurative lotus leaf.

This lake was called the Cloud Cover Lake, and it was the source of all of the freshwater on this island. The name of the island was also derived from this lake, and bodies of water that split off from the lake nurtured all of the tens of millions of living beings on the island. There were numerous cities, towns, and villages dotted along the shores of the bodies of water, and to the west of the Cloud Cover Lake was a main branch by the name of Heavy Sand River.

To the left of the river hundreds of thousands of kilometers away from the Cloud Cover Lake was a massive city that was over 1,000 feet tall, aptly named Heavy Sand City.

The city was constructed from the unique black heavy sand that was gathered from the Heavy Sand River, and at this point, the city had already stood for close to 100,000 years. Not only were there millions of mortals living in the city, there was even a cultivation sect that was as old as the city itself.

That night, the sky was gradually beginning to darken, and the sun hadn't yet completely set.

The setting sun was only just peeking over the horizon, and its dying light had illuminated a vast section of the sea and the tall city walls of Heavy Sand City a blood-red color.

All of a sudden, a streak of azure light flew rapidly over the sky before landing atop the city to reveal none other than Han Li, who had arrived here after a long journey.

He swept his gaze across the buildings in the city down below, and a grim look appeared on his face.

Most of what should've been an impregnable city wall beneath his feet had already collapsed, leaving an enormous hole, and even the embrasured watchtowers on the city walls had been completely destroyed and reduced to an unrecognizable state.

Both the inner and outer sides of what remained of the city walls were smeared with blood, some of which had already begun to turn black and coagulate, giving off a nauseating odor.

The city was riddled with destroyed and collapsed buildings, and many sets of human and animal remains could be seen interspersed throughout the rubble, all of which were severely ravaged and in horrific condition.

As the sun gradually set below the horizon, the entire city was engulfed by a giant shadow, plunging it into complete darkness. There was no other sound aside from the howling of the wind blowing through the completely lifeless city.

Right at this moment, Han Li suddenly spotted a burst of yellow light, which had appeared in the central area of the city, and it seemed that someone had lit a fire there.

He immediately released his spiritual sense in that direction, and moments later, he shot forth from the top of the city wall like an arrow, hurtling directly toward the spot where the fire had been lit.

A resounding boom rang out as Han Li plummeted down into the center of a spacious courtyard, causing the entire courtyard to shudder violently. The houses that were already on the verge of collapse instantly toppled over one after another to produce a loud commotion.

The fire that had been lit at the center of the courtyard was also scattered into countless sparks by the force of the impact of Han Li's landing.

The three people gathered around the fire were so horrified that they instantly fell to their knees.

Among them, a brown-robed young man and a middle-aged woman were trembling uncontrollably as cold sweat poured down their faces, while the dark-skinned man that rounded out the trio was kowtowing repeatedly to the ground, not even daring to look at Han Li as he implored, "Please spare us, Senior! We'll leave this place right away..."

Chapter 218: A Coincidence

As the dark-skinned man was speaking, he was frantically crawling backwards on his hands and knees.

The three of them were only late-Foundation Establishment cultivators, and even though they couldn't ascertain Han Li's cultivation base, just the force of his landing alone made it clear to them that he was a powerful cultivator who could crush them like ants, so they naturally didn't dare to linger here any longer.

Han Li's brows furrowed slightly upon seeing this, and he said in a cold voice, "Hold on a second. Who are you?"

The trio immediately stiffened up in the face of Han Li's interrogation, and in the end, it was the brown-robed young man who mustered up some courage before replying, "We are just a group of itinerant cultivators from Floral Sun City. We didn't know that you were here, Senior. Otherwise, there's no way we would've dared to come here."

"Do you know what happened here to reduce this city to such a state?" Han Li asked.

The brown-robed young man faltered slightly upon hearing this, and he turned to Han Li with a perplexed expression as he asked, "You're unaware of what's happened here, Senior? Could it be that you're foreign cultivator?"

Han Li was initially rather perplexed to hear this, but he then quickly understood what the young man was referring to. Indeed, for these low-grade cultivators who had most likely lived their entire lives in a small area on the island, they were naturally of the opinion that the island they were on was an entire continent, which made all cultivators from outside the island foreign cultivators to them.

"Cut the chit-chat! Tell me what happened here!" Han Li said in a cold voice.

"From what we've heard, the creature that resides in the Cloud Cover Lake came out to feed again, and it slaughtered everyone in the city," the brown-robed young man hurriedly replied.

"What does this creature look like? Have you seen it for yourself?" Han Li asked as he raised an eyebrow.

"I certainly haven't seen the creature, Senior. Otherwise, there's no way I would've lived to tell the tale. However, it's said that this creature has already been cultivating for countless years, and its enormous in stature, almost comparable in size to the hill outside the city. Its tongue is several thousand feet in length, and the venom in its belly..."

The brown-robed young man hurriedly told Han Li everything that he had heard about the beast.

"That's right! The creature comes out to wreak havoc every once in a while, and each time, it'll only be satisfied after slaughtering an entire city of people!" the dark-skinned man added.

Han Li's heart stirred slightly upon hearing this, and he asked, "Does this creature only come out for seven days once every 10 years, only to disappear again for the next 10 years?"

The dark-skinned man was rather taken aback to hear this, and he asked in a careful voice, "Have you already heard the rumors, Senior?"

Han Li's heart sank slightly upon hearing this.

The creature that these people were referring to was most likely that mid-True Immortal Stage Origin Mirage Beast. It seemed that even though he had gotten here as quickly as he could, he was still one step too late.

In fact, he had felt rather perplexed on the entire way here.

Under normal circumstances, if an island had a freshwater lake at its center, then there should've been more settlements and higher population density closer to the lake, yet the situation on Cloud Cover Island was the exact opposite.

The coastal regions of the island were riddled with cities that virtually formed a ring around the entire island, but the closer one drew to the center of the island, the more sparse and well-concealed the human settlements became.

Even though Heavy Sand City was still hundreds of kilometers away from the Cloud Cover Cover Lake, it was already the closest city to the lake in the western region of Cloud Lake Island.

Given the information that Han Li had just received, this situation was most likely a result of the threat posed by the Origin Mirage Beast in the Cloud Cover Lake at the center of the island.

"Has there been no one to stand up to the creature and deliver it the retribution that it deserves for its heinous actions?" Han Li asked.

"Apparently, an immortal came to the island under the request of several nearby sects a very long time ago with the objective of slaying the creature. In the end, he fought the creature for three days and three nights before being defeated and retreating with severe injuries. After that battle, all of the sects involved were wiped out by the creature in a matter of days, and ever since then, no one has dared to stand up to it," the brown-robed young man explained.

"Come to think of it, what are the three of you doing here?" Han Li asked.

The three people had been kneeling on the ground the entire time, and they exchanged a few hesitant glances, not willing to reveal their motivations.

"Is there something you can't tell me?" Han Li asked as his expression darkened slightly.

The brown-robed young man shuddered, then hurriedly explained, "Where we are right now is the former site of the Falling Sand Sect, the largest sect in a radius of tens of thousand of kilometers. We were hoping to get here before everyone else and..."

The brown-robed young man's voice trailed off here, and Han Li finished his sentence for him. "And dig up some treasures from the ruins, right?"

"We've only just gotten here and haven't had a chance to find anything yet, Senior! if you don't believe me, you can check my storage pouch."

The brown-robed young man immediately pulled out his storage pouch before offering it to Han Li as he spoke, and the other two cultivators hurriedly did the same thing.

All it took was a brief flash of Han Li's spiritual sense for him to verify that they weren't lying to him. Everything in their three storage pouches combined didn't even have a collective value of five mid-grade spirit stones.

Han Li didn't despise them for their actions at all. As bottom-dwelling cultivators, particularly itinerant ones with no sects to rely on, cultivation was particularly arduous, and he was more aware of this than anyone.

He then carefully scoured the ruins of the Falling Sand Sect with his spiritual sense, and his brows quickly furrowed slightly.

This was a sect of a decent size, but for some reason, there were only a pitiful number of treasures left behind, and they were all of an extremely low caliber for Han Li's standards.

"There are still some things under the ruins to the east over there. Dig those things up yourselves, then leave this place right away."

As soon as his voice trailed off, Han Li rose up into the air as a streak of azure light before flying toward the eastern part of Heavy Sand City.

The treasures left behind in the sect were completely unappealing to him, so he decided to leave them to this trio instead as compensation for the information that they had provided him. Perhaps those treasures would be able to assist them greatly on their path of cultivation.

The trio of cultivators were instantly rooted to the spot upon hearing this, and they were so bewildered that Han Li was willing to help them rather than condemn them that they were at a loss for words. By the time they returned to their senses, Han Li was already nowhere to be seen.

All three of them turned in the direction that Han Li had departed in, then extended earnest bows of respect and gratitude before scrambling to their feet and rushing over to the ruins to the east to uncover the treasures there.

As for Han Li, he didn't immediately depart after reaching the eastern part of the city. Instead, he picked out a relatively intact courtyard in the area before descending into it.

The courtyard was quite a spacious one, indicating that it had previously been inhabited by quite a wealthy mortal clan, but those mortals were obviously no longer of this world.

After arriving in the courtyard, Han Li set up some simple restrictions, then made his way into the main hall.

He lit up one of the oil lamps in the room, then sat down onto a chair beside it.

After that, he flipped a hand over to produce his Transient Guild mask, which he promptly put on, and after chanting an incantation, a massive azure array plate projection appeared before him.

Prior to coming here, he hadn't done much research into the Origin Mirage Beast as he had been focused on traveling to Cloud Lake Island as quickly as possible. He had originally planned to enquire some larger sects in Heavy Sand City for information pertaining to the beast, but that plan had clearly fallen through.

While it was true that he had missed this seven-day window, he wasn't planning to return to the sect right away. Instead, he wanted to see if there were any other ways through which he could complete this mission.

However, the information provided by the sect was far from detailed, and his knowledge of the Origin Mirage Beast was also very limited. As for the information provided by the trio of cultivators from earlier, those were mostly just rumors, so they weren't to be relied upon.

Hence, he decided to turn to the Transient Guild to see if he could uncover more information on this beast.

The identification mission for the giant egg and those feathers that he had released earlier was still active, but hadn't received any responses.

After searching for some time, his eyes suddenly lit up slightly.

There really was a mission concerning the Origin Mirage Beast, and it seemed to have been posted over 1,000 years ago.

"Slay a True Immortal Stage Origin Mirage Beast. Reward: 30 Immortal Origin Stones."

Han Li faltered slightly upon seeing this, and this felt like too much of a coincidence.

Origin Mirage Beasts weren't extremely rare, but those who had reached the True Immortal Stage had to have been exceedingly rare. Could it be that the target for this mission was none other than the one in the Cloud Cover Lake?

A contemplative look appeared on his face as he pointed at the mission to contact the one who had released it through his mask.

Around 15 minutes later, a burst of ripples surged over the array plate projection, immediately following which a projection of an azure figure wearing a deer mask took shape in front of Han Li.

"Are you interested in the mission I released, Fellow Daoist?" the figure asked.

"Indeed, I am interested in the mission that you released concerning the Origin Mirage Beast. Do you know where it resides or have any further information on the beast?" Han Li asked.

A hint of elation flashed through the azure figure's eyes, and he hurriedly replied, "I'll be sure to tell you everything I know, Fellow Daoist. The beast in question resides on an island by the name of Cloud Lake Island to the east of the Ancient Cloud Continent, and it possesses the bloodline of the ancient true spirit, the Mirage Dragon. As a result, it can take on countless different forms and is particularly adept at adopting human forms."

"I'm assuming it must be quite difficult to deal with, right? Otherwise, there's no way your mission would've been left hanging for so long," Han Li mused.

"Truth be told, even as far back as several tens of thousands of years ago, the beast had already reached the mid-True Immortal Stage, and it's extremely cunning, so it is indeed rather troublesome to deal with," the azure figure replied in a truthful manner.

"In that case, 30 Immortal Origin Stones isn't much compensation," Han Li remarked.

A hint of urgency crept into the azure figure's voice as he said, "Truth be told, that's already all of the Immortal Origin Stones in my possession at the moment. However, the spirit husk of the beast is an exceptional spirit material for refining armor, and you can keep it if you can kill that beast."

After a moment of contemplation, Han Li nodded as he said, "Alright."

"Does that mean... you're accepting this mission, Fellow Daoist?" the azure figure asked with a hint of disbelief in his voice.

"I can't guarantee that I'll be able to complete the mission, but I'll certainly give it a try," Han Li replied.

"This is fantastic! In that case, I wish you the best of luck, Fellow Daoist!" the azure figure said in an ecstatic voice.

Chapter 219: Small Test of Abilities

Two days later.

The morning sun was rising up from the surface of the sea, basking the cold Cloud Lake Island in a warm glow.

There was a murky layer of mist above the surface of the Cloud Cover Lake at the center of the island, and the mist showed no signs of dissipating even under the light of the rising sun.

At this moment, Han Li was hovering high up in the sky, surveying the lake down below.

Blue light flashing within his eyes, while his spiritual sense was scouring over the lake, but he discovered that he was unable to see or detect anything through the mist.

With a flick of his wrist, the long black saber that he had obtained from Fang Pan appeared in his grasp.

Layers of golden scales that emerged over his body, and his arm instantly thickened significantly while a layer of piercing black light appeared over the surface of the black saber, drawing in the world's origin qi in the surrounding area.

Countless inky-black runes appeared on the blade of the saber, releasing waves of black light that were imbued with potent law power fluctuations, causing the surrounding space to tremble and ripple.

He raised the saber high above his head, then brought it down in a forceful slashing motion toward the surface of the lake down below.

The sound of howling wind rang out as the entire saber glowed with radiant black light, and a massive saber projection that was over 1,000 feet in length was unleashed before crashing down upon the lake with devastating force.

Even before the saber projection arrived, the sheer force and pressure that it released caused the surface of the lake to part down the center.

A burst of thunderous rumbling rang out as massive waves swept over the surface of the Cloud Cover Lake, and two enormous walls of water erupted in opposite directions before sweeping toward the shore with tremendous force.

The waves were so powerful that they swept all the way beyond the shore of the lake before crashing into the nearby forest.

"Who's there?!"

A thunderous roar of fury rang out from the bottom of the lake, immediately following which a streak of golden light erupted forth from beneath the waves, hurtling directly toward Han Li.

Han Li focused his gaze on the streak of golden light to find that it contained a square-faced middle-aged man in a golden robe with a pair of dark purple eyes. The man was holding a golden longsword that it was piercing directly at Han Li.

The man wasn't giving off any demon beast aura, but Han Li's intuition told him that this was the Origin Mirage Beast that he was searching for.

The golden longsword had radiant runes shimmering on its surface, and it was giving off a peerlessly sharp aura.

A loud clang rang out as Han Li parried the sword with his black blade, and the tremendous impact of the clash sent the golden-robed man flying back, while Han Li only wobbled slightly before immediately steadying himself.

"To think that a pitiful little itinerant immortal like yourself would dare to challenge me! You must truly have a death wish! I just so happen to require the blood essence of a human True Immortal to help me break through my bottleneck, so you've come at just the right time!" the golden-robed man chuckled coldly as he steadied himself several thousand feet away.

As soon as his voice trailed off, he suddenly hurled his golden longsword forward, and it split up into thousands of golden longswords amid a flash of light, arranging themselves into layers to resemble an enormous golden lotus flower blooming in the sky.

In the next instant, a string of loud clangs rang out as the golden longswords flew through the air one after another, hurtling directly toward Han Li like a flight golden sword dragon.

Initially, Han Li was of the opinion that these golden longswords were nothing more than sword projections, but only as the golden sword dragon flew toward him and attempted to sink its fangs into his body did he discover that it possessed a substantial form.

He immediately raised his saber to ward off the sword dragon, jamming it into the sword dragon's mouth to prevent it from being able to bite down onto him.

At the same time, the golden sword dragon lashed out with its claws from down below, striking him on the chest to tear his robes apart, leaving several alarming white marks on his golden scales.

Han Li immediately retaliated with a slash of his saber, which raised a huge flurry of sparks as he pulled it out of the sword dragon's mouth, then stomped both feet heavily down onto the dragon's head to send it flying back through the air.

However, before he had a chance to steady himself, the sound of howling wind rang out from behind him, and a strange beast that resembled a True Dragon suddenly appeared behind him before biting down toward his head.

The beast had the head of a dragon, but no dragon horn, and it also had the body of a dragon, but no dragon claws.

Han Li's pupils contracted slightly upon seeing this, and azure light flashed over his entire body as he ducked to the side, allowing him to just barely evade the beast's attack.

However, in the next instant, he felt a burst of excruciating pain spear through his shoulder.

As it turned out, the dragon-like beast had sunk its fangs into his shoulder, and even with his astonishingly powerful physical constitution, the creature was able to bite straight through his shoulder, causing him to bleed profusely.

Han Li was very much alarmed by this. He had clearly evaded that attack, yet somehow, the creature had still managed to sink its fangs into him.

He raised his saber-wielding hand up high, and right as he was about to bring the saber down upon the head of the dragon that was biting into his shoulder, a strong sense of peril immediately welled up in his heart, causing him to stop cold in his tracks.

In the next instant, Han Li felt a sharp pain in his mind, not because he had been struck by some other attack. Instead, he had unleashed a spiritual attack upon himself in order to snap himself back to his senses.

Sure enough, following that burst of sharp pain in his mind, he turned to his shoulder to find that it was completely fine, with no dragon's head attached to it.

If he had brought his saber down just now, he would've unwittingly chopped off his own arm.

"What?! There's no way a mid-True Immortal cultivator could've seen through my illusions!" the golden robed man exclaimed in disbelief as he hovered in the air several thousand feet away.

Even though Han Li had broken himself out of his opponent's illusion, he was still feeling extremely apprehensive.

He abruptly shot forward as he slashed his black saber through the air in an arc, lashing out at his opponent with tremendous force.

"Insolence!"

A furious look appeared in the golden-robed man's eyes upon seeing this, and he made a rapid series of hand seals, following which a ball of five-colored light instantly erupted out from between his fingers.

The five-colored light had a dreamy quality to it, and Han Li was struck by a rush of dizziness at the mere sight of it.

At the same time, a metallic grating sound rang out, and the golden sword dragon pounced at him from behind before attempting to sink its fangs into his back.

Han Li reflexively raised a hand to shield his eyes while slashing his saber through the air behind him.

A crescent-shaped saber projection was sent sweeping through the air before crashing heavily into the sword dragon, causing the latter to rock back amid a resounding clang.

Right at this moment, a giant translucent five-colored hand suddenly reached out from the illusory five-colored light ahead of Han Li before closing itself around his entire body.

Han Li instantly felt a burst of tremendous force compressing around his chest, striking him with a sense of asphyxiation.

In addition to that, the five-colored illusory light was still flashing incessantly, and its dizzying effect was slowing down his reactions ever so slightly.

"Die!"

An explosive roar rang out from behind the five-colored light, while the sword dragon that had just been repelled by Han Li pounced at him once again.

Two of the golden swords on its head abruptly elongated to resemble a pair of horns, which were aimed directly at the back of Han Li's chest.

Blue light was flashing urgently in Han Li's eyes, yet he was still unable to see through the illusory light up ahead, and his consciousness was beginning to become rather murky.

In this dire situation, he let loose a thunderous roar, and golden light flashed over his body as all of his muscles rapidly bulged, transforming him into a giant golden ape that was over 1,000 feet tall in the blink of an eye.

The giant hand around him was unable to contain him any longer and exploded violently.

As soon as he was freed from the giant hand, Han Li grabbed onto his black saber with both hands. The black saber had also extended to several hundred feet in length to match his new stature, and he slashed it viciously toward the illusory five-colored light and the golden-robed man behind it.

The sound of howling wind rang out as the five-colored illusory light was instantly scattered by the astral winds unleashed by the almighty slash, while the golden-robed man hurriedly flew in retreat with an alarmed and fearful look on his face.

However, the attack encompassed an enormous area, and he was unable to evade it in a short time.

Right as the blade was about to reach him, a peculiar grin suddenly appeared on the golden-robed man's face, and he didn't retreat any further as he merely allowed the blade to slice him into two.

The two halves of the golden-robed man's body warped momentarily before abruptly vanishing into thin air.

At the same time, the giant sword dragon that was pouncing at Han Li from behind suddenly began to speak. "Let's see how you dodge this attack!"

Its speed abruptly doubled as it spoke, and it was piercing directly toward the back of Han Li's chest.

With his back facing the sword dragon, Han Li was only able to take a step forward, and he didn't have enough time to dodge the attack or turn around.

Right as the sword dragon was about to plunge into his back, a burst of azure light suddenly appeared in the air between him and the sword dragon before abruptly vanishing from the spot.

In the next instant, the oncoming golden sword dragon suddenly lost all momentum, and it plunged straight down toward the lake below in a limp and lifeless fashion.

A faint smile appeared on Han Li's face as he reverted back to his human form, then descended in pursuit of the golden sword dragon.

A string of clangs rang out in succession as the golden swords around the sword dragon's body fell away one after another, revealing the body of the golden-robed man within.

However, a gruesome hole had been punched through his glabella, and his strange purple eyes had also lost all of its luster and vibrance, having turned a lifeless gray color.

The nascent soul that was residing in its head had also already been destroyed.

Han Li extended a hand before making a grabbing motion, and all of the golden longswords that had split off from the sword dragon's body vanished amid a flash of golden light, leaving behind only a single sword that fell into his grasp.

He inspected the golden longsword briefly before stowing it away into his storage bracelet.

Meanwhile, a burst of azure light suddenly flashed within the bloody hole in the golden-robed man's glabella, and a tiny azure sword that was only around an inch in length flew out from within before quickly expanding and reverting back to its original form.

This was none other than Han Li's Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords, and all 72 of them had been combined into one on this occasion.

After nurturing the flying swords in his body for the past few decades, they had already completely absorbed the immense amount of sword essence that they had devoured all those years ago. At the moment, each sword had just about reached the level of an Acquired Immortal Treasure, and when combined into a single sword, they were well and truly comparable to a true Acquired Immortal Treasure.

Back in the Blaze Dragon Dao, he had never used the swords as he was concerned that Xiong Shan would notice, so this was the first opportunity that he had had to test out the swords, and they had given him a massively pleasant surprise.

Chapter 220: Along the Way

It seemed that Han Li was able to slay the Origin Mirage Beast in just an instant, but in reality, it had taken a bit of preparation.

Back when he had almost chopped off his own arm after falling prey to the golden-robed man's illusion the first time, he had already activated his Spirit Refinement Technique to discover that its true body was concealed within the sword dragon, so the golden-robed man was nothing more than a deeper illusion.

After acquiring this piece of knowledge, Han Li decided to play along, combining the 72 Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords in his body into one in advance before lashing out to deal the killing blow right as his opponents thought that he had won the battle.

With a wave of his hand, all of the Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords flew back to Han Li, then circled around in the air for a moment before vanishing into his body.

Han Li took a glance at the body of the golden-robed man on the surface of the lake, then rose up into the air before descending onto the lake as well, sending slight ripples surging over its surface.

He bent down and examined the golden-robed man's body with his spiritual sense for a moment, then raised his right hand before bringing it down like a blade, plunging it straight into the golden-robed man's lower abdomen to pull out a walnut-sized dark purple demon core.

After losing its demon core, the body of the golden-robed man suddenly began to expand.

A layer of fine cold scales appeared over the body's skin, and the golden dragon robe that it was wearing was quickly torn apart. The body gradually elongated before ultimately transforming into a dragon-like beast with no horns and no claws, then slowly sank into the lake.

After a moment of hesitation, Han Li cast a water repulsion restriction on himself before descending into the lake as well.

Inside the lake, he quickly spotted the body of the Origin Mirage Beast, which was sinking toward a palace on the lakebed.

The Cloud Cover Lake was over 1,000 feet deep, and the light on the lakebed was extremely dim, but the palace was giving off radiant white light, resembling a glittering and translucent crystalline palace.

Upon arriving in front of the palace, Han Li discovered that it was encompassed within a near-transparent light membrane that was keeping out all of the water in the lake.

Instead of immediately entering the palace, Han Li drifted over to the body of the Origin Mirage Beast, then plunged his fingers into the body to pull out a tendon.

The deer-masked figure from the Transient Guild had told him that this demon beast potentially possessed the bloodline of the Mirage Dragon, so he wanted to see if he could extract the blood essence. However, after toiling away for quite some time, he was unable to extract even a single drop of blood essence, and he could only give up in the end.

After harvesting all of the useful parts of the demon beast's body, he returned to the palace and bypassed the light membrane with ease, arriving in front of the palace gates.

The crystalline palace before him was extremely beautiful to behold, with all types of intricate engravings on its surface, making it resemble an immortal abode far more so than the lair of a demon beast.

Han Li laid his palm against the palace gates before pushing forward, and the two white jade gates, each of which was around 30 feet tall and a foot thick, began to slowly open inward.

Han Li made his way into the palace through the entrance, and he discovered that the furnishings inside were rather bare.

There were only two rows of cylindrical pillars standing on either side of the palace, but several small mountains of items of all types of different descriptions had been piled up around the pillars, presenting an astonishing sight to behold.

As it turned out, these mountainous piles of items consisted of all types of spirit stones and treasures of different grades and calibers, all of which were mixed together and strewn about in a haphazard fashion.

Several days ago, he had wondered to himself why there were so few treasures left in the ruins of the Falling Sand Sect, but it had now become apparent to him that the vast majority of the treasures in the sect had to have been brought here by the Origin Mirage Beast.

It was clear that this beast was a hoarder, and this vast collection had most likely come from all of the cities and sects that it had razed to the ground over the years. With its demise, all of these things now fell into Han Li's hands.

After carefully examining the mountainous piles of treasures for some time, Han Li suddenly spotted a semi-transparent object peeking out from behind a golden dragon throne deep inside the palace.

He immediately made his way over to the throne before stepping around it to discover a snake-slough-like object, which appeared as if it were made from some type of crystalline material, but it wasn't hard or cold to the touch in the slightest. Instead, it was as soft as if it had been woven from silk.

This was undoubtedly the Origin Mirage Beast's spirit husk.

Han Li immediately stowed the spirit husk away in his storage bracelet, then pulled out several storage rings to collect the mountains of treasures in the palace.

After close to half a day, all of his storage rings and the storage bracelet on his wrist had been completely filled.

The majority of the collected treasures consisted of spirit stones, and most of them were low or mid-grade ones. Among them, top-grade spirit stone proved to be exceedingly rare, with only around 600 to 700 in total.

If he were to convert the rest of the spirit stones, he estimated that he would be able to exchange them for another 300 to 400 top-grade spirit stones.

It seemed that none of the nearby sects were all that powerful. Then again, this only made sense. If there were any powerful sects nearby, then this Origin Mirage Beast wouldn't have been able to wreak havoc as it pleased for all these years.

Aside from the spirit stones, there were also over 100 treasures and several hundred artifacts, as well as some strange and exotic spirit materials, but not even a single spirit plant or pill.

The artifacts weren't noteworthy in any way, but there were some decent treasures. Of course, they weren't going to be useful to Han Li, but they would've certainly made for great additions to the collections of Meng Yungui and the others.

As for the golden longsword that the Origin Mirage Beast was using, Han Li was able to determine that it was a metal-attribute Divine Spirit Treasure, making it a treasure comparable to Han Li's former Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords.

There weren't many spirit materials in the Origin Mirage Beast's collection, but some of them were giving off very peculiar auras, and even though Han Li couldn't identify them, it was clear to him that they were no ordinary materials.

In particular, there were several head-sized chunks of dark golden metal that had clearly been formed naturally, but there were countless flower-petal-like patterns all over its surface. Furthermore, it was slightly warm to the touch.

For the next few days, Han Li didn't immediately depart from the palace. Instead, he took advantage of this time away from the Blaze Dragon Dao to unleash all of the sword arrays in his Azure Essence Sword Arts a few times with his Azure Bamboo Cloudswarm Swords.

Unsurprisingly, the sword arrays had become significantly more powerful, and Han Li was very pleased to see this.

Right before he departed from the Cloud Cover Lake, he put on his Transient Guild mask to contact the deer-masked figure, who was astonished that Han Li had managed to complete his mission so quickly.

Han Li naturally wasn't going to explain anything to him, and he offered the demon core of the Origin Mirage Beast for the deer-masked figure to examine. The deer-masked figure was ecstatic, and he immediately issued the 30 Immortal Origin Stones to Han Li.

The only reason Han Li had taken on this mission was because it was one that he could complete along the way while he was carrying out his regular elder mission for the Blaze Dragon Dao. Furthermore, he didn't want to have to wait a whole decade for the Origin Mirage Beast's next outing.

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Several months later.

As soon as Han Li returned to the Blaze Dragon Dao, he immediately went to the side hall of the High Profound Palace without delay.

Just like last time, the hall was completely empty, and the gray-robed elderly man seated behind the redwood table was on the verge of falling asleep. Only after hearing the sound of Han Li's footsteps did he open his eyes ever so slightly.

The elderly man sat up straighter as he yawned and asked in a lazy voice, "Oh? Why are you back so soon? Could it be that the mission is too difficult for you to complete, so you're planning to submit merit points instead?"

Han Li offered no reply as he pulled out a storage pouch before setting it down onto the redwood table.

The elderly man faltered slightly upon seeing this, then briefly inspected the contents of the storage pouch with his spiritual sense, and all of the drowsiness in his eyes instantly vanished.

"I had high hopes for you, and you lived up to them, kid! I didn't think you'd be able to complete the mission so quickly."

"I was very fortunate. By the time I got there, the Origin Mirage Beast just so happened to have been absent, so I was able to complete the mission very quickly," Han Li lied.

"You're a lucky kid, but sometimes, luck is also a part of one's power," the elderly man chuckled in response, and it was unclear whether he believed Han Li's claims or not.

He stowed the spirit husk of the Origin Mirage Beast away, then pulled out that azure book and a jade brush. After scribbling something down into the book with the brush, he took Han Li's elder badge from him, and after a flash of white light, 200 merit points had been added to the badge.

"Alright, you've completed the first mission. Go back and take a rest, but don't forget to come back soon for your next mission," the elderly man said as he returned Han Li's badge to him.

"Please assign me the next mission right now, Senior," Han Li requested.

"Well, aren't you hard-working? You're completely different from those sly old foxes who try to delay their missions as much as possible," the elderly man chuckled.

Han Li offered no response to this.

Time was of the essence for him, so he naturally had to be more diligent.

The elderly man flipped open the azure book as he spoke, and after flipping through its pages for a while, he stopped on a certain page as he said, "There's a slightly urgent mission here, so I'll assign it to you."

"What is it, Senior?" Han Li asked.

"Our sect has a large Fire Origin Crystal mine in the Fire Cloud Peak to the southwest of the Ancient Cloud Continent. For some reason, many of the miners in there have recently gone missing, so the sect had to temporarily close down the mine. A Grand Ascension Stage elder that was stationed there ventured into the mine to examine the cause of the disappearances, but he went missing as well.

"Hence, a request has been submitted for the sect to send an inner sect elder to examine the situation and transport all of the Fire Origin Crystals that were excavated in the past 10 years back to the sect. This shouldn't be a very difficult mission, but the reward of 180 merit points is quite decent," the elderly man said.

Han Li nodded in response upon hearing this. "I see. Seeing as it's an urgent mission, I'll set off right away."

He immediately handed over his badge to accept the mission as he spoke, then departed without any delay.

"What an interesting lad," the elderly man mused to himself as he looked on at Han Li's departing figure.