

Alchemy 1561

Chapter 1561: A Party

"Why did you ask her that?" the Queen asked Alex as they flew back toward the palace.

Even though he was a King, Alex was made to quickly leave the Ice Mist Palace as respectfully as they could. He had wanted to look around the place, but it seemed they truly didn't want him to.

Since he had little authority in this place, he said nothing and left. Not before getting the answer to his question though.

'After she got the evolved constitution,' Alex thought. 'She must have made it to the center after awakening her constitution.' He could see how she then activated the beacon at the center and called people from the higher realms into this world.

Alex wondered how such a thing could exist in this world, but this world originally belonged to the demons anyway, so it wasn't that hard to come up with an explanation.

One of the demons, or maybe even the entire upper echelon, might have set up this place for when their goddess was finally reborn. But then was it a coincidence that they put this place in this land?

Alex thought it would be better to assume that such places were built all over the lower realms.

"What do you think?" he asked Godslayer regarding his thoughts.

"Sounds probable," the spirit said, giving it a bit more thought after answering. "I'm more so questioning why they want their goddess at all."

"It's the goddess," Alex said. "They could do no harm getting her. Still, I'm sad that they got to her so fast. I didn't have the time to figure out if she remembered me or not."

"Don't let it turn into an Inner Demon," the spirit said.

Alex shook his head. "I know it won't," he said. "I'm just a little sad about it is all."

He remembered the white-haired young girl one last time before it was time to forget about her, whether or not she was the reincarnation of his master.

There was no point in dwelling on the past if he knew he couldn't do anything about it. He had to keep moving forward.

Alex stayed with the queen for a while longer, giving her some pills as he had done with all the other monarchs as well as letting her use his Mountain Crushing artifact, before leaving the capital.

He had toured the capital, so he wanted to go tour more of the other cities.

The cities in the Ivory Kingdom were surprisingly more easily accessible than the ones in the Gold Kingdoms. Where one had to fly through mountains and storms to reach other cities, here they just had to fly past a bunch of snow-filled plains.

Not that Alex even got to do so as he was teleported everywhere.

Every new city Alex arrived, he would look at the newsboard and make sure to note that his arrival had been noted. Then, he would stay a few weeks there before moving to the other cities.

He did so for a few months until one day, his plan worked and someone contacted him so discreetly that even he barely recognized someone had met him.

The man appeared as a guard of the City lord in the city and notified Alex about an event that was taking place. He then gave him a talisman that described the event that was being held.

No one suspected anything, but the talisman held another piece of information aside from just information about the event. It held a message from Yan Yating, the leader of the Oathbreakers.

"I have heard about your 3 demands," the man's voice entered Alex's mind through the talisman. "We accept those demands."

"I should note that anything and everything about your first demand, what my people can give you is mostly under oath, so you might end up with barely anything. Still, I will keep up the demand to the best of my ability."

"Secondly, about this... person in your other demand, I did not know such a figure even existed at all, but I can understand what you must be feeling right now. We will try our best to give you what we can find."

"Finally, while I highly disagree with what you ask, I will still accept it," he said. "Find the girl and you can get started. We will exchange the product with the information the next year. I hope you can be done by then. Good luck."

Alex took down the talisman and was surprised at how forthcoming the man was. Still, he had managed to hide everything they had talked about while talking about everything. A normal person coming across this piece of talisman would have had no idea what he was talking about.

Alex read through the talisman once again to make sure he didn't miss anything and then destroyed it completely.

3 days later, it was time to go to this event.

General Fan and 2 other strong soldiers followed Alex to the party. They weren't going to leave them out of their sight no matter where he went. It had been happening ever since he had returned and Alex was starting to believe that the Emperor had a hand in this.

He was almost sure that the Dragon Emperor had started suspecting his involvement with the Oathbreakers. If not, these men were extremely protective of him.

There were nobles and high-ranking figures from all over the city and wide in this small party that the City lord had planned.

At first, Alex had believed that the Oathbreakers had their hand in organizing this party, but it seemed they were only taking advantage of it.

The party was instead regarding the City lord's daughter successfully entering the Saint realm at the age of 200. That was considered fast here and extremely fast everywhere else.

This sort of person would have been considered one of the greatest talents in the Western Continent, and a high-tier talent in the other two continents. In the Eastern Continent, however, she was just an upper middle-grade talent.

Her true talent would show itself once she started her Saint cultivation journey. That was where their cultivation speed would slow down to almost nothing and they would take generations to break through to anything.

If she was able to reach the Saint Transformation realm in 1,000 more years, her name would be sung through the entire continent for generations to come. Alas, Alex could tell that was impossible given how slow her True realm cultivation speed itself was.

He looked around the room, searching for signs of the girl he was supposed to meet, and he knew who the girl most likely was. But he couldn't find her at all. She was nowhere to be seen.

That was until he noticed a girl with a completely different look, but of similar build and height staring at him from time to time from a distance. She was looking for a way to get close without drawing suspicion.

"I'll stay here, you two go mingle with the crowd. Many seem to be wanting to talk with me, but I don't want to talk with them," he told his two elders. "Deal with them on my behalf."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the two Elders said and left.

Alex stayed behind at one corner of the room, looking at the party. "Do you all not want to go get involved in the party?" he asked the Generals and others who followed him. "It's a good party."

"Our job is to look after you, Your Majesty," General Fan answered.

"Still, you can enjoy," Alex said. "I doubt anyone would want to kidnap me in this place." He looked at the soldiers and saw no reaction from them. They hadn't found it funny at all.

"Actually, it might be better if you all stay here," he said. "It deters the others from wanting to come talk to me. I don't want to talk with them."

"Is there a reason?" General Fan asked.

"Too many people," Alex said. "I give way to talk to one and soon we'll have a tidal wave of people wanting to talk to me. It might make me sound bad, but I have no interest in that."

"It makes you sound reasonable, Your Majesty," the General said.

Alex nodded. "We should be leaving tomorrow, yes?" he asked.

"Yes," the General said. "We will be heading to the East Ivory Tundra region starting tomorrow. There are a bunch of cities there."

Alex nodded. "Don't make plans for anything after that," he said. "I want to enter closed cultivation soon."

"How soon, if I may ask, your Majesty?" The General looked at him curiously.

"A month at best," Alex said. "I want to enter closed cultivation. My pills are running low and I need to improve my cultivation too. So I need to make some preparations for the future."

"I see," the General said. "I will plot out routes to only the most important and impressive cities in the tundra."

Alex nodded.

The two elders returned sometime later and spoke about the various people they met. "They seem satisfied getting to talk with us," Yao Ning said. "You don't need to bother meeting them, Your Majesty."

"Good Job," he said. "Can we leave now?"

The General looked around. "I'll tell the City Lord," he said.

Alex nodded and watched him leave. He then turned to Yao Ning who gave a very subtle nod.

A small imperceptible smile formed on Alex's face that the other soldiers had not noticed at all.

He had received the Package from Yao Ning. It was time for them to leave.

Chapter 1562: 8th Year

If Alex could make the pills he was requested to make as quickly as he was allowed to, he could have completed the entirety of it in less than 2 weeks. With the involvement of pill clouds, he would need less than 3 months to complete making all the pills.

If he wanted to not arouse suspicion that he was making too many pills at once, Alex would have to spread those out over more than 6 months. And that was exactly what he did.

During his 'closed cultivation', Alex took around 7 months to complete making all the pills. He had to slow down his rate of making pills by making time for his cultivation of all sorts.

His Qi cultivation was still stuck on the 1st realm of the Saint Soul realm, but he was starting to see it coming to a crescendo beyond which he could break through in a short amount of time. As for when that would be, he wasn't yet capable of telling.

Not only did he have to improve his Qi, but he also had to improve his own soul in the Saint Soul realm. As a result, his cultivation speed has gone down a lot over the last 3 years.

Taking 4 years in total to reach just the 2nd realm of Saint Soul was a long time for Alex, but he couldn't complain. There were people around him who waited centuries to go up a single realm after all.

Alongside his Qi cultivation, his Body Cultivation had improved quite a lot thanks to the Mountain Crushing artifact. He had managed to cross halfway through the Saint Core realm with his physical body, getting closer and closer to the Saint Soul realm in physical strength as well.

However, the improvement had come in a burst toward the start, and by now it was starting to get slower and slower. To cross from the 5th Saint Core realm of body cultivation to the 6th Saint Core realm, it had taken him nearly 6 months.

It had to partially do with his body requiring further refinement in the latter realms, and partially to do with him having to slow down on his usage of spirit stones. He had to save them for what was necessary.

His blood aura had no way of improving while he was in closed cultivation and the same was the situation for his Intent and new Dao.

His Sword Intent had no way of improving either. It hadn't had a way to improve for a long time as he hadn't got the chance to train properly. He did not want to let the people here know he could use Sword Aura, and with just the lack of fighting and training in general, he hadn't had the chance to improve it.

But he wasn't worried about it just yet. Soon he would have the opportunity to do just that. Just a few more years was all he needed.

Until then, it was better if he focused on the rest he could easily improve.

Alex left the cultivation room and met up with his elders. They were busy cultivating as well, so they had to stop to meet with him.

"Has anyone come to the Swan courtyard while I was gone?" Alex asked them.

"The Crown Prince came to meet you once, I believe," Liang Shufen said. "But he left after learning that you were busy."

Yao Ning's face twisted into a frown. "Why is your cultivation base the same, Your Majesty?" she asked. "I had assumed you had broken through."

"Hmm? Me?" Alex shook his head. "That was Pearl and Whisker. I haven't broken through yet. I am getting close, however."

They nodded.

"Are we to hand over the pills now?" Yao Ning asked Alex.

Alex nodded.

"Who are these people, Your Majesty?" she asked. Liang Shufen was curious all the same as well.

"I told you," Alex said. "It is better if you know nothing about these people. Anyway, let them know that I plan to visit the Blueheart city for the next few weeks and then to go roam the Azure Kingdom."

"I will," Yao Ning said.

Alex felt quite impatient despite having waited nearly 10 months for this. He went out to visit his alchemists before leaving for Blueheart City.

He hadn't been there for nearly 4 years, and yet it felt like it was just yesterday that he left this place to go to Goldheart city for the auction.

Alex was allowed to fly on the boat on the way to the Blueheart city. Being in the Azure Kingdom, they did not fear random bandits attacking the King of the Southern Continent.

Along the way, Alex couldn't help but feel surreal regarding how long it had been since he had seen his family. Since he had seen his father, mother, and daughter.

7 years he had spent away from them. It was already 3 months into the 8th year as well. A few years of closed cultivation and he would be halfway through his time on this continent.

'When will I return?' he wondered. He didn't want to wait the entire 20 years. He had to kill the Emperor if he was in fact responsible for his cousin's death. He was already someone that Alex hated for potentially killing Pearl's mother, but the situation had gotten even more personal with Hannah's death.

And that person was the one that he had to help become the best alchemist in the realm. There was no doubt in Alex's mind that if the man created a pill with pill veins, it would have all 9 pill veins in it.

He was just that strong.

"Your Majesty, welcome back!" Long Weiyuan greeted Alex excitedly. Next to him was a relatively young woman with long dark-brown hair that flowed behind like a waterfall. She was the queen of the Azure Kingdom, one that Alex hadn't gotten to meet the last time he was there.

"Greetings, Your Majesty. I am the Queen of this Kingdom, Jun Jiaorou. It is my utmost pleasure to meet you." The woman bowed, the gold stacked on her hair threatening to fall out of it.

Alex greeted the two of them and was led inside the palace. They served him all kinds of expensive treats and refreshments before allowing him to rest for a bit.

He had a simple plan for now. He would stay in this city for a few weeks to try and see if the Oathbreakers would come to him. If they didn't, he would move to the other cities, especially ones around the edges of the Kingdom to lure them out.

Once they were out, he planned on swapping the pills for the information.

So, he spent the next few days with the King and Queen, interacting with them as much as he could, thanking them for letting his elders stay there when he was gone.

The couples were more than happy to let Alex stay there for the time being and even refused the pills he gave them as a thank you.

However, Alex managed to force it on them one way or another. They were rather happy to receive it.

3 weeks after that, having not received any sort of message from the Oathbreakers, Alex started his journey to scour the kingdom until one of them found him.

Chapter 1563: The Three Mountain Ranges

Not very different from the other continents, the Eastern continent did not have many mountain ranges either.

Not counting the scattered mountains that were as many as islands in the ocean, there were exactly 3 mountain ranges here.

The most important of these mountain ranges was the Golden Mountain range which was home to over 98% of the gold in the entire continent. As such, they were perhaps the most popular of the mountain range of the continent.

The Golden Mountain range went through most of the Gold Kingdom, its edges touching on the Beast Paradise to the east and part of the northern segments of the Ivory Kingdom to the west.

After that was the Ebony mountain range which was said to be full of natural resources, be it in the form of plants or metal ores. These mountains in general were also some of the tallest mountains out there. The most impressive mountain of the entire continent, the Celestial Peak also lies in this exact mountain range.

The Ebony Mountain range started at the border of the Emerald Kingdom and the Ebony Kingdom around the Middle-Eastern section and wrapped around the eastern shores of the Ebony Kingdom.

Finally, the third and longest mountain range of all was the Silver Mountain Range. It started in the westernmost section of the Ebony Kingdom and made its way through the Silver Kingdom, near the border of the Azure Kingdom, and all the way up to the eastern shores of the Ivory Kingdom.

The mountain ranges were named as such for a long time, so the countries they were located in were named as such as well.

Covering the entire North to South length of the Eastern continent, the Silver Mountain range was the longest of all 3 mountain ranges. And yet, it was the one that people least cared about due to its lack of proper natural resources.

Instead, people had built homes on it, building cities on and around the mountains. One such city was the Skylorn City at one of the highest peaks of the Silver mountain range, surrounded by a deep forest on the eastern side and a desert on the west.

This city, along with a handful of others was considered part of the Azure Kingdom due to the desert to the west being not a good place for human

And this city was the one where Alex had been contacted by the Oathbreakers.

He had been passed along a message by a tour guide while out on the ride, and they wanted to meet him down in the forest to the east. Alex couldn't just sneak out, lest he arouse suspicion from the many strong folks that were here as his guard.

He never trusted them to be anything more than his prison guards.

They had returned from the tour, so Alex was supposed to be cultivating overnight. He had told the group as much and so he had to set up himself as someone that was still here, while he left.

Alex closed his eyes and focused. He used a technique to the best of his ability, separating a layer of Yang from him, transforming it into an ethereal version of him that held the same aura and Intent.

He had made a Yang clone using the doppelganger technique that he rarely got to use nowadays. He placed Whisker in charge of handling the aura while he placed it on top of the Immortal puppet that still wore the damage-measuring artifact on its chest.

Once it was all done, Alex took a deep breath and teleported.

He arrived a couple hundred meters away from the guest house that they were staying at. If he had to, Alex could force himself to teleport over a kilometer or two at this point while having his Qi and his Intent increase so much in such little time.

However, that required him to try his best. This one, he was trying to lay low. The moment he arrived in the night city, surrounded by no one, he started walking away as quickly as he could, without giving away who or what he was.

With his face mostly hidden with not just a pulled-down bamboo hat, but also the white Hell mask, he made his way down the city toward the forest.

20 minutes later, he was deep in the thick forest, away from most cultivators who might have wanted to train on the outskirts. He walked unnoticed into the forest and searched for who he was looking for from the start.

To his surprise, they had made no attempt to hide themselves. Alex could see a small group of people, hanging around on the tree, waiting for him. He placed down a small concealment formation that covered not just him but also the men and women that were up on the tree.

A few of them were surprised at the quickly deployed formation, but the others seemed to have guessed it was coming. Or maybe they just weren't surprised.

A man slowly landed on the floor, his face out in the light for anyone who could use to see. "Good evening, Your Majesty," Yan Yating spoke with a wide smile. "We're happy to have met you again."

"We?" Alex asked, looking around. He noticed the other folks nod toward him in greeting as well, two of whom had been there the last time they had tried to kidnap him. "Well, it's good to see my kidnappers again." He chuckled at his own words before others misunderstood the joke.

"Have you finished what we asked, Your Majesty?" Yan Yating asked.

Alex shrugged. "Have you finished what I asked?" he asked the man.

Yan Yating showed no hesitation in bringing up a talisman and tossing it to Alex. Alex was about to read it when he noticed the runes of the talisman that was given to him and immediately stopped.

Yan Yating spoke a moment afterward. "It is a one-time use talisman as you might've guessed," he said. "You can read through it right now to make sure the talisman has everything you wanted. Or, you can give us the pill and leave with the talisman."

"I will read it right now," he said, but he didn't let his guard down at all. "If you try and do something to me, I will destroy the pills so you can never get them."

"Sure," Yan Yating said. "I wasn't trying to dupe you or anything. We have brought you the information you asked for. Although I should warn you, there wasn't much we could find for you."

Alex looked at the man and then at the others behind him. Not a single one of them seemed to try and do anything.

"Very well, let me see what you got me then," he said and used his senses to look into the talisman. As he started reading the contents of the talisman, a string of information flowed into his mind, starting with the first thing Alex had demanded for his cooperation.

Information on the Azure Dragon.

There wasn't much to go by here, and most of what was written here were repeated information that he had learned already. What he wanted was new information, especially regarding the beast's death, but that seemed impossible to get.

What he did learn was something he hadn't even thought of at all.

The Azure Dragon's corpse had not been destroyed at all. It had remained unmoved in the secret realm where it had died all those years ago, as per the orders of the Emperor.

Chapter 1564: Han Ahlin

Alex paused halfway through his read, wondering what he had just read meant.

'The Dragon died, but his corpse wasn't taken away?' Alex thought. He was not just curious as to what it meant, but also why the Oathbreakers would give him this. On the surface, there was no need for them to give him anything about the Dragon after his death.

On its own, he would ignore it, but together, it was a mystery he needed to solve. He thought for a long moment.

The Dragon's corpse remaining inside the secret realm created a couple of possibilities.

First, the Emperor was most likely still reverent of the Azure Dragons and didn't wish to desecrate his corpse. So, he had left it behind.

Second, the Dragon's body had an Intent to it that made it hard to store in a storage bag or storage rings and bring out.

Third, the Dragon Emperor probably just didn't want people to accidentally realize that the Azure Dragon was dead.

Alex remembered something from a while ago when he was returning from the Brightfalls City to the Dragon Capital. Their pathway intersected the Azure Dragon's secret realm, but they had been made to take a detour.

Was this why? Because they didn't want anyone to accidentally come across its corpse?

'Wait, was the Dragon Emperor involved in the Azure Dragon's death or not?' he thought. He had always had a reasonable suspicion about the fact that the Dragon Emperor had most likely been responsible for

the death of the heavenly beast in one way or another, but this made his suspicion not hold as much water.

Or maybe it made it a more solid suspicion. Maybe the reason the corpse was still there meant that the Dragon Emperor didn't want people to find out about the Azure Dragon's death and start making their own judgment on the matter.

What was the point of not telling the general population if he hadn't been involved? Was he afraid of threats from the other continents? Like he had done to the Western Continent?

He was the strongest. His continent was the strongest. And he knew for a fact that the other heavenly beasts couldn't come attack him.

The only reason he had to have been holding back the information was because he had been responsible.

At least, that was what Alex believed, and what he believed wasn't necessarily the truth. He needed more to make proper judgments. He read the rest of the information on the talisman regarding the Azure Dragon, but none sounded helpful.

It especially lacked information about the inside of the secret realm, which he could imagine was under oath to not reveal. That was most likely an oath they had to say even before the entire fiasco.

He skipped over to the next half of the information in the talisman, and immediately felt his heart skip a beat when he remembered it was about Hannah.

Her name was written there in the talisman, but modified to sound similar to the names of this world. Han Ahlin.

'Sister...' Alex thought and braced himself for what he was going to read next.

Han Ahlin had entered a very small sect on the eastern side of the Azure Kingdom, one known as the Winding River sect. However, due to her talent, she had improved so incredibly fast that she had made a large name for herself in the small sect.

However, it was quickly overshadowed by every other player making a big name for themselves. She was just a part of a statistic now.

A year later, she disappeared from the sect. As for where she had gone, no one in that sect knew.

The Tail Legion was brought out of reserve to do something. The information about it was vague, and the most Alex could get out of it was that they were meant to return with some sort of... thing.

A formation flag, a piece of jewelry, a weapon, a shield, or even just a random ingredient. It could have been anything.

During that hunt, they had come across Hannah. The information afterward wasn't there and what was there was not helpful. But that girl named Jiaolun had been one of the soldiers here and that was what had led to Hannah's death.

The talisman burst into his hands as he had finished reading it. The flame disappeared and the dozen or so men and women in front of him stirred as they realized he had finished reading it.

Alex stayed silent for a while, slowly calming what anger he had felt. What was it that the Emperor had been hunting for and why was it with his sister? And why was it that she hadn't just handed it back? Or was it something she could not hand back?

Why was everything about this entire situation so vague? What did he have to do to get concrete answers? Ask the damn emperor himself?

He calmed down a little before looking toward Yan Yating. "Is this all you could find?" he asked.

The man nodded. "Anything and everything about His Majesty, the Azure Dragon is either already public or under oath, so we couldn't find anything more to give you," he said. "As for... that girl that I hear is your cousin, her situation is even more curious."

"What do you mean?" Alex asked.

"I can't imagine why the Dragon Emperor could ever want to go after her. I can't imagine what the thing he is searching for is. I knew this was a thing, but it is only recently that I cared to look into the situation and try to figure out the things inside it."

"Something had happened here that even the folks that do not know about the Azure Dragon's death were forced to go against him," the man said. "I had never bothered to ask what it was exactly that had happened, but thanks to you I have some inkling."

Alex looked at him. "But it still doesn't make any sense," he said.

"No, it doesn't," the man said. "I don't know what it could be that the Dragon Emperor wanted from this girl who was not even 25 years old at the time. All I can imagine is one of the treasures that all the players get when they come to this world."

"Hmm," Alex gave that a thought. "I didn't think of that." However, when he thought some more about it, it didn't make as much sense. "No, that can't be it. The Emperor hunted for the item and came across my cousin. If he knew she had it, he would have hunted for her directly."

"Also, it makes no sense why one would be forced to speak an oath on something of such low importance," he said. "That man has done things that are far worse."

The people thought of it and couldn't come up with a rebuttal. "Well, there's nothing else we can help you with regarding these two, you're on your own," Yan Yating said.

Alex nodded. "What about the third demand?" he asked.

"We will fight to kill, but we cannot guarantee that. He is too strong after all," Yan Yating said.

"I understand," Alex said. He brought out a storage bag and tossed it to them. "There are the pills you wanted. Next time I see you all, I hope it will be the day when the Dragon Emperor dies."

Chapter 1565: A Few Years Later

There was nothing left for Alex to divert his attention to for the next few years. He had learned all he could, and what he couldn't, there was no way for him to learn.

As such, he decided to focus his time and energy on his own cultivation base, improving himself.

The very year after he started that, he reached the 2nd realm of the Saint Soul realm. Three years after that, he reached the 3rd realm of the Saint Soul realm.

His physical body barely lagged behind him as well, reaching Saint Soul's 1st realm by that time. While it was nowhere near his own cultivation base in terms of its strength, the level it had reached was still quite amazing.

Alas, he had ended up using up his reserve of Saint spirit stones with barely any remaining. Fortunately, however, nearly 13 years had passed since he had been in the Eastern Continent and the Golden auction was up in about a year, having repeated from the last 10 years.

He could sell some pills there. Or at least the two elders could. He had to be elsewhere during that time most likely.

Aside from body and Qi, he had made some progress in everything else as well.

The most important progress he made was in his task to downgrade the Immortal Spirit Pill into a Saint grade. He had only done it a couple of weeks ago.

He had tried his best with the Ten Thousand Earth pill as well, but that had turned out to be much more difficult. At the rate he was going, Alex would become an Immortal himself before he managed to turn the pill into a Saint-grade version.

As for the Wood Spiritual Root Improvement pill, that seemed plausible to be completed in the next decade or two. He had made some significant progress, but there was still a way to go.

He had made other improvements in various aspects of cultivation and alchemy, but none in the big ones that mattered like his Sword Intent, Blood Aura, or Dao.

As for the rest, things were going fine.

Pearl and Whisker showed great improvements during the few years as well, cultivating each and every moment. They were both far stronger now.

Alex had planned on remaining in closed cultivation for a while longer but had to leave because Tian Honglui was in the capital and had requested to meet him while he was there.

Since it was already close to the time when Alex would have to stop anyway, he decided to be done with his closed cultivation and go meet the man.

Alex met the man in a small restaurant in the capital that was barely any popular at all. Tian Honglui was sitting in a corner and quickly waved his hands to catch Alex's attention before bringing him over.

Alex ignored the many eyes that fell on him and made his way toward the young painter.

"Your Majesty," the man almost shouted. "How long has it been? I've been wanting to see you again for a while now."

"Brother Tian, I have missed you as well," Alex said. "What brings you to the city?"

"Oh, I came for the Hall of Fame exhibition that they were doing in the Royal School. They wanted me to be there," the man said. "I thought you would be there since it was a big event, but I didn't see you there."

"I was in closed cultivation," Alex said. "How was the exhibition?"

"It was alright," Tian Honglui said. "They focused it more on me than the paintings, but I suppose that's understandable." He shrugged.

Alex chuckled a bit. "The Hall of Fame paintings are good, but it can't be any better than seeing and hearing from the person that made it there 3 times in a row."

Tian Honglui gave a small smile. "You could do it too, Your Majesty," he said. "Alas, I don't think you have the intention to."

Alex shook his head. "I don't have the intention for it," he said. "Besides, I haven't focused on my painting in quite some time, so I don't think I would make it there without some significant attention in that matter."

Tian Honglui shrugged. "Oh yeah, I wanted to ask regarding that, will you sell a painting in the Golden Auction this time around?" he asked.

"Sell a painting?" Alex asked, thinking to himself. "I don't see why I can't do that. I am planning to make some pills, especially for the auction once again. But painting isn't a bad idea."

"Can you help me with mine?" the young man asked. "You have some strong Dao, so I was hoping you could help me with a random painting. Anything will work, I'm trying to challenge myself."

Alex thought for a bit and nodded. "Sure," he said. "I can do that."

"Haha, great," Tian Honglui said excitedly.

The food arrived, a large bowl of soup with chunks of vegetables and meat floating in a dark brown broth with a layer of liquid fat on top.

"I was meaning to ask," Alex said. "Why are we here?" He pointed to the shop. No matter how he cut it, this shop was not a big place at all and was mostly filled with lower-realm cultivators.

"This is my go-to place when I'm in the capital," the young painter said. "Back when I was studying here in the Royal School, my starting years were... let's say not very good for my heart."

"One day, I came here on a whim and ordered this very food. When I ate it, it reminded me of Mother's cooking, back when she was still alive," he said. "That helped me calm down a lot. Since then whenever I was sad or burdened or anxious or in any sort of sour mood, I would come here to wash it away with this soup that reminds me of home. Of a place I could never return to."

The young painter slurped up a spoonful of soup. "My cultivation base is high now and I don't need to eat anything to survive, but still, from time to time, I like to come here and eat this. To remind myself of the days of the past and all the good times I had."

Alex paused for a moment before tasting the soup himself. The soup was barely any good to his tongue after tasting the delicacies the high-level chefs of the Dragon Palace made for him whenever he requested it.

And yet, he couldn't help but feel warm when he swallowed it. He smiled a little and took another spoon and another, and soon he was halfway done with it.

Tian Honglui chuckled a bit and dug into his own soup, chewing on the piece of meat that floated in there.

Alex took a bite of a small piece of vegetable, the fresh flavors not destroyed by the hot soup. He was only about to swallow it when it stuck in his throat, the world seemingly stopping around him.

Tian Honglui continued as if nothing happened, but he too had to pause and look at Alex in surprise when he realized what was amiss. "Wait, isn't that—"

Alex gulped, swallowing his food, and sent his senses outside to sense the storm that formed. One he was so very familiar with.

A pill Cloud was forming outside, and he was not the one making it.

Chapter 1566: Veined Pill

Alex knew what was happening. There were no other possibilities. Still, he held out hope and tried to check in the direction of the Royal School of Alchemy. Maybe one of his alchemists had been the one to make the pill.

Alas, they were not. The pill cloud was forming, and it was forming atop the Dragon Palace.

No one around him seemed to notice what was happening at all. Everyone went about their daily life, with only Alex feeling any sort of emotion at all. That was until he noticed that they were just ignoring what was happening.

'They are already used to it,' he thought.

"Your Majesty, how is there a pill cloud when you're here?" the painter asked.

Alex stood up. "I'm sorry, brother Tian, but I must leave for now. I'll meet you a few days later for the painting. It was great seeing you again."

Before Tian Honglun could say anything, Alex was already out of the shop and rushing toward the Dragon Palace. The shadow guards that were sent after him rushed behind him as he ran back to the Dragon Palace.

Alex arrived at the Dragon Palace around the time the third lightning fell and then reached his elders during the 5th lightning that fell from the pill clouds.

"Your majesty," Yao Ning called to him the moment she saw him. "What is going on? Is this not you?"

"No," Alex said. "I think this is the Dragon Emperor. No, it most definitely is him." He didn't know how to feel about it. Seeing someone who was his enemy becoming stronger was not something Alex wanted to see.

However, he had no choice but to continue watching.

The 6th and the 7th lightning did nothing to Alex's spirit, but the 8th lightning made him hesitate and feel anxious. He could make the 8-veined pill. He could do it for a long time since he brought up his blood aura to that level.

However, the level after that was not something Alex could do. The pinnacle of what was possible with pills as a Saint realm cultivator was something Alex knew he couldn't reach for a long time.

And today, he was seeing someone who had never made a pill cloud form before making one.

The Dragon Emperor's very first pill was going to have 9 pill veins. Alex didn't know how to feel about that.

When the 9th lightning fell from the heavens, Alex could only watch in silence as his mind tried to think through the consequences of what had occurred. As someone with nine-veined pills, the Dragon Emperor was going to be a much tougher opponent.

And he had already been the toughest one Alex had ever found. If Alex wasn't wrong, then the Dragon Emperor was already stronger than the Mad Immortal that had kidnapped him all those years ago.

Something changed in the sky that made everyone look up at once. Saint realm cultivators could easily tell what was happening, and even True realm cultivators could tell something was different, though they lacked the understanding to come to a conclusion.

"Is that... a breakthrough?" Liang Shufen couldn't help but ask. Alex was of the same thought as well, albeit he couldn't think of a reason why the Dragon Emperor would be breaking through to the Immortal realms right now.

'Did he figure out how to make pill clouds consistently?' Alex thought to himself. He himself had never really managed to make pill clouds without using the pill separating Qi, and he had yet to give that to the emperor.

The breakthrough aura disappeared all of a sudden, giving everyone a fright, and the day returned to normal once again with no clouds in the sky. To anyone who was already not used to this shenanigan happening every few minutes in the capital from time to time.

No one knew this was the Dragon Emperor doing it this time around, so they never had any inkling of exactly how big this thing was.

After waiting for a few minutes, Alex returned to his room and decided to wait for the dragon emperor to be done with it.

It took him 3 days to meet the Dragon Emperor.

Alex walked into the hall where the Dragon Emperor waited for him, days after he had summoned the pill clouds. Alex made his way toward the seat where the Dragon Emperor was sitting with no sense of urgency or anything.

"Congratulations on your pill cloud, Dragon Emperor," Alex said as he sat on an empty seat opposite the Dragon Emperor. "I hope our trade was what helped you do it."

"It did," the Dragon Emperor answered. "I would thank you for the knowledge had I already not paid for it."

Alex shrugged. "It doesn't hurt to say it though," he said. He hesitated a bit before asking the next question. "Did you... succeed in making a 9-veined pill?"

The Dragon Emperor didn't answer Alex verbally. Instead, he tossed him a pill bottle that Alex swiftly grabbed from the air and opened to look inside. A pill tumbled inside the bottle, one with 9 different lightning scars on it; Alex counted it.

The blue pill gave Alex a sense of surprise and the strong smell wafting away from the pill made Alex realize just how strong the pill was.

"Incredible," he couldn't help but say. "A 9-veined Saint Cultivation pill. This should speed up your Qi cultivation nearly a hundred times if I'm not mistaken."

The Dragon Emperor raised an eyebrow at those words. "You are quite fast when it comes to knowing what pill it is just by looking at it," he said.

"The smell is a big part too," Alex said.

"Still surprising," the Dragon Emperor said. "Anyway, I don't believe you came here to look at that pill."

"I was," Alex said. "What did you think I was here for?"

The Dragon Emperor couldn't help but give an untrustful look toward Alex before letting go of it. "You really just came to check my pill?" he asked.

"That and ask you how you managed to do it," Alex answered. "I haven't given you everything you need to make pill clouds, so I was—"

"Oh, but you have," the Dragon Emperor said, cutting off Alex.

Alex paused. "Sorry?"

"You have given me everything I need to make pill clouds," the Dragon Emperor said. "Perfect recipes, brilliant pill-forming techniques, and then the knowledge about the mushrooms. The mushrooms were the biggest part I presume, thought it could be all three."

Alex's eyes narrowed for a long moment as he tried to find lies in the Dragon Emperor's words, but he hadn't been lying. "You really did it..." he said softly. "You managed to learn how to use the mushrooms."

"I had to search around for it," the Dragon Emperor said. "Took me a while to find an alchemist with proper knowledge about that. He was a player too. Do only players know about this?"

Alex didn't say anything.

"Now I don't even know what to trade with you for the next 2 trades," he said. "You already can make pill clouds."

"I can't," the Dragon Emperor said. "What you saw a few days ago was just a coincidence. I have made hundreds if not thousands of pills, and yours was the only information that helped me go past that final barrier, even though I would attribute my current success to luck more than anything."

"Luck?" Alex asked. "What's there to be lucky about? You put in effort and you get the result."

"Yes, but I've been doing that for a long time and will do that for a long time too, and yet I never managed to for pill clouds," the Dragon Emperor said. "It was only after your information that I managed to do anything."

Alex remained silent, blaming himself for giving the information so early. Alas, he couldn't stop it from happening. He had no choice.

"And I still need it to do anything," the Dragon Emperor continued. "I do not know for certain if what I have learned is accurate too. I didn't manage to form another pill cloud."

Alex's eyes perked up at those words. "Sorry?" he asked, surprised. "You... don't know exactly what to do?"

"I'm just guessing out here," the Dragon Emperor said. "I don't have the entire knowledge. Even if I do, I do not know about it. But I doubt it a little. After all, I couldn't make another pill cloud."

"You tried?" Alex asked.

"Why did you think I was so late to leave?" the Dragon Emperor said. "I thought I would rise the glory and form more pill clouds, but it is not as easy as I thought it would be. One needs more than just luck. You need absolute knowledge too."

"That was why I had hoped you were here for another reason."

Alex looked at the Dragon Emperor, realizing only just now what he meant. "You want information on the mushrooms that I have," he said.

"Yes," the Dragon Emperor said. "Let me see if what I found is what I need to have known. I need to learn more and make more pill clouds in the future. I cannot let it all up to chance."

Alex felt a bit of relief when he heard that, but all anxiety hadn't gone. Even if the pill clouds had been accidental, Alex was about to help him once more to make him a better alchemist.

Even though he hadn't intended it before, Alex was now going to have to do the third trade with the Dragon Emperor.

Chapter 1567: A Single Stroke

"Did you do it?" Pearl asked Alex after he had returned from talking to the Dragon Emperor.

"I was supposed to give it to him for the trade anyway," Alex said. "It's only right that I do it before I don't get the chance to. He was this close to figuring out about the mushrooms."

Pearl fell into a thought, and Alex did the same. It was true that they both didn't want the Dragon Emperor to get stronger, but there was no choice on Alex's part this time around.

"What do we do now?" Pearl asked. "If he can make pill clouds frequently, won't he ascend?"

"No, don't worry about that," Alex said. "Those three by themselves won't be enough for him to make pills frequently, and the World Defying Mushrooms aren't that common either."

"He might be able to form pill clouds every 100 pills now, instead of every few hundred," Alex said.

"Didn't my 6th grandma say that pill clouds by themselves are quite rare?" Pearl asked. "He won't need more than what he has to have a good life in the Immortal realms."

Alex nodded. That was what Luo Beihan had told them, but he shook his head immediately afterward. "If I were to give you a recipe for a pill that has a 1 in 10 chance to instantly send you to the next cultivation base, would you take it?" he asked.

Pearl was surprised at the tangent, but he decided to answer Alex anyway. "1 in 10? That sounds like a good pill, doesn't it?" he asked. He didn't know much about pills, but he definitely knew a thing or two about cultivation and how difficult it was to break through to the next realm.

"What if you find out I have a recipe that can guarantee a pill that helps me break through each time," Alex said. "Would you want it?"

"Of course," Pearl said.

"Which one would you want of the two?" Alex asked.

"The one that guarantees," Pearl said.

Alex was about to continue when Pearl cut him off once again.

"I get it now," he said. "Yes, that makes sense. Even though he has every reason to leave right now and now live like a lowly cultivator in the Immortal realms, he won't leave just yet because he knows there is something more lucrative here that he can acquire."

Alex nodded. "Until he gets everything from me that he knows he can use to make pill clouds every time, he won't leave," he said.

"I see," Pearl said. "But he will get that by the end of our 20-year period here, right?"

"7 more years," Alex said with a sigh.

13 years had passed since he had come here. The past 4 years especially had all been a blend in his mind as he had spent all of it cultivating with only ever leaving his closed cultivation once.

And that one time had been to go meet with Jai Heiyun, who he had discreetly sent to find information on his sister's old sect to see what she could find. There was nothing he got out of that except the knowledge that his sister hadn't had much time to spend in this place before she was forced to leave... for some reason.

"We'll have to get stronger," Pearl said.

"Yes," Alex said. "We definitely have to get stronger."

"And we can't have it just be through cultivation," Pearl said. "I need to get stronger, and I want to fight to get stronger."

Alex nodded. He knew he had to get stronger and he needed proper training to achieve that. He was thinking of ways to achieve that.

"We should soon be able to train properly," he said. "Just a few more months."

Pearl couldn't help but look forward to whatever was coming.

Alex went to meet with his elders, having thought of a new plan. He was going to go to Blueheart City for a few months and then head over to the Silver Kingdom after that.

His next few days were going to be spent helping his alchemists and Tian Honglui with his paintings. After that, it was all free for him.

He went to Blueheart City a week later and met with the King there once again. He was welcomed just as respectfully as he had the last time he had come here as well.

It felt like yesterday for Alex, but it had been over 5 years since then. Time moved so quickly when one spent most of it in closed cultivation.

"Your cultivation base surprises me each time, Your Majesty," the King said.

Long Weiyuan was still quite young and had a cultivation base in the mid-Saint Soul realm, which Alex could tell had remained stagnant for a long time. His words were somewhat filled with envy.

"I have some of the best techniques, and best pills, and I get to cultivate in the Dragon Palace," Alex said. "I would not dare show my face if I can't even do this much."

The king only chuckled a bit and said nothing. He knew Alex liked being alone, so he left him after a bit.

Alex took the time to go to the garden where he sat and worked on a painting that he was planning on selling in the Golden Auction that would start in 6 months or so. He ruminated on the actual content of the painting and knew that one with some sort of Dao would sell the best, so he went with that approach.

No one needed to know his thoughts and emotions.

He thought about what he could make for a while before deciding that he didn't need to make anything fancy to give off an aura, he took some golden paint and made a single slash from the top of the canvas to the bottom, splitting the painting into two halves.

It was a simple thing but that didn't mean it was bad. In fact, he was quite proud of it.

"Sword aura... and is that Dao of Cutting?" someone spoke from behind Alex.

Alex quickly turned around to find the Crown Prince standing not far away from him.

"Crown Prince? What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I had some free time before my workload increases in the next few months, so I decided to come here and try to learn some Dao if I could," the crown prince said. He pointed at the painting and spoke again, "That's the Dao of Cutting, right? I'm trying to learn it right now."

"Yes, it is," Alex said. "Do you want to peer in here?"

"Sure," the Crown Prince said and looked at the painting, getting lost in it for a while. His face went through an array of expressions as he tried to figure out a bunch of things.

"There's... something else here," the man said. "I can't tell what it is though."

Alex nodded. He had added Dao of Gold and Dao of Sharpness into the only paint that was the golden line. Sword Intent and Cutting Dao was just the half of it.

He didn't bother explaining it.

The prince stayed there, learning as much as he could before withdrawing his attention from it. "It's so minimal and yet so incredible," he said.

"I'm planning on selling it," Alex said.

"What?" the Crown Prince looked at him. "Without having it be checked if it's viable for the Hall of Fame?"

"I don't particularly care about being put in the hall of fame, so no," Alex said.

"But the hall—" the Crown Prince paused and shook his head. "Whatever. It is your painting after all. I can't tell you what to do or what not to do."

Alex smiled and stored the painting.

"What are you planning on doing next?" the Crown Prince asked.

"I was thinking of retreating to my quarters for now. I might go to the Domain of Enlightenment tomorrow," Alex said.

"If you have the time, do you want to go to the Azure Lake with me?" the Crown Prince asked. "I am planning on going there right now."

Alex thought for a bit and shrugged. "Sure. That works for me."

He left with the Crown Prince and visited the Azure Lake once again. He had been here a couple of times, and it never got any less magnificent. Even now, with the sunset reflecting in its light and the moon peeking through the side, it held the ephemeral beauty of twilight.

The Crown Prince sat on the sand and Alex sat next to him.

"I usually come here with Luoyang, but she's been busy lately, so I couldn't make time for myself to come here," the Crown Prince said. "Well, I can't really put the blame on her alone, I have been quite busy myself."

Alex just listened.

"I used to come here as a child with my mother to watch the sunset. Father was always busy, so she was the only one that could take me here. Then I grew up and started getting busy myself."

"Being the crown prince, my responsibilities were too big you know," he said. "It was only later in my life that I realized what I was missing. I wanted to come here with my mother once more. Me, her, maybe my brother too."

"Alas, she died before I could ever get to do that," he said with a sigh. "I was just too damn busy. I still am. I completely forgot about her death anniversary until 2 days ago."

"I'm a bad son, aren't I?" the Crown Prince asked with a small chuckle as he stared into the fading light of the sun.

The Sun went down beyond the horizon and momentarily gave a bright glow of a million colors beyond dying immediately as if it never existed.

Chapter 1568: The Empress' Death

Alex watched the evening get darker and darker as the light in the sky faded by the second. He could feel that the prince's sadness even from where he sat on the sand.

He turned around to find his solemn look staring into the horizon.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Prince," Alex said from the side. "I can't say how one feels when losing his mother, but I did lose my master early on. Her death had been sudden and unexpected, and it tore me for quite some time."

"Your master?" the Crown Prince asked.

"It was... a long time ago," Alex said. "She was my master for just about a year, and... even with just a year, she became someone close to me, and then I lost her. That was over 50? No, 60 years ago now."

"60?" the Crown Prince thought for a moment. "That was around the time I lost my mother too."

"I heard she was diseased with something incurable," Alex said. "It must've been hard on the Emperor, being an alchemist and not being able to make a pill to cure his wife."

Alex looked away, staring at the blue lake that was as wide as a sea. The lake was created by an Immortal, so the serenity he felt was artificial. He knew it. Still, he couldn't help but enjoy it.

He remembered his master and how she got poisoned. If he had been as good back then as he was now, could he have saved her?

The poison they were both afflicted by was a strong one from Immortal lands, so Alex wasn't sure just yet. There was a possibility for sure still.

He could tell the Crown Prince was lost in his own thoughts as well. As he hadn't said anything.

Or so Alex thought until he looked at the prince again and saw him staring back at him, with eyes filled with confusion.

"Is... something wrong?" Alex asked him.

"What do mean my mother was diseased?" he asked Alex.

Alex paused for a second, not understanding the intent of the question. "Your mother... she died of an incurable disease... right?" he asked. He went through his own memories to make sure he was remembering it correctly.

And he was. The Emperor had told him that the first empress had died some time ago of an incurable disease. That was why he had remarried with a woman he didn't even care about just so there was an Empress next to him.

"My mother was no weakling to die of some disease," the Crown Prince said. "She was the strongest person on the continent, second only to maybe my father. She was even younger than him, so she should count as more talented."

Alex stopped slumping and got straight. "Strongest?" he asked.

"My mother was someone at the peak of mortal cultivation," the Crown Prince said. "I can understand you not knowing about it as we don't flaunt our cultivation bases around, but still... you couldn't believe that she died of some random disease, do you?"

"I believed what I was told," Alex said. "I had no reason to not trust the information."

"And who gave you that information?" the Crown Prince asked, getting confrontational.

"The Emperor."

The Crown Prince was taken aback at the answer. "What?" he asked. "My... father?"

"Yes," Alex said. "Your father. He told me that very early on when I met him. Since no one else talks about the Empress at all, I had no choice but to believe him. Did he lie?"

"Yes," the Crown Prince said without thinking. He seemed lost in his thoughts, trying to understand why his father did what he did.

Alex was curious now as well. He was already surprised to hear that the Empress was as strong as she was, and now the reason for her death had been lied to him as well.

"How did she die?" Alex asked the Crown Prince, bringing him out of his stupor.

The Crown Prince seemed to have a hundred different thoughts going through his head that he had to push aside to answer Alex's question.

"She died during her lightning tribulation," the prince said.

It took Alex a moment to register what the Crown Prince had just said. "Wait... lightning tribulation?" he thought for a moment, and then his eyes went wide in shock.

"WAIT WHAT?!"

The Crown Prince looked at him, thinking that was the appropriate response to the thing he had just revealed. He nodded in return.

Alex looked around, making sure no one was close enough to hear them speak.

"Your mother... she died while trying to break through to Immortality?" Alex asked. In the 13 years he had been on this continent, he had maybe thought of the Empress twice, and in both of those thoughts she was either a mother or a wife.

Never had he thought of her as her own person. And to think such a massive event was hidden from him so close by at that.

He gulped down the surprise and asked, "She failed, huh?"

"Yes," the Prince said. "She was so close to it... and yet so far. Sometimes I wonder if maybe that was why Father didn't try to break through to Immortality."

Alex knew that wasn't the reason, but maybe it indeed was a part of it.

Doing nothing was living. Trying to break through was hanging life on a thread in front of a tall cliff which led to death. The Empress got nothing by trying to break through when she could have perhaps lived for another few millennia with her children and maybe grandchildren.

The two of them got silent and Alex started thinking about everything that he just learned. At first, his mind went over everything he learned, thinking nothing about anything more than that.

But then as he thought more about it, in context with everything else he knew, the things the Crown Prince said had some inconsistencies to it that Alex couldn't put his finger on.

He went through his thoughts, parting the hundreds of strings of thought, until he found the one that led him to a loom at the end of it. This was where the inconsistency in the information was originating from.

"Did your mother go to the ocean to break through?" he asked.

"Ocean? Why would she?" the Crown Prince asked.

"I was just curious," Alex said. "You said your mother went through her lightning tribulation, but if it was on land everyone would've seen it. Which was why I asked."

"She did it on land," the Crown Prince said. "And everyone did see it. Not everyone knows what it was, but they all saw it."

"They all... saw..."

That was what had been bugging him. That one piece of information that he hadn't thought of until now, and the moment he got it, it fit right into place.

That was the missing piece that let him know that the puzzle was wrong from the very beginning.

Because the only lightning strike that had been seen around the time the Empress had died, 60 years ago, was the Heavenly Judgment that Alex believed had killed the Azure Dragon.

"Do you mind telling me where your mother initiated her breakthrough?" he asked.

The Crown Prince shrugged. "She needed a safe space, so Father took her to a place where she would have no reason to worry about outside influence," he said.

"The Azure Dragon's secret realm."

Chapter 1569: Two Keys

Two possibilities went across Alex's mind when he heard what he did.

First, the Crown Prince was lying to him. He was lying about how his mother died and he was trying to hide information about the Azure Dragon's death.

Second, the Crown Prince himself wasn't aware that the lightning strike had been Heavenly Judgment and that there was no tribulation of lightning. It had all been a lie, given to him most likely by his father.

There was another possibility as well, a third one. And that was that the Crown Prince was telling the truth and the lightning that Alex had thought had killed the Azure Dragon had instead been something that had killed his mother.

But Alex did not find that possibility very probable, so he dismissed it even as it formed in his mind. The two remaining possibilities were what he believed to be the real ones.

He needed more information.

"Oh, is it the same as that painting from the Hall of Fame?" Alex asked. "You've seen that, right?"

"Is it?" the Crown Prince asked. "Hmm, I think it is. I suppose young Honglui managed to grab my mother's final moments in a painting. I never thought of it like that."

"Were you there when she tried to break through?" Alex asked him.

"No, it's dangerous, so only Father went with her," the Crown Prince said. "I only learned that she had died after father returned. He was gone before I even understood what he had said."

Alex could hear the emotion in the Crown Prince's voice, the sound of grief. He felt guilty trying to gain information out of him during his moment of vulnerability, but he had no choice. This was life.

"Did you at least get to say goodbye?" Alex asked. "Before she went to breakthrough."

"She came to me before she went over to His Majesty's realm," the Crown Prince said. "I am given to hold a key to the realm and she needed it to go inside. I wanted to go with her, but she said that it was risky and made me stay behind."

"That was the last time I talked with her," the Crown Prince said. "It is sad for me, but it is sadder for my brother. He wasn't even in the palace when Mother left. He didn't even get to say goodbye."

"He only found out after he came back and decided to leave in anger," the Crown Prince said. "We tell people that he's out touring the continent. That is the excuse father uses too. But I'm sure he's just angry regarding the entire situation and wants to stay away from the palace for as long as he can. He'll return when it's time."

Alex nodded. He didn't care about the second prince right now. No one did. He wanted to learn more about the Empress and especially...

"There's a key to the Azure Dragon's secret realm?" he asked. "It's not a simple teleportation formation to enter the domain? I would have assumed most of the secret realms to be set up that way."

Alex couldn't help but wonder if he could somehow enter this secret realm if he had the key. Could he do it secretly?

Not that he needed it to begin with. He had a Dao of Space and could easily connect the two separated Space to walk from one to the other. Still, the key would most likely help with formations and everything else set

"Yes, but there's more," the Crown Prince said. "From what I hear, the first Azure Dragon was someone quite fancy and wanted something special for his realm of stay. He built the usual teleportation formation and all, but for his son, he made two keys that he could use to enter the realm."

The first Azure Dragon had been the one responsible for making all the different secret realms, Alex remembered. "What sort of key?" he asked. "Is it something like the Dragon Medallion I hold?"

"No, nothing like that," the Prince said. "They were swords. I told you the Azure Dragon was fancy about it. He used actual swords as keys to the realm."

"...what?" Alex asked. He looked at the man, stunned at the words. "Swords?"

"Yes," the Crown Prince said. "You wouldn't think of swords as keys, would you?"

"No," Alex said. "What sorts of swords were these?" His heart beat faster and faster at this point.

"A pair of black and white swords. One was used to teleport someone through different layers of space, and another to tear through that space," the Crown Prince said.

Alex tried his best to show his emotions. "Do you mind if I see it?" he asked. "You have made me curious now."

"The swords?" the Crown Prince shook his head. "I'm afraid that's not possible, Your Majesty. One of the swords was destroyed by the lightning tribulation when my mother died."

"I see," Alex said. "Which one was it?"

"It was the black one, that let them teleport inside," the prince said. "Mother must have kept it with her when she was breaking through. Since nothing of hers survived the strike, the sword died along with her too."

Alex looked at the man, still sad about his mother's death. Each reminder a moment of grief that he hadn't fully dealt with yet. His emotions held clearly on his face.

This man was not lying at all.

'He doesn't know,' Alex thought. He looked at the prince's innocent eyes. 'He doesn't know what happened to the sword.'

The prince might not have known, but Alex did. He knew very clearly what had happened to the sword as he was currently in possession of it.

It was the black sword that had the Dragon Imperium's insignia on it. The sword that carried a teleportation aura around it.

It was the same damn sword that had been stuck on Pearl's mother's body, the one that had killed her when he had ripped it out.

The sword hadn't been destroyed in some damn lightning tribulation during the Empress' breakthrough to immortality. It had been lost when Pearl's mother had somehow been teleported across the massive world to the other side of the realm in the Western Continent.

He had managed to weed out some lies from the truths he had heard today, but still, that didn't answer much. All he could come up with were some conjectures that he didn't want to believe right now

'So I have the key to the Azure Dragon's realm,' Alex thought. That was helpful to know about.

"So only one of the keys remains," Alex said. "Right?"

"Yeah, the white one remains," the Crown Prince said. "Not that we needed them in the first place. We could always use the teleportation formation. Although not anyone can use it of course."

Alex nodded. "Did you get the white one too?" he asked.

"No, my father holds it," the Prince said. "Or wait, was it my brother? It is one of the two. I only held the black sword."

'And now I hold it,' Alex thought. It was fortunate that the prince couldn't sense his sword close by or else Alex's mission would've been compromised a long time ago.

The Crown Prince shook his head. "That's enough dwelling on the past," he said, looking at the dark landscape. "We should return soon."

Alex nodded and left the Azure Lake with more questions than before. Only this time around, he could tell that the questions were reaching deeper and deeper into the truth.

It would only be a while before the answer revealed itself.

Chapter 1570: Silverheart City

Alex arrived west of the Silver Mountain range, in a city that was established in a rocky region with large spikes of stones coming out from the ground all over the space.

The rock spikes were all painted metallic white, representing the Kingdom and the capital through it.

Alex had arrived at the Silverheart City of the Silver Kingdom.

He had arrived alone. That was not to say that he had nobody around him. But all those who were there were there only as his bodyguard. No one was here with him to be here with him.

Yao Ning and Liang Shufen had been sent to the Golden Auction to deal with the auction and sell his pills and paintings. He had let them know not to buy anything unless it was something incredible, as they were lacking funds at the moment thanks to their last big spend.

With the two away, Alex had to come to the Silver Kingdom alone as he couldn't miss the most important event for any Saint realm cultivator on the continent.

The Transcendent Martial Ground was opening in just a few days.

The secret realm opened once every 30 years or so, and unfortunately this time around, it overlapped the Golden Auction. Had it opened just a month later, people could've easily gone to the Golden Auction and made it to it in time.

They would've still missed the Realm of Trials 6 months later, but anyone who cared about the Realm of Trials usually wouldn't care about the Transcendent Martial Ground at all.

Alas, they had to make a choice, and as such many believed that the auction wouldn't be as good this time around. After all, no one in their right mind would give up the chance to test yourself and train yourself against the best of the best of the Eastern Continent.

That was still a few weeks away, so he had to come meet with the Queen of the Silver Kingdom, Mao Yingtai.

The woman with peach hair and a petite body gave a charming smile as she excitedly welcomed Alex. She stood outside the city gates, next to one of the protruding silver rocks.

The blue sky was free of clouds, and the summer breeze that blew in from the west made its way to this region as well, moving the tall grass outside the city in a familiar pattern.

"Your Majesty! It's been 10 years!" she said, waving her hands in a wild manner. To her side stood two older men and a young man, all of whom showed little to no emotion.

"Queen Mao, how have you been?" Alex asked the woman as he arrived next to her.

"Absolutely amazing, Your Majesty," she said. "Although, I'm still a little sad you took away my artifact."

"I won it fair and square," Alex said. "You can't call it yours."

The woman gave a cheeky little smile.

"Welcome to the Silver Kingdom, Your Majesty," the young man next to the Queen spoke. "We hope you have a wonderful time here."

Alex looked at the young man, moving his attention to him. The young man had black hair and deep blue eyes, but his face looked ever so similar to the Queen.

"Yingkong, I was getting there," she said before shooing him back. "That's my little brother. Don't mind him."

Alex had thought so. "You can be a queen if you have a brother?" he asked her curiously.

"Hmm? Why couldn't I?" the woman asked in a confused manner.

"You can't if you are married or have kids, right?" he asked her.

"Oh! Yeah, siblings are fine," the girl said. "They don't count as royals though. So you don't have to call him a prince or anything."

The young man sighed behind his sister.

"Anyway, let us go to the city," she said, letting Alex walk up to her so she could take him away. As they started walking, the rest of the group fell behind them.

"Weren't you supposed to be coming through the teleportation formation, Your Majesty?" Alex asked. "What happened?"

"I decided not to," he said. "I was already at the Azure Kingdom, so this is a short distance from there anyway."

"I see," the Queen said. "Ah, are you planning on entering the Transcendent Martial Ground, Your Majesty? You must be. Why else would you come here."

"I am," Alex said. This was a weird change of pace for him when meeting with rulers of the various kingdoms. Everyone tried to be regal about things, but Mao Yingtai seemed to care less about it.

'She wasn't this hyper the last time I saw her,' Alex thought. He wondered if her mood was sour last time due to what was happening in the Ivory Kingdom at the time. He remembered her being quite solemn back then.

"I do plan on going into the secret realm," Alex said. "That is primarily the reason why I came when I did. Otherwise, I would've come after the Golden Auction."

"I see, I see," the woman said. "Do you have any plans on what region you'll be fighting as part of?"

"I plan on remaining neutral actually," Alex said. "That... won't be a problem, right?"

Everyone that went into the Transcendent Martial Ground went as part of a kingdom. And in the end, the points would be tallied up to see which kingdom did the best.

As Alex was part of no kingdom, he wanted to remain neutral.

"But you can't be neutral," the Queen said. "You must be part of a group. That's just how it is."

Alex shrugged. "Then I'll have to take some time to consider," he said. "Do you wish that I join your kingdom?"

"Will you?" the Queen asked excitedly.

Alex chuckled. "We'll see."

They got onto a small flying boat and flew over the castle gates, into the city.

Alex looked down from the boat. The massive city went about its day normally. A few people looked up to stare at him as he passed by, but other than that, no one really cared that he was in the city.

He had been here for too long for people to care about him anymore.

The city wasn't unique to him anymore, the buildings the same as he saw everywhere else. What was unique were the rock spikes outside the city, but that didn't exist within it.

"Have you been to the Ebony Kingdom yet, Your Majesty?" the Queen asked.

"Not yet," Alex said. "I don't make a habit of visiting Kingdoms where I won't have much to do, unfortunately."

"Oh, so you'll be going there after the tournament?" she asked.

"Hmm? What's happening after the tournament?" Alex asked.

"The Harmonious Balance Haven's opening," the Queen said. "I assumed you would want to go there too."

"I don't know..." Alex said. "From what I've read regarding the place, it doesn't give much opportunity to show your skills, unlike the upcoming one."

"No, it is mostly to test your skills," the Queen said. "Whatever, there is plenty of time. You might as well worry about the Martial ground for now."

"I don't know if I will have to worry about it that much," he said.

The Queen turned to look at him with a serious look on her face. "Trust me, Your Majesty. You will want to worry. You are only in the Saint Soul realm. Meanwhile, the strong opponents can go to the Saint Transformation realm. They're just too strong."

"That's alright," Alex said with a smile. "I'm not particularly looking to fight extremely tough opponents. Just those that can help me improve myself."

"Hmm, if you're not intending to win it all, then I suppose you don't have to be that careful," the Queen said. "If you want to remain safe there, I can have my brother stay around you. He's strong enough to defend you all."

Alex looked at the young man who didn't react to him being brought up. The young man had a cultivation base of Saint Soul's 7th realm, making him quite strong.

He was 4 realms higher than Alex, so it wouldn't be an exaggeration on the Queen's part to say he was stronger than Alex. Only if she knew.

They arrived at the palace and Alex settled down in there. He spoke to the queen about a few things and even let her use the Mountain Crushing artifact.

The Queen was very hospitable and more than excited to talk with Alex about his journey as a cultivator. However weak she considered him to be, he was still a very talented person in her eyes.

She especially wanted him to talk about how he became so good at Alchemy. She even wanted him to give lectures on it to the alchemists in her city.

When Alex refused the offer, she changed it to a bet.

"How about we bet on how long you'll last in the secret realm once it begins?" she asked. "I will bet that you will last... 9, no 10 months."

"Is that so?" Alex smiled. "Here, I'll give you an advantage so you can guess again."

He passed along a talisman to the Queen, which he had prepared a long time ago.

The Queen read the talisman with widened eyes. "What is this?" she asked.

"I wanted to ask you to announce this when the secret realm opens up," he said.

"Are you sure? This will create a severe disadvantage for you from the start," she said.

"I know," Alex said. "I know what I'm doing."

The queen gave a thoughtless nod as she looked at the text. "If I'm to take this into account then... you will last 3 months at best."