

Daily life 291

Chapter 291 Intelligence Network (3)

"To put it more callously, only those the Order can afford to lose are put into the programme, however having said that, we still have to do all we can to increase their odds of survival and longevity, and one of those ways is to have a palace realm cultivator from the Order watch out for them, and the best candidates for that would be the judges who other than good combat acumen, have good judgment on them..." said Assistant Shi.

Yang Qing ended up raising his gait a little bit from the statement he had made. It didn't matter whether you were a mortal or a cultivator, words had a powerful effect despite the cultivation realm or station in life.

Assistant Shi's statement helped raise Yang Qing's self-importance.

"Is this how sect masters feel and clan patriarchs," smugly thought Yang Qing. However, water was immediately poured on his swelling mood.

"That being said ideally we would have preferred the roaming inquisitors to handle it since they are mostly outside so they know the lay of the land and have much more adaptability built from their experience outside. But with how much they have on their plate, and also the risk factor of them implicating the informants, it's safer to have judges," added Assistant Shi.

"Was there a need to add that part," Yang Qing grievously thought as he withered back into his shell.

"You will be in charge of 24 informants widely spread about throughout the continent and you will need to maintain contact with all of them at least once a year.

To help aid you in the matter, among your new privileges one of them is the use of spatial runes leading to all the Order branches around the continent.

I don't have to tell you this but you obviously can't meet with them at any of those branches and it is also ill-advised to meet them within their own grounds to avoid drawing eyes.

Please have these," Assistant Shi said as he handed Yang Qing three things. One of them was a white jade talisman, the other was a green jade key that had a black claw symbol at the bottom and the last one was a crystal feather.

"Within the talisman, you will find the list of the 24 organizations that will now be part of the intelligence network under your supervision. You are to conduct yearly meetings with the Order informants and record everything they have to share, could be rumors, could be something actionable, whatever it is make sure to have it recorded in thorough detail and you will drop it off at the External logistics booth number 4.

In addition, should the informant need any help you are to immediately render aid even if it is at the expense of blowing their cover, however, if it risks your life to the point where your survival is in doubt you are encouraged to ignore the call for help.

I know it's rather cruel, but every person within the programme is told of that fact beforehand and they still choose to do what they do," said Assistant Shi when he saw the grim look on Yang Qing.

"I understand," Yang Qing heavily said.

In his mind he knew those chosen for the programme, this was like another opportunity for them especially after failing to make it into the Order. They get the chance at reinventing themselves. Yes, there were inherent risks, but there were gains to the affair too such as getting the chance to establish something big.

Within his list of 24 organizations, Yang Qing saw one kingdom in there, which even though was a newly promoted rank 4 kingdom, it was still a kingdom and the ruler of that kingdom was once someone who had failed to get into the Order and had no parents or background to speak off. He had no talent or power, and if things had remained constant for him, he would have likely died an unremembered, unremarkable death. Another statistic and nobody that showed the southern continent wasn't safe to those without ability and backing. But now here he was, a king of a young kingdom that has only been around for 300 years. Even though in the grand scheme of things he could still easily die and was just a stronger ant, he was a strong ant that managed to create something that would have otherwise been an impossibility for him.

To them, no matter what happens, they would have done the unimaginable. However, even though Yang Qing's mind could rationalize it and see how it could be a benefit for them, it was still hard to swallow when he thought no matter how much that king has contributed to the Order in terms of the information they have provided when it came down to either the king, his kingdom or Yang Qing's safety, Yang Qing's safety would take priority without a second thought.

"Such is the cruelty of life, we all have a value attached to us which at times dictates whether we live or die. It applies to them just as much as it applies to us.

Within the list, I've given you, even among them there are differences. There are those you will give more attention to than the others because of their potential value.

As cultivators we either aim to increase our value or grow strong enough to subvert its existence in our lives.

Personally, I hope someone among them reaches that point," said Assistant Shi with a gleam in his eye.

"Now, the last two objects; the jade green key and the crystal feather, both of them are your identity markers," Assistant Shi said as he pointed to the two objects in Yang Qing's hand.

Yang Qing got a contrasted feel to them. The jade key was smooth and cold to the touch and had a soft squishy feel to it like it was easily malleable like clay, while the feather had a gentle warmth to it and was as hard as a top-tier monarch-grade artifact. Yang Qing wasn't sure if he could break it even if he fully exerted himself in it.

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"The green jade key will grant you the authority as the defacto owner of the Green jade pavilion, which is a rank 4 merchant organization under the control of the Order using the White rose pavilion as a hidden proxy, so if anyone looks they'll think it's one of their many subsidiaries that isn't worth any mention.

The pavilion has a lot of businesses under it from alchemy shops, to blacksmith shops, to apparel manufacturing and the like. It makes a decent profit, however, none of the members working there are in any way tied to the Order.

The top leaders think they are owned by some organization under the White Rose Pavilion. However, they have no idea of the organization, but what they do know is to respect the holder of that key as the overall leader of the pavilion," said Assistant Shi.

Yang Qing couldn't hide his excitement as he gently held the green jade key.

"You can also use the key as your identification at the Golden earth bank to withdraw the proceeds of the pavilions from there. They deposit 50% of the profits at the bank every three months.

In terms of the pavilion, I think it's okay to let things run autonomously, but if you want to be hands-on it's okay too since whatever you earn from them along with your discretionary fund is what you will use to support the informants should a need ever arise."

Yang Qing quickly inserted his spiritual sense into the jade slip to see what businesses were under the Green jade pavilion. He was surprised to find despite being a rank 4 merchant organization, they had their hands in a lot of different kinds of business, though some were mostly small scale, however, their bread and butter were in medicine and herb trade.

Yang Qing eagerly went through the list almost as if he was looking for something specific.

"The pavilion doesn't have a restaurant under its list of businesses if that's what you're searching for..." said Assistant Shi.

Yang Qing instantly deflated when he heard that.

"It's not all bad though. Unlike the discretionary fund, whatever you choose to do with the 50% share of the Green Jade pavilion is entirely up to you. Just as long as you're able to handle anything that crops up with your information network, we don't care how or what you spend that share on," said Assistant Shi as he looked on in amusement at Yang Qing's sporadic changes in emotion.

"How much do they make annually?" asked Yang Qing with eagerness in his voice.

"About 10 million high-grade spirit stones a year, though there have been a few good years that its reached about 30 million," answered Assistant Shi.

Had Yang Qing not known about the amount in the discretionary fund he would have been excited about the figure, however, the 40 million figure warped his sensibilities. He couldn't help but think 10 million was too low despite it being an amount he was free to do as he wished unlike the 40 million.

Assistant Shi chose to ignore his despondency and went on to finish with his explanation.

"The last item on the list is the feather of a crystal tear Yuan. Each of the 24 informants has a feather just like that one, however, the one you have is the main controller of the feathers they have.

You will need to refine it with a wisp of your spiritual essence. Once you have, you can insert a bit of your essence into it and it will link you to the other 24 feathers which have also been refined with their owner's spiritual essence.

The crystal tear Luan is a rare bird with attunement to both soul and space. With the feather you can contact the other informants and using your feather as a conduit, you'll appear in a different domain linked by the feather. Using wisps of your spiritual essence, you can communicate with each other. However because these are just its feathers you can't communicate for more than 2 minutes, otherwise you risk damaging it.

You will need to give it a four-day cool down after every use and it also needs spirit stones or dense spiritual liquids to renew it. So only use it for emergencies or when you want to set up a location for the meetup with the informants.

Other than that I don't think there's anything more to add. The informants have already been informed that you will soon be in contact with them. So please do reach out to them as soon as possible.

I wish you all the best in your new journey, I know it's a lot but the fact that you made it here means you're up to the task. Do take care of yourself Judge Yang Qing and thank you for these.

I have a feeling you may end up with a sizeable profit this year young judge," said Assistant Shi as he pointed to the vermilion wine and the smoked pork.

He gobbled up the remaining piece and downed the wine remaining in his urn. He got up after that and faded like a fuzzy shadow before Yang Qing even had the time to offer his thanks.

"Thanks, Assistant Shi, I hope I will be able to measure up," muttered Yang Qing as he cupped his fist in the empty office.

"Guess this will have to wait till later tonight when I'm done with everything," thought Yang Qing as he fiddled around with the crystal feather with an encumbered look.

Yang Qing sighed heavily as he stored away the three items and disappeared from his chambers with the use of his gold eagle medallion.

He reappeared an instant later and made his way to the internal logistics division to begin the procedure of liquidating his abode before he went to the external logistics division to introduce himself to Lu Mei the person from the division attached to his court who would aid him in converting and settling up the payments of his commissions, then after that was when he would finally make his way to Requiem and finish his events for the day.

Chapter 293 Original Judges

Yang Qing didn't waste much time at the internal logistics department when it came to liquidating his abode. He was clear, direct, and brief. He made sure to ignore all sorts of 'well-meaning' suggestions that came from the attendant who tried to convince him to try the abode for a week before he made a decision, and if within a week he still did not want it, they could convert it then.

However, Yang Qing wasn't easily tricked. He knew it was more than likely a trap. Who knew what could happen within a week? He may very well end up being given the runaround and find himself one year in being fleeced dry maintaining two cultivation abodes, making the Order richer.

Yang Qing heard none of it and quickly insisted on settling the matter right then and there. He opted to trade the abode for a natural treasure from the open vault. He was given a token that he would present at the vault to trade for an item that was the equivalent value of the abode.

Yang Qing left in a ginger mood as he made his way to his next stop which was the External logistic division. The visit was a short one since it was basically him introducing himself to the department member attached to his court. As far as he knew the logistics personnel attached to him would remain with him throughout his stint as a palace court judge. This is whether he was an outer palace court judge or a core palace court judge, his attached personnel member from the External logistics division would not change, thus it was better for him to establish a cordial relationship with them.

The meeting proceeded smoothly. Lu Mei, the personnel attached to his court, was a pretty sociable person. She had been an attaché to the palace court for almost ten years and Yang Qing would be the 14th judge attached to her within the present batch of palace court judges.

With how burdensome the process of remuneration was, every logistic personnel attached to the palace court could only have a maximum of 15 judges attached to them and Lu Mei was one judge shy of reaching her limit.

She was very generous in her explanation of the ins and outs of her duties and all she expected of Yang Qing, which luckily for him wasn't much other than ensuring the spirit stones were made available three days prior to the agreed-upon date of payment which would give her enough time to convert the spirit stones into whatever format the person who completed the commission would want. In addition, Yang Qing would also have to hand her the report of his valuation of the commission. As long as she had those two things, she would be able to handle the rest easily.

This worked well for Yang Qing who felt he already had his hands full with the intelligence network, his cases that he was currently undermanned in, and whatever new duties that were tied to his next stop, the Requiem.

Yang Qing exchanged a few pleasantries with Lu Mei along with promising her a meal at the Thousand Flavors restaurant before he finally left for the office of the Judicial Committee.

There was no direct way of heading to Requiem, at least not one that he knew off. In fact, Yang Qing didn't even know where the grand prison of the Order was located, despite him sending a fair share of cultivators that way. The only way he could access the place was via the Judicial committee.

The Judicial Committee could be considered to be the spirit council form for the judges of the Order. It was made of former judges who gave up their posts, for another role which was to judge the judges. Every judge had judicial discretion on their cases however whatever judgments they made on their cases were subject to review by the judicial committee.

The committee would evaluate whether the sentencing was sound and whether the judge and his team had done enough on the case to make a sound ruling.

Using their judgment, experience, and information on hand they would assign a grade to the judge and the grade was per case. The grade has a variety of uses within the Order, one of which was in gaining bonuses. At Yang Qing's current post if he got an evaluation score of good at the end of the month, he would get a bonus of 10,000 high-grade spirit stones, and the higher the grade, the higher the bonus.

The reverse was also true. If he got a low grade, he would suffer penalties. Those penalties were in the form of fines. If the issue seems to be a common occurrence then the particular judge would be placed under investigation to see if the malfeasance is intentional or incompetence. If it's found to be the former then the judge gets sent to requiem, but if it's the latter then they get reassigned to a different department within the Order, however, even in that new role they would be placed under close monitoring.

If one wanted to move up the courts, having a decent valuation was one of the prerequisites along with an increase in their cultivation base. Therefore, the Judicial Committee had a lot of influence in the promotion and demotion of judges and their roles didn't stop there as they acted as intermediaries for the judges to different departments within the Order, one of which was Requiem.

If Yang Qing wanted to head there it would have to be through them.

Yang Qing went to the hallway of the main building and triggered a rune at the center of the hallway using his gold eagle medallion. He disappeared from the center of the Hallway and reappeared in a rustic building that was in the middle of a small grove.

The building was made of old brown brick and had flying eaves roofing. The area was tranquil, surrounded by green lush trees and a small pond next to the building. The building was a two-story building and was 2000 square feet.

Outside the building's entrance, there were three elderly men leisurely seating about on futons. Two of them seemed engrossed in playing Go while the last one was fiddling around with a miniature penzai.

They all had greying white hair and white robes that had the symbol of a hammer hanging above a podium. This was the symbol of the members of the judicial committee.

Yang Qing on arriving here straightened his robes out of habit and carefully went forward and cupped his fists in greetings.

"Junior Yang Qing, greets the elders," said Yang Qing in a deferential tone.

Yang Qing's respect for them wasn't because of their ability to influence the growth or destruction of his career but rather because of their prior identity.

The Judicial Committee was also known by another name, it was known as the Collection of the Original Judges. The committee was made up of 17 members and every one of them were the very first judges the Order ever heard. The groundwork upon which every judge currently works on was set up by them, and they have continued to do so even after they left their posts and became part of the judicial committee.

From the original batch, some joined the committee, others went to the spirit council, others became deans or instructors at the institute, others joined different departments and others died in the conduct of their duties.

Every judge held them in high esteem and Yang Qing was no exception. The Judicial Committee may not be as powerful as the Spirit Council, but in terms of prestige they didn't lose out, and when it came to power even though they couldn't compare to the Spirit Council that only consisted of soul formation experts, the Judicial Committee wasn't that bad off. Of the 17 members, there were a few soul formation experts while the majority were domain-level experts.

Yang Qing knew of the three members present, the one fiddling around with the penzai was one of the soul formation experts of the committee. His name was Long Enlai and the two-playing go; one of them was Jiang Heng and the other was Jia Bohai. They were both late-stage domain experts as far as Yang Qing knew.

"Yang Qing, you're here, would you like chrysanthemum tea?" asked Long Enlai who was still busy pruning and adding a few touches to the penzai. Every time he did so, the change would be reflected in the background of the building they were staying at. One second there was a bare rocky mound the next it was replaced by a forest, then a river, then a mountain.

Yang Qing wasn't sure whether the changes were real or fake because to him it felt very much real.

"How are you finding your new position?" gently asked one of the elders playing go.

"Heavier than I expected," said Yang Qing as he picked up the cup of Chrysanthemum tea that floated next to him.

"It seems you have already met with the Shadow Hawks?" asked the other elder.

"Yes," answered Yang Qing as he took a sip of the tea.

"This is good stuff!!!!!" thought Yang Qing as his eyes lit up.

"Who knew Shen Zhu's impetuous idea would grow into one of the backbones of the Order, shame it came at the cost of his life," said Long Enlai with a sigh. The other two elders sighed along with him as they put aside their go table.

"Shao An should be expecting you, Yang Qing so we will not delay you any further," said Long Enlai as he drew a seal on the penzai, immediately after a spatial tunnel opened up behind the building revealing 12 mountains.

Yang Qing took a small gulp as he felt a terrifying aura within those mountains.

Chapter 294 Could Be A Grotto

He could feel the palpable aura of fear and despair that had surrounded those mountains like a fog. Other than that, he could feel the arrays along with something he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was but every mountain could eviscerate his existence within an instant. He even had serious doubts he would survive even if he had the three saint-grade artifacts with him.

"How do they work here all year round," wondered Yang Qing.

He steeled himself and immediately stepped forward into the open spatial tunnel.

"All the best young judge," said one of the elders.

Yang Qing nodded gratefully toward them as he could feel the encouraging gazes from each one of them.

Once he stepped into the tunnel, his backside closed and all he could see were the largest 12 mountains he had ever laid his eyes on. Before Yang Qing stepped into the spatial tunnel, the 12 mountains looked ordinary like any run-of-the-mill mountain that he could spot anywhere around the continent. Whether it was in terms of size or general outlook they seem to be mundane and nothing seemed to stand out except for the despairing aura surrounding them and the terrifying sensation Yang Qing felt from them on a visceral level. However, the moment his foot touched the other side and his backside closed, the scenery he saw underwent a seismic transformation.

The mountains were still 12 however they now seemed starkly different to what they were. They were now humongous, Yang Qing had to crane his neck to see them and even then, he couldn't see their peaks which were surrounded by white fog that if one paid attention to it, could hear the wails of people and beasts.

Other than their humongous size, each of the 12 mountains looked distinctive to one another which overturned their normal mountain look. One mountain had lightning rains over it of different colors, another was shrouded in complete darkness, another was the complete opposite as it was shrouded in a blinding white light, another was covered in red, orange, and blue flames, while another had variable changes happening to it; one minute it was flooding, the next it was a scorching desert and another a hail storm was running through it and another it was covered with a blizzard.

Not all mountains were depictions of horrifying disasters. There was one that looked to be the picture of perfection. It had lush vegetation, a healthy river running through it and animals leaving in it. It was a complete functional ecosystem. The only thing about it that was strange was the animals running around none of them was below the palace realm, and the plants were all in the monarch grade. It looked more like a blessed land than anything.

Yang Qing even had to rub his eyes a few times to confirm he was at the requiem. The other horrifying-looking mountains were a reminder, especially the one covered in nothing but poisonous plants and bugs. Even the air around it had transformed into a purple-black fog that had the earmarks of a terrifying natural poison. It was sweet smelling and had that dangerous beauty to it.

Each of the 12 mountains had something that made them unique from each other. Yang Qing was soaked in the terrifying grandeur of the place as he waited for someone to guide him in.

The place he currently stood seemed to be at the edge of a cliff with a bottomless pit below. The 12 mountains he saw before him seemed to have their bases beneath that pit and rose high up above which further highlighted their enormous size.

Yang Qing couldn't risk taking another step because he felt the same terrifying presence, he felt earlier coming from below the cliff. The region was dark and had a faint fog to it. Yang Qing's heart would race and his qi flow would turn chaotic every time he tried to stare below. After trying it two times and getting the same feeling he decided he had enough of tempting fate.

Just as he was wondering how long he would have to wait he saw a red-orange branch come from one of the mountains as it traveled at an alarming speed toward Yang Qing's direction. Yang Qing was perturbed at first since this was the Requiem and after the short experience he had of the place, it wouldn't be surprising if something out of the norm happened, like maybe an attack from something within those mountains, and when he saw the branch heading his way he assumed it was exactly that.

It was only when he detected a familiar aura being produced by that branch did he halt his thoughts and preparations for an impending attack.

The branch came to a halt once it was in front of Yang Qing. Yang Qing felt a gentle heat coming from it that had one of the densest concentrations of vitality and purity to it. His green flame tree even paled in comparison.

"Just what tree is this?" wondered Yang Qing as he took a step onto the branch. Even though it was a branch, it had about a 100-meter width, and as for its length, Yang Qing didn't even bother to estimate it. Even though the 12 mountains seemed like they were just right ahead of him, no more than a few kilometers away, he could feel that wasn't so. The space seemed like it had been folded to make it appear like they were really close by.

When Yang Qing's feet were both firmly placed on the branch, it immediately began to move. Only when he was atop it did Yang Qing realize how fast it was traveling. Even fully exerting himself a thousand times over he would not be able to match its speed.

Yang Qing standing atop the branch realized that at random intervals the branch would produce a flame-like glyph in the air and a snapping sound would be produced. Yang Qing wasn't sure but he felt that even the space itself seemed to have restrictions attached to it.

"How far are the mountains?" Yang Qing wondered as he narrowed his gaze on the 12 mountains whose position didn't seem to have changed over the past five minutes despite the speed and the distance they had traveled.

Going by how fast they were traveling, Yang Qing would have already made his trip to the Red Maple Empire within that timeframe, which was roughly 50,000 kilometers from the main headquarters of the Order. However, within Requiem, it didn't seem like he had moved at all.

"Where is Requiem anyway. I wonder if it shares the same area as the headquarters and the institute," wondered Yang Qing.

The area was too bizarre a place that it made Yang Qing doubt whether they shared the same grounds or was it maybe in some hidden grotto. Yang Qing felt it was more likely the latter mostly because of safety reasons.

Grottos were similar to mysterious realms except when it came to grottos they were usually smaller in size and were naturally occurring. Grottos were usually created from a natural treasure or some triggered inexplicable natural occurrences that could never be replicated such as dao fusion that mixes with a heavenly tribulation that could result in a grotto.

Even till date deep research and study was being conducted towards unearthing the mysteries of grottos. Other than being naturally occurring they had other features that made them uniquely better compared to mysterious realms which were artificially created.

Some of those unique features was a grotto could only have one owner or controller and as long as they were alive that fact would not change easily. It was rumored grottos had spirits of their own just like how ancestral dragon veins would develop spirits. Every grotto formed was rumored to have a spirit formed at the point of its creation and as long as you gained the recognition of the grotto's spirit you could control it however you saw fit. But this also came with a risk, one could die if they gained the ire of the grotto's spirit.

The theory remained unproven since grottos were uniquely hidden and every organization that was rumored to have a grotto, were all powerhouses. From the intelligence records Yang Qing had access to, no organization below rank 1 had a grotto.

Even if the theory about a grotto spirit was unproven, what was undeniable was the worth of a grotto. Because of how uniquely they were formed, each grotto had that uniqueness down to the natural treasures they formed. Some of the rarest and unheard off treasures were formed inside grottos, and some were so unique to the point that they could completely subvert the common sense of the cultivation world.

One instance of it was a fruit that turned a mortal who didn't have the tiniest cultivation aptitude at all into a talent with a special physique with three dantians each holding a specialty in the wood, earth, and water element. That person went on to found the Universal saint garden medical valley, a rank 1 sect that was as powerful as the two Holy Lands because of how many connections they had built over the years as the number one ground for healing. Their founder has made monumental discoveries in the medical Dao, that a third of the medical techniques and remedies being practiced in the continent came from his hands.

There was even a rumor going around that even if you only had a single breath left on you, a shattered body, and a dantian, as long as you ended up in death stealer Lin Fan's hands, you were sure to make a full recovery and even be renewed stronger than ever.

He ended up with the moniker 'death stealer' because of how many cultivators he brought back from the brink, which ended up being a protective halo over the Saint garden medical valley. A lot of cultivators both mundane and renowned have been healed by Lin Fan, from emperors to bandit kings, to sect masters of orthodox sects to leaders of assassin organizations and each one of them would drop everything should Lin Fan require their assistance.

He was the most favored and the most dangerous man in the continent and such a change was triggered by a grotto.

Yang Qing couldn't help but wonder if the Requiem was one too, it was too weird and unique not to be one, and if it was,

who was the owner?

Chapter 295 Owner Of The Grotto

However, moments later Yang Qing quickly dismissed his guessing thoughts because finally there was a change in the mountains. They seemed grander than before and their effects became much more prominent to the point that some of the defensive features of Yang Qing's robes were triggered.

However, there was nothing to worry about because in the next instant a gold-red barrier formed around the branch that shielded him from the effects of those mountains.

"How do the core formation and palace realm guards survive here," Yang Qing inwardly wondered with a faint shiver as he recalled the short experience.

Requiem guards had a bare minimum threshold which was a late-stage cultivation base and a blue core. However, based on the experience he just had, Yang Qing had doubts about whether anyone below the domain realm would be able to survive on those mountains not unless they had special tokens or artifacts that helped them stave off the effects of the mountain.

When his thoughts reached this point, he couldn't help but look below to the long branch beneath his feet that he had detected Vice Warden Shao An's aura on.

After 20 minutes Yang Qing had already arrived at one of the mountains. It was the mountain that had normal-looking features, except for the spirit beasts that he detected where none was below the palace realm and was lush with monarch-grade herbs.

The branch took him to the summit of that mountain. On the way over Yang Qing finally realized how terrifying the mountain was despite its picturesque and serene look. He had detected almost 18 spirit beasts that made his soul tremble. For such an effect they either had to be at the peak of the palace realm or were at the domain realm already. Other than that, Yang Qing had this nagging feeling there were even more terrifying spirit beasts it's just that he was too weak to detect them.

The 18 spirit beasts that he did detect, acted in a docile manner when they sensed the presence of the branch. With his safety assured that was when Yang Qing decided to boldly take a closer look at the mountain and its 'occupants.' Use of spiritual sense seemed to have been restricted within the area so he could only use his eyes.

"Are they?!!!" Yang Qing had a look of dismay as he spotted two spirit beasts seating cross-legged as they traded what looked to be jugs of wine. They had a long scroll unfurled between them and they seemed to be discussing it, based on the serious expressions they had as they pointed to certain parts of the scroll.

One of the spirit beasts was an ashen rainbow deer and the other was a sapphire-eyed aurora bear. They were both in the middle stages of the palace realm. Under normal circumstances they should have provided a wide berth to each other since the stronger a spirit beast was the more territorial, they were.

It was rare to find two spirit beasts of similar cultivation base being in this close proximity to one another without breaking into a fight. Though spirit beasts in the palace realm had the same intelligence as humans or spirit beasts that had already unlocked their wisdom pearls, they usually avoided each other. Of course, there were exceptions such as Bolin and the green flash viper or Haishi and the green flowered babirusa. However, for the former, though they could be considered friends, there was still a hierarchy. In some regard, Bolin could be considered a subordinate of the green flash viper.

A subordinated relationship could create such a scenario and as for Haishi's case, she was an oddity who didn't exactly know the way of the spirit beast world and its ruthlessness. Thus when she tailed the green flowered babirusa she didn't have the malevolent bloodthirsty aura of a spirit beast that had eaten fellow spirit beasts, which was why the green flowered babirusa was comfortable enough to ignore her and their cultivation base were a few minor realms apart, so it had another reason not to care if it was being followed by a weaker spirit beast or not.

But for spirit beasts that were at the same cultivation level, they rarely tolerated each other, the few instances that they did was usually under influenced circumstances such as the spirit beasts being groomed at beast tamer halls around different organizations. In such a circumstance they'd be trained and forced to tolerate each other, however, even then there was always some sort of hierarchy.

Yang Qing observed some more and was shocked to find the harmonious relationship exhibited by the two spirit beasts could be seen by other spirit beasts around the mountain even the domain realm spirit beasts.

"Could it be the work of a top-tier gold-grade beast tamer?" wondered Yang Qing as his glittered at the strange interactions around him, however, all that was cut short because in no time he was already at the peak of the mountain which was covered in nothing but yellow grass and snow and a 1-meter golden red tree that had luscious leaves.

Beneath that tree was Shao An fiddling with some broken dark grey almost rusty amulet which he put away when Yang Qing appeared.

Yang Qing's eyes were wider than even when he saw the mountains because he saw the branch that had carried him over, casually disappear into Vice Warden Shao An's index finger.

"Thank you for bringing me over Vice Warden Shao An," said Yang Qing as he cupped his fists in greeting.

"Just call me Shao, and be casual like you are with Lei," said Vice Warden Shao An as he invited Yang Qing over for a seat.

"It should be your first time here, what's your impression?" Vice Warden Shao An asked.

"It leaves an impression," Yang Qing said as he smiled bitterly when he saw the look Vice Warden Shao An was giving when he had a small smile tug on his lips.

"Is this a grotto?" since Vice Warden Shao An seemed casual, Yang Qing thought he might as well ask one of the few things on his mind about the place.

"That it is..." Vice Warden Shao An said as he paused as his gaze turned distant and nostalgic when he stared in a random direction in one of the mountains.

"I was astounded too when I came here the first time. The 11 mountains really do leave an impression, En Sang lucked out with this place, too bad he doesn't seem to value it at all. He would rather be anywhere else but here," said Vice Warden Shao An with a rueful smile.

"En sang? Isn't he the chief librarian!!!!?" Yang Qing inwardly thought with a shocked expression.

Chapter 296 Duty For Life

"Pardon me, the Chief Librarian is the owner of this place?" asked Yang Qing.

"Yes, this place is his," answered Vice Warden Shao An.

"He is also the true warden of this place, however because of his disinterest of being in the place, another person had to be appointed to hold the position in his place.

But since only En Sang is the only one who can fully control this grotto, the current warden can only be considered a nominal warden."

Yang Qing found the whole matter curious. The chief librarian has always been a mercurial figure within the Order. No one knew his true face, gender, or even race. He would go around transforming into a different person all the time, and make appearances in random places. It could be at the students' mess hall at the institute or a party filled with high-ranking figures like Dean Zhu Lao's welcome ceremony.

Yang Qing had always kind of admired his seemingly free-spirited and mysterious nature. He never seemed to have a set work schedule and could go wherever he wanted to.

Hearing that someone like him held two posts came as a surprise to him, and none of those posts was small. The chief librarian was the head of the largest library in the whole of the Order, while the warden was the topmost figure in a place that locked some of the most infamous cultivators in the Southern Continent.

As Yang Qing wondered about their mysterious chief librarian, he suddenly recalled Vice Warden Shao An's statement.

Yang Qing turned his head and counted the mountains. He repeated this action about two times and finally turned his head.

"You said 11 mountains but aren't they 12?" asked Yang Qing.

"The mountains are 11 and the place we are right now isn't a mountain but something made by En Sang. Everything you have seen; from the mountain itself to the river and the spirit beasts, every single thing here except for this tree was formed from En Sang's bloodline trait," said Vice Warden Shao An as he pointed toward the short golden red tree they were seated under.

Yang Qing's jaws were hanging loosely, wondering what bloodline trait could create a whole massive mountain and a functioning ecosystem. He even scanned the area once more for good measure.

It was still a mountain.

"There's no need to wonder about him, he is a monster through and through even by the Order's standards. Now let's get to the matter at hand..." said Vice Warden Shao An pulling Yang Qing's cascading thoughts back.

"As you've been already told you will be handling the evaluation and rehabilitation of a few prisoners from here. The exact number is seven. You will stick with those seven for the next four years, in which you will be giving an evaluation report of their conduct, annually.

That report will be shared with Requiem, the judicial committee, and the spirit council. However, you only need to give it to the judicial committee and they will do the rest. Someone from the review committee will also be working alongside you.

You will get the various list of projects from them and the daily supervision will also be done by them. Your part will be to conduct random check-ins every year.

As for how many times you need to do the check-ins, well you can decide that for yourself, as long as it's sufficient enough for you to make an accurate judgment about them.

The judgment criterion is pretty simple. It's to find out if they're pardonable and redeemable. Every year you will give points in accordance to your judgment of their character and your reasoning needs to be clear to us, so be thorough.

Whatever you need to do to find out their true characters, do it. Be as creative as you can in testing them. At the end of the four years whatever conclusion you come to will either have them released, sent back here permanently, or executed. So be very mindful of your assessment and don't make it lightly. The four-year period can be extended since four years is the basic bare minimum for the programme. With your instruction, more years can be added.

Also, I think I should tell you, the seven cultivators you get for the programme and every other cultivator after that will be your responsibility. If they get pardoned and cause a tragedy years later it will be up to you to clean it up regardless of whether you will be in the palace courts or the domain courts or in the Spirit council or judicial committee.

Whichever station you will be in, doesn't matter. Every prisoner you get from this moment on will be your responsibility for life. So do keep that in mind," Vice Warden Shao An said with an austere look.

"I will," Yang Qing solemnly said.

"Okay. Now for the prisoners. You will need to have at least one palace realm cultivator in your list of seven, as for the remaining six it is up to you. You can mix them up or you can single out one cultivation base, it's all up to you.

After our talk last time, I went ahead and created a list for you. In there, you will find thirty names. Four are in the palace realm, twelve are in the core formation realm, eight are in the foundation establishment realm and the remaining six are in the qi refinement realm.

You can go and look at them in depth later and decide which seven you'd like," said Shao An as he handed Yang Qing a white jade talisman.

"You will find their bios, the crimes they committed and why they did it, along with that you will also find the thoughts of different guards on the cultivator themselves which are based on the interactions

they have with them both directly and indirectly. It should help paint a picture of who you are dealing with," said Vice Warden Shao An.

Chapter 297 The Twelve Mountains (1)

"Thank you," answered Yang Qing with a smile.

He immediately roughly scanned the contents of the talisman. The information was just as thorough as the one he had gotten from Song Guozhi to prepare him for his ceremony.

A report this thorough he couldn't help but feel grateful for the vice warden. Without his involvement, the details would not have been this deep. With the information he had on hand, Yang Qing could make the best choice he could, though the risk was always there that those he chose may end up turning on him, however, the report helped lessen those odds somewhat.

As Yang Qing was sifting through the report, he noticed something that made his brows rise up.

"Senior Shao, what do the animal symbols beside them mean?" asked Yang Qing.

When going through the report he noticed that every name listed there had a symbol of an animal next to their names.

The animals were; a rabbit, rooster goat, rat, dog, pig, horse, and an ox.

When he thought about the symbols closely, he realized they were the zodiac symbols.

"The symbols are the designation of the mountain they are imprisoned at. Those in the qi refinement are imprisoned in the rabbit mountain which is that mountain over there filled with a lot of holes around it...."

Vice Warden Shao An pointed to one of the mountains to the west of their direction. The mountain had little vegetation and was riddled with holes, that made it look like it was a million ant hills combined together.

"The rooster, the goat, and the rat are the mountains that house the criminals in the foundation establishment realm. The rooster houses those in the early stages, the goat houses those in the middle stages and lastly, the rat houses those in the late stage to the peak of the foundation establishment realm.

It's those three respectively," said the vice warden as he pointed towards three mountains that were side by side.

The Rooster Mountain had what looked to be two miniature suns around it. One was golden yellow and the other was dark orange.

The Goat Mountain was barren and only had one single tree growing at the peak. The tree was about 1200 meters tall and had tiny green leaves. However, what was distinctive about it were the large roots and thorny vines that came from that seemed to have traversed the whole mountain.

The Rat Mountain had a few trees here and there, while the mountain was filled with murky black water. Yang Qing felt like the water had corrosive nature to it. If a mortal was exposed to it they would get riddled with all kinds of diseases within minutes and when it came to cultivators, a body refining expert would have internal organs corroded continually. Yang Qing even detected it had the ability to corrode someone's qi.

He couldn't help but wonder what requirements were needed to form an insidious grotto as this one and how the chief librarian even managed to make it his own.

Gaining ownership of such a grotto came with considerable risks, especially in the early stages.

"The Pig and Dog are the mountains that house those in the core formation realm. The Pig Mountain houses those in the early to middle stage of the core formation realm, while the dog mountain houses those in the late stages to the peak of the core formation realm.

It's those two respectively," Vice Warden Shao An said as he pointed to two other mountains.

The Pig Mountain had nothing on it except constant tremors and thunderous earthquakes which immediately repaired itself only for another earthquake to happen. The effects were of varying degrees and accompanying those earthquakes were landslides.

Dog Mountain was the complete opposite of Rooster Mountain. It was dark and gloomy and had a lone moon above it as the only source of light. The moon's light seemed to be dimming. Yang Qing could detect the glow had detrimental effects attached to it especially ones that were targeted towards the mind. One of those effects was inducing mania.

The more Yang Qing looked at it, the more he felt it seemed familiar. He narrowed his gaze on the plants around it and his pupils shook.

'Poison. It's that mountain,' he wondered in shock.

When he arrived, he had seen a mountain that was surrounded by purple smoke that had a dangerous enchanting beauty to it and poisonous plants below it along with insects.

When he closely examined the gloomy mountain, he realized it was the same poisonous mountain from before except the moon above it seemed to be restraining and concealing the poison. Only when he looked closer did he discover minute poisonous elements spread about in most of the plants.

'What kind of crazy place is this grotto?'

Before, Yang Qing only gave the mountains a cursory glance since he was warier of the terrifying sensation he got from the recess of the abyss below the mountain.

After he met up with Vice Warden Shao An, even if he was close to the mountains than before, their effects seemed isolated from him, and at the time he was fully concentrated on committing Shao An's introduction of his new role to memory.

Only now when he purposely evaluated them, did he realize how terrifying those mountains were, and even what he sensed seemed to have been reduced and wasn't the complete effect.

'How do they survive?'

"Lastly the horse and the ox mountains house those in the palace realm. The horse mountain houses those in the early and middle stages of the palace realm and also those in the quasi-palace stage while the ox houses those in the late stage to the peak of the palace realm.

The Horse Mountain is that one, and the Ox Mountain is the one to its right," said Vice Warden Shao An.

The Horse Mountain was the one Yang Qing had taken note of before that had variable changes. One minute it was a scorching desert, the next it was flooding. The changes happened to the weather and the landscape, only the mountainous structure remained but what was on it changed every few minutes, and every change seemed to be a natural calamity, though it did exhibit a calm surrounding once in a while, it was rare. As for the changes, though they seemed normal calamities, Yang Qing detected dao of destruction mixed in with those calamities.

A core formation expert, even one in the late stages would not be able to survive there for more than 30 minutes before their body and soul were destroyed.

Chapter 298 The Twelve Mountains (2)

Yang Qing quickly averted his gaze from Horse Mountain to Ox Mountain. The Ox Mountain was the mountain covered in three different colored flames. They were orange, red, and blue. The more Yang Qing concentrated on those flames the more he felt like his whole body down to his soul was engulfed in those flames. The blue flame had the highest potency of the three, while the orange was the weakest, though even though it was weak it could burn a core formation to ashes in an instant.

"This could be an alchemist's and blacksmith's paradise as long as they could bear the flames," thought Yang Qing. Certain ingredients needed a certain type of flame to be able to refine them either into a potion or weapon.

Yang Qing even spotted a few unique herbs and ores growing within those flames. He had no idea as to their identities since grottos usually had unique natural treasures tied to the intrinsic nature of the grotto itself.

After being given a brief introduction to the mountains, Yang Qing couldn't help but wonder about the identities of the remaining ones. If he went by Vice Warden Shao An's statement about there being only three mountains, then he guessed the three mountains housed domain-level criminals and maybe even one at the soul formation.

Just as he was about to investigate them further, he heard Vice Warden Shao An's voice warning him.

"Don't try to look at them too deeply otherwise even with the protection of the parasol tree, you won't leave unscathed."

Yang Qing hurriedly pulled back his when he heard Vice Warden Shao An's warning.

"Those three mountains are special in comparison to the rest, which is a given considering they are used to imprison domain experts. If you're not careful your soul, your mind, and body may be injured by them, even passively," warned Vice Warden Shao An.

"Thank you for the kind reminder Senior Shao," said Yang Qing with an apologetic smile. His back was covered in sweat.

Because of the illusion of safety he had with Vice Warden Shao An, he had forgotten where he was. This was where the most heinous cultivators were housed. Those who had committed all kinds of atrocities such as single-handedly massacring a whole city or a whole clan with different means.

How could a place that housed cultivators like them be a place anyone could do as they pleased? It had to be even more dangerous than its occupants, otherwise, it would not serve its purpose as a doomed prison for the damned. A place built to break their spirits and their lives.

The name Requiem was rather ironic considering the nature of the place. It did not give repose to those imprisoned but guaranteed them never-ending torment. Though if one looked at it from a different angle the name was fitting. While those imprisoned here didn't gain any peaceful rest, their victims,

both the living and the dead would get rest knowing those who harmed them were receiving the worst possible treatment they could ever get, even worse than what they got and such a thought may have a comfort to them.

"Since I am your senior and I understand the curiosity of youth. I could tell you of the three mountains even if you can't analyze them as the rest."

Vice Warden Shao An had a smile as he said this when he saw Yang Qing quickly perk up his ears and eyes gleaming with curiosity.

'I hope he won't take out a bag of sunflower seeds and wine' Shao An playfully thought.

"The remaining three mountains; monkey, snake, and tiger are for the mountains that house the early-stage, middle-stage, and late-stage domain experts respectively.

When you came in you must have noticed the mountain that was raining different colored lightnings, one that was complete darkness and one that was covered in light.

The Monkey Mountain is the one with the lightning rain, the Snake Mountain is the one covered in complete darkness and the Tiger Mountain is the one covered in complete light..."

"What about where we are?" asked Yang Qing.

Even though it wasn't part of the Grotto mountains he still felt it held a significant role. The Chief Librarian couldn't have created it just for kicks or maybe it was where the Requiem Guards lived. It could be considered the only habitable place in the whole grotto Every other place was a disaster waiting to happen.

"This is the Dragon Mountain, the prison for the soul formation experts and also their burial ground because, unlike the rest of the cultivators, we can't risk having them around for too long.

Every soul formation expert caught is executed within 10 years, not that we have soul formation experts here.

For now, it's just a nice mountain to relax at and drink tea and admire the view," said Vice Warden Shao An.

For some reason Yang Qing didn't believe him, he felt there was more to the Dragon Mountain, and the part about there not being a soul formation expert present had its doubts too. He didn't have any basis other than gut instinct and youthful indulgence and curiosity.

Yang Qing had an unhealthy penchant for seeing mysteries even where there were none, which was why he usually got taken for a lot of his spirit stones at the open-air market. The weirder an object looked, the more likely Yang Qing would spend an arm and a tooth to get it.

"I think it's about time to send you back. I'm afraid without En Sang's token, it will get dangerous for you to be here even with my assistance, and the warden isn't around to keep that thing at bay," said Vice Warden Shao An as he looked below them.

"There is something down there!" Yang Qing fearfully thought. He had learned his lesson from before, so he made no attempts to look downward.

He exchanged a few more words with Shao An before he was brought away the same way he was brought back. The ride back however was two times faster than before. In ten minutes, he was back at the cliff he appeared from and the spatial domain to the Judicial Committee building was already open. He immediately jumped in, leaving the nerve-wracking Requiem behind.

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"Luckily it is still in deep hibernation," muttered Shao An as he stared below him with an austere look and a golden glow in his eyes.

Chapter 299 Preparation For The Entrance Examination

"That thing must really be something for it to need 11 mountains and En Sang's blood essence just to seal it."

Vice Warden Shao An's eyes turned into a golden flame with while his pupils morphed into the shape of a tree. A few minutes later he sighed and went back to lounging under the tree, as he read some booklet he had.

...

Yang Qing didn't spend too much time with the three elders of the judicial committee when he came out. He exchanged a few words with them, one of which was he will send his decision of the seven inmates he would be supervising to Vice Warden Shao An through them.

After the experience he just had, the less interaction he had with the place the better. It was better and safer to use the Judicial Committee as the go-between.

Once he was done, he made his way to his abode but not before informing both Zheng Hu and Ma Yuan to meet up with the two roaming inquisitors attached to him; Xia Ting and Yu Gen. He needed to get the case going which he hoped would have made some major headway in the coming week or so before he got swamped in his other cases.

Ma Yuan tried to act composed and not impatient but Yang Qing could tell underneath he was as anxious as any man who lost his wife and daughter could be. In fact, one could argue Ma Yuan was even more nervous from the moment Yang Qing took over the case.

While finally there was a glimmer of hope that he may be able to find his wife and daughter, a newfound fear cropped up from that possibility and that fear was what would be the status of his wife and daughter when they were found?

Would they be alive? What would be their condition in case they were found alive?

The cultivation world was ruthless as it came, it didn't matter whether you were a man, woman, child, or an elder with one foot in the grave, as long as you were weak you were subject to the grim realities of the underside of the cultivation world where the strong preyed on the weak.

When Ma Yuan had little to no hope of finding them and was wishing for his death, the one positive thing he had which was more wishful thinking than anything else, was they were alive and well. But now with the Order's help and all these grounds they had started making in just a few days, he now had to face the realities of what would he find at the other end of that venture.

As an orphan and a rogue cultivator, he knew how bad it could get which was why even though he seemed ecstatic when Yang Qing told him about the progress and having more hands on the case, he couldn't hide the fear in his eyes from Yang Qing.

Yang Qing sympathized with him but he knew not knowing would be a far worse fate for Ma Yuan. That torment made Ma Yuan want to take his life in the most painful way possible and had Yang Qing not been around, Ma Yuan may have very well succeeded in his endeavor.

Yang Qing left the preliminary investigation to the roaming inquisitors and Zheng Hu could assist where possible even if he was in the core formation and the case more than likely involved someone in the quasi-palace realm or the palace realm.

With how much information they had to sift through, every help would be needed, which was why Yang Qing even contemplated having certain aspects of the case on commission for an outside contract in case the Wind Gliding Mercenaries failed to come up with anything in the coming week.

After Yang Qing was sure he had handled everything i.e. the things that concerned Ma Yuan's case and the things for his induction, he left for his abode to prepare for the entrance examination that would be starting in just two days. He had today and tomorrow to ensure everything was in place.

With how desperate the Order was for talent and manpower, the entrance examination for new recruits was much more serious than other organizations and Yang Qing's role as the chief examiner this time was likely to be closely monitored.

If he did a good job, he was likely to get rewarded with merit points and other tangible benefits, but if he messed it up, he had no doubt the Order with all its creativity would find a way to make sure he would pay dearly for it. He didn't want that to happen which was why despite how much it pained him, he decided to ask for help from the one person he never wanted to.

...

"You sure kept me waiting a while, o' mighty palace court judge."

Yang Qing immediately had veins throbbing on his forehead when he heard those words and the mocking look of the person saying them.

"Huילang can you not eat my food and mock me at the same time?" said Yang Qing in exasperation as he pushed Kang Huילang's feet off his table.

"You're the one who called me. So, what is it?" asked Kang Huילang as he returned his feet back up the table.

Yang Qing exhaled in defeat and went to take a seat opposite him and took out a worn-out bamboo scroll from his storage ring.

Kang Huילang who was nonchalant before with a lazy look leaned forward to the scroll with interest in his eyes.

Yang Qing proceeded to unroll it over the table revealing all its contents, though with how aged it was, almost half of it was illegible, however, there was one part that was clearer than all the other texts and images. It was the cursive title at the top of the scroll.

It had the name '108 Steps of the autumn leaves.'

"Where did you get this?" asked Kang Huילang as he traced through some of the texts with his fingers.

"I got it from hall master Ren Xin of the Rapids spear hall."

Kang Huילang who was about to be enthralled by the scroll, flinched as an angry look appeared on his face.

"Don't think I don't know it was you who goaded that she-devil Wei Liling to attack me," Kang Huilang angrily said.

"You know she would have attacked you regardless of what I said, especially after what happened in your duel last time," answered Yang Qing unperturbed by Kang Huilang's angry glare.

"So, what do you need from me? It can't be to help you complete this art, you're better at that sort of thing than me and if you needed help, Boqin would have been a better choice than me," Kang Huilang curiously asked as his attention was drawn back to the contents of the bamboo scroll.

"Ordinarily, yes, I'd ask Boqin for help if I needed it, but right now I need your particular expertise. I'll be the chief examiner for this year's entrance examination for the institute and as such I need to make sure it's prepared thoroughly and one of the ways is through this cultivation art.

I think you may have noticed already, that this art has a rather in-depth layout towards laying down fundamentals however those fundamentals are built for those already in the qi refinement realm, and even for them it only becomes relevant to those in the late stages, preparing for their journey into the foundation establishment realm.

But the problem is the bulk of those coming for the test will have no cultivation, or will be in the body refinement realm or the early stages of the qi refinement. While there will still be a lot of them in the late stages, their numbers pale in comparison to those in the body refinement or the early stages.

I need help in refining the cultivation art so it can be usable with those groups. The first part of the art is still intact, which we can use as a basis to create something simple and usable by those without a cultivation base or in the body refining realm and the early stages of the qi refinement.

With the short amount of time I have, I'll need your help with the combat arts attached to the art while I focus on the art as a whole," said Yang Qing.

The 108 steps of the autumn leaves was an incomplete gold-grade cultivation art he had received from the hall master of the One thousand hall battle palace.

The art seemed to have been created with the sole purpose of reinforcing the cultivation base of the practitioner by solidifying their fundamentals at each stage from the late stage of the qi refinement realm to the foundation establishment realm. The legible part of the technique had reached the peak of the core formation realm, while from the palace realm going forward was incomplete.

It not only helped the user improve their cultivation realm but it also touched on different combat arts that were integrated into the art to help with its purpose of solidifying the fundamentals.

It had palm arts, fist arts, saber arts, sword arts, spear arts, and movement arts attached to it. However, these arts were created for someone in the late stages of the qi refinement realm, any one weaker would struggle to execute them, thus Yang Qing had to modify them along with modifying the entire cultivation art for those weaker than its minimum requirement.

Tackling the combat aspect and the cultivation art would require some effort and time which he didn't have, therefore enlisting the services of a combat monster with already three different types of intents and an aptitude for every weapon, was the next best option. Kang Huilang, just like him, had a peerless jade physique. His was the Harmonious cataclysmic jade bones, which gave him an unnatural aptitude towards combat sense and attunement of different combat arts.

With his help, they would be able to complete everything in time, and one part of his preparation would be done.

Chapter 300 The Crazy Ones

"I'm not going to help you for free, it will cost you," said Kang Huilang.

He put his feet up on the table, along with an accompanying smug grin.

Yang Qing wasn't too surprised by his words. He would have been more surprised if Kang Huilang agreed to help him with no strings attached.

"How much?"

With how short of time he was, Yang Qing had already prepared himself to get fleeced. Luckily, he had the gifts from his ceremony, so he would be spared from paying out of pocket.

"Mmh, I think 10,000 middle-grade stones should do it," answered Kang Huilang, closely monitoring Yang Qing's reaction.

"Fine, but for that cost you will need to do something more, don't worry it's nothing strenuous and is something I've just thought up would be great for the test..."

Kang Huilang was surprised by Yang Qing's ease with which he accepted the charge. He had expected for them to go back and forth like they usually did before he finally settled for 7,500 middle-grade spirit stones, which was his real asking price.

'I should have asked for more.' Thought Kang Huilang in regret.

"What do you need?" asked Kang Huilang.

Yang Qing showed a devious smile as he explained the ins and outs of his ideas.

"Are you sure the institute will agree to it? I don't want to end up getting fined with you because you went overboard with your duties," said Kang Huilang.

"I think they will agree to it..." said Yang Qing as his gaze turned solemn.

"In terms of cultivation, while the quality of intake hasn't changed, other aspects seem to have been neglected.

Things are not the same as when we got in or the seniors before us... the world may seem safe on the surface but it has a lot of undercurrents and one of those undercurrents is charged toward us, Lai Lei and others like him are proof of it..."

A heavy silence ensued for a few seconds. Lai Lei's attack happened eight months ago and when news of it spread, it hit them heavily because they knew Lai Lei, they were close to him because he was the chief inquisitor under Dai Chen and they knew each other even during their Institution days.

It's one thing hearing a random colleague getting attacked but it's another when that colleague is also a friend. From that moment, the danger felt very real. Also, the manner in which Lai Lei got attacked added to it. He got surrounded by fifteen cultivators of which eight were half-step palace realm cultivators just like him except for the fact that they had used forbidden means to reach that level, which was why Lai Lei was able to escape the encirclement in the fast place albeit with a lost arm, leg, and a cracked dantian.

Though he survived, the attack showed there were people capable of forcefully creating half-step palace realm cultivators, and had the means and the guts to target those from the Order and also manage to hide their identities.

Every Order employee had an arrow in the dark pointed at them, and who knew how bad the next attack would be, if or when it happened?

"The people coming now need to be mentally for the storm that may come for us. If they're not ready, this is the best we can give them to protect their lives.

Since the attacks started happening, there have been cases of desertion from those in the outer core courts, and other departments that put its members in the field.

I don't fault them for running, when they came in, they came in for the glory that came from becoming a member of the Order but what they got is an increased threat to their lives because of their association with us. Some even left comfortable lives for it, and they haven't been at the Order long enough for them to willingly give up their lives for it..."

Yang Qing at some point took out vermilion wine and poured a cup for himself and Kang Huilang.

"Huilang this is why we need crazy people. Those willing to trade their lives for a shot at something selfish that the Order can give them. Isn't that why we came here in the first place?

We didn't have lofty ambitions of bringing peace to the whole Southern Continent or fighting for glory, we all wanted something from this place, thus we fought and clawed our way in and continue to do so to selfishly keep hold of what lured us in here in the first.

Here's to finding crazy people like us," said Yang Qing with a malevolent grin. He raised his cup towards Kang Huilang who was dazed but then showed a similar-looking grin.

"To the crazy ones," he answered as he clinked his cup with Yang Qing's, and then both downed their cups, with Yang Qing immediately refilling them after.

"I'll still need the 10,000 middle-grade spirit stones though," added Kang Huilang as he brought the cup over for a sip.

"Sure, no problem. I don't know why you keep up with the bets, it's not like you have ever won and worse you compete with guys from the administration hall.

There's no way you'd ever win against them," said Yang Qing with a pitying look.

"Even though I haven't won, it won't always be that way, I'm getting better and better at it, it's only a matter of time now, and when that moment comes, I'll show those bastards," Kang Huilang snortingly replied as a battle intent flashed in his eyes.

Yang Qing couldn't help but shake his head at this. Since their institute days, Kang Huilang developed the nasty habit of placing bets on random things such as the punishment Yang Qing would get from the instructors for his many incidents. Yang Qing even intentionally got in trouble at some point and tried his hand at it since the betting pool had enough money to buy him a thousand crimson pigs for a whole month. He lost that bet and ended up punished, and a few spirit stones light.

After they graduated, Kang Huilang's habits turned to bet on cases, more specifically random pop-ins. He and a few others from different departments would bet on different aspects such as how many random pop-in cases the outer core court will get, or guess the weirdest random case that may come in before it did.

Kang Huilang has been doing it ever since he was an outer core court judge and not once had it ever gone his way. Which was why he was always borrowing from them, along with offering tutoring classes to those from the institute at a cost.

Yang Qing shook his head in wonder at how many weird people were in the Order. There was Kang Huilang and his cohorts gambling on cases, Mao Yunru spending most of her income on information brokers, Zhang Qingge who paid thousands of fines due to her berserker shy nature, Dai Chen who funded a lot of amateur wine brewers in different parts of the continent in the hopes there was a diamond in the rough among them, thus guaranteeing him a lifetime supply of quality wine.

'Is there no one normal here?' wondered Yang Qing in worry.

He pulled his thoughts back into extrapolating the 108 steps of the autumn leaves cultivation art. With how little time he had, he couldn't afford to waste it in wonder at the oddness of the people the Order accepted through their doors.