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Book 26: World Level Chapter 32: The Twelve Palaces of Brightshore

Ji Ning was meditating on sword-arts by himself within his astral island, using the top-grade temporal acceleration Dao treasure, the Luminous Room.

Ning was seated in the lotus position. Before him was a table that had a flagon of wine, a scroll of parchment, a brush, and a brush holder. Every so often, he'd pick up the brush and spend a bit of time painting on the scroll.

"The fifth stance of the [Nameless] sword-art, the Silent World. I still need to spend a bit more time on it." Ning was close to mastering the fifth stance of the [Nameless] sword-art, which was the highest level stance which World God Northrest himself had been able to master!

They were both World-level cultivators and had both reached the level of full mastery in the Dao of the Sword, but there were still differences in their sword-arts!

Northrest had only been a supreme World God due to his Eternal weapon, but some of the truly peerless geniuses which the Brightshore Kingdom had abducted and brought to this place were capable of that level of power even when they used mere Dao weapons. Some were even more terrifyingly strong!

This was what a difference in sword-arts could make.

In terms of profundity of sword-arts, there were quite a few people on the Astral Islands who were superior to Ning! Ning himself understood this quite well. In short, he simply hadn't been training for long enough, and he had broken through to the World level just recently. If these people knew that he had reached the level of full mastery a mere thousand years after reaching the World level, they would probably be completely stupefied.

"Others won't care about how long you have been cultivating. They will only care about how strong you are. My advantage lies in the strength and speed which the azureflower mist energy has imbued me with. It gives me the speed and strength of a Daolord of the First Step! But my weakness is my sword-arts..."

"I need to hurry up and collect a set of the sword-arts legacy. That will be of use to my sword-arts as well," Ning mused.

Anything referred to as a 'legacy' would include extremely detailed, step-by-step instructions for cultivators to use. The [Nameless] sword-art which Ning had acquired was just a fragmentary record; it couldn't really be referred to as a true legacy.

On the other hand, the many stone sword-steles which World God Northrest had painstakingly erected in order to help his successor better understand the first stance of the [Nameless] sword-art, the Heartsword stance, would qualify as a legacy. It contained detailed instructions and provided true guidance to the learner.

It was the legacy which World God Northrest had prepared for his successor.

As for the ninety-nine legacies on the Astral Islands, two of them were sword-arts. However, these sword-arts had been left behind by Samsara Daolords. It must be understood that ever since Ning had left the Three Realms, he hadn't encountered any formidable Daolord-level experts of the sword who could provide him with tutelage. He had been working hard all by himself.

"Eh?" Ning was suddenly disturbed from his meditations. "Someone came?"

He had bound this astral island long ago and thus was easily able to sense the presence of an outsider.

"Even I am restricted from leaving my astral island. For someone to come to my island means that this is probably a citizen of the Brightshore Kingdom." Ning placed his brush on the brush stand, then immediately left the Luminous Room.

After putting his treasure away, Ning emerged from his private room and then walked into his courtyard where he saw a figure standing outside.

It was an old man dressed in azure armor who had his hands clasped behind his back. As Ning pushed open the doors to his courtyard, the old man turned around and smiled at Ning. "I am Flameflow. I am from the Thunder Palace of the Twelve Palaces."

Ning was startled. This old man was a Samsara Daolord? He immediately said, "Darknorth greets you, senior Flameflow."

"Darknorth?" The azure-armored man nodded slightly, then let out a praising sigh. "My dear Darknorth, you are an impressive figure. Just three months after coming to the Astral Islands, you have already ascended to the fourth stratum, then won six consecutive battles here."

"I'm not quite where I need to be yet. I need ten consecutive victories before I can make it to the fifth stratum," Ning said.

"Generally speaking, the newcomers to the Astral Islands will have to undergo many battles and acquire a few legacies, allowing them to improve and grow before they are able to ascend to the fifth stratum." The azure-armored old man said, "As soon as you came here, you won six battles in a row here on the fourth stratum. I trust that it won't be too hard for you to ascend to the fifth stratum."

Ning understood this as well. There was one particularly valuable part of being here on the Astral Islands: there were many dazzlingly talented cultivators here. In the rest of the Endless Territories, it would be quite hard for Ning to encounter suitable foes. For a transcendent World God to encounter another transcendent World God was an incredibly rare experience.

But here on the Astral Islands, a large number of formidable World-level cultivators had been brought together. It was entirely possible and quite easy for a person to seek out opponents who were roughly on par with him in strength, or perhaps someone slightly stronger or weaker. Since losing a duel might very well result in death, everyone was motivated to fight to their fullest potential. As a result, all the surviving cultivators were generally able to grow stronger and stronger.

Only by making it to the fifth stratum would you receive protection... but how many would ever be able to ascend to that stratum?

“Please sit, senior.” Ning gestured towards the wooden table and seats nearby. Ning had placed them here, as he often enjoyed sitting down and enjoying some wine as he stared at the many astral islands hovering outside.

Daolord Flameflow sat down.

“Please.” Ning sat down on the other side and helped pour some wine.

“I know you are skilled in lightning,” Daolord Flameflow said.

“You know, senior?” Ning was surprised. Although he had fought quite a few times in the Astral Islands, it was only during his two most recent battles that he had used thunder and lightning. His previous opponents had been so weak that he hadn’t felt the need.

“I have full records of all the battles you engaged in here in the Astral Islands.” Daolord Flameflow chuckled. “Only by watching your battles and learning where your specialties lie shall the Twelve Palaces be in a good position to judge and choose from amongst you.”

“The Twelve Palaces?” Ning was puzzled.

Daolord Flameflow smiled. “You were abducted to this place by the almighty Hegemon, but you probably don’t know much right now. For weaker cultivators, being brought here was a calamity, but for someone like you it is a blessing. The almighty Hegemon... he is an incomparably powerful figure that is one of the few that truly stands at the very apex of the Endless Territories. He has been alive for an extremely long period of time and was the founder of our Brightshore Kingdom.”

Daolord Flameflow asked, “Have you heard of the Dao Alliance?”

“I have.” Ning nodded.

“The Dao Alliance spans an incredibly vast area and virtually all cultivators belong to the Dao Alliance. Compared to the Dao Alliance, our Brightshore Kingdom is more aloof and more secretive.” Daolord Flameflow said, “The Brightshore Kingdom almost never gets involved in any wars, and so we are on fairly good terms with the Dao Alliance.”

On good terms with the Dao Alliance? Ning let out a sigh of relief. Vastheaven Palace was part of the Dao Alliance; if the Brightshore Kingdom was on bad terms with the Dao Alliance, Ning would’ve been in trouble. But if they were on good terms... why would this almighty Hegemon abduct so many of the World-level cultivators belonging to the Dao Alliance?

“The Brightshore Kingdom is primarily divided up into twelve palaces,” Daolord Flameflow said. “There is also an imperial clan of individuals who are of the same race as the almighty Hegemon. Although they are few in number, they are extremely powerful.”

“They are of the same race as the almighty Hegemon?” Ning suddenly thought back to that enormous, terrifying behemoth that had abducted him to this place.

Of the same race as that behemoth?

“Yes. The members of the imperial clan are extremely few in number, but every single one of them possesses incredible strength and power. But of course, the almighty Hegemon is the mightiest of them

all,” Daolord Flameflow said. “The imperial clan rarely shows itself, while the Twelve Palaces of Brightshore comprises virtually all of the cultivators, Aeonians, special lifeforms, and other powerful experts of the Brightshore Kingdom.”

Daolord Flameflow continued, “The Twelve Palaces are very powerful. They are divided into the Palace of the Saber, the Palace of the Sword, the Palace of Radiance, the Palace of Mortality, the Palace of Thunder, the Palace of Flames, the Palace of the Heart, the Palace of Kindwater, the Palace of Woodform, the Palace of Skymetal, the Palace of Deepearth, and the Palace of Spacetime. My palace, the Thunder Palace, holds almost all of the Brightshore Kingdom’s experts in the Dao of Lightning. We have the accumulated legacies of countless generations of lightning-attribute experts and many Daolords! If you were to join us, you will definitely be able to make great strides on this path.”

Only now did Ning truly understand. At the top of the Brightshore Kingdom stood the Twelve Palaces. As for the almighty Hegemon and the imperial clan... the almighty Hegemon was of course quite powerful, but his imperial clansmen were simply too few in number.

As for the Twelve Palaces, a steady flow of new people would constantly join them. Just look at the cultivators and special lifeforms currently within the Astral Islands. The most skillful members would all be brought into the Twelve Palaces in the future.

“Once you acquire a full legacy, you’ll be qualified to leave this place. If you wish to join the Thunder Palace, you can just shatter this message-talisman of mine.” As Daolord Flameflow spoke, he produced a deep azure talisman that was brimming with flickers of electricity. He handed the talisman straight to Ning. “Once you shatter this, I’ll sense it and immediately come receive you.”

Ning blinked. The Thunder Palace? It was destined that he would walk the path of the Dao of the Sword! His mastery over lightning was far weaker than his mastery of the sword. The entire reason why he had some skill in this area was all thanks to one of the nine secret-arts of Daolord Allgod, the [Novessence Thunder].

Daolord Flameflow continued, “I know that you are also skilled in sword-arts, and I imagine that in the future you shall have to choose between the Sword Palace and the Thunder Palace. None of the Twelve Palaces will give you any pressure; you can choose whichever palace you so desire.”

“Oh, right.” Ning’s eyes suddenly lit up. “Senior, you said just now that you know the results of every battle?”

“Yes. That way, the Twelve Palaces can more easily choose our new members,” Daolord Flameflow said.

“Then have you received word of a female Chaos Immortal who is skilled in the element of fire? She has fifty-one bugbeasts that are comparable to master-class World Gods as well as a full set of eighteen powerful golems that are also comparable to master-class World Gods.” Ning continued hurriedly, “This is what she looks like. She came here by my side.” As Ning spoke, he waved his finger in the air and caused an image of Su Youji to appear out of nowhere.

“I don’t know what she looks like, but as for a female Chaos Immortal skilled in fire who has bugbeasts and eighteen golems...” Daolord Flameflow laughed. “There is indeed someone amongst the new arrivals who fits these criteria.”

Ning let out a sigh of relief. He found her. Finally, he had found Su Youji!

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Book 26: World Level Chapter 33: The Tenth Battle

“Female Chaos Immortals are rare to begin with, and ones who specialize in using golems and bugbeasts are even rarer. When you factor in her being skilled the Dao of Fire... yes, there’s only one who fits it all.” Daolord Flameflow looked at Ji Ning. “Is she your Dao-companion?”

“She is my friend,” Ji Ning replied.

“It seems that being your friend is a good thing.” Daolord Flameflow said, “Are you planning to acquire a full legacy, then lose it to her on purpose?”

“Yes.” Ning nodded. Once she acquired a full legacy, she would be able to leave this place.

Daolord Flameflow said, “Then there is something I must tell you in advance.”

“Yes?” Ning looked at the Daolord. Something he needed to know in advance? Was there something wrong with this plan of his? But based on what he had seen thus far, losing on purpose was entirely permitted.

“Being in the Astral Islands is both a curse and a blessing. If your friend is extraordinarily talented, it might be a better idea for you to let her stay here for a while longer. But of course, if she’s weak it would be best for her to leave early on,” Daolord Flameflow said. “My reminder to you is this... even if she manages to survive the Astral Islands, it’ll still be quite hard for her to join the Twelve Palaces.”

“Very hard?” Ning was intrigued.

“Yes.” Daolord Flameflow nodded. “The Twelve Palaces represent the twelve most powerful organizations in the entire Brightshore Kingdom. They recruit Daolords as well as truly talented World-level cultivators who are worthy of further training. It is quite difficult for the many denizens of the Brightshore Kingdom to actually join the Twelve Palaces.”

Daolord Flameflow continued, “There are some, for example, who willingly became slaves of the kingdom. Although they are still considered our citizens, they stand at the lowest rungs of society. As for those who went to mine for a thousand chaos cycles, they will become citizens upon their return, yes, but do you really think they are qualified to join the Twelve Palaces?” Daolord Flameflow laughed. “Becoming a citizen of the Brightshore Kingdom and joining the Twelve Palaces are two separate matters.”

Ning now understood.

“Take yourself, for example. You have the power to make it into the fifth stratum, which is why I came to give you an invitation.” Daolord Flameflow continued, “Some weaker World-level cultivators might never receive an invitation, even if they do manage to put together a complete legacy. There is a high barrier to entry for the Twelve Palaces, and even the citizens of the Brightshore Kingdom have to undergo many different trials before they are granted entry. But of course, people like you who have received invitations don’t need to go through any further trials.”

Ning nodded.

He understood. However, he still wanted to help Su Youji as quickly as possible. Ning knew exactly what her strengths and limitations were. She had just reached the World level a short while ago, and her insights into the Dao weren't even as profound as Ning's, nor was she a battle-hardy World God. She would be able to buy herself some time with her bugbeasts and golems, but as time passed... eventually, she would encounter a truly talented expert and might well lose her life.

"I'd like to ask you, senior, to tell me which astral island she is on," Ning said.

The golden book included detailed records of every astral island, including basic information about each cultivator and the treasures they held. There was naturally a notation of each location as well.

Generally speaking, the cultivators in the Astral Islands would only learn of each other's locations through actual combat. But it was only natural for a Samsara Daolord of the Thunder Palace of the Twelve Palaces to know much more.

"The astral island she is on has the address of 399-236," Daolord Flameflow said.

"So this one over there." Ning immediately was able to locate the island in question. This astral island was still on the first stratum.

"My young friend Darknorth, I won't disturb you any further. If you wish to join the Palace of Thunder, simply shatter the talisman and I'll come welcome you." Daolord Flameflow rose to his feet.

"Thank you for everything, senior." Ning felt quite grateful towards the man. If it wasn't for his help, even he didn't know how long it would be before he found Su Youji's astral island.

"A minor matter," Daolord Flameflow said with a laugh. He then turned and left, disappearing into the skies.

Ning watched silently and pensively as the Daolord left.

"I need to make it to the fifth stratum as soon as possible. I'll then acquire one of the simpler sword-arts legacies and lose it to Youji right away," Ning mused to himself. Two sword-arts legacies and one footwork legacy. Ning wanted the footwork legacy the most. Alas, it was highly ranked and hard to acquire. In fact, most of the legacy treasures were with the cultivators on the fifth stratum.

In the coming days, Ning began to issue challenges anew to the other cultivators on his stratum.

The fourth stratum. The seventh battle.

Ning encountered an expert who was skilled in the Dao of Spacetime. This was Ning's toughest, most grueling battle, because his opponent's fleeing skills were simply incredible, allowing him to retreat and advance as he pleased.

Ning knew that he had an advantage in actual power, but he was still unable to do anything to his opponent. Even when he used the [Novessence Thunder] to restrain his foe's movements, his foe's movements remained unpredictably fast and fluid. In the end, Ning was forced to split his body into two, using two bodies to battle at the same time. Although each body was weaker than his true body, they were still individually superior than his opponent in strength. Ning wasn't exactly slow. With two bodies surrounding and attacking at the same time, as well as the assistance of the [Novessence Thunder], Ning was able to force his opponent into admitting defeat.

The fourth stratum. The eighth battle.

This battle was against an Aberrant. Special lifeforms were different from ordinary cultivators. Ordinary cultivators were all born from the Worldheart of their chaosworld. Natural-born Elder Gods like Nuwa were said to be born from the primordial chaos, but in reality it was the chaosworld generated by the Worldheart which gave birth to them. They were born with mastery over one of the Heavenly Daos of their chaosworld, but they still emerged from the mysterious, marvelous powers of their Worldheart.

True Gods, Empyrean Gods, mortals... all of them were produced from the Worldheart.

Special lifeforms, however, were truly born within unique situations within the endless primordial chaos. There was a qualitative difference between them and cultivators, and although some of them were weak, others of them were inconceivably strong.

This opponent fighting Ning was an ape-like creature. Just prior to the battle, the creature was crunching his way through a tasty meal of strange, metallic objects. It had a body as tough as a Dao weapon and incredible strength, but it was also extremely intelligent. It had even deeper insights into the Dao than Ning did!

However, in the end it still lost.

This was because Ning was just as strong as it was, but was also much faster! Most importantly of all, Ning was wielding six Eternal weapons while the ape had to rely on its two arms... but to actually kill the ape would be incredibly difficult, because Ning was unable to damage its body. Binding it would also be quite difficult. The only thing Ning could do was force it to admit defeat.

The fourth stratum. The ninth battle.

This was an simple, direct battle. Ning easily gained victory.

"I've already won nine battles in a row. One more battle. Just one more win and I'll have made it into the fifth stratum. Things will be much simpler then." Ning was feeling rather confident. Thus far, he hadn't encountered any foes that required him to use his Elementum Waterflame Gourd. That was his final trump card which he would only use when absolutely necessary.

"Next challenge." Ning sent out yet another challenge to a cultivator on the fourth stratum.

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"He's won a total of nine victories in a row now."

One of the twelve astral islands within the fifth stratum.

A skinny, swarthy-skinned child with three eyes dressed with strange silver cape was staring intently at the golden book in his hands. "I hear that the almighty Hegemon personally selected this latest crop of newcomers. It really does seem as though some of them possess tremendous potential. This fellow who won nine battles in a row might not necessarily be powerful, but he definitely has been the fastest mover."

The golden book only included some basic information regarding the World-level cultivator on each astral island. It didn't include information such as win-loss totals. Still, it wasn't too hard to divine such information.

Ji Ning, for example. Ever since he had reached the fourth stratum, he had won every battle he was in. He had gained a number of legacy treasures, while the ones he had defeated had been completely drained of their own legacy treasures! Just by watching the movements of the various legacy treasures, one would easily be able to divine who had won which battles. It was obvious that Ning's total legacy treasures had increased nine separate times after arriving on the fourth stratum, while there were nine fourth-stratum cultivators who had lost those exact same treasures. Clearly, he had won nine battles in a row.

"Twenty-one of the newcomers have fought their way into the fourth stratum, but eight ended up being pushed back into the third stratum. Some of them managed to fight their way back into the fourth stratum once more. Only five have won every battle they were in. The fastest has won nine battles, while the second fastest has won six." The skinny, swarthy-skinned child read on. Speed didn't count for much; the slower ones might just be a bit more cautious.

"It is rare for me to meet a worthy opponent. Mmm... once he wins his tenth battle and makes it into the fifth stratum, I'll send him a challenge." A strange smile flashed past the child's face. "I'll teach him a thing or two and let him know that there is a heaven beyond the heavens."

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"Oh? He's won nine battles?" A black-robed expert on the fourth stratum was flipping through the golden book as well. Although he was on the fourth stratum, it had been a long, long time since anyone had challenged him. This was because he had once made it to the fifth stratum and thus received the protection of the Astral Islands! Making it to the fifth stratum was a testament to his power. Most of his former opponents now knew how strong he was and wouldn't challenge him without a good reason. As for the newcomers including Ning, few of them would be so rash as to challenge someone under protection.

"Eheh, he's about to make it to the fifth stratum and receive protection? It won't be that easy. Not just everyone is worthy of being protected. You might be just one step away... but I will ruin your hopes."

"You are just one step away, but I'll let you die in the grips of despair. Just thinking about it excites me. Seeing a genius perish in despair is such a lovely sight." The black-robed expert let out a chilling laugh as he issued Ning a challenge.

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Book 26: World Level Chapter 34: The Black-Robed Expert

A gentle wind was blowing through the Astral Islands.

Ji Ning was in an excellent mood today. He was flipping through his golden book when his face suddenly changed. "A challenge?"

Ever since he had risen to the fourth stratum, this was the first time someone else on the same stratum had sent him a challenge! The fourth stratum was just a single step away from the fifth stratum, causing everyone to be quite cautious and unwilling to casually start a duel against an unknown cultivator on the same level. They would first gather as much intelligence as possible before deciding whether or not to challenge the newcomer.

“He is actually one of the protected cultivators?” Ning frowned. “There are only around twenty protected cultivators in all the Astral Islands! All of them are unfathomably strong. For him to challenge me...”

“Wait. I’ll wait for a short while.” Ning shut his eyes and began to wait calmly.

Each day, a person could only issue a single challenge. Earlier this day, he had already issued a challenge to another member of the fourth stratum, a cultivator who was not under protection. However, that person wouldn’t necessarily accept his challenge. The higher the stratum, the more cautious cultivators were about dueling people on that stratum.

This was especially true for fourth stratum cultivators who hadn’t received protection!

The closer they were to the fifth stratum and receiving protection, the more cautious they would become. They would generally first defeat some cultivators on the second or third strata, but they wouldn’t kill them. Instead, the fourth stratum cultivator would force these weaker cultivators to swear lifeblood oaths that they would accept any challenges from him, with him swearing that he would not take their lives.

That way, once the fourth stratum cultivator received a challenge from someone on his level that he didn’t wish to fight, he could immediately issue a challenge to those cultivators on the second and third strata, allowing him to avoid the challenge.

It was possible to avoid battles in this way, but unexpected things would sometimes happen as time went on. For example, those second and third strata cultivators might already be engaged in a duel, preventing them from accepting the challenge from the fourth stratum cultivator. This wouldn’t be considered a violation of the oath.

Thus, during the past two weeks, Ning had only been able to successfully challenge someone a single time. All his other challenges had been declined.

“I hope this one will go through. Unless absolutely necessary, I’d rather not duel a protected cultivator until I myself receive protection as well,” Ning mused.

If he wasn’t protected while his opponent was, their mental approach to any duel would be completely different.

Time ticked on minute by minute.

Rumble.

The golden book now displayed some new information. The cultivator which Ning challenged had just entered into a battle against a different individual.

“Another one avoiding battle.” Honestly, Ning had expected this outcome. He had only succeeded once in the past half month, after all.

“No choice but to accept the challenge. Time for me to see just how strong these protected individuals are.” Through the golden book, Ning was made aware that this individual was a special lifeform, was under protection, and had quite a few legacy treasures. Other than that, Ning knew nothing at all.

Ning reached out through the golden book and shattered the writ of challenge, accepting the challenge. He then immediately walked towards a room filled with many divine runes. Ning stood there in the center of the room, allowing the formation to be activated and teleport him away.

Rumble...

This was another oceanic island, filled with beauty and grace. Ning appeared atop a small mountain within the island, and he immediately saw the distant, azure-blue waters of the sea as well as the dazzling sands of the beach.

Rumble... another figure suddenly appeared on that same mountain, just a few hundred meters away from Ning. This was a figure that was completely covered in black robes.

Ning looked at his opponent.

The black-robed figure looked back at Ning as well. Only a pair of crimson eyes were visible beneath his dark robes.

“Upon arriving here at the Astral Islands, you immediately ascended to the fourth stratum, then won nine battles in a row.” The black-robed figure’s voice was cold and dark, and his eyes were completely different from the eyes of a cultivator. Those crimson eyes looked even more bizarre and sinister than the eyes of various strange beasts and monsters which Ning had encountered in the past. This was no cultivator. It was a special lifeform.

“Quite impressive. Given enough time, you would definitely be able to ascend to the fifth stratum. Unfortunately, you won’t have that chance.” The black-robed expert laughed, and his laughter was extremely grating and ear-piercing.

“Hahaha... you are just one step away, but you are going to die here. Do you not feel despair? Ahaha...” The black-robed expert laughed wildly, a chaotic aura of fire beginning to emerge from his body. This aura alone was probably capable of driving some weaker cultivators to the brink of insanity.

Ning simply frowned. No enmity existed between the two of them, and yet this man wished to destroy Ning’s future prospects?

“You talk a big game,” Ning said calmly.

Boom! A large black sword suddenly appeared in the black-robed expert’s right hand. Although it could be described as a sword, it didn’t have any edges to it at all. The aura emanating from this greatsword gave Ning an impression of incredible weight and density.

“Ahahaha, I dare make these claims because I have the power to take your life. You simply haven’t been here in the Astral Islands long enough, and you haven’t undergone sufficient tempering. There is no place in the outside world which is quite like the Astral Islands, with its many elites and geniuses for you

to test yourself against. I think you won't be able to take so much as my very first sword-blow." The black-robed expert let out a bizarre laugh.

"Hmph." Ning's gaze turned sharp, and a crimson-gold lightning seal suddenly appeared on his forehead.

Ning was beginning to get rather irritated by this black-robed expert's words. Screw the talking; he was going to give this person a taste of his [Novessence Thunder] first!

Bang! A crimson-gold streak of lightning shot out with incredible speed, giving the black-robed expert no time to dodge at all. The lightning bolt hammered directly against him, causing his body to tremble slightly. However, he was still able to stand there calmly.

"What powerful lightning. Unfortunately, I'm the wrong person for you to use it against." The black-robed expert completely ignored the [Novessence Thunder], allowing it to crackle and writhe around his body. A few flickers of lightning brushed against some of the nearby boulders, instantly reducing them to dust.

"You can die now." The black-robed expert struck out with his sword.

Ning didn't dare to be too brash. This person knew that he had won nine battles in a row on the fourth stratum, but still dared to make the claim that his very first sword-blow would be too much for Ning to handle. Without a doubt, this strike would be an extraordinary one.

Boom! Once this strike was unleashed, the skies above the oceanic island began to dim. Countless flaming clouds began to gather in the air above them, and the sword crushed down upon Ning as though it was bringing the might of Heaven and Earth down with it.

The sword came crashing down towards Ning with a feeling of absolute, immeasurable ponderance.

"Allgod stance!" A cold, fierce light flashed through Ning's eyes as well as he unleashed the most dominating, explosive sword stance he possessed. As Ning's insights into the sword had risen, his Allgod stance had become increasingly extraordinary as well. It was now able to unleash a truly significant amount of the might of Violetjewel's quintessence core.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Ning immediately manifested [Three Heads, Six Arms]. His six swords transformed into six blood-colored wyrms that howled towards the massive world-sword that was crashing down upon him.

BOOM!!! When the first blood-colored wyrm slammed into the greatsword, the blood-colored wyrm was brought to a halt but the greatsword was knocked flying backwards.

"What?!" The black-robed expert let out a startled shout.

"He does have a bit of power. No wonder he bragged so much." Ning was secretly startled. Thanks to the azureflower mist energy, Ning was as strong as a Daolord of the First Step and far above the vast majority of World-level cultivators. He was also using an Eternal weapon and had unleashed his most powerful sword-stance, a strike which was so powerful that very few were capable of withstanding it.

And yet... that black-robed expert's greatsword had managed to halt his strike in its tracks! But of course, it had only been able to block Ning's first strike. Ning had six Eternal weapons he was using!

Although one of the blood-colored wyrms had been destroyed, the other five continued to surge forward towards the black-robed expert.

“How can...” The black-robed expert was absolutely stunned. A blazing crimson warblade appeared in his other hand, a saber that gave off a similar aura of incredible ponderance. He joined his saber and his sword in front of him, using them to block Ning’s attacks.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The five blood wyrms came crashing down with enough power to shake the heavens.

BOOM!

The entire mountain they were on actually collapsed, and the island itself split apart as the ground below the strike was completely caved in. As for the black-robed expert, Ning had already smashed him down into the very bottom of the sea.

Swoosh! Moments later, the black-robed expert came charging out of the waters of the sea. He hovered there in midair, staring at the distant Ji Ning who was standing atop a gray boulder.

“You talked a big game, but you don’t have much to back it up.” Ning let out a chuckle.

“You...!” The black-robed expert was enraged.

There was a reason for his earlier braggadocio. He was an extremely powerful special lifeform, and despite being at the World level he was completely capable of unleashing a level of power comparable to that of a Daolord of the First Step. Given that his two Eternal weapons were also quite suited to him and to unleashing the type of power he specialized in, most fourth stratum foes would never dare to take his blows head on.

That was why he had felt so confident in his abilities! What he didn’t realize was that for many years now, the way Ning had fought was by directly crushing his foes with overwhelming power.

“Your swords are quite powerful, and you are just as strong as I am.” The black-robed expert’s voice began to transform, turning low and gravelly. As for his crimson eyes, they began to be filled with an even more insane look than before. “You are now qualified to see my true form.”

Boom!

The area around the black-robed expert suddenly became filled with endless tendrils of dark-red flames. He was like the god of this world of flames, and his black robes suddenly vanished, revealing the form underneath...

[The Desolate Era](#)

Book 26: World Level Chapter 35: A Miserable Victory

It was a humanoid creature whose skin was completely pitch-black. His eyes were crimson red in color, and the way in which he stared at Ji Ning made Ning feel uncomfortable. This pitch-black humanoid’s skin suddenly began to crack and split apart, revealing a dim crimson substance beneath the skin.

Pop! Every so often, a piece of that crimson material would suddenly shoot out from beneath his skin, moving vastly beyond the speed of light and causing spacetime around it to twist and distort.

The creature simply stood there, allowing his 'skin' to crack and pop. Every so often, more of that crimson substance would shoot out. Whenever it touched the waters of the ocean, the water would begin to hiss and boil away. Whenever it touched the the remnants of the island, the island would shudder and break apart even further.

"You've forced me to reveal my true form, which means you have to die. You are indeed qualified to make it to the fifth stratum, but unfortunately for you... you ran into me." The sable creature spoke in a hoarse voice, and a few flecks of that crimson material flew out from his mouth with each word.

"Aren't you the ugly one," Ning said softly.

"You-!"

The sable creature was both embarrassed and enraged. Cultivators were the true masters of the Endless Territories, after all. They were simply too numerous! Even though he was an incredibly powerful special lifeform, when he was born from the primordial chaos he found himself to be the only member of his race. Thus, he changed his appearance and always wore a black robe, spending his life within the world of cultivators.

As a result, even he himself felt that his true appearance was rather ugly. However, only by revealing his true form was he capable of unleashing his full power. There was nothing else he could do. When normal cultivators insulted him, he wouldn't be that irritated, but the person who just spoke was a powerful cultivator who was on his general level of power.

"All you can do is flap your mouth. Remember this in your next life. The person who killed you is Sabafey." The sable creature let out a low growl as he gripped the heavy warblade and the heavy greatsword with his hands.

"What an ugly name as well." Ning was intentionally mocking him. He could tell that this special lifeform had a fairly weak Dao-heart.

"Die." Two sonorous streaks of saber-light and sword-light struck out, carrying an aura of incredible majesty and power.

"Hmph." Ning once more manifested three heads and six arms, using his six Eternal weapons fight back.

"Eh? What's this?" When Ning transformed into a streak of lightning and charged forward, he immediately sensed spacetime twisting around him. This had an impact on even his own agility and movements. Clearly, this Sabafey was capable of causing spacetime to twist all around him in a domain-type maneuver.

"Hmph." Ning let out an angry snort as that streak of crimson-gold lightning once more blasted out of his forehead. The lightning was shaped like a Flood Dragon as it struck out, but once it moved closer to that black humanoid, it was impacted by some of the crimson substance spurting out of its cracked skin. The crimson-gold lightning instantly began to tremble.

“We haven’t even clashed yet, but that crimson substance shooting out of his body and this domain around him is already having an impact on my abilities. So this is the power of his true form?” Ning was secretly nervous.

Boom!

Boom!

A streak of black light suddenly shot out. This was the sable freak, Sabafey!

A streak of lightning shot out as well. This was the three-headed, six-armed, white-robed Ji Ning. Crimson-gold lightning continuously shot out of Ning’s forehead.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

The two instantly clashed multiple times in midair, causing the air around them to tremble, the fragments of the island beneath them to sink deeper into the sea, and tremendous tidal waves to arise.

The two of them battled in a wild orgy of destruction, and Ji Ning was clearly at a disadvantage in this fight.

“Damn.”

Ning was forced to repeatedly dodge backwards, then charge forward once more. As for the black freak Sabafey, he fought in an utterly dominating fashion. Although he only had a single warblade and a single greatsword, his strength and savagery was enough to allow his two weapons to completely overwhelm Ji Ning.

In fact, the unique spacetime domain surrounding this creature was enough to make him superior to Ning in speed as well.

“So his true form makes him this much stronger than before.” Ning could feel how difficult this battle was becoming. The power of every single blow from the enemy’s sword and saber was superior to Ning’s power. Even though Ning had six weapons to his foe’s two, he was still at a marked disadvantage in this fight.

In truth, this special lifeform was indeed as physically strong as a Daolord of the First Step. He was on par with Ji Ning, and his insights into the Dao were even more profound than Ning’s. This was the reason why the power of his every blow exceeded Ning’s power.

As for their earlier clash? Before revealing his true form and unleashing his full power, he looked just like an ordinary cultivator dressed in black robes. He had only been able to unleash roughly ten or twenty percent of his maximum power in that state, which was why his full-strength blow was merely on par with one of Ning’s sword-strikes. Things were completely different now.

“You are definitely going to die. You are gonna die!” Sabafey’s hoarse, maddened voice rang out. He held an advantage in both speed and power!

This was the first time since arriving at the Astral Islands that Ning had been in such a terrible situation. He was being completely dominated.

This was someone who was just as fast and as strong as him, but who also had an even higher level of insight into the Dao. Sabafey had been training here at the Astral Islands for an extremely long period of time, and he possessed that strange domain which was even stronger than Ning's [Novessence Thunder].

Ning was being crushed.

As the saying goes, if you always stay on the defensive, sooner or later you will lose. Ning no longer dared to let things continue like this.

"Come out!" Ning was furious as well. This Sabafey really was trying to kill him and sever his path.

Whoosh!

A black-crimson gourd suddenly appeared out of nowhere next to Ning. This was the Elementum Waterflame Gourd! The gourd hovered behind Ning, then instantly spat out two streaks of dragon-shaped lightning. One streak of lightning was the Watersmoke Lightning, and it looked a flood of black water descending from an enormous stormcloud. The power of this lightning was so tremendous that it alone was superior to Ning's [Novessence Thunder]. As for the second streak of lightning, it looked like a cloud of flame and was just as strong as the first streak of lightning.

Two streaks of lightning. The first was Watersmoke Lightning, the second was Firecloud lightning. Fire and water were incompatible by nature! They were opposing forces! But these two streaks of Dao lightning simultaneously coiled around each other as they thundered towards the sable freak, Sabafey.

"What is that?!" The sable creature was shocked.

BOOM! BOOM!

The two streaks of Dao lightning showed no mercy at all. They simultaneously hammered down upon the sable creature, then began smashing into each other as well. As the two streaks of fiery lightning and watery lightning collided, they unleashed an utterly ruinous level of explosive power that caused even Ning himself to be in awe.

Even most supreme World Gods would be instantly slain by such an attack. As for transcendent World Gods, they would be heavily injured at the very least. A few consecutive blows would ensure that they would perish.

Only Daolords of the First Step would be able to endure such a blow, but even they would be heavily restricted and bound.

Boom! Boom! The two streaks of Dao lightning furiously swirled around the sable creature's body, and each time they collided they released tremendous amounts of power, causing Sabafey's speed and strength to both fall dramatically.

"This is Dao lightning!" Sabafey called out in shock.

"Yes it is." Ning charged forward once more.

"So what if you have Dao lightning? It can at most slow me down. It can't kill me!" Sabafey remained as ferocious and savage as ever. His true body was indeed comparable to that of a Daolord of the First

Step, allowing him to endure the strikes of these two types of Dao lightning. However, he was still hindered tremendously by them. He was now slightly slower than Ning!

Boom! Boom! Boom! His warblade and his greatsword still held roughly half of their former level of power. He was still able to crush Ning in power.

Still, things were now much simpler for Ning. Now that he had an advantage in speed, he was able to advance and withdraw at his leisure. In addition, his foe's advantage in strength was now much smaller than before.

"Kill!"

"Kill!"

The two continued to battle ferociously.

"I am a special lifeform. This cultivator has to be using his divine power at an incredible rate. He won't be able to hang on for much longer, while I'll be able to keep going for quite some time." Sabafey was filled with confidence. He was certain he would be able to keep fighting for an extended period of time.

"Every single drop of my azureflower mist energy represents the distillation of all my divine power, heartforce, and Immortal energy. I'm not using any particularly powerful divine abilities for this fight. I'll be able to go on for ages. This special lifeform has to be using some sort of secret art which allows him to release tremendous amounts of power, but I'm certain he won't be able to maintain it for too long." Ning was filled with confidence as well.

Ning was merely using [Three Heads, Six Arms]. This divine ability used up fairly little divine power. Ning was mainly relying on his azureflower mist energy in this battle, and it wasn't being used up that quickly.

This battle went on for more than two full hours.

At first, both were very confident. As time went on, both Sabafey and Ning grew increasingly amazed. By now, Ning only had sixteen drops of his azureflower mist energy left.

"I admit defeat!" Finally, Sabafey let out a disgruntled growl. "Given how much power you have unleashed, you have to be using up divine power at an incredible rate. How is it even possible for you to continue fighting for this long? How?!"

If Ning was using abilities like the [Starseizing Hand], he would indeed be using up divine power at an astonishing rate.

Ning let out a sigh of relief.

He had won. Finally, he had won.

He could sense the golden book in his possession begin to transform. He was now under the protection of the Astral Islands, which acknowledged the fact that he had just won ten battles in a row on the fourth island.

“Hand over your legacy treasures.” Ning stared at him. If it wasn’t for the fact that this person was also under protection, Ning would’ve shown him no mercy at all and slain him. This person wasn’t going to be able to hold on for much longer.

“Don’t be smug. I was defeated by the others on the fifth stratum, after all.” Sabafey let out a hoarse growl. “There are many on the fifth stratum who are stronger than me. You are indeed quite strong, but your insights into the sword are quite mediocre. Ahaha... you are even inferior to a special lifeform like myself.”

As he spoke, he waved his hand and tossed out a large amount of legacy treasures. Upon losing, he had to hand over everything he had unless Ning voluntarily accepted less. He didn’t dare violate the rules of the Astral Islands.

“EXIT!” Sabafey raised his head and let out an angry shout.

Whoosh! Spacetime twisted around him, causing his sable form to disappear into thin air.

Ning waved his hand, collecting the many legacy treasures. His golden book immediately sent him an alert, informing him that he had already acquired a full legacy and that he was permitted to leave the Astral Islands whenever he wished.

“A full set?” Ning wasn’t that surprised. He knew that Sabafey had many legacy treasures on him, including a full legacy set.

Swoosh!

Ning waved his hand again, causing the Elementum Waterflame Gourd to fly towards him as well.

Ning put away the gourd. If it hadn’t been for this gourd he probably would’ve lost this fight, even if he was able to keep himself alive. Upon losing, he would’ve been knocked down to the third stratum once more, where he would’ve had to slowly accumulate enough wins for another promotion.

“Sabafalle. He was merely an individual who wasn’t strong enough to stay in the fifth stratum permanently. He was beaten down into the fourth stratum... and yet, he is incredibly powerful. My sword-arts are indeed a weak point.” Prior to this, Ning didn’t fully realize how great a weakness this was. However, the more he battled against other incredibly talented figures, the more he realized how lacking his sword-arts were. In the end, he simply hadn’t spent enough time as a World-level cultivator.

“So many of the cultivators on the fifth stratum are more powerful than him?”

A flicker of battle-lust appeared in Ning’s eyes. “Good. The stronger they are, the better.”

Ning raised his head and called out, “Exit!”

Whoosh.

Spacetime twisted around Ning, causing him to be teleported away and back to his own astral island.

[The Desolate Era](#)

Book 26: World Level Chapter 36: The Watcher in the Dark Abyss

The six strata of astral islands continuously circled around each other in a very orderly manner.

At the very top stratum, the sixth stratum, there was just a single astral island. The fifth stratum had a total of twelve astral islands that slowly circled each other.

Rumble...

One of the hundred-plus islands belonging to the fourth stratum began to slowly fly upwards.

“What?”

“Is that...”

“Someone made it to the fifth stratum.”

The many cultivators on the lower strata of the Astral Islands all raised their heads to stare at the higher-level islands. Hundreds of thousands of them were watching as this particular island ascended from the fourth stratum to the fifth stratum.

Many cultivators felt complicated feelings in their heart. They dreamed of being able to make it to the fifth stratum. That way, they would similarly be able to receive the protection of the Astral Islands! Alas, this was far, far too difficult a task.

“A change in destiny...”

This was what countless cultivators were murmuring silently to themselves.

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“He was quite fast. He was brought here alongside the rest of us in this batch, but he actually made it to the fifth stratum before I did.” A jade-haired woman dressed in silvery, semi-translucent gauze was murmuring to herself softly from within her island on the fourth stratum. “And a cultivator at that. I’ve never ever met any World-level cultivators who are a match for me, but almost as soon as I arrived in the Brightshore Kingdom I encountered one. How intriguing. What’s more, the Brightshore Kingdom treats cultivators and Aberrants equally, giving no special preferences or advantages to either.”

“I like this place.” A smile appeared on the jade-haired woman’s face as natural mist began to swirl around her.

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“I never would’ve thought that those puny cultivators would give rise to someone who might be a match for me. He actually made it to the fifth stratum before I did.” A devilishly handsome silver-haired youth was murmuring softly to himself.

He was a member of the Aeonians who had long ago found the path he needed to take to become a Samsara Daolord. However, he wanted to become more powerful before doing so. That way, he would benefit even further from his Awakening of his Aeonian bloodlines.

Still, he had to admit that the Brightshore Kingdom truly had gathered many freakishly talented figures. The fourth stratum alone was filled with many figures who had been quite difficult for him to overcome. This made him quite cautious.

Anyone capable of surging into the fifth stratum so quickly was definitely a powerful figure.

“Although cultivators are individually weak, there’s simply too many of them. There are far more of them around than we Aeonians. In the end, the law of large numbers means they will give birth to many freakishly strong figures.” The silver-haired youth mused to himself, “Once I enter the fifth stratum, I’ll definitely have to test him out myself.”

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Ning’s ascension to the fifth stratum did indeed arouse the interest of quite a few of the other freakishly talented World-level cultivators. The ability to make it into the fifth stratum was a testament to his strength!”

“Another person has joined us in the fifth stratum?”

“Interesting. A few days from now, I’ll have to give him a challenge and see how he does.”

“I wager that Kilostar will be the first challenger yet again. Ahh, forget it. Just let it be him.”

The fourth stratum and the fifth stratum were completely different.

The cultivators on the fourth stratum weren’t under any protection. As a result, they would rarely accept or issue challenges. They were all quite cautious. However, these twelve peerless geniuses on the fifth stratum were all incredibly strong and talented figures. This was why they were able to keep their positions within the fifth stratum stable. Even if they occasionally fell down to the next level, they would quickly rise up once more. All of them delighted in battle.

In fact, the entire reason why they were still here was because they wanted to keep fighting!

As for the legacies? There was no point in being greedy. They merely needed to local the ones they actually needed. The best part of being here was the ability to battle against all these World-level cultivators. The experience they gained through combat was quite useful to them.

An astral island within the fifth stratum.

A skinny, swarthy child dressed in a silver cape was flipping through his golden book, roaring with laughter. “Ahahah! He didn’t disappoint me. He actually beat that Aberrant named Sabafalle. Although Sabafalle is a bit of an idiot, beating him is no easy task. Interesting, interesting.”

“Still, simply defeating Sabafalle doesn’t mean much. Sabafalle is completely incapable of standing stably amongst the ranks of the other fifth stratum individuals. Kid, I’m going to teach you the true meaning of the phrase, ‘there is always someone stronger than the strong’.” The skinny, swarthy child laughed.

“Challenge issued!”

He issued a direct challenge to Ning through the golden book.

“Heh heh heh... the other eleven fellows on the fifth stratum will all give me some face. Same as always! I’ll be the first to challenge the newcomer.” A look of excitement was in the swarthy-skinned child’s eyes.

All of them had lived together for quite some time. They had formed certain habits long ago.

Each time a newcomer made it to the fifth stratum for the first time, it would be Kilostar who would challenge that person first. Kilostar wasn't necessarily the most powerful of the twelve, but he had the fewest weaknesses. He was capable of dealing with any foes that appeared. Even if he had to fight against that terrifying fellow from the sixth stratum, he'd still be able to at least keep himself safe! In other words... he was capable of dealing with any World-level cultivator, no matter how freakishly talented that person was.

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The dark abyss directly below the hundreds of thousands of astral islands.

At the very bottom of the abyss.

Hiss. Crackle. Nine strange flames were flickering here.

Above the flames was a horizontally placed longspine that was over a thousand meters long. An enormous haunch of meat that was at least three hundred meters long was currently spit on the spear.

The beast's flesh was being slowly roasted by the nine flames, and its surface was just slowly turning red. To fully cook it would probably take quite some time.

"Delicious. Absolutely delicious." A burly, nearly-naked man with tousled black hair was seated, dressed in simple battle garbs. In front of him was a large basin that was over thirty meters long, filled with roasted meat. He was chomping through the meat with relish.

Sitting opposite of him was a muscular golden-haired man dressed in golden armor. This man also had an enormous basin front of him, also filled with roasted meat.

"King Wu, your hunting skills really aren't bad. This Bloodflame Dragon had to be comparable to a Verge-level Daolord. Its flesh is simply savory." The golden-armored warrior was crunching his way through the meat as he spoke. Not just anyone was powerful enough to chew through this! "Hunting these things really isn't easy. I think you Imperials must have damn near wiped them out of the Endless Territories by now."

"We pretty much wiped them out ages ago." The black-haired, nearly-naked man shook his head. "The Hegemon, that old bastard, captured more than anyone else. He's able to instantly teleport to any territory he pleases, whereas I actually had to physically run across countless territories before I was able to find a single Bloodflame Dragon. I then had to pretend to be a cultivator, for fear that once it realized who I was it would self-destruct rather than let me capture it. It took forever for me to capture it! Ehehe... but now that I have one, I can slowly savor it for an extremely long period of time."

Bloodflame Dragons were incredibly, terrifyingly powerful beasts. They were unlike cultivators or Aeonians; they neither used divine power nor had any Immortal energy. They were actually similar to bugbeasts, but they were far more powerful than bugbeasts.

However, it was incredibly rare for one of them to be found in the Endless Territories. They had been driven to the point of extinction long ago, precisely because the Brightshore Imperials' favorite food was Bloodflame Dragons.

A Bloodflame Dragon which had reached the Verge of the Daomerge had a body that was comparable in size to an entire chaos star. If you ate just a thousand meters of it with each meal, you would be able to able to feast for an extremely long period of time.

Alas, ancient creatures such as the members of the Brightshore Imperials would live for even longer.

“King Wu.” The golden-armored warrior glanced off into the distance towards a strange beast that was wreathed in flames. This creature possessed tremendous vitality and power, but it was currently suffering all sorts of unspeakable torments. “I heard that you Imperials just gained a new clansmen. Shouldn’t you take his training a bit more seriously?”

“For me to even keep an eye out for him is me being much more serious than usual. Yeah, this abyss is filled with plenty of danger, but so long as I keep an eye out I’ll be able to guarantee that he stays alive,” the black-haired man said between mouthfuls of meat.

“Eh?” The black-haired man suddenly raised his head to stare upwards.

His gaze pierced through the darkness of the abyss as well as the protection of the Astral Islands, allowing him to see Ji Ning. Ji Ning was currently flipping through his golden book within his room in his astral island.

Right at this moment, Ning suddenly found himself seized by an invisible, inexplicable terror. It was as though some terrifying creature had just taken notice of him.

“It seems a new kid is about to join your Twelve Palaces as well.” The black-haired man looked towards the golden-armored warrior. “He made it to the fifth stratum quite quickly, and he’s a cultivator just like you are.”

“He’s not bad, I suppose.” The golden-armored man laughed. “We cultivators are fairly weak in general. It is quite rare for an extremely powerful cultivator to emerge. We simply can’t compare to the members of your race. All of you are born with utterly enormous power.”

“Is that comparable? Is that even comparable?!” The black-haired man glared at him. “How many of you are there? How few of us are there? The Hegemon, that old bastard... how much time does he need to spend wandering the Endless Territories before he is able to find another member of our race? For each new member of our race that is born, another ten Daolords emerge amongst you cultivators. You cultivators give birth to monsters by the bundle. Just look at the Twelve Palaces. How many Daolords do you have? And how few members do we have in our imperial clan?”

[The Desolate Era](#)

Book 26: World Level Chapter 37: The Plight of Su Youji

“Ahaha!” The golden-armored warrior laughed. “Fine, I misspoke.”

“Sometimes, I really envy you cultivators. There is a stupid large number of you. You guys are absolutely everywhere. Every single territory has you cultivators in them.” The black-haired man sighed and shook his head. Suddenly...

“THAT BRAT! Is he trying to die?!” The black-haired man’s eyes suddenly bulged out. Two streaks of golden light shot out of his eyes, passing through the barriers of spacetime and reaching a distant figure in a distance place.

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The Astral Islands.

“What just happened?” Ning’s entire body had turned stiff. He felt as though an utterly terrifying presence had suddenly taken notice of him. However, that terrifying sense of danger quickly dissipated.

“Who was that just now?” Ning guessed that it had to have been an incredibly powerful figure who was scrying upon him, a figure that didn’t even bother to hide his aura. If he had, there was no way Ning would’ve been able to sense him.

“That sense of danger... it was second only to the sensation I felt when I encountered that terrifying behemoth that brought me here,” Ning mused to himself.

The terrifying behemoth that had devoured him and brought him to this place was the most terrifying thing Ning had ever encountered in his life. It vastly surpassed any and all experts Ning had encountered in the past.

The Brightshore Kingdom was an organization that was on the same general level of power as the entire Dao Alliance itself. The Dao Alliance was unfathomably powerful, while the Brightshore Kingdom was very secretive and quite powerful as well.

“Doesn’t matter, I guess. Either of them can crush me like a bug.” Ning couldn’t be bothered to worry about it. The point of the almighty Hegemon bringing them here was to raise a crop of powerful cultivators. Even the most powerful of organizations would need constant injections of fresh blood, after all.

No matter how powerful their elite experts were, only their Eternal Emperors would live eternally. Samsara Daolords who did not succeed in the Daomerge would all perish eventually. Thus, they needed to ensure a constant, steady stream of new blood.

Ning was one of them, a future expert of the Brightshore Kingdom.

“Mm. Fortunately, Youji is still alive.” Ning flipped through the golden book again, then let out a sigh of relief.

“Eh? Someone just challenged me?” Ning frowned. One of the talented geniuses of the fifth stratum had just issued him a challenge. It must be understood that the twelve members of the fifth stratum had been on that stratum for a long period of time. They were all definitely superior to Sabafalle in power.

Ning had been forced to pull out his Elementum Waterflame Gourd for the sake of defeating Sabafalle.

“I’m currently protected by the Astral Islands. Even if I lose, I would at most lose some legacy treasures. However... I need to make sure this set gets to Su Youji first. If too much time passes, something unexpected might happen.” Ning didn’t dare to be too arrogant.

Ning waved his hand. Whoosh! Three hundred and twenty legacy treasures suddenly appeared before him. These were all fiery red leaves. The fiery leaves were all gathered together, and Ning could immediately sense the tremendous amount of information they contained, as well as that blazingly powerful aura of fire.

This was a legacy pertaining to the Dao of Fire. Sabafalle, Ning's previous opponent, had walked the Dao of Fire. The reason he had kept these legacy treasures with him was so that he could be in constant contact with the blazing will they contained. However, the treasures had now fallen into Ning's hands.

All he had to do was swear a lifeblood oath and he would immediately be able to study this legacy.

Ning did end up learning it, but he simply memorized its contents. This legacy was indeed quite profound and remarkable. Just by reviewing the entire legacy from start to finish, Ning's insights into the Dao of Fire increased substantially, reaching a level of near-parity with his Dao of Water or his Dao of Thunder.

"Possession of a legacy really does make a big difference," Ning mused to himself. "Still, my Dao is the Dao of the Sword. I can't waste my time and energy on fire." Ning quickly buried this legacy into another corner of his mind. He had simply memorized it to gain a bit of additional experience, as all Daos shared certain commonalities. This legacy contained many abstruse mysteries that would be of some use to Ning in his mastery of the Dao of the Sword.

"Time to challenge her." After looking through the legacy treasure, Ning nodded silently to himself. Su Youji was quite talented in the Dao of Fire. If he gave this to her, it would be of tremendous benefit to her in mastering the Dao of Fire. She would improve quite quickly.

Ning sent Su Youji a challenge.

"I hope she accepts. She has to accept." Ning was rather worried and nervous.

He had learned the location of Su Youji's astral island from Daolord Flameflow, but Su Youji didn't know that Ning had reached the fifth stratum. If she suddenly saw someone from the fifth stratum challenge her, would she accept?

If she did not, then Ning would have to accept this duel from Kilostar, his fifth stratum challenger. If he won, that was one thing, but if he lost... his legacy treasures would all be gone as well.

It wouldn't be too hard for Ning to get another set of legacy treasures, but to get another set that was of the Dao of Fire which Su Youji could use would be quite difficult. In addition, if too much time passed... Su Youji might perish.

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The bottom stratum of the hundreds of thousands of astral islands. One of the islands was covered with plants and flowers. This was a very beautiful island.

Su Youji, dressed in fiery red robes, was lying within the grass, staring at the skies. A look of exhaustion was on her face.

"If this keeps up, I really won't be able to endure for much longer. Master... I probably won't be able to accompany you for much longer."

Su Youji lay there in the grass, utterly exhausted. She truly had almost no energy left.

Ji Ning had given her his bugbeasts and his set of Hellwind Golems. At first, she had indeed been able to win quite a few battles in a row with ease. On the first stratum, there really weren't that many who were a match for her.

But soon, trouble began to appear.

News that she had many bugbeasts and a set of Hellwind Golems quickly began to spread. There were many powerful World-level cultivators who wanted those bugbeasts and those powerful golems!

For example, there wasn't a significant difference in power between cultivators on the third stratum and those on the fourth stratum. If they had a set of Hellwind Golems helping them out, a third stratum cultivator might be able to charge into the fourth stratum and have a chance at acquiring a full legacy.

Especially for those who specialized in close combat, a set of Hellwind Golems and a host of bugbeasts would allow them to become far stronger.

Many of the World-level cultivators who had been living here at the Astral Islands for a long time knew each other. At critical times, they would issue each other challenges to avoid dangerous battles. Thus, in the end there were three powerful World-level cultivators who found out about the golems and the bugbeasts.

Two of these three came from the third floor, with one coming from the fourth floor. All of them furiously challenged Su Youji day in and day out. Su Youji did her best to avoid them. When she could not, she would go fight the ones on the third floor.

"I was able to hold on for a few times... but how much longer will I be able to hold?" Su Youji mumbled to herself. She had been here for more than half a year, and the past few months had been an utter nightmare.

Rumble...

Suddenly, an island ascended from the fourth stratum to the fifth stratum.

"The fifth stratum?" Su Youji's eyes lit up. "A cultivator reached the fifth stratum? Could it be Master?" She deeply hoped that it was Ning, but she knew that there were many individuals of tremendous talent and skill amongst the fourth stratum.

"I hope it is Master. So long as Master can stay alive... that is enough." Su Youji prayed silently. She didn't hope for Ning to rescue her. Logically speaking, there was no way for Ning to even find out which island she was on.

Just as her thoughts were racing, suddenly...

"A challenge?" Su Youji could sense that yet another challenge had been sent to her golden book. She remained quite calm, because she received challenges every single day. Her bugbeasts and golems were simply too irresistible.

"A challenge from the fifth stratum?" Su Youji was badly shocked.

Her bugbeasts and golems were indeed attractive, but it made no sense for those protected freaks on the fifth stratum to take an interest in them. Prior to this, the highest-level challenge had come from someone on the fourth stratum, and that had been her only challenge from that stratum.

“Eh? It seems... to be from that person who just made it to the fifth stratum?” Su Youji quickly noticed this. Every day, she would go through the golden book, and she recognized the twelve markers that originally belonged to the fifth stratum islands. Given her memory as a Chaos Immortal, she was naturally able to memorize those twelve at once. The person who had just challenged her was not one of the twelve.

“This person challenged me immediately after reaching the fifth stratum? If this person has already received protection, it makes no sense for him to be interested in my bugbeasts and golems. Could it... truly be Master?” Many thoughts flashed through Su Youji’s mind.

She didn’t dare to believe it.

She felt that it was all wishful thinking.

However... she also had the vague feeling that it really could be her master. Logically speaking, there was no reason for a newly ascended fifth stratum expert to immediately issue a challenge to her.

“Could it be that Master had a way to discover astral island which I am on?” Su Youji hesitated for a long moment.

“Screw it. I’m at the brink of collapse anyhow. Even if it really is an enemy, I’d be satisfied with my defeat coming at the hands of someone on the fifth stratum.” Su Youji gritted her teeth, then accepted the challenge.

She quickly entered a room in her island covered by divine runes. As the runes lit up and activated, spacetime began to twist around her as she was teleported off of the astral island.

This was yet another oceanic island. There was a volcano on this island that was belching lava and flames, causing the island to be covered with a layer of grimy soot.

Su Youji appeared out of nowhere. She immediately saw a figure off in the distance.

A white-robed figure.

A figure carrying a sword on his back.

“Master...” Su Youji’s body trembled slightly as she murmured these words.

“Youji.” The figure turned and looked at her.

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Book 26: World Level Chapter 38: Kilostar

Su Youji’s eyes instantly reddened. She was both shocked and delighted. Her heart was filled with many complex emotions. She felt excited for Ji Ning upon realizing that he had fought his way through so many World-level cultivators to make it to the fifth stratum, and also celebrated for herself.

The exhaustion and pressure she felt was all wiped away.

“Youji.” Ning’s form blurred as he transformed into a streak of light that flew to her side. He looked at her carefully. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m just so happy.” Su Youji finally smiled, and her smile was absolutely incandescent. She now looked like her old self again. “If you came just a bit later, Master, you probably wouldn’t be able to find me.”

“What’s going on?” Ning was shocked. “You are on the first stratum. Those bugbeasts and golems should’ve been enough to let you hang on for quite some time.”

“Against the first stratum cultivators, I would’ve been, yes. But third stratum and fourth stratum cultivators often send me challenges.” Su Youji said helplessly, “I can’t even avoid them.”

“Third and fourth stratum? There are so many cultivators on the first stratum. Why would they single you... shit!” Ning turned pale. He realized what had happened. He had given her those bugbeasts and golems with the best of intentions, but the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Here at the Astral Islands, whenever someone was discovered to be in possession of good treasures that person would often find himself targeted. What, then, of such a powerful set of golems and bugbeasts? Although it was hard for most of the cultivators here to send each other messages, there were indeed a few alliances and partnership. It made sense that word would eventually spread to the third and fourth strata.

“I screwed up.” Ning shook his head.

“It wasn’t your fault, Master. Even I didn’t realize what was going to happen. Only later on did I understand how badly they wanted my golems and bugbeasts,” Su Youji said.

“You must have been exhausted.” Ning could imagine how life had been for her recently. Those third and fourth strata cultivators had assuredly done everything they could to try and force Su Youji to fight them. Although she had struggled and fought back, how long would she be able to do so? As more time passed, most likely there would be even more powerful cultivators who would take interest in her.

“I admit defeat.” Ning suddenly spoke out in a high voice, his words echoing within the air above the volcanic island.

“Master?” Su Youji was stunned.

“I admit defeat in my duel against you.” Ning laughed. “This set of legacy treasures is for you. Don’t you need any other treasures?”

Su Youji suddenly realized what was happening.

“Hurry up. This set of legacy treasures is useless to me, and I’ve already received the protection of the Astral Islands.” Ning laughed as he waved his hand, causing the three hundred and twenty leaves filled with the Dao of Fire to float over towards Su Youji.

Su Youji immediately waved her hand to accept this legacy. She had won this battle. If she wanted to do so, she could demand that Ning hand over all of his legacy treasures. But of course, since she was going to leave the Astral Islands there was absolutely no point to acquiring more of these legacy treasures. You had to acquire a full set in order to gain a legacy, after all.

“Alright. Now that you have a full legacy, hurry up and leave the Astral Islands,” Ning instructed. “This place is far too dangerous for you.”

For someone like Su Youji, this was indeed an incredibly dangerous place. Without the bugbeasts, she was at high risk of death. With the bugbeasts and golems, she became the target of even more powerful cultivators.

“Alright.” Su Youji felt many complex emotions in her heart.

“Also. Once you leave the Astral Islands, do your best to enter the Twelve Palaces,” Ning said. “At present, you most likely aren’t strong enough to attract their interest. However, now that you have this legacy, you’ll be able to grow much more powerful. Focus on your cultivation, and if the opportunity arises you should do your best to enter the palaces. In the future, I will join the Twelve Palaces as well.”

“Twelve Palaces?” Su Youji was puzzled.

“The most powerful organization in the Brightshore Kingdom. At the very apex of the Brightshore Kingdom stands its Twelve Palaces and its imperial clan.” Ning gave her a simple explanation. “You only acquired a full legacy thanks to my assistance, and so the Twelve Palaces won’t grant you automatic entry. You’ll need to train hard and undergo many trials before being permitted to enter the Twelve Palaces.”

“Understood.” Su Youji knew her own limits. To even escape this place alive was a stroke of tremendous luck. She didn’t daydream about being granted automatic entry into the Twelve Palaces.

“This is my talisman. Keep it with you at all times, and I’ll be able to sense your location. After I leave the Astral Islands, I’ll go find you.” As Ning spoke, he handed out a jade talisman to her.

Su Youji accepted the jade talisman. It was slick and cold in her hands. She nodded slowly. “Alright.”

“Go, then. Be careful once you enter the rest of the Brightshore Kingdom,” Ning instructed.

“Don’t worry. After what happened here, I’m going to be even more careful in the future. Besides... even if the outside world is a dangerous place, it can’t possibly be as dangerous as these astral islands.” Su Youji chuckled.

These two, master and retainer, didn’t have too long to chat. In the end, they had to part once more as they were each teleported to their own astral islands.

Su Youji first memorized the entire legacy, then chose to depart.

“Damn.”

“That bitch actually acquired a full legacy and left.”

“That freak who made it to the fifth stratum lost to her on purpose? No wonder she had such valuable bugbeasts and golems. It must’ve been that freak who gave it to her.”

“Do you think that freak who made it to the fifth stratum will take revenge on us?”

“We are in trouble now.”

The cultivators who had been eyeing Su Youji and repeatedly challenging her for her treasures all began to grow restless and uneasy. However, neither Ning nor Su Youji were interested in revenge.

Although Su Youji had been driven to the brink of despair, she didn't feel any hatred for them. She knew that they were also struggling to survive. When they encountered anything that could help them or increase their chances of acquiring a full set of legacy treasures, it was only natural for them to do anything they could to win it.

As Su youji saw it, she had already escaped from this sea of bitterness, whereas all of her tormentors were still struggling. In all the hundreds of thousands of astral islands, only those twenty or so figures who had received the protection of the Astral Islands would be truly at ease.

"What? He made it up, then fell down again?"

"He actually lost that set of legacy treasures to a first stratum cultivator?"

All the cultivators kept a tight watch on their golden books, and they noticed whenever any changes appeared. They were able to almost instantly scan through the information pertaining to all of the islands, and they quickly realized that one particular island now contained a legacy treasure pertaining to the Dao of Fire.

Someone on the fifth stratum had lost to someone on the first stratum? And that person just so happened to now have a legacy of the Dao of Fire?

"He lost on purpose?"

"Damn, why don't I have friends like that?"

"Ugh."

Ning's astral island sank from the fifth stratum to the fourth stratum once more.

Kilostar, the cultivator on the fifth stratum, was a bit irritated by this. He had sent Ji Ning a challenge, but in the end Ji Ning had actually chosen to battle Su Youji instead. "He actually avoided my challenge and delivered his legacy treasure to a cultivator on the first stratum?"

"Hmph. I'll keep challenging him. Let's see if he has the balls to accept. If he does, I'll hold him in some respect."

The next day, Kilostar once more sent Ning a challenge. This time, Ning didn't decline.

Ning was now under the protection of the Astral Islands, after all. He was brimming with confidence and the desire to do battle. He wanted to see just how powerful the freaks of the fifth stratum were. Kilostar was also a cultivator, after all!

The two were both teleported to a black oceanic island. They stared at each other from afar.

Kilostar had the appearance of a skinny, swarthy-skinned child. His silver cape fluttered in the breeze, and as soon as the battle began Kilostar transformed into a thousand clones. This sight instantly caused Ning's face to tighten. "That's the [Thousand Bodies Sutra]."

“Just so. This is the [Thousand Bodies Sutra].” Kilostar’s thousand clones were capable of joining together into a strange formation akin to a Thousand Elder Gods Formation. Ning was completely surrounded by Kilostar’s clones, and an almighty domain-type effect began to apply to the area, filling it with Kilostar’s power.

Although Ning fought back with all his power, going so far as to use his Elementum Waterflame Gourd, he wasn’t able to do anything to this formation at all.

As for the thousand Kilostars, they continuously assaulted Ning. Ning’s two mighty streaks of Dao lightning blasted out with wild abandon, slowing down and restricting the actions of the many Kilostars, and Ning struck out with maximum power each time. Although Kilostar was absolutely dominating Ning in this battle, Ning’s six Eternal weapons gave him an utterly airtight defense.

“Your sword-arts aren’t that powerful, but your defenses really are tight.” Kilostar then merged with the rest of his clones into one body.

With his clones merged together, he now had a body comparable to that of a Daolord of the First Step. He was now able to use divine abilities as well!

Although Ning’s azureflower mist energy enhanced his body, there was no way for him to use that mist energy to cast divine abilities.

Kilostar wielded a single scimitar in one hand, and his saber-arts were ephemeral and unpredictable. He was incredibly strong and incredibly fast, a far more frightening foe than Sabafalle.

Ning’s swords were trembling with each collision, but fortunately he was able to use his six swords to defend in succession. He was being completely dominated in this fight, but every so often Ning would intentionally allow one of Kilostar’s blows to land upon him, resulting in the power of his aquaflect armor playing quite a few nasty tricks on his foe.

“I have an utter ocean of divine power thanks to the [Thousand Bodies Sutra], but how is it that YOU are able to keep fighting for so long?” After fighting for an extended period of time, Kilostar was completely stunned. “Screw this, I’m done! This is just an utter waste of my divine power. My name is Kilostar. What is your name? You are indeed strong enough to reside amongst us within the fifth stratum. If nothing else, you can use your divine power to keep fighting until you exhaust and defeat some of the others on our stratum.”

“My name as Darknorth.” Ning smiled as well. On this day, he became friends with Kilostar.

Still, in the end Ning acknowledged defeat in this battle. Thus, he once more fell, this time from the fourth stratum to the third stratum.

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Book 26: World Level Chapter 39: Life in the Astral Islands

A year later.

There were now fifteen astral islands within the fifth stratum, all slowly circling each other. Ji Ning sat within one of the astral islands, seated atop a wooden seat and slowly sipping a cup of wine as he read through the golden book.

Whoosh.

One of the other astral islands in the fifth stratum suddenly began to drop down towards the fourth stratum.

“What a mess.” Ning couldn’t help but sigh softly.

Indeed. During the past year since he had been the first in his group of cultivators to make it to the fifth stratum, others such as Gorho, the Empress, and the Waterstrider had all made it to the fifth stratum as well. This made the fifth stratum much more lively than it had been in the past. Previously, all twelve of the cultivators on the fifth stratum knew each other quite well, resulting in very few challenges amongst them. Most of them would engage in training, only choosing to issue challenges once they felt as though they had made some new breakthroughs.

But the sudden addition of so many new geniuses had caused a huge disturbance. The twelve original denizens of the fifth stratum were all intrigued and excited, beginning to issue challenges to the newcomers.

One battle after another had begun to play out. With each battle, a fifth stratum expert would lose and fall down to the fourth stratum. However, that person would quickly be able to ascend to the fifth stratum once more.

Fall down, rise up.

Fall down, rise up.

Every few days, an astral island would fall down.

The fifth stratum always had at least nine astral islands within it. At most, it had a total of sixteen.

“Compared to all these other freaks and geniuses, I really am just an ordinary figure.” Ning let out a sigh.

After battling many times against the others, Ning realized that the vast majority of the people within the fifth stratum were special lifeforms! Only a small number of them were cultivators! Everyone had his or her own specialty, and only Kilostar could be said to have almost no weaknesses.

Kilostar had a total of a thousand clones!

In terms of raw combat power, most likely only Ji Ning was a match for him. Once he used his thousand bodies to form that great formation, there was no one capable of injuring him at all. In terms of raw power, once his thousand bodies merged into one... he truly stood at the very top.

This was why Kilostar had never fallen from his position within the fifth stratum! As for the newcomer named Waterwalker, he was a special lifeform that similarly did not fall from the fifth stratum after reaching it. Ning had battled against him before as well. Waterwalker had a look of innocence in his eyes, almost as though he was a newborn child. He just stood there and allowed Ning to attack him as

he pleased. Waterwalker himself simply transformed into an enormous globe of water, and none of Ning's attacks could harm him whatsoever.

This virtually invincible defensive technique, all by itself, was enough to let Waterwalker find stable footing here on the fifth stratum.

"Kilostar relies on his thousand clones and that formation, making it impossible for anyone to harm him. As for Waterwalker, he can transform into an enormous water drop that is equally impervious to harm. Still... Waterwalker seems to be a completely guileless man. I wonder if he really is that innocent or if it is all a façade." Ning was puzzled by this as well. Although they had only met a single time, the man had given Ning a good impression. The problem was that his innocence seemed excessive to the point of artifice. Before the duel between the two of them had started, he had repeatedly asked Ning all sorts of random questions. It was as though he was curious about everything.

Their 'fight' simply consisted of Ning attacking him and him not fighting back at all. No matter how hard Ning hit him, it was useless... and as Ning hit him, he actually continued to engage Ning in energetic conversation, continuing to ask Ning all sorts of random questions. In the end, Ning had to admit defeat.

"My body isn't any whit weaker than the bodies of those special lifeforms. My only weakness lies in my sword-arts. If only I had mastered the sixth stance of the [Nameless] sword-art! If I could do that, I would be able to easily deal with any of these other freaks on the fifth stratum." Ning pondered on this matter. If he could master the sixth stance, his sword-arts would become comparable to Kilostar's saber-arts. This was the same level which Arroyo's saber-arts had been on, and also the same level which the trials of the three Mirrorsnow Paintings were on.

The sixth stance of the [Nameless] sword-art represented a specific level of attainment. At this level, a master-class World God could use a mere Dao weapon to unleash the power of a supreme World God.

With this sword-art and the Elementum Waterflame Gourd... Ning would be able to fight Kilostar to a standstill.

Two more months went by.

Ning finally managed to acquire a full sword-art legacy, but it was the legacy ranked seventy-third. Ning had been planning to wait a few days then gift this legacy to World God Pillsaint, who he was quite fond of, but he didn't expect that during this period of time he was once more accosted by Waterwalker. Ning was unable to do any damage to him whatsoever, and the man absolutely refused to admit defeat, instead continuing to engage Ning in conversation. In the end, it was Ning who once more was forced to admit defeat.

Waterwalker had a bad habit. After he won a challenge, he would insist on taking away all of his opponent's legacy treasures. As he put it, "I really like these legacies."

There was nothing Ning could do...

He could only sigh quietly to himself. World God Pillsaint, you've been here for quite some time already. Just wait patiently for a bit longer. When I find the chance, I'll give you another set of legacy treasures.

Five more months passed before Ning was able to acquire another set of sword-arts legacy treasures. This set was the one ranked number nineteen.

Within Ning's estate-world.

This was a vast place with a towering mountain at the center of it. At the tallest peak on this mountain there was a white-robed youth who was seated in the lotus position, staring at the wide world beyond the mountain.

"I've finally mastered this stance, the 'Silent World'."

From this vantage point at the top of the mountain, his gaze was able to see to the very edges of this estate-world. Ning felt as though this entire world was under his control. In addition, he had benefited from his acquisition of those two mighty sword-arts legacies. As a result, Ning finally mastered the fifth stance of the [Nameless] sword-art, the 'Silent World'.

"I've only mastered five stances. That is nothing." Ning shook his head.

In the Endless Territories, this was already an incredible achievement. World God Northrest himself had merely reached this level of sword-arts. However, Ning was now comparing himself to the terrifyingly talented geniuses which the Hegemon of the Brightshore Kingdom had selected from throughout the many territories.

"To reach the sixth stance is no easy feat. Even after gaining those two legacies... it'll take me tens of thousands of years at the very least, or perhaps as much as a few hundred thousand years." Ning shook his head and sighed.

Arroyo had made his breakthrough during the battle atop the Samsara Grinders.

The sixth stance would allow Ning to just barely fulfill the criteria necessary for overcoming Eternal Emperor Mirrorsnow's trials. To reach this level truly would be very difficult. Ning was living in the Astral Islands, had a large group of fellow geniuses to test himself against, and two mighty sword-arts legacies. This was why he might be able to succeed in 'just' a few hundred thousand years at most. This seemed like a long period of time, but Ning had the temporal acceleration treasure known as the Luminous Room. A thousand years in the real world might be enough to allow him to master this technique.

"As for these two sword-arts legacies?" Ning waved his hand, causing a thick tome to appear.

This tome was six hundred pages long. Each of its pages was a legacy treasure. Ning had to acquire all six hundred pages before being able to merge them all into this book and acquiring the sword-arts legacy within it. This was the legacy that was ranked nineteenth.

Ning flipped the book open.

Every single page had a single character on it that was filled with the aura of the Dao of the Sword.

Ning had memorized this legacy long ago. As for the six hundred characters, they represented six hundred different types of sword-intents that allowed Ning to get a better understanding of this sword-art.

"This Daolord Shipstream truly loved calligraphy. I love calligraphy as well. That's something we have in common." After acquiring this legacy, Ning had also gained some information regarding Daolord Shipstream.

Daolord Shipstream was an ancient power who had reached the Verge of the Daomerge. In the end, he had failed his Daomerge. He had perished and his Dao dissipated.

He liked to wander about and disliked combat. He titled himself Shipstream because he liked to voyage through the Endless Territories. Due to his personality, his sword-arts didn't focus on offense; instead, they were incredibly defensive!

He had left behind an extremely detailed and complete legacy, as well as those six hundred characters. Each legacy represented a specific sword-intent. Ning himself was fond of using calligraphy to symbolize his sword-intent, and so he was easily able to understand the information and insights which Daolord Shipstream had sought to transmit through these characters. Given that Ning's sword-arts were quite defensively oriented to begin with, he was indeed able to quickly understand the true essence of the sword-arts of Daolord Shipstream. A short month after gaining this legacy, Ning had mastered the fifth stance of the [Nameless] sword-art.

Two sword-arts legacies.

The first was ranked seventy-three. It seemed dazzling but it actually had clear weaknesses.

The second was ranked nineteen. It had been created by Daolord Shipstream. It seemed ordinary and unremarkable, but it was actually filled with boundless wisdom.

Afterwards, Ning continued to focus on analyzing his sword-arts. Even though Kilostar once more issued Ning a challenge, Ning made his position quite clear. "I can admit defeat, but I absolutely cannot give you this sword-art legacy. If you don't accept my terms, then I won't admit defeat and we can just keep up this battle of attrition. In all honesty, most likely the only person capable of defeating Ning in a battle of attrition was Kilostar. But of course, that was if Ning didn't use any of his chaos jewels. When Ning had left the Badlands Territory, he had converted quite a bit of his chaos nectar into chaos jewels.

None of the other cultivators could possibly beat Ning in a battle of attrition.

Kilostar walked the path of the Dao of the Saber. He really didn't care about sword-arts at all and so he didn't mind Ning's terms.

Waterwalker... Ning wasn't able to do anything to him, but he wasn't able to do anything to Ning either.

Thus, the book which had been personally authored by Daolord Shipstream remained by Ning's side. Each day, Ning would spend much of his time silently meditating on this book, and his sword-arts continued to rise in profundity, especially in defense.

Ning was so absorbed in his sword-arts that he very nearly forgot all about World God Pillsaint. As far as Ning was considered, if he could help out he would, but that was a favor and not an obligation. World God Pillsaint had been here for countless years anyhow. To be here for another ten thousand years or hundred thousand years wouldn't be that big a deal to him.

Time flowed out. In the blink of an eye, more than five hundred years had gone by in meditation and battle.

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Book 26: World Level Chapter 40: [Nameless] Sword-Art, Stance Six – Unicorn's Heart

Within the estate-world of the first Mirrorsnow Painting.

There was a towering palace here that was absolutely beautiful. A figure slowly materialized atop the royal throne at the front of the hall. It was the golden-robed emperor.

“You’ve come again.” The golden-robed emperor stared downwards.

Ji Ning nodded from his position below the throne. “Be careful this time. If you are overconfident, you might end up being defeated by me.”

“This is the first time I’ve heard you say such a thing.” The golden-robed emperor’s eyes lit up as he produced that wide golden greatsword. He rose to his feet and began to walk down the stairs from his throne. “Come, come! Don’t disappoint me.”

Ning produced one of his Frostice Swords as well.

Ning stood there without moving. As for the golden-robed emperor, he slowly walked down the steps. Although the two had yet to engage, their auras were beginning to surge and press against each other. Both were carefully inspecting their foe. Although the golden-robed emperor had won every match, he himself was aware that Ning was posing an increasingly great threat to him.

“Something’s off.” The golden-robed emperor suddenly sensed something strange. Although Ning stood a distance away from him, he gave the emperor a sensation of unpredictable fluctuation. This was something he had never sensed before in his previous battles.

“Forget him. I’ll smash it all to smithereens.” The golden-robed emperor’s path was a Dao of righteous valor and honor. He raised his golden greatsword up high, then sent it crashing downwards towards Ning.

Boom! A terrifying aura of power blasted out as the greatsword chopped down furiously towards Ning, seeming to carry such great power that it could hack any foe to death. This terrifying aura alone was enough to freeze the hearts of many World-level cultivators.

Sniiiiick. Ning’s frozen sword flashed out like a streak of azure mist as it scraped upwards towards the golden greatsword.

Although he was just using the flat of his blade to push at and scrape at the sword, this actually made things harder for the golden-robed emperor than a frontal clash would have! The strange power held within Ning’s sword caused the emperor’s golden greatsword to change directions, causing it to completely miss Ning.

If you couldn’t hit your opponent, it didn’t matter how powerful your sword-arts were.

“So his technique really has changed.” The golden-robed emperor was startled.

“The [Nameless] sword-art truly is marvelous.” Ning was overjoyed. Although he had just learned this sixth stance of the [Nameless] sword-art, he hadn’t actually employed it yet. This battle against the golden-robed emperor was his first time actually using it in battle.

This clash had resulted in him easily defeating the valiant, killing blow of the emperor. Although Ning had been able to withstand this strike in the past, it had always been incredibly taxing for him. In fact, he would stumble backwards after each block.

This time, he didn't have to use too much strength. He was able to effortlessly use a single strike to block this attack without even having to face it head-on.

"Again." The golden-robed emperor let out an angry roar. Suddenly, a golden streak of crescent sword-light appeared high in the air of the palace, then chopped down horizontally towards Ning.

Crack! Once again, Ning unleashed that seemingly casual strike in response. He sent his sword scraping against the edge of that golden crescent. As their weapons collided, the power of each person's sword-arts began to clash against each other. The golden-robed emperor's sword-art were more dominating whereas Ning's sword-art was more ephemeral and unpredictable. However, for some reason Ning was able to change the direction of the emperor's sword yet again.

The golden greatsword had been sweeping directly towards Ning, but as Ning sent his own sword scraping and pushing down upon the greatsword, the sword-light ended up slashing into the ground in front of Ning's feet. It completely missed Ning.

"How can this be? This is impossible."

The golden-robed emperor was angry now. He launched one attack after another, and each sword was filled with truly valiant and dominating power.

Each strike of Ning's seemed to be very casual and relaxed, but in truth he had focused all of his concentration into each strike. He had unleashed his sword-arts to maximum effect, and during this battle he began to gain a better and better understanding of the application of this sixth stance of the [Nameless] sword-art. He began to better understand how to actually use it in battle, and as this battle proceeded Ning began to relax.

Snick! Snick! Clank!

Sword-light clashed over and over.

It was very strange. Generally speaking, when two experts battled their weapons would produce sonorous explosions, as though the heavens were about to collapse. However, whenever Ning's sword collided with his opponent's sword, it merely produced a very gentle sound. It was as though Ning was using a brush to write words on parchment. He seemed quite relaxed and at ease.

Snick!

Ning's fluctuating sword-light once more scraped against the golden sword-light. This time, it scraped straight past it and stabbed straight into the golden-robed emperor's throat.

The sword went straight through the emperor's throat. Everything went still.

The golden-robed emperor came to a halt, and Ning withdrew his Frostice Sword.

“You’ve won.” The golden-robed emperor had a strange smile on his face. “Your sword-arts have been improving for years now. I knew that sooner or later, you would be able to defeat me. Still, even I didn’t expect that it would happen this quickly. Can you tell me what your sword-art is named?”

“This is a sword-art created by a major power. This the sixth stance, and its name is the ‘Unicorn’s Heart,’” Ning said.

“The Unicorn’s Heart?” The golden-robed emperor nodded slowly. “Your sword truly is ephemeral and unpredictable. It makes things quite uncomfortable for your foe.”

“Senior, your sword-art is honorable, direct, and dominating. I had to fight for very long before I was able to win through one fortunate strike,” Ning said. In truth, when he had first started fighting he hadn’t been very familiar with the Unicorn’s Heart. Naturally, it was very hard for him to win. However, as he slowly began to grow increasingly familiar with this technique, he had improved to the point of being able to stab through the emperor’s throat with one blow.

The [Nameless] sword-art was very interesting.

The first stance was the Heartsword stance. It required the wielder possess absolute control over his his sword, allowing his heart to be in control of the sword and the world around it.

The second stance was the Killsword stance. It was an utterly dominating and powerful stance.

The third stance was the Great Firmament stance. It allowed the user to create a world unto itself. In truth, this was the upgrade version of the Heartsword stance. It perfected the technique, giving it even more perfect defensive powers and making its attacks even tighter.

The fourth stance was the Horizon’s Edge stance. It could be described with one word – fast!

The fifth stance was the Silent World stance. It could be described with one word – savage! The fourth stance and fifth stance were both attacking stances that were meant to be used against different types of foes. Some foes could only be dispatched with speed, others required dominating and savage sword-arts.

The sixth stance was the Unicorn’s Heart stance. This represented an evolutionary transformation of the Great Firmament stance. It was much brighter than the Heartsword stance; the Heartsword stance only gave absolute control over the sword, whereas the Unicorn’s Heart was able to produce all sorts of marvelous effects.

It could easily block, deflect, and redirect attacks. It could also kill foes!

This sword-art was ephemeral, unpredictable, and incredibly abstruse. It was extremely hard to comprehend. Fortunately, Daolord Shipstream’s legacy and the book he had left behind were highly focused on defense. Once a defensive technique reached the later stages, it would also gain something akin to the flavor of the Unicorn’s Heart. After all, truly powerful sword-arts all had things in common.

Thus, after five hundred years Ning was able to master this sixth stance.

“The first stance, Heartsword stance. The third stance, Great Firmament stance. The sixth stance, the Unicorn’s Heart stance. All of them are highly defensive techniques that can also be used to slay my

foes.” Ning knew quite clearly that these three stances were fundamentally the same. All of them focused on tightly controlled sword-arts that sought out flaws to use for sure-fire kills.

The Killsword stance, Horizon’s Edge stance, and Silent World stance were stances that were completely focused on attacking while holding nothing back.

“You have defeated me and passed my trial. However, you must defeat the other three as well,” the golden-robed emperor said. “Only then shall you gain the legacy of the Eternal Emperor and become his personal disciple! Emperor Mirrorsnow’s sword-arts were some of the most terrifying sword-arts of all the Endless Territories. If you become his disciple, your future prospects shall be limitless.”

“Understood.” Ning nodded.

Ning currently had a total of three Mirrorsnow Paintings. The first held the golden-robed emperor, the second held the assassin, and the third held the fisherman.

The assassin’s sword was a bizarre sword that was focused on murder and death. In a world of darkness, the assassin would suddenly appear and disappear out of nowhere, his sword-light flashing as he stabbed at Ning.

Ning would be forced to stand there, Frostice Sword in hand, blocking each and every strike from the assassin. The assassin’s sword-arts were on the exact same level as the golden-robed emperor’s sword-arts, but they had completely different styles. They provided different insights to Ning, allowing Ning to gain many new insights into the Unicorn’s Heart. At first, he still found himself unaccustomed to dealing with the assassin’s fighting style. However, he slowly became accustomed to it and found it increasingly easy to deal with.

Snick! Swish!

Sword-light flashed as it stabbed straight through the assassin’s throat.

The assassin was incredibly slender. His face was covered with scales, and his eyes glowed with green light. This was the first time Ning had caught a clear glimpse of the assassin’s face.

“You won. Defeat the other three and you shall receive the Eternal Emperor’s legacy.” The assassin spoke in a hoarse voice, then disappeared once more.

The estate-world within the third painting. This was the world of the fisherman.

The two clashed for quite some time. The fisherman no longer seemed as relaxed and carefree as he had been in previous battles. This time, he fought with full intensity and deadly seriousness. Ning’s expressions were similarly solemn, and the two battled for more than two hours. This high-intensity battle gradually began to wear both of them down.

It must be understood that Ning’s battles against the other two had lasted for less than one hour.

“The fisherman’s sword is unpredictable and fluctuating, and he uses that fishing pole of his to fight me. That pole is sometimes rigid but sometimes flexible, whereas my sword is incredibly sharp and resilient... and yet, I’m still unable to breach his defenses.” Ning was beginning to understand.

The fisherman's sword was quite similar to his own Unicorn's Heart. Both were unpredictable, fluctuating sword-arts that sought out a chance to deliver a single lethal strike.

By comparison, the fisherman's sword had a 'softer' defense, but once he reached an opponent who was a match for him the fisherman unleashed virtually all of the potential within his sword-arts, resulting in Ning being completely unable to harm him.

Finally, the two came to a halt.

"Your sword-art is incredibly profound and mysterious. It truly is one of the most profound sword-arts of all the Endless Territories. However, my own sword-arts were passed down by the Eternal Emperor himself. If you wish to defeat me, you'll need to improve a little bit more." The fisherman calmly walked back to his pool and began to fish again. "You can leave now."

Ning wasn't disappointed. Instead, his heart was filled with joy. This battle with the fisherman had resulted in him improving dramatically in his Unicorn's Heart.

[The Desolate Era](#)

Book 26: World Level Chapter 41: The Coming of Bertulu

After mastering the sixth stance of the [Nameless] sword-art, 'Unicorn's Heart', Ji Ning spent another year before he was able to develop the third stance of his [Quintessence Sword-Intent], the 'Astral' stance.

Blackmist stance, Allgod stance, Astral stance. These three stances were named after three places or people that had a huge effect on him.

The Unicorn's Heart and the Astral stance were sword-arts on the same general level of power. However, when Ning used Violetjewel to executed the Astral stance he was able to unleash several times more power.

After his sword-arts improved, Ning became capable of standing firmly within the fifth stratum. Even Kilostar was merely on par with Ning.

In truth, when Kilostar used his full power he was clearly on a higher level of power than Ning. Unfortunately, Ning had the Elementum Waterflame Gourd and six sets of Violetjewel. It was hard for the other geniuses to compete against him in terms of wealth and treasures.

"You have six damn swords, whereas I just have a pair of warblades... and you, you sly bastard, keep on releasing lightning to attack me as well!" Kilostar was frustrated by his battles against Ning as well. He had to go all-out in each fight, but he was still only able to fight to a standstill. "Screw this, I'm done! I'm not going to accept any more challenges from you. Go ahead and admit defeat! I'd rather die than admit defeat in this battle."

Kilostar immediately transformed into a thousand clones again and entered his formation. He absolutely refused to admit defeat, and this great formation ensured that there really was no way anyone could do anything to him.

Ning was in quite a good mood, and so he voluntarily admitted defeat.

Thirty-two years after learning the Unicorn's Heart, Ning finally managed to piece together the footwork legacy he wanted.

"I finally have it." Ning stared at the jade tome in his hands. The footwork legacy consisted of a series of jade slips, and there were a total of eight hundred slips. After acquiring all eight hundred, they came together to form a jade tome that radiated several large characters: "Swear the oath and you can view my true teachings." There were a few other smaller characters hovering nearby those larger characters as well.

Ning reviewed the restrictive spells pertaining to the jade tome, then immediately swore the oath. A large amount of information then began to transmit into Ning's mind.

Moments later, a series of tightly clustered characters began to emanate out of the jade tome, bringing with them an aura of marvelous and profundity.

"Footwork technique. What does this phrase means? It simply refers to a technique meant for movement! Unless there is a tremendous gap in power, a powerful footwork technique is far more effective than offensive or defensive techniques. This is true for both mortals as well as Eternal Emperors!

"If I am always a step ahead of you, your sword shall never touch me. Even if I can only dodge it by one centimeter, I'll have rendered your sword-arts useless against me, no matter how powerful they are.

"If my footwork techniques are powerful, I'll be able to strike my foes without him being able to strike me. All shall be under my control."

Ning read these words, then slowly nodded. He understood the importance of a good footwork technique. When he was young and living in Swallow Mountain, his mother Yuchi Snow had personally taught him his first footwork techniques. Ning had never abandoned his progression in this area, and had always infused his insights into the Dao into his footwork techniques. He had even purchased a pair of Thunderlight Wings! His footwork abilities were actually quite excellent compared to his World-level peers. He actually wasn't lacking in this area.

"All good footwork techniques share certain commonalities. They allow you to instantly explode with speed, allowing you to dodge attacks as best you can. Two people might have the same level of divine power and the same insights into the Dao, but the one who has superior footwork techniques will be able to dodge faster. A good footwork technique can make a tremendous difference.

"This footwork technique of mine involves the cycling of divine power that can be divided up into three layers of expertise. The first level is most likely comparable to that of the footwork techniques most cultivators use, allowing them to dodge and move at high speed. The second allows for nearly instantaneous dodging that is at a far faster level. As for the third level..."

As Ning read on, he couldn't help but laugh awkwardly.

The cycling of divine power?

His greatest source of power came from his azureflower mist energy. No matter how strong his divine power became, it couldn't possibly compare to that mist energy! Although this technique's unique methods of cycling divine power had been transmitted into Ning's mind, it truly was of no use to him.

Still, Ning read on.

“The power you can unleash from your footwork depends on two things. The first is the way in which you cycle your divine power. The second is the skill with which you execute the techniques.

“Those who have a high level of skill are able to easily surpass those at a lower level of skill, even if they don’t use any divine abilities.

“My footwork technique has a special history to it. Long ago, when I was paying my respects to the almighty Hegemon of the Brightshore Kingdom, I saw a lightning dragon. This lightning dragon was actually a streak of lightning which the almighty Hegemon had created that was capable of gaining eternity. When I saw how this ‘Eternal Thunderdragon’ moved about, I meditated for many years before coming up with this technique, the Thunderdragon footwork technique. It can be divided up into five different levels.

“The first level is the level known as ‘control’. Anyone who studies this footwork technique of mine can master this level.

“The second level is the level known as ‘infusion’. You shall infuse all of your insights into the Dao into this footwork technique. If you are skilled in the Dao of Spacetime, you should infuse those insights into your footwork. If you are skilled in the Dao of the Saber, then you can do the same. Only once you truly and completely merge your deepest insights into the Dao into my Thunderdragon footwork technique shall you have mastered my ‘infusion’ level.

“The third level is the level known as ‘draconify’. When you use this footwork technique, an illusion of a lightning dragon shall protect your body, allowing your speed to increase dramatically. At this level, you shall have begin to grasp the true essence of this technique.

“The fourth level is the level known as ‘thunderdragon’. This footwork technique can be used to control a type of lightning which is on the same level as other types of Dao lightning. Once you reach the fourth level, the lightning you control can become one with your body. You shall be the lightning and the lightning shall be you. You’ll be able to move as fast as Dao lightning. Even I myself have only ever reached this fourth level.

“The fifth level is the level known as the ‘Eternal Thunderdragon’. After I created this technique, the almighty Hegemon looked it over and added a few improvements to two parts of it, then informed me that once this technique reached the apex one would be able to manifest a streak of Eternal lightning, then become one with it. I have spent dozens of chaos cycles painstakingly meditating on this technique as a Verge-level Daolord, but I’m still unable to make any improvements. I can’t even imagine what sort of level this ‘apex’ which the almighty Hegemon spoke of is at, but I’ve taken the liberty of describing it as the fifth level.”

Ning couldn’t help but sigh in amazement as he read this. This footwork technique was far too powerful.

The rest of the jade tome just included a few diagrams. There were a total of eighteen images of thunder dragons. As for the detailed information regarding the footwork technique as well as the divine power cycling method, all of that had been directly transmitted into Ning’s mind.

“The divine power cycling method is useless to me, but this footwork technique itself is incredibly powerful once one reaches the apex of it.” Ning knew exactly what the phrase Eternal lightning entailed.

Chaos lightning belonged to the World level of power, which was why it could easily breach the limits of the Heavenly Daos. Chaos lightning flew incredibly fast, roughly ten times faster than the speed of light. Generally speaking, even most Daolords were unable to move that fast.

Dao lightning belonged to the Samsara level of power. Some Dao lightning was born from the endless primordial chaos, but some had been created by Daolords! In the Three Realms, Zhurong had created his own Zhurong Godfire while Suiren had created his Eternal Kindlefire. Samsara Daolords were similarly capable of creating their own incredibly powerful types of Dao lightning. Dao lightning flew incredibly fast, far faster than Chaos lightning. Generally speaking, they were able to move a hundred times faster than the speed of light.

As for Eternal lightning... this level of lightning was something out of the legends. Ning had never heard of any type of Eternal lightning emerging naturally from the primordial chaos. Perhaps it existed, perhaps it did not. Only Eternal Emperors could hope to create Eternal lightning, and that only if they had reached incredibly profound levels of insight into the Dao of Lightning.

As for how fast Eternal lightning moved? Ning had no idea as he had never seen it before.

“When one reaches the apex of this footwork technique, one will be able to manifest a type of Eternal lightning, then merge with it?” Ning was speechless. How fast would such a person become?!

“Still, even the creator of this footwork technique was only able to reach the fourth level. This, despite the fact that he was so talented that he was able to develop it after merely seeing the Hegemon’s own Eternal lightning. Most likely, the only reason why this footwork has a so-called ‘fifth level’ is because of the two alterations which the almighty Hegemon made to it.” Ning instantly realized that the fifth level was most likely something illusory and untouchable, like the reflection of the moon in the waters of a lake. If even a Verge-level Daolord spent dozens of chaos cycles without being able to master it, who could?!

“My ambitions aren’t that high. I’ll be happy just reaching the third level.” Ning was still feeling quite excited.

At the third level, he would gain the protection of an illusory thunder dragon that would allow him to move with incredible speed.

Life for Ning in the Astral Islands was quite blissful. He had memorized two valuable sword-art legacies that he could train in, which included very detailed instructions on their use. He had also memorized an incredibly powerful footwork technique, one that was far superior to any other technique which Ning had ever seen. This, too, was available for Ning to train in as he pleased.

As for experts on his same general level? There were dozens of freakishly talented geniuses for him to duel against.

Time passed on, one day after another. The battles between the fifth stratum cultivators became rarer and rarer, as by now everyone had already fought everyone else. Some of them had battled each person multiple times by now. Even Kilostar and Waterwalker had dueled each other. But of course, the end

result was that Waterwalker had been defeated. Kilostar maintained his undefeated streak within the fifth stratum.

Time flowed on, and in the blink of an eye Ning had spent a thousand years here at the Astral Islands.

The sixth stratum still had just a single astral island hovering within it. This was the residence of Bertulu, and he had issued no challenges. No one was qualified to truly challenge him.

Within this astral island there was a white-haired youth dressed in loose white robes who was seated in the lotus position on the ground. Suddenly, his eyes opened up. He had a gentle, warm gaze, but they seemed to hold the light of countless stars within them. He murmured softly to himself, "A thousand years have gone past. The new cultivators have experienced a thousand years of tempering and growth. I imagine they should have reached a bottleneck in power by now. It is time for me to challenge them a bit. Mm... I shall start with Kilostar."

Soon, something happened that stunned all of the cultivators of the hundreds of thousands of astral islands.

Kilostar, who had never fallen from the fifth stratum after entering it, had actually fallen down to the fourth stratum. All of his legacy treasures had been seized by the sixth stratum.

Everyone knew that the sixth stratum cultivator, Bertulu, had just struck out and defeated Kilostar!