

Sect Master 271

Chapter 271: Probe

Meng Zhang took a big detour outside before entering the Firewell Market. The market was still thriving, unaffected by recent events. Having visited the Firewell Market numerous times before, Meng Zhang knew the way well and headed straight to a shop with a large signboard displaying the gilded characters "Lao Family's Trading House."

Seeing Meng Zhang, a familiar face, the shop's assistant hurriedly welcomed him inside. The shopkeeper of Lao Family's Trading House was none other than Lao Bulu, an old acquaintance of Meng Zhang.

With his white hair, Lao Bulu warmly greeted Meng Zhang, "What brings the Grand Sect Master of Taiyi Sect here today? Was it the wind that blew you all the way to this place?"

It had been more than twenty years since Meng Zhang first met Lao Bulu. Meng Zhang, now at the Foundation Building stage of cultivation, had matured but retained a similar appearance. On the other hand, Lao Bulu, who was still at the Refining Qi stage, had aged significantly.

Meng Zhang was aware of Lao Bulu's background after years of interaction. The Lao Family was a vassal clan of the Flying Swan Sect and had a close relationship with them. Talented disciples from the Lao Family would usually join the Flying Swan Sect, gaining access to abundant resources and opportunities. Being affiliated with the Flying Swan Sect was considered a favorable path for a person with ordinary talents like Lao Bulu, as it not only helped him earn cultivation resources but also allowed him to accumulate wealth for future generations.

The conversation between Meng Zhang and Lao Bulu continued. The Lao Family relied on the business transactions with Taiyi Sect, and in the past, both parties had profited considerably. However, due to the command from the Flying Swan Sect, Lao Bulu had to suspend the cooperation with Taiyi Sect. Eventually, after Forest Spring Watch's relationship with Flying Swan Sect normalized, Meng Zhang reestablished contact with Lao Bulu and resumed their previous collaboration. Over the years, their businesses had expanded, bringing considerable benefits to both sides.

Lao Bulu looked at Meng Zhang, feeling a sense of emotion. When he first saw Meng Zhang, he was a green and inexperienced young lad. Recognizing Meng Zhang's potential, Lao Bulu deliberately formed a good relationship with him. Now, after so many years, Meng Zhang still exuded an air of magnificence and authority, while Lao Bulu had become elderly.

At the age of over seventy, Lao Bulu's path of cultivation had already come to an end. If it weren't for the family still needing his service, he would have retired long ago. Lao Bulu warmly entertained Meng Zhang, engaging in lively conversation and cherishing their rapport.

For Lao Bulu, people like Meng Zhang were the most precious wealth in terms of connections. Without getting straight to the point, Meng Zhang engaged in casual chatter with Lao Bulu for the time being.

Lao Bulu was very patient and unhurried, engaging in a leisurely conversation with Meng Zhang. Meng Zhang tried to gain insights by hinting at the internal connections of the Lao family within the Flying Swan Sect. Although Lao Bulu's cultivation base was average, his experience in the

business world had exposed him to all sorts of deceptions and intrigues. He could easily see through Meng Zhang's subtle schemes.

Meng Zhang's interest in the internal connections of the Lao family within the Flying Swan Sect indicated his desire to establish contact with the sect. As Taiyi Sect's Sect Master, he was supposedly a subordinate of the Forest Spring Watch, so secretly contacting the Flying Swan Sect was intriguing. Influential forces like the Lao family often received special commands, not only to gather information for the Flying Swan Sect but also to monitor various events within the Endless Sea of Sand.

Following the resolution of the chaos caused by the sand monsters, Lao Bulu received a mandate from his family to use his connections to gather intelligence on the Earthfire Sect and the Forest Spring Watch. He was also supposed to establish contact with members of both sects and, if possible, seek alliances with their subordinate sects, like Taiyi Sect.

Taiyi Sect, being a subordinate of the Forest Spring Watch, was one of the groups Lao Bulu deliberately sought to befriend. He was willing to endure some losses in their business dealings to maintain a good relationship with Taiyi Sect. Thus, when Meng Zhang proactively approached him, regardless of the reason, expressing a desire to secretly contact the Flying Swan Sect, Lao Bulu considered it a favorable opportunity.

Lao Bulu noted Meng Zhang's intentions and decided to report to his family later. Simultaneously, he disclosed the Lao family's connections within Taiyi Sect to Meng Zhang, even providing a way for him to directly contact the Lao family's connections within the Flying Swan Sect.

Meanwhile, as they conversed, Meng Zhang secretly employed Mind Reading to understand Lao Bulu's thoughts. The fact that the Flying Swan Sect was taking action did not surprise Meng Zhang. The extensive connections of the Lao family within the Flying Swan Sect were impressive, considering they managed to relay messages to Gold Core Daoist Masters through several intermediaries.

By reading Lao Bulu's mind, Meng Zhang gained a clear understanding of the Flying Swan Sect's stance, which put his mind at ease. It appeared that subordinates like Taiyi Sect had some value in the eyes of the Flying Swan Sect, meaning Meng Zhang could confidently establish contact without worrying about being ignored.

After spending quite some time chatting with Lao Bulu, Meng Zhang concluded the conversation. Finally, he mentioned that since attaining Foundation Building, he had not traveled far and was now planning a journey. He expressed his desire to visit the territory of the Flying Swan Sect, the rulers of the Endless Sea of Sand, as he had always been fascinated by it.

Understanding Meng Zhang's intentions, Lao Bulu stated that the Lao family would warmly welcome such an esteemed guest, and if Meng Zhang arrived at the Flying Swan Sect's territory, they would arrange for a cordial reception.

Both parties now understood each other's intentions. After leaving the Lao family's establishment, Meng Zhang first went to the black market to gather information about the Flying Swan Sect's current territory. Originally, he intended to visit Shangguan Wen to inquire about the Earthfire Sect's situation. However, since the Earthfire Sect had become a Gold Core sect, numerous cultivation forces were trying to establish relations with them, causing a long queue of visitors outside

Shangguan Wen's residence. Disinterested in joining the crowd, Meng Zhang abandoned the idea of paying him a visit.

Chapter 272: Experience

After leaving Firewell Market, Meng Zhang rode the Crimson Feather Eagle and flew towards the direction of the Flying Swan Sect. As the ruler of the Endless Sea of Sand, the Flying Swan Sect theoretically controlled all the land in the region, except for the Northern Desert Qi Family's territory.

The Flying Swan Sect's territory could be roughly divided into three categories. The most prosperous area in the Endless Sea of Sand was directly governed by the Flying Swan Sect, which included every spirit vein and oasis, all belonging to the sect itself. Surrounding the Flying Swan Sect's direct territory were the lands of vassal families closely associated with the sect. These families were subject to the Flying Swan Sect's control and enjoyed its trust, serving as a defensive buffer for the sect.

In the remote regions, far from the Flying Swan Sect and located on the edge of the Endless Sea of Sand, were territories belonging to sects such as the former Twin Success Valley. These sects nominally pledged allegiance to the Flying Swan Sect but maintained a strong degree of independence. While they paid tribute and answered limited calls to serve the Flying Swan Sect, their loyalty was not unwavering. Generally, unless necessary, the Flying Swan Sect refrained from interfering in the internal affairs of these sects. However, they did establish commercial outposts through organizations like the Flying Swan Building, extracting substantial profits from these territories. In secret, they also deployed spies to monitor these sects' every move.

Certain sects like the Forest Spring Watch, Liu Family, and Earthfire Sect, which were originally part of this category, gained recognition as Gold Core sects and were considered independent from the Flying Swan Sect in terms of occupying territories. Taiyi Sect, a vassal of the Forest Spring Watch, was no longer under the direct management of the Flying Swan Sect.

The flight speed of the Crimson Feather Eagle was swift. In just half a day, Meng Zhang had left Firewell Market far behind and exited the Earthfire Sect's territory. Earthfire Sect shared borders with the Flying Swan Sect, and after leaving its domain, they entered the vast territory of the Flying Swan Sect, the most prosperous area within the Endless Sea of Sand.

Even in the desolate desert, this land was dotted with oases and frequented by numerous mortal merchants and travelers. In remote areas like Earthfire Sect and Forest Spring Watch, mortals dared not venture alone. Without the protection of Cultivators, they were unable to defend themselves in these oases.

However, within the territory of the Flying Swan Sect, mortals could freely travel between oases, and exchanges among them were frequent. Various communities established by mortals existed in these oases, pledging allegiance to the Flying Swan Sect and assisting in managing mundane affairs. Unless necessary, the cultivators of the Flying Swan Sect did not interfere with the mortal world.

Overall, the direct territory of the Flying Swan Sect was a flourishing and prosperous world, though this was the situation before the upheaval caused by the sand monster. After the devastation wrought by the sand monster, the Flying Swan Sect's territory was no longer as thriving as it once was. Even

though Meng Zhang had already received intelligence about the current state of the Flying Swan Sect's territory from the black market and was mentally prepared, the sights and experiences on the way still amazed and saddened him. The former prosperity had become history.

Meng Zhang traveled all the way and witnessed one ruined oasis after another. Within these oases, the devastation was evident, and life was absent. Former residents, whether they were Cultivators or ordinary mortals, had either perished at the hands of sand monsters or left their homes, seeking refuge in distant lands.

Cultivators had a slightly better chance of survival as they could escape after an oasis fell to the sand monster invasion. On the other hand, ordinary mortals faced the sand monster army without the qualifications even to be considered cannon fodder, leaving them defenseless and akin to lambs waiting to be slaughtered. Moreover, due to the sand monsters' complete destruction of the spirit vein, these oases were gradually deteriorating. It wouldn't take long before they vanished entirely from the face of the earth, transforming into deserts.

The scale of destruction caused by the sand monster army astonished Meng Zhang, whether it was during the time of Twin Success Valley's existence or the recent chaos near Forest Spring Watch. The previous incidents had limited monster numbers or were promptly dealt with, resulting in relatively small areas of destruction.

However, the recent sand monster invasion encountered by the powerful Gold Core sect, Flying Swan Sect, was terrifyingly large. Even Flying Swan Sect suffered immense losses. Without the sect's presence, the entire Endless Sea of Sand would likely have fallen. Meng Zhang couldn't help but acknowledge that Flying Swan Sect, as the ruler of the Endless Sea of Sand, made significant contributions and was truly indispensable.

The direct territory of Flying Swan Sect and the lands of closely related vassal families were intertwined and overlapping. If precious cultivation resources, such as various minerals, were discovered in the vassal families' territory, Flying Swan Sect would claim the area as its direct territory. Additionally, if a vassal family's bloodline were to perish or they committed serious mistakes, they would be expelled or exterminated, and their land would be reclaimed by Flying Swan Sect. This complex network of territories not only strengthened the relationships between the sect and its vassals but also allowed Flying Swan Sect's influence to penetrate deep into each family.

As Meng Zhang continued his journey, he passed through numerous oases that had already turned into ruins. He wondered if they belonged directly to Flying Swan Sect or were under the control of vassal families. Even the oases that managed to resist the sand monster army suffered heavy losses during the battles. While the sand monster chaos had been quelled, these weakened oases became targets for various loose cultivators, especially bandits.

Flying Swan Sect's direct territory fared better, but the weaker vassal families suffered greatly. Hordes of loose cultivators swarmed in, with some resorting to extortion and blackmail while the bolder ones directly broke through the protective formations and plundered everything.

The recent natural disaster was barely over when they faced this predicament. The people living in this land were truly unfortunate.

As Meng Zhang passed by one oasis, he encountered a group of bandits robbing it. Initially, he didn't want to get involved and planned to leave. However, upon witnessing the bandits not only

robbing but also killing both Cultivators defending the oasis and ordinary people, his sense of justice was stirred.

As the Sect Master of Taiyi Sect, a reputable orthodox sect, Meng Zhang couldn't tolerate such actions. Thus, he took on the role of a righteous hero and swiftly dispatched the group of Refining Qi stage bandits, leaving them dead. Ignoring the gratitude and bowing from the oasis residents, Meng Zhang departed as though he were a true wandering hero, leaving behind a taste of hidden greatness and humility.

Chapter 273: Indignant

Meng Zhang rode on the back of the Crimson Feather Eagle, flying steadily deeper into the territory of the Flying Swan Sect. Whenever the Crimson Feather Eagle got tired, Meng Zhang would stop and rest for a while or stow away the mount, flying on his own for a while, allowing the eagle to recover inside the spirit beast pouch.

Meng Zhang wasn't in a rush; he took his time on the journey. Sometimes he would stop to appreciate the scenery and observe the surroundings. Along the way, he made a few moves that slightly delayed his progress. It took nearly ten days for Meng Zhang to approach his destination gradually.

Rather than heading directly to the gate of the Flying Swan Sect, he decided to visit the territory of the Lao family first. After establishing contact with them, he intended to seek their introduction to the higher-ups of the Flying Swan Sect. The distribution of power among the vassal families surrounding the Flying Swan Sect was not a secret, and obtaining a map of the Flying Swan Sect's territory was relatively easy.

Before coming here, Meng Zhang had done thorough preparation and was well acquainted with the surroundings. He wasn't worried about getting lost and took his time, sometimes even deliberately deviating from the path to investigate the surroundings.

On this morning, Meng Zhang had arrived near the territory of the Lao family. He was originally casually strolling around when he stumbled upon an incident where a group of loose cultivators was robbing someone. To his surprise, he also encountered familiar faces.

Seated on the Crimson Feather Eagle, Meng Zhang surveyed the hilly area below. It wasn't a large region, and a series of hills enclosed several valleys, forming a small oasis. Currently, the entire oasis was enveloped in a thick protective barrier, and a group of cultivators outside was desperately trying to break through it. The two leading cultivators at the Foundation Building stage, hovering above the oasis, were relentlessly bombarding the barrier below. These two cultivators were acquaintances of Meng Zhang. One was the infamous lone bandit, Gu Sanqing, and the other was the leader of the White Sand Pirates, Daoist Whitesand. They were both hired by the Liu Family and Green Bamboo Mountain to participate in the battle against the four major sects' coalition forces. Due to their successive retreats during the battle, the Green Bamboo Mountain and Liu Family coalition suffered a disastrous defeat.

Unexpectedly, after so many years, he encountered them again in this place. Of course, it wasn't surprising for them to be here. Thieves like them were like vultures, always seeking out wherever there was a carcass. After the large-scale war in the Flying Swan Sect's territory, the place was left

devastated, and many vassal families were severely weakened, presenting a perfect opportunity for cunning bandits like them to take advantage of the chaos.

Since he had been playing the role of a righteous hero a few times since entering the Flying Swan Sect's territory, Meng Zhang had grown accustomed to the feeling and even became somewhat addicted to it. Now, witnessing familiar bandits engaging in robbery, Meng Zhang couldn't just stand idly by.

Jumping down from the Crimson Feather Eagle, Meng Zhang stowed away the mount and swiftly descended towards the ground. Gu Sanqing and Daoist Whitesand had already put in a lot of effort to severely damage the protective formation below. Seeing the wavering glow below, the two were delighted, knowing that with a little more effort, they could break the formation and wreak havoc within the oasis.

At this moment, Meng Zhang descended from the sky and appeared behind the two. He didn't have any intention to sneak attack, thus didn't deliberately conceal his presence. Accompanied by the whistling wind, Meng Zhang floated down gracefully.

Alerted, Gu Sanqing and Daoist Whitesand suddenly realized his presence and turned to face Meng Zhang, who was flying towards them.

"It's you, kid," Gu Sanqing gritted his teeth and said.

Encountering Meng Zhang once again, Gu Sanqing's mind was quite complicated. Although as a notorious thief among the loose cultivators, he was known to retreat when facing strong opponents – it was instinctual. But for Gu Sanqing, who had been a seasoned thief for many years, being frightened away by this novice Foundation Building cultivator, Meng Zhang, was a huge blow to his reputation within the loose cultivator community.

Though reputation couldn't be eaten as food for loose cultivators, the deterrence caused by a cowardly bandit was significantly diminished. In recent years, Gu Sanqing had partnered with Daoist Whitesand as sworn brothers and had been wandering together. They had just begun to enjoy a few good days after dealing with the chaos caused by the sand monsters.

Seeing Meng Zhang's arrogant appearance, did he really think he could easily deal with them? On Gu Sanqing's side, there were two Foundation Building stage cultivators, not to mention a bunch of miscellaneous Refining Qi stage cultivators.

Thinking about this, Gu Sanqing felt extremely furious. Before Meng Zhang even arrived, his voice preceded him, saying, "A bunch of riffraff, don't you dare resist arrest. Must I take action myself?"

Such arrogant words, such undisguised contempt, almost drove Gu Sanqing and Daoist Whitesand to explode with anger. Especially for Gu Sanqing, who had been frightened away by Meng Zhang once before, this time, he wanted to teach Meng Zhang a lesson and restore his reputation, relying on the numerical advantage.

"Youngster, you've gone too far," Gu Sanqing shouted loudly as three short qing flew out and stabbed towards Meng Zhang. Daoist Whitesand remained silent, lifting his axe and sending out waves of energy towards Meng Zhang.

Meng Zhang released his flying sword, Tangling Silk Soft Sword, which descended from the sky like a swift dragon, directly sweeping towards the two.

As soon as they made their move, Gu Sanqing and Daoist Whitesand felt that something was off. How could this kid be so strong? No, he was actually a mid-level Foundation Building cultivator!

Both of them were seasoned old thieves with rich combat experience, and they immediately recognized Meng Zhang's strength. This kid was just so young, yet he had already reached the mid-level Foundation Building stage. When they were hired by the Liu Family and Green Bamboo Mountain, they had carefully gathered intelligence on their enemies. They had assumed Meng Zhang was just a newcomer at the early Foundation Building stage, but unexpectedly, he was a fierce tiger at the mid-level Foundation Building stage.

The two thieves reacted quickly and immediately wanted to disengage from the battle. Gu Sanqing and Daoist Whitesand exchanged a glance and acted in perfect harmony. Each of them took out a talisman.

Once the talismans were activated, one turned into a giant sword, slashing towards Meng Zhang, while the other transformed into a long whip, viciously lashing out at him.

Surprisingly, these were Second Rank talismans crafted by a Second Rank Talisman Master, and they were even of high quality. The power of the talismans was definitely not inferior to that of an early Foundation Building stage cultivator's attack.

Meng Zhang didn't take it lightly and manipulated his flying sword to neutralize the attacks from the two talismans. Taking advantage of the distraction caused by the talismans, Gu Sanqing and Daoist Whitesand quickly retrieved their magic tools and disengaged from Meng Zhang.

Gu Sanqing then took out another talisman and turned into a gust of clear wind, swiftly flying towards the rear. Daoist Whitesand produced a jade leaf that transformed into a flying boat.

Daoist Whitesand flew onto the flying boat, and it immediately dove downward. Some quick-witted members of the White Sand Pirates jumped onto the flying boat, but many thieves couldn't make it in time and were left behind as if they were discarded.

Despite carrying so many people, the speed of the flying boat remained undiminished. It shot up into the sky like lightning, accelerating in the opposite direction of Gu Sanqing's escape route.

Chapter 274: Old Jian

Gu, known as "Three Spears," unleashed a Second Rank Wind Escaping Talisman, using its power to flee westward at a speed much faster than an ordinary Foundation Building early-stage cultivator.

The jade leaf released by the White Sand Pirates was also a rare and special flying boat, and its speed was not slow either.

These two guys had been robbing others for many years, and it seemed they had some life-saving treasures on hand.

The two of them fled in different directions, and by the time Meng Zhang had neutralized the attacks from the two talismans, they had already escaped quite far.

Meng Zhang hesitated for a moment, unsure of whom to pursue. In this short amount of time, they had disappeared without a trace.

In the end, there was no deep enmity or significant conflict of interest between the two sides. Meng Zhang was unwilling to waste time on a thankless task.

After the chaos caused by the sand monster subsided, the area was in turmoil, and the thieves were rampant. Meng Zhang didn't have the ability to change all this. Being able to help when he saw injustice was already commendable enough.

Below, there were still about twenty or so remaining White Sand Pirates.

A group of small cultivators in the Refining Qi stage, upon seeing their backing had fled, naturally dispersed, each using their methods to escape for their lives.

These thieves were rather smart. However, Meng Zhang had no intention of letting them off so easily.

The Tangling Silk Soft Sword transformed into a whip, and with a sweep, several fleeing thieves were entangled, causing them to collapse on the ground, unable to move.

Meng Zhang landed heavily on the ground, raising his left foot and stomping down heavily. Several thieves who had used Earth Escaping Talismans to burrow underground immediately felt a powerful force compressing the earth and stone layers, pressing in from all directions.

Two of them reacted quickly and hurriedly fled toward the surface. When they finally managed to crawl out from the ground, they lay on the ground, continuously coughing up blood.

The ones who were not fast enough were directly crushed into a pulp by the earth and stones.

At this moment, two flying boats with the Flying Swan Sect's emblem engraved on them flew in from afar at an extremely fast speed.

In the blink of an eye, the flying boats arrived near the oasis and descended to a lower altitude, getting closer to the ground.

A group of cultivators wearing the robes of the Flying Swan Sect's Refining Qi stage disciples leaped down before the flying boats even came to a complete stop, chasing after the fleeing members of the White Sand Pirates in all directions.

As the rulers of this region, it was their duty to maintain order and capture bandits.

Since disciples of the Flying Swan Sect had appeared, Meng Zhang no longer needed to intervene.

Meng Zhang floated about a person's height above the ground, calmly observing the Flying Swan Sect disciples pursuing the fleeing White Sand Pirates.

He probably looked somewhat out of the ordinary, being the only one floating there alone.

Two Flying Swan Sect disciples in the Refining Qi stage ran directly up to him, and without any courtesy, one of them asked, "Who are you? Why are you here, and what's your relationship with these bandits?"

Meng Zhang nearly burst out laughing. This was the conduct of disciples from major sects. How dare these mere Refining Qi stage cultivators be impolite to a Foundation Building stage cultivator?

He wondered how these two managed to survive until now.

If it were a Foundation Building stage cultivator with a bad temper, slapping them to death with a single palm wouldn't have been impossible.

While it was true that the Flying Swan Sect ruled the Endless Sea of Sand, it was not easy for a Foundation Building stage cultivator to be discovered if they wished to conceal themselves. If they fled far away and left the Endless Sea of Sand, they wouldn't need to care about the Flying Swan Sect at all.

Witnessing Meng Zhang's silence and refusal to even glance at them, the two Refining Qi stage cultivators felt offended and angrily pointed at him. However, they were not foolish enough to provoke a Foundation Building stage cultivator actively.

"You wait," they uttered harsh words before preparing to call for reinforcements. But before they could turn around, a figure flew out from a flying boat and arrived in front of Meng Zhang.

"Daring indeed, to show disrespect to Sect Master Meng. Step aside," the stern-faced middle-aged cultivator with sword-like eyebrows and sharp eyes reprimanded them. Hearing his scolding, the two disciples from the Flying Swan Sect were startled and didn't dare to delay, immediately turning and leaving.

The one who spoke was Lao Jian, a Foundation Building stage cultivator of the Flying Swan Sect. A few days ago, he had heard from younger members of his sect who asked him to be a guide for Meng Zhang during his visit to the Flying Swan Sect. Lao Jian had planned to complete his patrol mission and return to the sect, expecting to welcome Meng Zhang's arrival. Unexpectedly, he encountered him here.

Lao Jian, a prominent figure within the Flying Swan Sect, had once followed Daoist Master Fei Yu to monitor Forest Spring Watch's movements after the formation of Guang Zhi Daoist Master's core. He witnessed the scenes of the fierce battle between Taiyi Sect, Green Bamboo Mountain, Liu Family, and four other sects, and was familiar with the intelligence about Meng Zhang, despite never having met him formally. Meng Zhang had heard of Lao Jian's reputation from Lao Bulu.

Despite Lao Jian's appearance being younger than Lao Bulu's, he was Lao Bulu's uncle. Due to his exceptional talent, Lao Jian had joined the Flying Swan Sect at a young age and received great attention after reaching the Foundation Building stage, even having the opportunity to follow a Gold Core Daoist Master closely.

Lao Jian held a significant position within the Lao family in the Flying Swan Sect and was one of the important connections Lao Bulu planned to introduce to Meng Zhang. It was quite coincidental for them to meet before reaching their destination, the Lao family.

"I happened to pass by here and saw the White Sand Pirates attacking this oasis. I had some grudges with them in the past, so I took the opportunity to intervene and ruin their plans," Meng Zhang explained briefly why he appeared at this moment.

"Do these damn thieves think that our Flying Swan Sect is defenseless?" Lao Jian cursed with hatred. After the chaos caused by the sand monsters, not only did the major affiliated families suffer heavy losses, but the Flying Swan Sect also lost many powerful cultivators.

Instead of directly robbing the affiliated territories of the Flying Swan Sect, the various groups of bandits and pirates attacked the affiliated families, causing chaos and unrest in the Flying Swan

Sect's territory. At first, the sect had limited manpower and only asked the affiliated families to strengthen their defenses, without launching a massive crackdown on the bandits.

However, these bandits grew bolder and more rampant over time, turning the Flying Swan Sect's territory into a lawless mess. Enraged, the higher-ups of the Flying Swan Sect, despite the shortage of manpower, formed patrol teams to conduct inspections inside and outside their territory. Whenever they encountered the bandits, they would deal with them harshly.

Surprisingly, these bandits not only resisted the Flying Swan Sect's patrols but also engaged in guerrilla warfare against them. Due to the vast size of the territory and the severe lack of manpower, the Flying Swan Sect's patrols couldn't completely eradicate these bandits in a short period.

Chapter 275: Old Friends Reunited

For some unknown reason, Lao Jian decided not to hide anything from Meng Zhang and honestly revealed the current situation around them, as well as the difficulties faced by the Flying Swan Sect. Unexpectedly, Meng Zhang was taken aback by Lao Jian's openness. Compared to the two inexperienced young disciples, Lao Jian showed little arrogance typically associated with disciples from major sects, making an effort to treat Meng Zhang as an equal.

At this moment, the protective formation around the nearby oasis slowly closed, and a large group of cultivators emerged, warmly welcoming the cultivators from the Flying Swan Sect and expressing gratitude for their help. Earlier, when Meng Zhang repelled Daoist Whitesand and "Three Spears" Gu, the cultivators in the oasis did not close the protective formation or come out to welcome Meng Zhang. Naturally, there was some resentment for being treated differently, but as a disciple of a minor sect like Meng Zhang, he understood their caution.

In case Meng Zhang was in league with the White Sand Pirates and their previous encounter was just an act, closing the formation and leading Meng Zhang inside would be inviting trouble.

At this moment, the leader of the group of cultivators, also a Foundation Building stage cultivator, walked forward on his own initiative. He bowed deeply to Meng Zhang and Lao Jian, saying, "Thank you both for your assistance. Senior Brother, may I ask who this fellow cultivator is..."

"Come, let me introduce you both," Lao Jian said.

"This is Sect Master Meng of Taiyi Sect. Sect Master Meng's cultivation base is extraordinary, with numerous records of defeating cultivators of the same level."

"Sect Master Meng, this is Huang Ping, the master of this oasis."

With Lao Jian's introduction, Huang Ping joined the conversation and began talking with Meng Zhang.

It turned out that several cultivation families coexisted within this oasis. Each family had a small population, and even fewer were cultivators. Though they were called cultivation families, they were more like cultivation households. Among them, Huang Ping had the highest cultivation base, being the only Foundation Building stage cultivator in the oasis. As a result, he was elected to be in charge of all the affairs within the oasis.

This oasis was not far from Lao Jian's territory and happened to be on the patrol route of the Flying Swan Sect's disciples. Therefore, despite the chaos and rampant bandits in the surrounding areas, this oasis remained relatively peaceful and had not faced much disturbance from outsiders.

Earlier that morning, the White Sand Pirates suddenly attacked, but fortunately, the cultivators in the oasis were highly vigilant, especially Huang Ping. He had been conscripted by the Flying Swan Sect in the past and had participated in wars against sand monsters. With his rich combat experience, Huang Ping immediately activated the protective formation and led the cultivators from the oasis to defend against the attack until Meng Zhang arrived to provide aid.

Even if Meng Zhang hadn't passed by this oasis, Lao Jian's patrol team would have eventually arrived here.

In fact, before Lao Jian's patrol team approached the oasis, they received a distress signal from Huang Ping, prompting them to hasten their journey.

Huang Ping and Lao Jian had a good relationship; they became comrades during the war against the sand monsters.

After chatting for a while, Huang Ping warmly invited Meng Zhang and the disciples of the Flying Swan Sect to be guests in the oasis. While they conversed, the disciples of the Flying Swan Sect were not idle; they were busy chasing and capturing the fleeing White Sand Pirates, either apprehending them or eliminating them on the spot.

Lao Jian wanted to interrogate the captured White Sand Pirates thoroughly, and he also wanted to have a detailed conversation with Meng Zhang. So, without hesitation, Lao Jian accepted Huang Ping's invitation and suggested that Meng Zhang stay as well. Meng Zhang readily agreed, and together with the disciples of the Flying Swan Sect, they were welcomed into the oasis.

This oasis is called Gui Xiang Oasis because it is planted with many osmanthus flowers. When the flowers bloom, their fragrance spreads in all directions, giving the oasis its name.

Not all the osmanthus flowers in the oasis are ordinary; many of them are spirit flowers. The Gui Xiang Oasis produces a special delicacy known as Guihua Cake, made using a unique secret method. This cake is an excellent spirit food that can regulate the true qi within the body and promote the circulation of energy through the meridians.

One of the major specialties sold by the Gui Xiang Oasis to outsiders is the spirit food, Guihua Cake. The cultivators in the oasis are very warm and hospitable towards those who have helped them, showing them gracious hospitality.

Huang Ping welcomed Meng Zhang and Lao Jian into the guest hall and served them tea and Guihua Cake while engaging in casual conversation. After a while, a disciple came to report that the captured White Sand Pirates had all been brought in. Lao Jian apologized to Meng Zhang and went to interrogate them personally.

Left alone in the hall, Huang Ping continued chatting with Meng Zhang. As he was well-informed about the Flying Swan Sect's territory, he proved to be an interesting conversationalist and provided Meng Zhang with a considerable amount of useful information.

Not long after Lao Jian left, he hurriedly returned, apologizing for the interruption. He had obtained crucial intelligence from the White Sand Pirates and now knew the location of their stronghold. Lao

Jian intended to strike while the iron was hot and wipe out the White Sand Pirates completely. He asked Meng Zhang to wait at the oasis for a while, as he would return victorious shortly.

Meng Zhang offered to accompany Lao Jian on the mission, willing to help in the battle. However, Lao Jian declined with some pride, stating that Meng Zhang was a guest and should not need to take action. With the strength of the Flying Swan Sect, they could easily crush those audacious bandits. Therefore, Meng Zhang should stay as a guest at the Gui Xiang Oasis.

Before leaving, Lao Jian instructed Huang Ping to take good care of Meng Zhang, emphasizing the importance of treating their distinguished guest well. Huang Ping readily agreed, promising to ensure Meng Zhang's comfort.

In the following days, Meng Zhang enjoyed himself at the Gui Xiang Oasis, indulging in food, drink, and entertainment, making for a very pleasant afternoon. As the evening approached and night fell, Meng Zhang expressed his intention to meditate.

Huang Ping arranged for a dedicated maid to escort Meng Zhang to a carefully prepared guest room. Just as the maid left and Meng Zhang was about to begin his meditation, someone knocked on the door.

Meng Zhang opened the door and saw an eleven or twelve-year-old girl standing outside. She had a lovely appearance, with two braids adorning her head, and stood poised at the doorway. She acted maturely and greeted Meng Zhang respectfully, "Senior, are you Meng Zhang from Taiyi Sect?"

"Yes, little girl, what can I do for you?" replied Sect Master Meng with a nod.

"The Taiyi Sect is located to the west of Singing Sand City and was once a vassal sect of Twin Success Valley. Sect Master Meng, are you the disciple of Taiyi Sect's Sect Master, Daoist Profound Spirit?" the girl continued to inquire.

"You seem to know a lot for such a little one. Everything you said is correct," Meng Zhang said, intrigued.

"Sect Master Meng, do you remember An Lei, the An Family Patriarch? He is my grandfather," the girl said cautiously.

Chapter 276: Old Friend's News

Upon hearing the long-lost name "An Lei," Meng Zhang was initially stunned, then his expression became complex. It had been more than thirty years since then. At that time, Meng Zhang had just joined Taiyi Sect, having only practiced cultivation for a few years.

An Lei, the head of the An Family, happened to pass by nearby and decided to pay a visit to Taiyi Sect. Before moving to Twin Success Valley, Taiyi Sect was a sect with several Foundation Building cultivators and had once been affiliated with the Flying Swan Sect for a period of time. However, their mountain gate was later breached by a sand monster army, and the remaining disciples had to migrate northward, settling in a more desolate and remote place to rebuild the sect.

An Family and the original Taiyi Sect had a good relationship, having cooperated against common enemies on several occasions. However, after the migration of Taiyi Sect, the two families gradually lost contact.

Since An Lei was passing by this time, he took the opportunity to visit his old friends and reminisce about the past. Taiyi Sect warmly welcomed An Lei's visit.

To An Lei's surprise, the once prosperous Taiyi Sect had now become so weak that all of its Foundation Building cultivators had perished during meditation, and there were no new Foundation Building cultivators born. It had even fallen to the point where they didn't have any Refining Qi stage cultivators.

An Lei was not a petty person and treated the current Taiyi Sect with respect and warmth. During his visit, An Lei noticed the young Meng Zhang. Although he didn't know that Meng Zhang possessed a high-quality spiritual root, An Lei was attracted to his intelligence, wit, and extraordinary comprehension.

After careful observation, An Lei was certain that Meng Zhang's aptitude for cultivation was excellent. Thus, he proposed to Taiyi Sect's Sect Master, Daoist Profound Spirit, that he wanted to bring Meng Zhang back to An Family and nurture him to become a member of the An Family.

Given that Taiyi Sect sought to curry favor with the An Family, they were happy to support this proposal. However, Daoist Profound Spirit wasn't enthusiastic about it, and Meng Zhang himself firmly refused, insisting on staying at Taiyi Sect. He even declared that he was born a member of Taiyi Sect and would remain devoted to it.

An Lei, a broad-minded elder, wasn't displeased by Meng Zhang's rejection. He admired Meng Zhang and, before leaving, offered him some gifts, including spiritual stones and talismans – common items for Foundation Building cultivators, but a significant gesture for Meng Zhang at that time. Later, these gifts helped Meng Zhang overcome many difficulties.

Decades had passed, but Meng Zhang always cherished An Lei's kindness and assistance. This time, when he came to the territory of Flying Swan Sect, he also planned to pay a visit to An Family along the way.

"You are truly An Lei, Senior An's granddaughter?"

"Yes." The young girl nodded emphatically.

"My name is An Xiaoran. In the past, my grandfather and my family members mentioned you. He said that he had discovered an outstanding young man in Taiyi Sect named Meng Zhang, but unfortunately, this young man refused to leave Taiyi Sect."

"After so many years, Senior An still remembers me," Meng Zhang exclaimed emotionally.

"By the way, why are you alone here, and how is Senior An doing?" Meng Zhang inquired.

Upon hearing Meng Zhang's question, An Xiaoran's mood visibly dampened, and her face became clouded. Without waiting for Meng Zhang to ask further, she voluntarily began to tell him.

As it turned out, several years ago, An Lei led the elite members of the An Family to the frontline to battle against the sand monster army after being summoned by the Flying Swan Sect.

After a series of consecutive battles, the elite forces of the An Family were completely lost, and even An Lei himself suffered severe injuries, shaking the foundation of the family.

After the great war concluded, An Lei returned to his family only to discover that the family was on the brink of upheaval. Surprisingly, a cultivator named Zeng Jiexiong, from an unrelated family, had

unknowingly taken control of the An Family's power. Originally from a loose cultivator background, Zeng Jiexiong was recruited into the An Family due to his outstanding talent, and he married a woman from the An Family, becoming a son-in-law.

Zeng Jiexiong was usually low-key, honest, and hardworking, drawing little attention within the An Family. However, after his younger brother, Zeng Jiantang, joined the prestigious Flying Swan Sect and successfully achieved Foundation Building, Zeng Jiexiong's status within the An Family began to rise gradually.

Before An Lei led the elite members of the family into battle, Zeng Jiexiong, through his brother's connections, was deployed ahead of time, avoiding the bloody frontlines by being assigned to the logistics team. Under the care of others, Zeng Jiexiong managed to earn enough merit and exchanged it for a Foundation Building Pill from the Flying Swan Sect. With the successful Foundation Building, Zeng Jiexiong took advantage of the absence of An Lei and others and returned to the family.

Being the only Foundation Building cultivator at the time, he began to alienate others, promote loyalists, and even recruited many outsiders into the family. As a result, several of the direct lineages of the An Family members died under mysterious circumstances.

In just a few years, the fortunes of the An Family changed drastically. By the time the war ended and An Lei returned to the family, it was already too late for him to reverse the situation. An Lei, severely injured and nearing the end of his life, was powerless to confront Zeng Jiexiong.

In desperation, An Lei could only rely on the remnants of his influence as a Foundation Building cultivator to arrange matters for the younger generations within the family. An Xiaoran awakened her spiritual roots while An Lei was away on his expedition.

At that time, An Family members were subjected to exclusion by Zeng Jiexiong. Except for those who voluntarily aligned with him, the rest were subjected to various forms of harassment. An Xiaoran awakened her spiritual roots without anyone measuring the quality and attributes of her roots. Based on her own intuition, she secretly found a cultivation manual titled "Wood Ignition Technique" from the family's collection and began her practice.

Before he passed away, An Lei arranged for An Xiaoran and her younger brother, An Moran, to come to the Guixiang Oasis. Huang Ping, the person in charge of the oasis, owed An Lei a favor from the battlefield and, upon receiving An Lei's personal letter, welcomed An Xiaoran and her brother.

Not long ago, news of An Lei's death spread throughout the An Family. With his demise, the An Family fell completely into the hands of Zeng Jiexiong. As Meng Zhang listened to An Xiaoran's account, he simultaneously used Mind Reading to understand her thoughts. Every word spoken by An Xiaoran was true.

Hearing about An Lei's death, Meng Zhang's expression turned grave, filled with a sense of sorrow. It was truly unexpected that a respected senior like An Lei would meet such an end. Meng Zhang had originally intended to visit him but arrived too late, missing the chance to see him for the last time. With An Lei's passing, the An Family's fate also took a turn for the worse, and it seemed that he would not rest peacefully.

The An Family's position within the Flying Swan Sect was relatively remote, and after Zeng Jiexiong took control, he intentionally isolated various news about the An Family. If Meng Zhang had not chanced upon An Xiaoran today, he might still be unaware of An Lei and the An Family's situation. The information he gathered from the black market before leaving was still quite incomplete regarding the situation within the Flying Swan Sect.

Chapter 277: Request

After An Xiaoran finished speaking, both of them fell into a long silence. The heavy atmosphere persisted for a while before Meng Zhang finally reacted. He invited An Xiaoran to sit in the room and prepared to have a serious conversation with her. Given the situation with the An Family, Meng Zhang considered An Lei's face, and if he could lend a hand, he wouldn't hesitate.

Once they were seated, Meng Zhang asked, "After the An Family encountered trouble, didn't anyone from your clan seek help from the Flying Swan Sect?"

Since it was confirmed that An Xiaoran was indeed a descendant of An Lei and she wasn't lying, Meng Zhang refrained from prying into her thoughts further. As a grown man, he felt a bit embarrassed about reading the mind of a young girl, and out of respect for the deceased, he decided to hold back.

"Zeng Jiexiong's younger brother, Zeng Jiantang, holds a considerable position within the Flying Swan Sect. With his protection, Zeng Jiexiong doesn't have to worry about the Flying Swan Sect interfering," An Xiaoran explained.

"And also, as long as the matter isn't excessively severe, the Flying Swan Sect won't actively meddle in the internal affairs of vassal families. Thanks to Zeng Jiantang's connections, Zeng Jiexiong has already taken care of the relevant cultivators within the Flying Swan Sect. It's challenging for information about the An Family's internal affairs to leak out, and even if it does, there's no evidence."

Though An Xiaoran was young, she spoke in a logical manner and clearly explained the various advantages and disadvantages.

"Sect Master Meng, could you tell me about your Taiyi Sect?" An Xiaoran made a request. Since they had time, Meng Zhang proceeded to share information about the Taiyi Sect, excluding any classified details.

During the conversation, An Xiaoran asked many questions, inquiring about the Taiyi Sect's internal situation and the surrounding circumstances. Meng Zhang was surprised that such a young girl as An Xiaoran could pose such pertinent questions, hitting the key points accurately. He talked for quite some time before finally concluding his explanation.

After listening attentively to Meng Zhang, An Xiaoran fell into deep thought. Meng Zhang didn't rush her and patiently waited.

After a long while, An Xiaoran stood up and said seriously, "Sect Master Meng, based on the affection my grandfather held for you, may I make a request?"

"You can tell me. As long as it's within my capability, I will definitely not refuse," Meng Zhang responded, equally solemn. He didn't underestimate An Xiaoran just because she was a young girl; he treated her with respect and sincerity.

"Sect Master Meng, I want to live in Taiyi Sect together with my younger brother. Can you accommodate us?" An Xiaoran earnestly made her request.

"It's not a problem; it's just a minor matter," Meng Zhang readily agreed to An Xiaoran's request.

"By the way, may I ask you something? Are you unhappy living here, and have you faced any bullying? Of course, if you don't want to answer, that's okay," Meng Zhang asked casually.

An Xiaoran remained silent for a moment before responding, "My grandfather once told me that Sect Master Meng is a man of great integrity and loyalty. You gave up the opportunity to advance further and joined the An Family out of gratitude to your sect. Can I trust you?"

With such a question from the young girl, Meng Zhang could only smile. Despite having engaged in deceitful and manipulative activities in the cutthroat world of Cultivation, at his core, he was still a good person. At least at this moment, Meng Zhang was more sincere than ever before.

"You can rest assured. Even if it's not for the sake of your grandfather, I won't deceive a young girl like you. Although I, Meng Zhang, am not exceptionally talented, I still care about my reputation."

After obtaining Meng Zhang's assurance, An Xiaoran finally revealed the true reason. It turned out that during her time with the An Family, due to her young age, nobody was particularly wary of her. An Xiaoran had accidentally discovered that Zeng Jiexiong's subordinates had colluded with some bandits.

When White Sand Pirates suddenly attacked the Osmanthus Green Oasis, An Xiaoran keenly realized that it might have been orchestrated by Zeng Jiexiong. The ultimate goal was to capture her and her younger brother, An Moran. As for why Zeng Jiexiong wanted to capture them, An Xiaoran didn't elaborate, but Meng Zhang could guess.

Before An Lei's death, he probably made arrangements, and there must be something Zeng Jiexiong wanted from the An siblings—likely related to the An Family's hidden treasure or something of the sort. However, Meng Zhang had no desire for those things. He couldn't bring himself to covet a young girl's possessions.

Meng Zhang was truly surprised. He hadn't expected that Zeng Jiexiong, or whoever he was, had secret dealings with White Sand Pirates and similar bandits. However, upon further thought, it made sense. Without the cooperation of local families, these bandits wouldn't have been able to operate so freely and have such timely information.

An Xiaoran didn't actively expose this matter because she knew that baseless words wouldn't be easily believed by the people of the Flying Swan Sect. Besides, being a young girl, her words wouldn't carry much weight.

"This sudden attack by White Sand Pirates brought trouble to Grandpa Huang because of my brother and me. If Sect Master Meng hadn't arrived in time, the consequences would have been dire."

"We can't stay here any longer, so we planned to seek refuge with Sect Master Meng."

Seeing An Xiaoran speak with such confidence and maturity, Meng Zhang couldn't help but tease her, "Why aren't you afraid that I might be affected or that those bandits will come after Taiyi Sect?"

"It's different. Taiyi Sect has three Foundation Building cultivators, and Sect Master Meng is a mid-level Foundation Building expert. Both Zeng Jiexiong and those bandits wouldn't be a match for Taiyi Sect."

"Besides, Taiyi Sect is affiliated with Forest Spring Watch, not on the same side as the Flying Swan Sect. Zeng Jiexiong's attempts to use his brother Zeng Jiantang's connections to oppress Taiyi Sect with the Flying Swan Sect's strength are unlikely to succeed."

An Xiaoran was young, but she had a clear and comprehensive way of thinking. Meng Zhang couldn't help but activate his Deception Breaking Eye and take a closer look at her. At that moment, he was astonished; he felt like he had found a treasure. Although he didn't use a spiritual testing plate for a detailed assessment, Meng Zhang was certain that An Xiaoran had outstanding spiritual aptitude, almost on par with his top disciple, Niu Dawei.

Not to mention An Lei's influence, just based on An Xiaoran's talent alone, Meng Zhang wouldn't easily let her go; he would definitely take her in as a disciple. Such exceptional talent and beauty were extremely rare, and he had come across her just like that.

"To hell with fate! I won't miss this opportunity."

Even though An Xiaoran hadn't explicitly expressed her desire to join Taiyi Sect and only sought refuge there, Meng Zhang believed that once they returned, he could find a way to persuade her to become a disciple of Taiyi Sect.

"You can rest assured. I will do everything in my power to protect you and your brother. Once we're at Taiyi Sect, not even the gods themselves could take you away from us."

Meng Zhang gave a solemn promise.

Chapter 278: Carrying off

Upon receiving Meng Zhang's promise and sensing his sincerity, An Xiaoran's face showed a relieved smile. Meng Zhang and An Xiaoran agreed that when he left, he would take her and her younger brother with him. As for Huang Ping, An Xiaoran had prepared an explanation. She would tell Huang Ping that Meng Zhang and her grandfather were old friends, and her grandfather had spoken highly of Meng Zhang during his lifetime, hoping that she and her brother could join the Taiyi Sect.

Now that Meng Zhang had arrived at the Gui Xiang Oasis and coincidentally encountered An Xiaoran and her brother, they were ready to fulfill their grandfather's wish and leave together, heading to the Taiyi Sect. After discussing their plan, An Xiaoran left to find Huang Ping.

Suppressing the excitement in his heart, Meng Zhang meditated for a while to calm his emotions. When it was about to dawn, Lao Jian, along with several disciples from the Flying Swan Sect, returned from chasing the White Sand Pirates. Lao Jian seemed frustrated, feeling like he had lost face.

Seeing Huang Ping and Meng Zhang coming towards him, his expression improved a bit. Without waiting for them to inquire, Lao Jian recounted all the details of their operation, explaining how he obtained information from the captured White Sand Pirates about their hideout, and how they had tried to catch them but arrived a step too late.

The White Sand Pirates had already moved their base when they arrived. Despite their diligent search around the area, they had found nothing. Disheartened, Lao Jian returned empty-handed. Huang Ping asserted that the pirates must have left the oasis as soon as they got wind of their pursuit.

Huang Ping comforted Lao Jian, saying that capturing thieves was not an urgent matter and that with the strength of the Flying Swan Sect, the thieves would eventually be caught. Lao Jian smiled wryly at the reassurance. However, he chose not to reveal some of the internal affairs of the Flying Swan Sect to Huang Ping, despite their good friendship.

After a night of hard work, the members of the Flying Swan Sect rested at the Gui Xiang Oasis. As a Foundation Building stage cultivator, Lao Jian didn't feel tired. He chatted with An Xiaoran and Meng Zhang briefly before finding an excuse to talk privately with Meng Zhang.

As a member of the Lao family and an Inner-Sect Disciple of the Flying Swan Sect, Lao Jian was considered trustworthy. Meng Zhang activated his Mind Reading Divine Ability to secretly probe Lao Jian's thoughts, though he was aware that cultivators like Lao Jian might have some resistance to mind-reading abilities due to their cultivation techniques.

Meng Zhang's cultivation base was slightly higher, but he couldn't access Lao Jian's thoughts in great detail. However, through subtle cues, Meng Zhang could unmistakably sense that Lao Jian meant to ally with him rather than harbor ill intentions.

It appeared that despite Taiyi Sect being a small faction, it held some value in the eyes of Gold Core sects like Flying Swan Sect. Since there was a potential for mutual benefit, things became easier.

During their conversation, both of them cautiously probed each other. Lao Jian openly expressed Flying Swan Sect's goodwill, making no secret of his intentions to win over Meng Zhang. On the other hand, Meng Zhang vaguely conveyed some dissatisfaction with Forest Spring Watch and hoped to align more closely with Flying Swan Sect.

Thanks to his innate Divine Ability, Mind Reading, Meng Zhang gained more insights and gradually took the lead in the conversation. He began to lament to Lao Jian about the lack of access to Foundation Building Pills, which made it difficult for the junior disciples of Taiyi Sect to achieve Foundation Building. If this continued, the sect's future would be at risk of discontinuation.

Lao Jian understood that Meng Zhang was laying out his conditions for alliance. To win over Taiyi Sect, Flying Swan Sect would undoubtedly need to offer something in return. However, the allocation of Foundation Building Pills was in the hands of higher-ups in the sect, and Lao Jian couldn't make decisions independently.

Nonetheless, he promised to do his best to advocate for Taiyi Sect and convince the higher-ups to support them with Foundation Building Pills. Lao Jian's practical and realistic approach reassured Meng Zhang.

Of course, the request for Foundation Building Pills was just one of the conditions put forward by Meng Zhang. Binding Taiyi Sect to Flying Swan Sect's cause involved several steps and

negotiations. Meng Zhang not only wanted to extract enough benefits from Flying Swan Sect but also needed to understand the sect's capabilities to deal with the changing situation in the Endless Sea of Sand.

Meng Zhang wouldn't board the Flying Swan Sect's ship without verifying their strength. While Flying Swan Sect had ruled over the Endless Sea of Sand for years and possessed hidden cards, Meng Zhang's three opponents, except for Northern Desert Qi Family, were merely Foundation Building sects with only one Gold Core Daoist Master each, lacking the depth and accumulation that Flying Swan Sect had.

From his heart, Meng Zhang was more inclined to believe that Flying Swan Sect was the stronger force.

Lao Jian was merely testing Meng Zhang's attitude and didn't have much authority in negotiations. He invited Meng Zhang to travel together to Flying Swan Sect, as there was no need to proceed to the Lau family's place since they had already met Lao Jian here.

Meng Zhang, prepared to take An Xiaoran back to Taiyi Sect, didn't wish to delay outside for too long and agreed to Lao Jian's request.

Meanwhile, An Xiaoran used the excuse they had discussed with Meng Zhang to inform Huang Ping that they, the siblings, would accompany Meng Zhang and leave together.

As someone with experience in the martial world, Huang Ping naturally understood that An Xiaoran's words were not entirely true. However, since An Xiaoran willingly wanted to leave, and Meng Zhang was the lord of a sect and acquainted with Lao Jian, he believed they could be trusted.

Huang Ping honored his late friend An Lei's trust by accommodating An Xiaoran and them. Since they desired to leave, he respected their wishes. After resting for half a day, Lao Jian set out with Meng Zhang. Leaving all the disciples of Flying Swan Sect behind, he took Meng Zhang ahead. Before departing, Meng Zhang requested An Xiaoran and her brother to accompany them, and Lao Jian had no objections to that.

Chapter 279: Reception

An Xiaoran didn't keep Meng Zhang waiting for long. He arrived at the side of the flying boat with a few people. Among them, only An Xiaoran awakened his spiritual roots and began cultivation, possessing a Refining Qi cultivation base at the second stage.

An Xiaoran's younger brother, An Moran, appeared to be around seven or eight years old but carried himself like a little adult, with a serious expression and seldom any smiles. Following behind An Moran were three lively kids aged five or six, making a fuss along the way.

At the rear were a young couple, each holding an infant. Among these mortals, An Moran was An Xiaoran's true younger brother. The three lively kids were the descendants of An Family cultivators. The chance of awakening spiritual roots among the descendants of cultivators was higher than ordinary mortals, but it wasn't guaranteed. At least, neither An Moran nor the three kids had awakened their spiritual roots yet.

The young couple were mortals and relatives of the An Family cultivators, specifically responsible for taking care of this group of children, including their own infants.

Apart from two Flying Swan Sect disciples in the flying boat's cabin, responsible for piloting the vessel, there was no one else on the flying boat. An Xiaoran brought this group of mortals on board, and after Meng Zhang and Lao Jian also boarded the flying boat, it slowly took off and soared into the sky.

Once the lively kids got on the flying boat, they began to make a commotion, and the young couple struggled to control them. An Xiaoran glared at them and reprimanded a couple of sentences, immediately quieting the kids down.

Lao Jian was considerate; to take care of the mortal passengers, he activated a protective formation on the flying boat, keeping the strong winds at high altitudes outside while ensuring it wasn't too cold inside the vessel.

Meng Zhang stood at the bow of the flying boat, observing the scenery below. Lao Jian accompanied him and engaged in casual conversation.

Meng Zhang pretended to be concerned and said, "Brother Lao, what we're discussing this time must remain confidential."

Lao Jian burst into laughter and replied, "Sect Master Meng, rest assured. My disciples may be a bit pampered, but they won't casually leak the sect's secrets. As for Brother Huang Ping, he is even more discreet."

Internally, Meng Zhang wasn't as worried as he portrayed himself. His visit this time was an openly known matter and not some secretive affair. The business relationship between Taiyi Sect and the Lao family had existed since the days of Twin Success Valley.

Moreover, whether during the time of Twin Success Valley or now in Forest Spring Watch, having some personal connections between sect disciples and Flying Swan Sect disciples was quite common. As long as Forest Spring Watch didn't know about the secret cooperation between Meng Zhang and Flying Swan Sect, there wouldn't be any issues. Such surface-level personal relationships could actually help conceal their covert dealings.

Meng Zhang's display of concern was merely a gesture. It was this sort of stance, indicating a desire to join Flying Swan Sect while still having reservations, that made Flying Swan Sect willing to invest resources to win over Taiyi Sect.

The location was already quite close to Flying Swan Sect's direct territory, and the flying boat's speed was fast. After over a day of flying, a towering mountain came into Meng Zhang's view.

This mountain had been the entrance to Purple Gold Sect hundreds of years ago. However, after Flying Swan Sect destroyed Purple Gold Sect, they relocated their entire sect to this place, establishing it as Flying Swan Sect's new entrance.

On the plain below the high mountain stood a grand city, known as Flying Swan City. It was the most prosperous and bustling city in the entire Endless Sea of Sand.

Here, both immortals and mortals coexisted, and cultivators from various paths gathered. Countless merchant caravans traveled back and forth, making it a constantly bustling place filled with people from all walks of life.

Within the city of Flying Swan City, there are numerous flying boats and flying camels that regularly travel along the routes spread across the vast Endless Sea of Sand. These routes gather

people and goods from all over the Endless Sea of Sand, which are then transported to various destinations within the region.

As Meng Zhang knows, within the Firewell Market, there are scheduled takeoffs and landings of flying boats and flying camels from the Flying Swan Sect, specifically engaged in passenger transport and the delivery of valuable goods.

Looking ahead at Flying Swan City, Lao Jian couldn't help feeling sorrowful. He said, "A few years ago, this city was thriving and vibrant, like a garden of blooming flowers. But a great battle with the sand monsters left it devastated. Now that the war is over, the city has become desolate and much quieter."

Meng Zhang consoled, "With time passing, the losses caused by war will gradually be compensated. It's only a matter of time before Flying Swan City returns to its former glory."

"After the great war, people yearn for peace. But there are always some who fear peace and harmony in the Endless Sea of Sand, and they seek to disrupt it," Lao Jian said, giving Meng Zhang a meaningful glance.

"As a member of the Endless Sea of Sand Cultivation World and the Sect Master of Meng, I cannot stand idly by if this region is plunged into another devastating war," Meng Zhang solemnly replied.

Lao Jian's words were eloquent, but Meng Zhang's timely declaration was to reassure him and put his mind at ease.

Instead of flying towards the mountain gate of the Flying Swan Sect or entering Flying Swan City, the flying boat directly landed in a mansion outside the city.

Upon disembarking from the flying boat, Meng Zhang and the others were received by designated personnel. An Xiaoran and the others were treated as Meng Zhang's entourage and were arranged to stay in a small courtyard. As for Meng Zhang himself, he resided alone in a more secluded small courtyard.

Once they were settled, Lao Jian bid them farewell temporarily. He needed to personally meet with the high-ranking members of the Flying Swan Sect to report the meeting with Meng Zhang and convey his attitude. There would surely be individuals with higher authority coming to negotiate with Meng Zhang.

After Lao Jian's departure, Meng Zhang quietly waited. Originally, having come to the bustling city of Flying Swan City, he had intended to explore the city, visit various shops, and see if there was anything worth purchasing. However, fearing that he might miss the meeting with the Flying Swan Sect cultivators, Meng Zhang had to abandon this idea and stay put.

This meeting was of great significance and involved the future stance of Taiyi Sect, possibly even determining the fate of the sect. Meng Zhang couldn't help but take it very seriously.

For two days, Meng Zhang waited in the small courtyard until he finally met the person he had been waiting for.

When a tall, imposing figure of an elderly man appeared before Meng Zhang, he was surprised. He had initially thought that the Flying Swan Sect would send an elder to receive him, which would already be quite grand. After all, the Flying Swan Sect was a Gold Core sect, while Taiyi Sect was merely a small Foundation Building sect.

Meng Zhang was truly taken aback to find that the person before him was none other than the current Sect Master of the Flying Swan Sect, Fei Hongzi.

This level of reception was unexpected. On one hand, he felt a sense of being valued, but on the other hand, he became cautious. For Fei Hongzi, the Sect Master of a Gold Core sect, to personally appear, it suggested that the intentions of the Flying Swan Sect might not be small. The small and fragile Taiyi Sect might not be able to withstand whatever they had in mind.

Chapter 280: Fei Hongzi

Flying Swan Sect is the dominant power in the Endless Sea of Sand. Fei Hongzi, as the Sect Master of Flying Swan Sect, has a widely recognized appearance and reputation throughout the Endless Sea of Sand. Not to say that everyone knows him, but at least figures like Meng Zhang, another Sect Master, are well aware of him.

"Are you really Senior Fei Hongzi?" Meng Zhang deliberately showed a surprised expression.

"I am indeed Fei Hongzi. I believe no one near the Flying Swan Sect can impersonate me," Fei Hongzi replied with an air of authority. But considering his status, he seemed quite approachable.

"Young talents like Sect Master Meng have long been famous. Meeting you today proves your reputation is well-deserved," Fei Hongzi complimented.

"Oh, you're too kind, Senior. Your reputation precedes you, known far and wide. I've admired your name for a long time," Meng Zhang humbly responded. After exchanging customary pleasantries, they finally got to the point.

"Sect Master Meng, what was the relationship between you and our Inner-Sect Disciple, Zhao Jiudou, in the past?" Fei Hongzi began with a question that seemed unrelated to the current situation.

Meng Zhang's heart skipped a beat, and he became wary.

"There were some entanglements between Taiyi Sect and Zhao Family in history. As for me and Zhao Jiudou, there were some minor grudges between us," Meng Zhang casually remarked, seemingly unconcerned.

"I see. Forest Spring Watch contacted our sect in the past, claiming that Zhao Jiudou framed and fled after harming their disciple. But at that time, Zhao Jiudou's soul lamp went out, indicating his death," Fei Hongzi said, sounding reminiscent.

"Because of that incident, there were some misunderstandings and disputes between Forest Spring Watch and our sect," he added.

Fei Hongzi asked casually, "According to the accounts, were you in the vicinity at that time, Sect Master Meng?"

"Yes, at that time, several forces, including ours, were called upon by Forest Spring Watch to join forces and exterminate the sand monsters," Meng Zhang honestly replied. "I didn't witness Zhao Jiudou harming the Forest Spring Watch disciple. I heard about it from Guang Hui Daoist afterward. At that time, I was searching for sand monster nests nearby."

Fei Hongzi glanced at Meng Zhang meaningfully but didn't press further on this question.

Meng Zhang knew that when Zhao Jiudou had his mishap, he became the primary suspect. At that time, all the sects, including Forest Spring Watch, had no motive to harm Zhao Jiudou secretly. Only he had grievances with Zhao Jiudou.

As for the speculation that Zhao Jiudou died at the hands of sand monsters, neither Forest Spring Watch nor Flying Swan Sect truly believed it. Flying Swan Sect didn't need concrete evidence; as long as they suspected Meng Zhang's involvement in Zhao Jiudou's death, they had numerous ways to make him talk.

However, Taiyi Sect was a vassal of Forest Spring Watch, and Flying Swan Sect's relationship with Forest Spring Watch was delicate, so they couldn't act recklessly.

Bringing up the past now was not to settle old scores with Meng Zhang. It was a negotiating tactic, attempting to intimidate him from the beginning and gain an advantage.

As a high-level cultivator at the Foundation Building late stage and a Sect Master, Fei Hongzi must have learned techniques to prevent others from reading his mind. Meng Zhang dared not use Mind Reading in front of Fei Hongzi to avoid alarming him.

After so many years in the Cultivation World, Meng Zhang had experienced numerous trials and tribulations, and he had learned to be cautious.

After experiencing numerous instances of reading people's hearts, his ability to observe and guess their thoughts had become quite remarkable. Even Fei Hongzi's tactics were easily seen through by him. Above the Flying Swan Sect, there were three Gold Core Daoist Masters who held real authority and were needed for significant matters. Despite being the Sect Master, Fei Hongzi couldn't completely control everything within the sect.

Speaking of Fei Hongzi, he seemed more like the overseer of the Flying Swan Sect rather than its true master. His influence and authority within the sect were likely limited. However, underestimating Fei Hongzi based on this would be a grave mistake.

Observing Meng Zhang's seemingly respectful but composed demeanor, Fei Hongzi abandoned his initial plans. He decided to be straightforward and not use any show of force. He addressed Meng Zhang, "As the lord of a sect, I believe you must have a clear understanding of the recent situation in the Endless Sea of Sand. Forest Spring Watch's Guang Zhi Daoist Master and Earthfire Sect's Elder Roaring Blaze have both formed their cores. Additionally, the Northern Desert Qi Family is watching from the sidelines. Many people may think that our sect has lost control of the situation and can't suppress our enemies in the open or in secret."

Meng Zhang appreciated Fei Hongzi's candor, and this openness seemed to earn him some favor. Fei Hongzi continued, "The true strength of our sect is not something outsiders would easily know. If I were to tell you that we not only have three Gold Core Daoist Masters but also an unknown Gold Core Daoist Master, would you believe me?"

Meng Zhang nodded, "I naturally believe you. After ruling the Endless Sea of Sand for so many years, the Flying Swan Sect wouldn't lack hidden cards or secret methods."

Fei Hongzi then asked, "But do you truly know everything about our enemies?"

To his surprise, Meng Zhang felt a hint of nervousness, and he replied, "Sect Master Meng is aware..."

"Indeed, Earthfire Sect has colluded with Fire Cloud Sect. I even suspect that Daoist Master Roaring Blaze's core formation was aided by Fire Cloud Sect."

Meng Zhang revealed this long-held secret, expecting Fei Hongzi to be surprised. However, Fei Hongzi appeared relieved, as if Meng Zhang had just mentioned a trivial matter. Unperturbed, Fei Hongzi said, "They are just a bunch of clowns. Their clandestine dealings are far from being concealed."

Meng Zhang couldn't help but wonder why Fei Hongzi had reacted that way earlier, showing signs of nervousness. Could it be that the Flying Swan Sect also harbored hidden enemies unknown to the public? Were there other hidden forces behind Forest Spring Watch and Northern Desert Qi Family?

He quickly pondered the possibilities, but due to the limited information he possessed, he couldn't decipher the truth of the matter. He thought he had a clear understanding of the situation in the Endless Sea of Sand, but Fei Hongzi's behavior revealed that there were many more secrets concealed in this place than he had ever known.

Seeing Meng Zhang lost in thought, Fei Hongzi chuckled. "Sect Master Meng, there's no need to worry about the Fire Cloud Sect. Ever since their defeat hundreds of years ago, they and the Yellow Lotus Sect East River Branch each had their Gold Core seniors swear an oath. From then on, the Gold Core Daoist Masters of Fire Cloud Sect and Yellow Lotus Sect East River Branch will never set foot in the Endless Sea of Sand." Fei Hongzi said this to ease Meng Zhang's concerns about Earthfire Sect and Fire Cloud Sect's collusion. Additionally, he intended to divert Meng Zhang's attention away from Flying Swan Sect's true adversaries.