

The Heavens 51

Chapter 51: My Treasure Mountain...

“Even though this kid isn’t a disciple of my Violet Fate Sect, you said anyone could enter this area. Seeing him run wild in your crappy mountain forest makes me feel good. I’m happy, so what?” Wu Dingqiu laughed, obviously feeling quite pleased. He had been reigning himself in all night, and now he knew that even though Eccentric Song spoke casually, he was hiding his discomfiture. Feeling quite pleasant, Wu Dingqiu looked down below at Meng Hao.

“That magic item of his can really dominate the Spirit Beasts,” said Eccentric Song. “His Cultivation base is low, though. He won’t be able to make it out of the Spirit Beast Forest. This forest is planted with trees I harvested from all the lands of South Heaven. It is watered with Spirit Water from the Milky Way Sea. Not only do the trees grow tall and strong, but they emit spiritual energy which the Spirit beasts can assimilate through breathing exercises. In my Spirit Beast Forest, there is also...” His voice came to a sudden, screeching stop.

Meng Hao shot forward, attracting the attention of the surrounding Demonic beasts. He was nearing the foot of the Spirit mountain; it was several hundred meters away. He was about to enter the region that none of the Violet Fate disciples had made it to.

Even though Meng Hao didn’t know why this area had so many white-robed disciples, he could sense that there was something odd going on. But with Shangguan Xiu on his tail, there wasn’t much time to think about it. He continued to move forward through the forest. Suddenly, an enormous Demonic beast, nearly twelve meters tall, burst out in front of him.

It was a gigantic woolly mammoth, with red eyes and sharp, gleaming tusks. Its body was like a small mountain, and the earth shook as it charged with shocking power.

“The kid is dead this time,” Eccentric Song said casually. “This is my Mutated mammoth, which I captured in the Life-wasting Cave, one of the most dangerous places in the Southern Domain. I raised it with medicinal pills, and it is one of the three most powerful Spirit beasts protecting this area. It has limitless power and incredibly thick skin. Ordinary flying swords can’t even scratch it. It is also proficient in a variety of magic techniques. Even someone of the ninth level of Qi Condensation would have trouble dealing with it. It can stop anyone under the Foundation Establishment stage.” Eccentric Song’s eyes had almost popped out of his head when he saw Meng Hao about to make it out of the Beast Forest. But now, he let out a sigh of relief.

Wu Dingqiu stopped smiling for the moment. He could see that this mammoth was no ordinary creature. The Violet Fate Sect didn't possess many Mutated beasts, but after hearing Eccentric Song blather on about it, he couldn't help but frown and mutter to himself that the man really was strange. He didn't care much at all for Cultivation, but loved seeking out Demonic beasts to raise, especially ones as strange as this.

Then, Wu Dingqiu's eyes began to shine. Eccentric Song's expression suddenly changed, and he shot to his feet, a horrified expression on his face.

Within the Demonic Forest, the Demonic mammoth charged at Meng Hao. Meng Hao took in a deep breath and retreated a bit, groaning inwardly about how many Demonic beasts were in this place. He raised the iron spear and pointed it. The charging Demonic mammoth stopped and began to quiver, then suddenly, its trunk exploded with a bang. Half of it flew through the air to land onto a nearby tree, which collapsed under its weight.

Enraged with pain, the mammoth continued to charge. Meng Hao waved his spear, and a boom sounded out. The mammoth's back exploded, then its mouth. Finally, its right front leg completely shattered, and it fell to the ground, skidding to a halt some distance away.

Horrific shrieks filled the Beast Forest. Meng Hao looked a bit pale-faced. He glanced around, then charged forward, leaving the Demonic Forest behind and entering the treasure mountain.

Some distance behind, Shangguan Xiu was in a tight spot, unable to free himself from the surrounding, red-eyed Demonic beasts. He could only watch as Meng Hao disappeared, his fury billowing up to the heavens.

Meng Hao left the forest, leaving behind a long trail of blood, as well as the miserable cries of the various Demonic beasts. It looked like some kind of Judgement day had just passed. The white-robed disciples stared in shock, panting and murmuring about the viciousness.

Meng Hao continued on up the treasure mountain, hoping that if he could pass over it, maybe he could finally shake off Shangguan Xiu. He moved forward at rapid speed, and soon reached the foot of the mountain. As soon as he stepped foot onto it, he suddenly stopped and stared in astonishment. Up ahead, lying beneath a boulder, was a pill bottle.

Multicolored strands of light wafted about it; it was clearly not an ordinary item. Meng Hao picked it up and opened it. Immediately, a fragrant medicinal smell wafted out. Inside was a medicinal pill the size of a thumb!

Looking shaken, Meng Hao placed the bottle into his bag of holding. Now he knew what all the white-robed disciples were doing in the area; they were trying to reach this mountain.

“That’s a Universe Spirit Pill, extremely useful to anyone in the Qi Condensation stage.” Wu Dingqiu laughed as he looked at the trail Meng Hao had left through the Demonic Forest.

Next to him, Eccentric Song had an extremely unsightly expression on his face. And yet, he let out a cold laugh. “My treasure mountain has many medicinal pills and Spirit Stones in it. This kid can grab a medicinal pill, but if he thinks he can reach the top, he’s dreaming. The Spirit Beasts on my treasure mountain are one in a million. Only the best of the best have the requisite latent talent to be placed on the mountain itself.” He spoke as lightly as ever, and yet the pain in his heart grew more and more intense.

“Look there,” said Eccentric Song, pointing at a Demonic beast that rose up ahead of Meng Hao. “That is a fierce beast which I raised myself. It has the body of a deer and the head of a python. It is extremely fast, and if it’s injured, becomes even fiercer. It will never stop fighting until it dies, and once it catches the scent of blood, it goes crazy. A Qi Condensation Cultivator who faces it will surely perish.”

After enough time passed for half an incense stick to burn, miserable shrieks drifted down the side of the mountain. Upon seeing all the blood, Eccentric Song appeared as if he might begin to go crazy. The Demonic beast which would never give up until dying gaped in astonishment, then fled at top speed. Its tail was destroyed and an eye was badly mangled. Worst of all, it only had two legs left. And yet, it still moved quickly, just as Eccentric Song had said. It fled at top speed.

Meng Hao continued forward. Having passed through another Demonic beast’s territory, he now encountered a pile of several hundred Spirit Stones. Looking excited, he continued on up the mountain.

Contented laughter rang out from Wu Dingqiu’s mouth. In fact, you could say that from Meng Hao’s appearance until now, he hadn’t stopped laughing.

“Wow, it really could move fast. Wouldn’t give up until it died!”

“No matter, no matter. There are many treasures on the mountain, this kid can grab some, but he won’t be able to leave with them. After all, he has to come back down the mountain to do that.” The words ‘no matter’ left his lips, and he looked calm, but he pulled out a Concentration Pill from his

bag and put it into his mouth. A crazed look had appeared in his eyes, and he felt a dark premonition in his heart.

An hour later ...

Meng Hao had already reached the half-way point up the mountain. The entire time, no matter what Demonic beast came his way, he would send it away screaming. There were a few dangerous situations, but with a wave and point of his iron spear, the danger would melt away. Then, heart beating, he would collect up Spirit Stones, medicinal pills, and magical items.

To Meng Hao, this entire mountain was a treasure trove. Right now, he was retrieving a scroll painting from behind a big boulder. It emanated a gentle glow along with abundant spiritual energy. It was clearly extraordinary.

Excited, he put it into his bag of holding.

Below him in the Demonic forest, more than a few Violet Fate Sect disciples lifted their heads up and caught sight of him, leaving them shocked.

As Eccentric Song watched all of this happening, his face grew darker and darker, and his body began to tremble. He stared at Meng Hao's bag of holding, inside of which were his Spirit Stones, medicinal pills, and magical treasures; especially the scroll painting. His heart hurt.

The scroll painting was a treasure he had acquired many years ago. Sealed within were the spirits of quite a few beasts. When his most beloved Demonic beast of all had died some years ago, he had sealed it within. And now, Meng Hao had taken it. Eccentric Song's body shook even more violently, so he produced two more Concentration Pills and swallowed them down.

He still struggled to maintain an unconcerned expression, but the ringing sound of Wu Dingqiu's laughter continued to pierce his eardrums.

"My treasure mountain has many treasures," he forced himself to say. "So what if a few of them get taken? He will not be able to escape the mountain. I've carefully collected these Spirit beasts from everywhere in the world. There are too many, he won't be able to escape them easily."

Two hours later...

Meng Hao had almost reached the snowy area past the mountain's halfway point. He wore an excited expression as he sped forward with even greater speed. Down in the Demonic forest, more than half of the Violet Fate Sect disciples engaged in this trial of fire could see him up there on the mountain. Expressions of surprise and envy covered their faces, especially when he stooped over to pick up things from the ground. Each and every one of them wished they could be in his place.

Shangguan Xiu stood, fists clenched, jaw clenched, completely helpless. He did not dare to go up the mountain. He was already in enough danger in the Demonic forest. Furthermore, he had overheard some of the white-robed disciples' conversations, and knew that this was a trial by fire for the disciples of the Violet Fate Sect from the Southern Domain. He felt conflict at heart, and seemed to have no other option than to give up. Only his intense hatred of Meng Hao caused him to reconsider.

As Eccentric Song watched Meng Hao injure the head of yet another of his precious Demonic beasts, he took out three Concentration Pills and swallowed them, continuing to pretend that he didn't care.

"I carefully collected that snow from the tops of auspicious clouds," he said slowly through his teeth. "It is the most suitable environment for my most treasured Spirit beasts. One of them, the Sky Rending Condor, is well known. Its talons can shatter metal and stone, its wings can kick up a violent wind. It is incredibly fierce, perhaps the most dangerous Spirit beast on the mountain. Even with that crappy spear, this kid is dead for sure when he enters its territory."

Three hours later...

One talon was shattered, half a wing was gone, and the giant condor coughed up blood. Wailing mournfully, it hid itself in the snow, crying out endlessly.

Meng Hao was almost at the peak of the mountain. All of the Violet Fate Set disciples were staring at him. They didn't care any more about fighting with the Demonic beasts. They stared in awe at his glittering, shining iron spear, and their eyes burned.

"Who is this person..."

"He intruded into our trial by fire and took away our rewards... it's too cruel."

“That iron spear is definitely a treasure from the Heavens! It’s so ferocious!”

Eccentric Song trembled in distress. He watched as Meng Hao, approaching the mountain’s peak, snatched up a black net. He could no longer feign calm. He stood up and took a step forward, ready to go teach Meng Hao a lesson.

Chapter 52: Bumper Crop

Once, he could endure. Twice, three times, four times, even five times he could continue to endure. By the sixth time, however, he was shamed into a rage and could endure no longer. The Heaven Entangling Net was even more precious to him than the scroll painting. It could instantly entangle an opponent, and had been among his treasured items for years. The higher your Cultivation base, the more effective it became. He had placed it on the treasure mountain to show off its splendor, so that people would see it and covet it. He had assumed it would be safe, and had never imagined that anyone would actually be able to take it. As of now, he had already begun to go crazy, and wished nothing more than to beat Meng Hao to death and take back the oil painting and Heaven Entangling Net.

But then, Wu Dingqiu, laughing smugly, flicked his wide sleeve and stood in front of Eccentric Song, blocking his way.

“Fellow Daoist Song is an illustrious Cultivator from the Southern Domain. What are you doing, exactly? Earlier, you said that for seven days, anyone could come here, and that all of the treasures of the treasure mountain were available for the taking. Don’t tell me you’re going to go back on your word?”

“You carried the peak over here yourself from Mount Tian Shan. The land was fertilized with soil from the bottom of the East Sea which hadn’t seen the light of day for ten thousand years. I remember someone saying that any Cultivator of the Qi Condensation stage could prevail, as long as they were skilled enough. Eccentric Song, acting like this really shows a lack of demeanor. If word gets out, you’ll definitely lose face.” Wu Dingqiu continued to laugh, clearly having no intention of allowing Eccentric Song to go anywhere.

Eccentric Song’s expression looked worse than ever, filled with bitter suffering. Before, he had spoken with utmost complacency, but now, everything he had said was being thrown back in his face. After a long moment, he slapped his bag of holding, pulled out two large Concentration Pills and swallowed them. Then he let out a long breath.

Suddenly, his eyes flashed, and he cast his consciousness out toward Meng Hao, intending to get some information about his iron spear. At first, he hadn’t paid the slightest attention to Meng Hao,

focused as he was on what the iron spear was doing. As soon as his consciousness emerged, Wu Dingqiu laughed and flicked his sleeve. A glowing shield immediately covered the entire plateau, blocking Eccentric Song's consciousness.

"Using your consciousness to inspect a lower generation Qi Condensation Cultivator? Eccentric Song, are you purposely trying to lose face?" Wu Dingqiu obviously was not willing to let Eccentric Song have his way in anything. He laughed. Eccentric Song, looking more put off than ever, could do nothing except flick his own sleeve. Another shield appeared just beyond the first shield.

"That kid's iron spear is extraordinary," he said. "If you won't allow me to inspect it with my consciousness, then I won't let you do so either."

Four hours later, Meng Hao had reached the mountain's peak, iron spear in hand. He walked up, look around, finally noticing the large flag stuck into the ground. Underneath the flag was a bag. Its surface was a mass of rioting colors; looking at it made you feel as if it could suck your mind out. Everything around it seemed to ripple and grow blurry. When Meng Hao laid eyes on it, he palpitated with eagerness and started panting. He grabbed the multicolored bag, and when he did, the flag fell to the ground.

Conversations had buzzed among the onlookers in the Demonic Forest as they watched Meng Hao calmly walked up the mountain, collecting huge amounts of Spirit Stones and medicinal pills. When the flag toppled more conversations broke out.

They gazed at Meng Hao with shock and envy, and then watched as he disappeared over the other side of the mountain.

Shangguan Xiu glared at Meng Hao murderously as he vanished. He didn't dare to pursue him; there were too many things about him he didn't know. Even though Shangguan Xiu's desire to kill him was stronger than ever, he also knew that it was almost too late to reach his medicinal plant. Gnashing his teeth, he stamped his foot onto the ground, looking very pitiful indeed. But anger pushed away his depression. He would have killed Meng Hao already, if he could only have thought of a way.

As he watched Meng Hao disappear onto the other side of the mountain, Wu Dingqiu's laughter rang out over the plateau. Eccentric Song stared with wide eyes as Meng Hao took his bag of the Cosmos. The blood drained from his face, and he seemed heartbroken. Now more than ever he regretted putting his bag of the Cosmos onto the mountain. He just couldn't believe what had happened. This time, he really couldn't endure any longer. He flicked his sleeve, and prepared to

pursue the damnable Meng Hao. But, before he could leave, Wu Dingqiu once again blocked his way.

“Wu Dingqiu, you still dare to block me!” shouted heartbroken Eccentric Song. “The flag is fallen. You didn’t win our bet, and I didn’t lose. The trial by fire is over. If you continue to obstruct my way, you can’t blame me for attacking you!”

“Fellow Daoist Song, we agreed ahead of time that neither of us would leave before we finished this game of Go. You are a grand, illustrious Cultivator of the Southern Domain. Don’t tell me you’re going to go back on your word? When I made to leave earlier, you wouldn’t let me. Yet you wish to leave before finishing our game?” Wu Dingqiu laughed as he used Eccentric Song’s own words against him. Not a trace of a frown remained on his face, which was now filled with a wide smile. He clearly would not allow the other man to leave. Seeing the bag of the Cosmos taken away had filled his heart with joy. Eccentric Song had waved that bag in front of him mockingly for hundreds of years; to see him hoisted on his own petard was wondrous to the extreme.

“You...” Eccentric Song glared murderously at Wu Dingqiu, and didn’t say anything for a long moment. Then, he gritted his teeth and stamped his foot down, shaking the mountain so hard it seemed it would collapse. But considering his status and prestige, he could do nothing more than sit back down and begin playing Go again.

Of course, Wu Dingqiu wouldn’t let him have his way so simply. He stroked his beard as he looked at Eccentric Song’s unsightly expression. Laughing, he very slowly picked up a Go piece and then purposefully put a very thoughtful expression onto his face. After a very, very long time, he slowly put the piece onto the board, his face solemn, as if he intended to make this game last for months.

“Leave the mountain,” said Wu Dingqiu, transmitting his voice to all of his white-robed disciples. “After I finish this game of Go, I will accompany you back to the Sect. In the meantime, the next stage of your trial by fire is to find the man you just saw on the mountain peak. I’ve taken a fancy to that treasured spear he has. Bring that spear back to me, and you will be promoted to the Inner Sect!” Each and every one of the disciples perked up at hearing this.

“Is the dignified Violet Fate Sect of the Southern Domain really going to kill people to take treasures?” said Eccentric Song. He was incredibly depressed, stuck in place because of his own words. But even though he hated Meng Hao, he couldn’t pass up an opportunity to cause trouble for Wu Dingqiu.

Glaring at Eccentric Song, Wu Dingqiu said, "Listen well. You must not cause problems for that person. You must trade with him, not rob him. Anyone who violates this command will be expelled from the Sect!" His next move in the Go game was even slower than the previous.

The Violet Fate Sect disciples scattered in all directions. Some of them circled around the treasure mountain in pursuit of Meng Hao; others went as fast as possible in different directions, hoping to intercept him.

Their trial by fire had been an utter defeat, something they were not reconciled to. However, they didn't hold any ill will against Meng Hao, but rather admired him. After all, they had all witnessed the blood-soaked events of moments ago.

All of them were determined to get the iron spear from Meng Hao. They would trade anything to get it, and if he was unwilling to trade, would have to think of some tricks to get it.

In any case, they all had clearly heard Elder Wu's words; they were to trade for the item, not rob it. Although... he had never said they couldn't use force.

As the white-robed disciples scattered, Meng Hao raced down the treasure mountain, collecting more Spirit Stones and medicinal pills as he went. Even though he never saw Eccentric Song and Wu Dingqiu, he had guessed that this place was most likely a trial by fire region set up by some Sect.

Even though Shangguan Xiu was no longer chasing him, he knew that whoever's trial by fire he had charged into might not be too happy about his interference. So, he maintained top speed, his heart pounding and his face filled with eagerness.

His bags of holding were all full; he had acquired more this time than on any other occasion since entering the Cultivation world, with the exception of the cave of the Flying Rain-Dragon. He casually packed away the Spirit Stones and medicinal pills.

Of course, the more things he picked up, the faster he tried to move. Gritting his teeth and continuously consuming Demonic Cores, he moved as fast as possible for three days, until he finally emerged from the mountain range. He looked both exhausted and energetic; in the past several days, he hadn't had a chance to organize his treasures, and now all he wanted to do was find a place where he could safely examine everything. As he moved forward, he noticed that far in the distance was what appeared to be a walled city.

He was in the east of the State of Zhao, and this city appeared to be magnificent and beyond ordinary. It was surrounded by a gentle glowing light, a shield which mortals wouldn't be able to see, and only Cultivators could sense.

"This place... it doesn't seem like a city of mortals. Could it be a city of Cultivators?" He stared in surprise, recalling a map of the State of Zhao he had seen. The map had not shown any city in this place. At yet there at the gate of the city, people were coming in and out, almost all of them Cultivators of the Qi Condensation stage. His assumption had been correct.

He decided not to enter the city. Instead, he found a cave in the nearby mountains. Concealing himself inside, he took a deep breath and then began to take everything out of his bags of holding and sort them.

"What medicinal pill is this? It's incredibly fragrant, even stronger than a Dry Spirit Pill... And this bottle, it has three pills inside, each one as transparent as crystal. They are definitely treasured pills." Licking his lips, he emptied the contents of two bags of holding, and after counting everything, he found that he had seventy-eight pills. There were many different types, each one seemingly stronger than a Dry Spirit Pill. Meng Hao's hands shook.

It took a long time for him to collect himself. Stifling his excitement, he pulled out ten more bags of holding.

"There were so many Spirit Stones on that treasure mountain. I just picked up the ones I noticed, and I wasn't really even paying attention. Yet I acquired so many..." He began breathing hard again as he looked at all the Spirit Stones. When he put them together and counted, he found that he had eight thousand, seven hundred and sixty four!

"I'm rich! Rich!" he murmured. He pulled out another bag of holding, inside of which were flying swords, pearls, two flags, a scroll painting, a black net. All of them were magical items.

His smile nearly split his face as he took the items out. This was especially true when he took out the scroll painting and the black net. They emitted powerful spiritual power, causing his heart to beat rapidly. He slowly unrolled the scroll painting, and a bright light shined out, filling the cave with its brightness and illuminating Meng Hao's face.

Inside, he could see a depiction of mountains and waters, within which existed a multitude of fantastic creatures. They had been painted, and yet somehow also seemed alive. When he opened the scroll he seemed to hear the roars of tens of thousands of beasts echoing faintly in his ears. His heart shook, and he dropped the painting to the ground.

After some time passed, he recovered from his shock. His eyes shining, he calmed his aura and picked up the painting again to examine it. It was clearly an incredibly valuable treasure. Meng Hao's heart beat even faster.

“A treasure! What a true treasure!” he said, breathing deeply. Then he pulled out the black net. Walking out of the cave, he poured some spiritual energy into it, then tossed it into the air.

The black net instantly expanded, growing larger and larger, and flying up higher into the sky. It seemed big enough to be able to envelop the whole mountain, like some powerful black cloud. The mountain began to shake, and cracks appeared on its surface as if it were about to collapse. The suppressive power increased, causing Meng Hao's heart to tremble. Astonished, he lifted his hand, sending out his spiritual energy, causing the black cloud to slowly shrink. It transformed into a black beam which shot back toward him and then became a small, black net.

He grabbed the net, his mouth dry. He breathed for a while, composing himself. His eyes glowed.

“This is better than even the best treasures from the Reliance Sect,” he thought, his heart pounding. Then, he pulled out the last item, the multicolored bag.

Chapter 53: How will you thank me?

“This... looks kind of like a bag of holding, but a bit better.” Meng Hao moved it back and forth in his hands, then used his spiritual power to feel it out a bit. Suddenly, his body began to tremble, as if it had been struck by invisible lightning. His eyes widened, revealing complete astonishment. After a long time passed, he lowered his head and looked into the bag.

“It's so big...” he murmured. It was a bag of holding, but was so large inside that it seemed as if it could contain heaven and earth. The insides were misty, and so boundless that Meng Hao's heart immediately shook.

It appeared as if entire mountains and rivers could be stored inside. Even though it was empty, its massive capacity was enough to call the bag itself a precious treasure.

Meng Hao's mouth and tongue were dry. The Spirit Stones had made him happy. The medicinal pills had made him quiver with eagerness. And then there were the magical items. The scroll painting had shocked him and the spiritual might of the black colored net had left him shaken. But this bag left his head buzzing. It took a long time to pull himself together.

“I’m rich. This is true wealth...” Meng Hao muttered to himself, gripping the multicolored bag tightly. But then the expression on his face suddenly changed.

“If that was truly some great Sect’s trial by fire, it wouldn’t be a big deal if I interfered, but they surely won’t let me get away with so many treasures, medicinal pills and Spirit Stones.” His heart began to thump, and a conflicted look appeared on his head. However, he was determined not to give up the treasures he had acquired.

He organized everything carefully, then breathed in deeply and looked out at the evening. He emerged from the cave and left the mountains, looking thoughtfully at the walled city off in the distance.

“I have a lot of medicinal pills,” he muttered to himself as he gazed at the city with glittering eyes, “but I don’t recognize any of them. Therefore, I can’t safely consume any of them.” He began to walk toward the city.

He moved quickly, and soon approached the city gate, above which were written three characters.

Eastern Refinement City.

The characters had an ancient feel to them, and had clearly been there for more than just a few years. Their faded surfaces made one feel as if they had seen ages come and go.

“Refinement is similar to Cultivation. And this is the East. The meaning of this city’s name is relatively straight-forward.” [TL note: The character for “Refinement” is pronounced similar to the character for “Cultivation.”]

As soon as Meng Hao stepped foot into the city gate, he saw two disciples standing there chatting. Their gaze settled onto Meng Hao.

They wore light blue robes and were both at the third level of Qi Condensation.

“Fellow Daoist, please pay your tax before entering the city.” His smile disappeared as he felt the pressure of Meng Hao’s Cultivation base.

“Fellow Daoists, I can tell from a glance that you are from a great Sect. I myself am from a small Sect, and I just came off the mountain. This being my first time here, could I trouble you two Fellow Daoists to give me some information about this place?” Meng Hao was innately scholarly, and spoke in a very polite manner. The two low-level Cultivators were instantly impressed, and the young man who had just spoken laughed.

“Well spoken, well spoken! Fellow Daoist, your Cultivation base is quite refined. If this is your first time out of the Sect, then I suspect your name will become quite well-known in the future.” The young man smiled as he spoke. For someone with such a profound Cultivation base to treat him so politely left him feeling quite pleased. “This is Eastern Refinement City, founded by the Three Great Sect Alliance of the State of Zhao, and one of the great Cultivation Cities in the State of Zhao. In order to enter, you have to pay a tax of one Spirit Stone.

“The cost is actually three Spirit Stones, but for you, just one will do. Please note, fighting is forbidden within the city limits. Violators will be punished severely by the three Sects. You must not forget this point.” He held out a wooden tablet to Meng Hao.

Meng Hao thanked him hurriedly and paid his one Spirit Stone. Then, he saluted with clasped hands and passed through the city gate.

He felt a bit of regret about the Spirit Stone. It was only one, but it was still money as far as Meng Hao was concerned. He might have over eight-thousand more in his bag, but he was very familiar with the copper mirror’s appetite for Spirit Stones, and knew that it wasn’t actually very much at all.

“What an expensive tax. If I didn’t absolutely have to come here, I wouldn’t pay it.” He walked quickly through the city, looking around. Dusk was falling, but the city still bustled, with people walking to and fro everywhere. The streets were filled with shops, most of which emitted brightly glowing lights. A single look confirmed that this was no ordinary place.

Everyone was a Cultivator. As he walked through the city, he didn’t see a single mortal. However, all of these Cultivators were of the Qi Condensation stage. Scanning the crowds, Meng Hao only saw about three people who, like him, were at the seventh level. Most were at the sixth, or lower.

Meng Hao walked down the broad streets, looking for shops that sold medicinal pills. He didn’t buy any, but rather asked questions. Three days passed, during which time Meng Hao traversed the entire city, visiting over thirty medicinal pill shops.

Even still, he only could find out information about seven or eight of the dozens of types of medicinal pills in his bag of holding. And yet, Meng Hao was excited. Of the pills he had learned

about, each and every one was considerably expensive. One of them was a Spirit Establishment Pill, worth fifty Spirit Stones, only useful at the seventh level of Qi Condensation.

In his bag of holding, he had eight of them altogether.

“Too bad there are so many pills that I still don’t know anything about.” On the third day, Meng Hao hesitated, then finally walked into an extremely luxurious building in the western district of the city.

It was three stories tall and emitted a glowing light. Even from a long distance, one could see its shine. Before, Meng Hao noticed that almost everyone who entered was of the sixth level of Qi condensation. There were even some of the eighth or ninth levels, and it seemed this was the only building they were willing to enter.

When he saw the name on the building, he was even more resolved to enter.

Hundred Treasures Pavilion.

The inside was filled with carved balustrades and marble steps. Everything seemed to be made of jade, and as soon as he stepped inside, Meng Hao instantly felt a dense spiritual force brush against his face. A dazzling assortment of displayed items met his eyes; medicinal pill bottles, flying swords, pearls, banners and other items could be seen everywhere.

There weren’t a lot of Cultivators present, so it was relatively quiet. They walked around separately in groups of four or five, each one accompanied by a young woman wearing a long, pink dress. The girls’ voices were light and airy, and they humbly answered all queries about the various items.

None of that was of very much interest to Meng Hao, though. What really captured his attention was some distance away on the second floor. Next to the stair case was an enormous Pill furnace. Wisps of smoke curled around it, and sitting next to it was a middle-aged man in a long black robe. He sat there cross-legged, back straight, expressionless, doing breathing exercises with his eyes closed.

He emanated a trace amount of power, but it was difficult to sense, as if he were keeping most of it hidden. If he didn’t, the entire pavilion would probably begin to collapse.

“A Foundation Establishment Cultivator...” Meng Hao’s pupils constricted. This middle-aged man emitted the same type of aura as Grand Elder Ouyang, making it immediately obvious to Meng Hao that his Cultivation base was at the Foundation Establishment stage, far above everyone else’s.

“I wonder if the day will ever come in which I have a chance to be a Foundation Establishment Cultivator.” After all the things he had experienced in the Reliance Sect, his heart was filled with the desire to become powerful. Right now, his head was lowered, but his eyes were filled with determination and stubbornness. His resolve was even stronger than ever.

“By using the Cultivation method of the Sublime Spirit Scripture, when reach Foundation Establishment, it will be a Flawless Foundation, much more powerful than Cracked or Fragmented. I will be strong even among Foundation Establishment stage Cultivators.” He took in a deep breath and raised his head. A young woman in a pink dress approached him. She was beautiful, and wore a relaxed smile on her face. She greeted Meng Hao with a slight bow. As she did, the front of her dress dropped, revealing an abundance of milky tenderness.

“Daoist Brother, do you need any assistance?” she asked.

Meng Hao’s face immediately turned scarlet, and he murmured to himself that he shouldn’t look at inappropriate things. Despite his determination, he couldn’t help but glance down, and his heart began to race. Even though he had been in the Reliance Sect for three years, he hadn’t spent time with any female disciples other than Elder Sister Xu. As for what he was looking at now he hadn’t seen anything like it in his entire life. His face was a bit dark, but at the moment you couldn’t tell at all.

“Do you have any jade slips which describe medicinal pills?” he asked with a dry cough, trying to cover up his embarrassment.

The girl was young, but her demeanor suggested she was quite experienced. She could instantly sense Meng Hao’s awkwardness, and was quite amused. Throughout her years, she had seen many customers, but few like Meng Hao. Holding back a laugh, she smiled and leaned closer toward him so that he would catch a scent of her perfume.

When the fragrant scent reached his face, Meng Hao’s face grew even redder. His eyes, however, contained no lasciviousness. Instead they were wide and clear; he was fundamentally not given to lust. He was just inexperienced with women, thus his flushed face.

“Of course we have jade slips regarding medicinal pills,” she said with a wink. “Please follow me, Daoist Brother.” She found his increasing awkwardness to be very cute. She turned, her waist

swaying, her curves entrancing. Meng Hao couldn't help but look, and again his heart began to race. With a bitter smile, he gave a light cough and hurried to follow her.

She led him to a lattice shelf off to the side which was filled with various pieces of jade. Amongst them, on a white tray, were three slips of jade, inscribed with the characters Three Jade Slip. "These jade slips introduce most of the medicinal pills that can be found in the State of Zhao. However, this is a copy, so the contents are somewhat unclear."

When she saw Meng Hao raising his hand to take them, she smiled. "You can't look unless you buy. The Three Jade Slip costs one hundred spirit stones." When she smiled, two beautiful dimples appeared. As she looked at Meng Hao, she thought that even though his face was a bit dark, it contained a scholarly and youthful charm.

As her perfume wafted around Meng Hao, he pulled his hand back and focused himself. He looked thoughtfully at the Three Jade Piece. It seemed just a bit too expensive, and he was hesitant to part with that many Spirit Stones.

"Is there anything that provides even more information than this?" he asked after a while, clenching his jaw. His whole purpose in coming here had been to buy a jade slip such as this.

"Of course!" replied the girl with another wink. "Follow me." She led Meng Hao to another corner, then pointed to a jade slip on a shelf. It was covered with small cracks.

"This is not a copy. It's an ancient jade slip which contains records of the various medicinal pills of the Southern Domain. It even details information about poison pills and their antidotes. Furthermore, it contains very realistic artistic depictions of the pills. Unfortunately, it is cracked, and will eventually shatter. You will only be able to read it four or five times."

Upon hearing her words, Meng Hao's heart quivered. He needed it, not for long-term use, but to solve the problem of his current situation.

"Daoist Brother, I hope you don't mind," she said with a smile, leaning close and lowering her voice. "The cost of this item is two hundred Spirit Stones. You should understand that if it wasn't cracked, it would be worth over one thousand. If you really want it, I can help you apply for a cost reduction. But, how will you thank me?"

Chapter 54: An Old Friend from the Sect

"I... I'm just a scholar..." Meng Hao gaped, his mouth wide, unsure of how to respond. When he had bought things back in Yunjie County, he had never encountered a situation like this. To have a beautiful girl smiling sweetly at him, looking so charming, caused the red flush to suddenly fill his face once again.

Seeing Meng Hao's embarrassed expression, the young woman covered her mouth and laughed softly. She turned, her waist swaying enchantingly as she walked over to the Pill oven. She lowered her head to speak to the middle-aged man who sat there in meditation.

When she returned, she winked at Meng Hao. "How about one hundred seventy Spirit Stones?"

"Many thanks, Fellow Daoist," said Meng Hao, sucking in a breath. Looking pleased at having saved a few Spirit stones, he quickly saluted with clasped fists.

"You can call me big sis," she said, holding the jade slips out to Meng Hao.

He accepted them, then cast some spiritual power into them. Immediately a vast tableau appeared in his mind. Glancing over it eagerly, he already noticed three of the pills that were contained in his bag of holding. He pulled out the one hundred seventy Spirit Stones and gave them to the girl, then cupped his hands together as he made to leave. The girl sighed and escorted him all the way to the door.

"My name is Qiao Ling," she said, her eyes filled with an interesting look. "Remember to ask for me next time you come." She looked him up and down as she spoke, her eyes charming and filled with poise. Meng Hao, face scarlet, saluted her and retreated as quickly as possible.

His heart pounded as he left, and didn't calm down for quite some time. He looked back at the Hundred Treasures Pavilion and caught sight of Qiao Ling standing there smiling softly at him.

He felt even more embarrassed. She had taken liberties with him!

He had never experienced a feeling such as this before. It wasn't a bad feeling, and he actually enjoyed it a bit. Coughing again, he lowered his head and continued walking.

About this time, a group of people emerged from the second floor of the Hundred Treasure's Pavilion. There were about seven or eight of them, including men and women. As they walked, they

chatted with each other. Among them was a young man wearing a light blue robe, walking in the back. He didn't look like he belonged, as if he were an attendant.

As the group left the pavilion, the young man happened to lift his head and catch sight of Meng Hao.

"Meng Hao!" he cried, staring. This caught the attention of the other men and women, as well as Meng Hao, who stopped walking and looked back to see all of them looking at him.

His expression did not change, but in his heart he felt conflicting emotions. The young man was none other than Zhou Kai, former disciple of the Reliance Outer Sect. His Cultivation base was at the fifth level of Qi Condensation. On the day of the Sect's dissolution, he had been rolled out by the red fog, and here he was today.

He seemed to be somewhat down and out, following a group of people dressed in expensive, brocaded garments. Most of them had threatening demeanors, and one of them was at the seventh level of Qi Condensation. The rest appeared to be at the sixth. They were clearly members of the great Sects of the State of Zhao.

Obviously, Zhou Kai had joined them after the dissolution of the Reliance Sect. For him to be with group such as this, he obviously could only claim the status of an attendant.

Meng Hao nodded to him but didn't say anything. He turned and made to leave.

"Who is this?" said a young man who stood next to Zhou Kai. He spoke lightly, but his tone was one of pride and arrogance. He wore a resplendent robe and held a fan in his hand. He was at the seventh level of Qi Condensation, and the others standing around them began to whisper among themselves and watch.

"Elder Brother Sun, this is a fellow member of my former Sect," said Zhou Kai hesitatingly, not mentioning Meng Hao's name or his status in the Sect.

"Meng Hao... that name sounds familiar."

"I remember," said one of the women in the group with a laugh. "He's the only remaining member of the Reliance Inner Sect. He looks a lot like the drawing."

The eyes of all the onlookers suddenly began to shine. Two people dashed ahead to block Meng Hao's path. In recent days in the Cultivation world of the State of Zhao, rumors of a shocking matter had been circulating.

The Reliance Sect had disbanded, but Patriarch Reliance wasn't dead. He had put on a display of power all for the sake of a single Inner Sect disciple. He had frightened the most powerful experts of the State of Zhao, causing a huge sensation. After the experts had returned from the scene, these rumors had spread across the entire Cultivation world of the State of Zhao.

Even more hotly discussed was how Patriarch Reliance had given his Inner Sect disciple a precious treasure, something powerful enough to shake the heavens and earth and kill any and all Cultivators. These rumors spread fast and wide, and as inquiries were made of the former Reliance Sect disciples, this person's name was soon revealed: Meng Hao.

If things had just ended in this fashion, then the matter would soon have come to rest. However, after returning from the Reliance Sect, the State of Zhao experts gradually realized something. Toward the end, it had seemed as if Patriarch Reliance's power had begun to wane slightly. Furthermore, considering Patriarch Reliance's famous temper, how could it be that they all were able to escape, without a single one of them being killed?

Speculation naturally blossomed, and many people began to pay more and more attention to the Inner Sect disciple Meng Hao. The three great Sects had issued orders that all disciples sent out of the Sect pay close attention and attempt to find Meng Hao. His picture had been distributed along with the order.

Now, people weren't certain. Even if Patriarch Reliance was alive, was his Cultivation base as powerful as before? Filled with misgivings about the matter, the three great Sects had proclaimed rewards would be given to any disciple who, upon encountering Meng Hao, could get information about the power of the treasure he carried.

Meng Hao stood there, looking coldly at the two people blocking his way. He heard footsteps behind him as four others blocked his path of retreat. His left and right paths also contained people. It seemed he was completely surrounded.

Within the Hundred Treasures Pavilion, Qiao Ling looked down with a frown.

“May I help you, sirs and ladies?” said Meng Hao coolly, his gaze sweeping around. His expression seemed indifferent, as calm as still water. He seemed completely confident, yet also cautious.

“No,” said the extravagantly dressed young man with a smile, fanning himself. “We’ve just heard that Meng Hao has a gift bestowed upon him by Patriarch Reliance. Having happened to run into you, we were hoping to take a look.” Within his smile glinted an icy coldness. And yet, his heart was circumspect; any treasured gift given by Patriarch Reliance should be treated with utmost caution.

But, these were disciples of the three Great Sects, which granted them extremely high status. Therefore, despite Meng Hao being at the seventh level of Qi Condensation, they still felt themselves above him.

“That’s right,” said another of the people surrounding him. He laughed. “Fellow Daoist Meng does have the treasure. Why not take it out for us to have a look?” He clearly viewed Meng Hao as being completely boxed in, with no way out.

Meng Hao looked as calm as ever, his eyes shining with a cold light. His mouth twisted mockingly, and he suddenly slapped his bag of holding, causing the people surrounding him to dodge to the side. Some of them even pulled out magical items.

A beam of light flashed, and suddenly, Meng Hao’s iron spear appeared in his hand. He stabbed it down into the ground, imbuing it with some spiritual energy so that it appeared to be a mighty weapon. It hummed, the sound reverberating about, causing the surrounding people to unconsciously take a step back, their gazes fixed on the spear.

“Whoever wishes to die can come up for a closer look,” said Meng Hao coolly, taking two steps back and flicking his wide sleeve. He appeared supremely confident, especially his mocking eyes and smile, as if he knew beyond doubt that anyone who attempted to look closely at the spear would be killed by it.

Actually, Meng Hao had taken two steps back because it brought him closer to the city gate. As soon as the surrounding people walked forward to look at the spear, he would attack, then take advantage of the chaos to flee. After all, this city was controlled by the three great Sects, and he knew that he could not get involved in any trouble here.

Everything was quiet as the onlookers gazed at the iron spear. At first glance, it did appear to be a bit beyond ordinary. It was covered with sweeping, decorative patterns, incredibly complex, dazzling even. The more people looked at it, the more amazing it seemed.

It glowed, its tip emitting beams of light which pierced the eyes like lightning.

Even Qiao Ling, up in the Hundred Treasures Pavilion, couldn't help but gaze at it. More girls appeared around her, all of them staring down.

After looking at it for a while, the several disciples from the great Sects frowned.

“It doesn't look like anything special; there are just some fancy markings on it. It doesn't seem to have any incantations on it at all....”

The fancy young man with the fan also frowned. “That's the treasure given to him by Patriarch Reliance?” After examining it, he laughed, then beckoned for Zhou Kai to step forward.

At this moment, the sound of footsteps could be heard from outside the East gate, drawing the attention of the surrounding Cultivators. Meng Hao's eyes flashed, and then he frowned. Clustered outside the East gate was a group of ten or more Cultivators wearing white robes. Some of them looked familiar, and when he saw the color of their robes, he knew that these were the disciples from whatever great Sect had been holding the trial by fire.

As he saw them entering through the East gate, he realized that his path of escape was now blocked. His frown deepened, and his hand slowly lowered to his bag of holding.

The fancy young man with the fan looked at the white robed Cultivators, and his eyes gleamed. His face filled with reverence, he cupped his hands in salute and said, “Elder Brothers from the Violet Fate Sect, I am humble Sun Hua [1. Sun Hua's name in Chinese is 孙华 sūn huá - Sun is a common surname. Hua can mean many things in names, most likely "magnificent" or "splendid"] from the Winding Stream Sect. Greetings, Fellow Daoists.”

Hearing this, looks of awe appeared on the faces of the surrounding Cultivators. They followed along with the first man as he saluted the white-robed Cultivators. They were famous figures from various Sects, and normally held a high position within the State of Zhao. But to meet disciples from a truly great Sect from the Southern Domain, they were instantly lowered down. Their expressions were suddenly that of longing and courtesy.

Recently, they had all received jade slips from their respective Sects reminding them that if they ran into any white-robed disciples from the Violet Fate Sect of the Southern Domain, they were not to provoke them.

As the white-robed Cultivators entered the city, they saw the State of Zhao disciples, but completely ignored them. Hearing their identities called out caused a couple of them to frown. Their eyes swept the surroundings, then came to rest on the iron spear stuck into the ground. They stopped in their tracks.

Other disciples who were watching the scene looked astonished. Their excited eyes flickered to stare at the State of Zhao Cultivators.

Chapter 55: Overbearing

A dark look flashed through Meng Hao's eyes. He was surrounded by disciples of various Sects from the State of Zhao, and the white-robed Cultivators were approaching from the East gate. If he aroused the attention of the various eccentrics from the three sects within the city, then his chances of getting away would be very slim.

When the disciples of the State of Zhao Sects saw the Violet Fate Sect disciples walking up, excited expressions lit their faces. To be able to make friends with them would increase their standing in their own respective Sects, and would provide great advantages in further development. Most of them had assumed the Violet Fate Sect disciples would ignore all of them, but it turned out they really were approaching them.

“Elder Brother Sun is very well known; that must be why they're coming over.”

“Yeah. He's a blood relative of one of the Elders of the Winding Stream Sect. His Cultivation base is extraordinary. The Violet Fate Sect disciples must be coming over to give him some face.” One by one, ingratiating smiles appeared on the faces of the surrounding State of Zhao disciples, especially the young man in the expensive clothes. He was growing more and more excited. Hearing the whispers of the bystanders, his heart filled with pride. It seemed he was fairly well-known after all, enough so to cause the Violet Fate Sect disciples to walk over. This matter would surely be talked about near and far, and his standing in the Sect would change immediately. His name would be known throughout the entire Cultivation world of the State of Zhao.

It seemed that to Meng Hao, what was happening was no big deal. He smiled, looking like he didn't care at all. As the young man in expensive clothes moved forward to greet the white-robed Cultivators, the State of Zhao disciples followed. The female disciples among them looked especially excited.

Meng Hao's eyes flickered. He pulled the iron spear out of the ground, and then turned to leave.

“Daoist Brothers from the Violet Fate Sect, I, Sun, shall treat you to a feast in the Phoenix Heaven Restaurant,” said Sun Hua, his expression one of extreme excitement and pride. “Fellow State of Zhao disciples, please join me in receiving the brothers from the Violet Fate Sect.” The collection of Cultivators behind him made the image even more distinct. Coupled with his excited expression, it was clear that he was taking the lead among the State of Zhao disciples.

Even as the words left his mouth, and he bowed with cupped hands, the Violet Fate Sect disciples walked past him, not even looking at him. En masse, they passed the entire group without a glance, hurrying quickly forward.

Sun Hua's mouth dropped open as he watched this happen, as did the other State of Zhao disciples who were following him.

At the same time, the person in the lead position of the Violet Fate Sect disciples let out a hearty laugh.

“Fellow Daoist, please stay,” he said. “Brother, did you just return from the treasure mountain? You have an outstanding demeanor. All of us who witnessed your actions on the mountain hold you in the highest regard. I am Qian Shuihen [1. Qian Shuihen's name in Chinese is 千水痕 qiān shuǐ hén - Qian is a surname which also means "1,000." Shui hen literally means "water mark"] of the Violet Fate Sect. Greetings, Fellow Daoist, may I respectfully ask your esteemed name?”

“Fellow Daoist, we've been looking for you,” said another. “We never imagined that we would run into you here. Hahaha! If the Fellow Daoist has time, I will send someone to arrange a banquet. I am Lu Song [2. Lu Song's name in Chinese is 吕宋 lǚ sòng - Lu is a common surname. Song has no real meaning. It's the same "Song" as the Song Dynasty] of the Violet Fate Sect. Please, allow me to treat you to a feast.”

Among the ten or more Violet Fate Sect disciples, these two had the highest Cultivation bases. They were at the eighth level of Qi Condensation. Faces filled with smiles, they hurried in front of Meng Hao, blocking his way. The spoke with utmost politeness, and when they approached, they saluted with clasped hands. When the State of Zhao disciples saw this happening; their faces filled with awe and veneration.

An almost imperceptible frown appeared on Meng Hao's face, but quickly disappeared. He smiled, and returned a polite salute. He mumbled his name unclearly, although he knew that even though he didn't say it clearly, these people could search him easily if they wanted to.

The State of Zhao Cultivators watched on in disbelief. Their heads spun as they watched the Violet Fate Sect disciples chatting in this way to Meng Hao.

This was especially true of Sun Hua, whose face went through a series of different expressions. He was insulted, of course, and watched Meng Hao with a look of disbelief.

He knew that the white-robed Cultivators were from the Violet Fate Sect in the Southern Domain. They were proud and arrogant, considering themselves to be unmatched in the world. And yet, they were incredibly polite to Meng Hao, and their eyes were filled with veneration.

Although he wasn't quite sure what had just happened, cold sweat broke out on his forehead when he saw them being so polite. He realized that if he had made a move just now to test out the spear, he would most likely have lost a lot of face.

He wasn't the only one who was shocked. Zhou Kai looked on, dumbfounded. Originally, he had regretted calling out Meng Hao's name, but watching this scene unfold, his eyes filled with admiration.

"Elder Brother Meng really did deserve to be an Inner Sect disciple. It's a good thing I gave him those Spirit Stones back then. The Sect was dissolved, and we were kicked away like stray dogs, but he's still out stirring up trouble. And somehow he's got the disciples from one of the great Sects of the Southern Domain to treat him so well." Zhou Kai sighed inwardly.

Up in the Hundred Treasures Pavilion, Qiao Ling blinked a few times, watching in disbelief as the Violet Fate Sect disciples surrounded Meng Hao. When she saw him speaking calmly with them, she couldn't forget what had happened moments ago between her and Meng Hao. Her interest in him was piqued even more.

"Elder Brother Meng," said Qian Shuihen, shifting the conversation topic to the spear in Meng Hao's hand. "Is this the treasured holy spear you used to rebuke the Demonic beasts on the treasure mountain?" He had looked the spear over just now, but it didn't seem to have any extraordinary qualities. And yet he clearly remembered how Meng Hao had wielded it to bloody so many Demonic beasts.

“Of course it is,” said Lu Song, laughing. “Your actions on the mountain that day left me in complete veneration of you. Elder Brother Meng, there’s no reason to deny it.”

A strange look appeared in Meng Hao’s eyes, but only for a moment. He smiled and nodded.

“Yes, this is the spear I used that day on the mountain,” he said candidly.

“This spear can only be called a great treasure,” said Lu Song. “I saw you use it to injure many Demonic beasts. Countless, in fact. Elder Brother Meng’s mighty actions have replayed themselves constantly in my mind.” He glanced at the spear, his eyes burning. Then he looked over coldly at Qian Shuihen, and the two of them locked gazes. They clearly didn’t like each other, and both of them knew that the other was determined to come out on top.

When the State of Zhao Cultivators heard all of this, their gazes were drawn to the iron spear. Their original intention had been to examine this treasure of Meng Hao’s. As of now, they didn’t need to. If the Violet Fate Sect disciples were convinced of its power, then it must be true.

Sun Hua’s eyes gleamed, and he walked forward a few steps, staring at the iron spear.

“Although, I do have to say,” laughed Lu Song with a shake of his head, “Elder Brother Meng, you really threw our trial by fire into chaos. You took so many medicinal pills, Spirit Stones and magical items from the treasure mountain....” From his expression, it seemed he didn’t mind.

“Oh that....” Meng Hao laughed, taking a few steps back.

“It’s no matter,” said Qian Shuihen, taking a few steps forward, eyes on the spear. “That treasure mountain belongs to Eccentric Song, and he shot his mouth off, saying that anyone with the skills could take whatever they want. Actually, Elder Brother Meng’s actions left me feeling immensely satisfied. But... Elder Brother Meng, regarding this spear; would you be willing to offer it up for sale? The Violet Fate Sect would be willing to offer a fair price for it!” Because Meng Hao held it in his hand, Qian Shuihen had no way to thoroughly inspect it. Because he was not at the Foundation Establishment stage, he didn’t have Spiritual Sense, and therefore no way to sense the minute details.

“Well....” Meng Hao looked hesitant.

“Elder Brother Meng,” said Lu Song, his eyes glittering. “This spear is really very important to us. Please, allow yourself to part with it!” He knew that the first objective was to force Meng Hao into agreeing. Then he and Qian Shuihen would have to battle it out. He took a step forward as he spoke, an overbearing air filling his eyes.

“Eccentric Song treats people wickedly and mercilessly. You took away many of his most prized treasures. If our Violet Fate Sect’s Elder Wu hadn’t held him back, Elder Brother Meng would be in quite a bit of danger right now.” Qian Shuihen advanced further, his bearing extremely overbearing. At this point, he made no effort to conceal his power and might as he spoke.

The other Violet Fate Sect disciples slowly moved forward, forming a circle around them. Their eyes gleamed with the desire to lay hands on the spear.

“This spear is just an ordinary item,” said Meng Hao, looking around at the circle of people, then turning back to Lu Song and Qian Shuihen with a frown.

“Elder Brother Meng, there’s no need for jokes,” said Lu Song with a laugh, his eyes moving over the haft of the spear. “I know I’m not mistaken. This is the spear that you used. That notch in the side, I saw it clearly that day.”

Meng Hao stared blankly. It seemed this person had looked at the spear even more closely than he had. He hadn’t notice any notch before, but now that he looked, sure enough, there it was.

When Lu Song saw his expression, it only served to further his certainty. Though he wore a smile on his face, his eyes were cold. He wasn’t allowed to kill Meng Hao to earn a spot in the Inner Sect, but could use other means, and he wouldn’t hold back.

“Even if it’s only an ordinary object, we still wish to buy it,” said Qian Shuihen threateningly, his voice even colder than before. “We are determined to have this spear. Please, Elder Brother Meng, don’t make things difficult for us, otherwise, we will be very displeased, and you will be too. You might have the spear in hand, but the Violet Fate Sect is one of the five great Sects of the Southern Domain. Even this far away, our power is greater than you can imagine, Fellow Daoist. Furthermore... it’s not we who want the spear, but rather Sect Elder Wu.”

Upon hearing this, the State of Zhao Cultivators all exchanged glances. Their faces lit up with sneers for Meng Hao, but they maintained their silence.

Sun Hua's smile was especially wide. Gaining the help of these people to get information about the spear was a good thing. Regardless of what happened in the end, he should be able to take advantage of the situation to make a move. Furthermore, despite Meng Hao having a treasured spear, he wouldn't dare to offend a great sect from the Southern Domain.

"If I don't agree, will you force me?" asked Meng Hao, his gaze growing grim.

"Our Sect doesn't steal treasures from people," said Lu Song with a laugh. "But Elder Brother Meng should think things through carefully. What good will it do you to offend us? Furthermore... if we really wanted to steal the spear, we could get other people to do it for us. We wouldn't have to do anything." He glanced over at the State of Zhao disciples standing a short distance away and nodded. Sun Hua and the others suddenly looked very excited.

"Elder Brother Meng, I, Qian, very much admire your performance on the treasure mountain. But let's not beat around the bush. Whether or not you want to sell the spear, you will!" His eyes were grim, and his words cold.

Meng Hao's heart groaned. If these people wanted to bring trouble upon themselves, he wouldn't stop them. A variety of expressions crossed his face, and he retreated a few more steps back, muttering to himself. Then, gritting his teeth, he lifted his head. His eyes were bloodshot.

"Esteemed Violet Fate Sect disciples. If you truly wish to purchase my spear, please, name your price." Meng Hao flicked his sleeve, stabbing the spear into the ground. His face seemed to be grim and filled with pain.

Chapter 56: Elder Brother Meng, Whether or not You Want to Trade, You Will!

When Meng Hao spoke, everything went quiet. Everyone's eyes focused on the iron spear sticking out of the ground.

Qian Shuihen laughed loudly, cupping hands in salute to Meng Hao.

"So, Elder Brother Meng is willing to part with his treasure. I, Qian, will not allow you to suffer a loss." He pulled out a bag of holding and tossed it to the ground. "Here are five hundred Spirit Stones!" Clinking sounds rang out as five-hundred Spirit Stones appeared, forming a small mountain. Off to the side, the State of Zhao disciples watched, gloating over Meng Hao's misfortune. Five hundred Spirit Stones was not a small amount, but also not a very large amount. If he sold a treasured item for that amount, he would become a laughingstock.

They weren't the only ones to think about the price. Meng Hao frowned. The difference was, his thinking was different from that of the State of Zhao disciples. In his estimation, the iron spear was probably worth two pieces of silver. To trade it for five hundred Spirit Stones meant that he was actually making a tidy profit.

“Are you kidding me?” said Lu Song. “Don't try to bully Elder Brother Meng. You think you can buy a treasure like that with just five hundred Spirit Stones? I will buy it for one thousand five hundred Spirit Stones!” With a cold harrumph and the flick of a sleeve, he produced a bag of holding. More clinking sounds rang out as one thousand five hundred shining Spirit Stones emerged, producing a pile much higher than Qian Shuihen's. It was a grand sight which left everyone nervous with anticipation.

The State of Zhao disciples' hearts pounded. To them, one thousand five hundred Spirit Stones was a lot. Even though they were disciples of the three great Sects, it would still be difficult to accumulate so many. They panted as they watched. Even Sun Hua seemed to quiver with eagerness. Zhou Kai stood behind him, dumbfounded. His admiration for Meng Hao grew even stronger, and he felt regret in his heart. He shouldn't have called out Meng Hao's name just now. He sighed, realizing that it was his fault that Meng Hao was being forced to sell his treasure.

“Junior Brother Song really does have gall,” said Qian Shuihen, giving Lu Song a cold look. He was determined to win the treasure. As far as he was concerned, it was his ticket into the Inner Sect, and he would not give up, no matter what price he had to pay. As of now, his true opponent was Lu Song. The two of them could clearly not discuss acquiring the spear together.

“All of you! Give me your Spirit Stones,” said Qian Shuihen, turning to looking at the five or six disciples behind him. “When we return to the Sect I will find a way to repay you.” Without hesitation, they opened their bags of holding and produced all of their Spirit Stones.

“Two thousand one hundred Spirit Stones,” Qian Shuihen said coolly, looking as if he didn't care in the slightest. “Elder Brother Meng, these are all the items that I possess.” He gave a cold look to Lu Song.

Lu Song's face twisted. The one thousand five hundred Spirit Stones he'd offered had been borrowed from the handful of fellow disciples behind him. Seeing how many Qian Shuihen had produced, as well as Meng Hao's apparent hesitation, he suddenly slapped his bag of holding.

“Elder Brother Meng, I have no more Spirit Stones. But, I have medicinal pills.” A bottle appeared in his hand. “Here are three Heavenly Water Pills, suitable for any Cultivator of the eighth level of

Qi condensation or lower. It is one of the best pills produced by the Pill Cultivation Workshop of our Violet Fate Sect. Each pill is worth five hundred Spirit Stones.”

The burning look in the eyes of the State of Zhao disciples grew more intense. They knew how valuable Heavenly Water Pills were.

Sun Hua’s breathing grew heavier. He had heard the Elders of his Sect speak of Heavenly Water Pills, and knew that they were one of the three most effective types of pills within the Southern Domain for eighth level Qi Condensation Cultivators. Even within the Violet Fate Sect, prominent members of the Outer Sect would have a hard time getting their hands on one.

Qian Shuihen frowned, his eyes fixed on Lu Song. Clenching his jaw, he slapped his bag of holding and produced his own pill bottle.

“I have no Heavenly Water Pills,” said Qian Shuihen dramatically, “but, seeing that Elder Brother Meng is of the seventh level of Qi Condensation, please accept these seven Earthly Spirit Pills. They were awarded to me for meritorious service within the Sect. They are perfectly suited for the seventh level of Qi Condensation.”

“I have some piddling Earthly Spirit Pills too,” said Lu Song with a cold laugh. He looked back at the disciples behind him. They gritted their teeth and produced their bags of holding, handing over ten Earthly Spirit Pills. They looked with reddened eyes at Qian Shuihen and his group.

“Elder Brother Qian, look....” said Meng Hao shyly. His heart beat rapidly.

Qian Shuihen’s face changed as he realized that his offerings didn’t match up to Lu Song’s. But this was his opportunity to enter the Inner Sect. He would not let it pass.

“Junior Brother Lu, you are determined to have it out with me today, aren’t you? Fine!” His eyes flashing fiercely. He slapped his bag of holding, and immediately, a black beam shot out, transforming into a black spike. It glittered like lightning, producing multiple afterimages. The afterimages all came to rest on Qian Shuihen’s hand, and everything grew quiet.

It was pitch black and carried an air of indescribable sharpness.

“Elder Brother Meng, this is a magical item bestowed upon me by the Sect. It is called the Hellfighting Spike. Cold and dark, if it wounds an opponent, the wound will freeze over and an

intense coldness will enter their body.” Qian Shuihen forced himself to ignore his heartache as he spoke.

When the spike appeared, the faces of the disciples behind Qian Shuihen filled with envy. Lu Song’s expression changed, and he looked distressed. He had never imagined that Qian Shuihen would take out the black spike.

Meng Hao’s eyes widened and his heart raced even faster. It wasn’t just him. A buzz of conversation arose among the nearby State of Zhao disciples.

“That’s a Hellfighting Spike from the Violet Fate Sect. I’ve heard the Elders speak of it. Only the Violet Fate Sect possesses them. It’s said there are only one hundred and eight in existence. Each one is shockingly powerful.”

Sun Hua’s mouth grew dry, and he stared fixated at the spike. He wished beyond anything that he could be Meng Hao, then he could have this treasure.

Lu Song’s face continued to twist. Grinding his teeth angrily, he thought about the chance to join the Inner Sect, and how there was only one spot available. He would not retreat from this opportunity. Enduring the disappointment, he slapped his bag of holding and produced a treasure.

It was a feather fan, composed of a total of sixteen multi-colored feathers. As soon as it appeared, it emanated a shocking spiritual power which struck fear into the hearts of the onlookers.

“Elder Brother Meng, this is my most valuable treasure. It is a Milky Way Fan. You don’t need to practice with it at all, you can use it immediately. It allows the user to soar, and can change size. The sixteen feathers can also fly out in an attack, or circle around you to form a shield. It can be used in both attack and defense. It is not a treasure of our Sect, but rather something I acquired by luck. Allow me to present it to you in trade, Fellow Daoist.” An unsightly expression filled his face, and his heart fairly dripped with blood, but in contending with Qian Shuihen for a spot in the Inner Sect, he charged forth without regard to rhyme or reason.

When the fan appeared, Qian Shuihen’s facial expression changed. He took two steps back, his eyes filling with lines of blood. He knew that this was an extremely valuable treasure. To offer this up was almost like risking one’s life.

As for the State of Zhao disciples, they looked shocked, and their heads hummed. They might not be familiar with the fan, but it was obviously a spectacularly extraordinary item. It emitted fierce spiritual power which left their hearts pounding in shock.

Sun Hua's eyes grew wide, and his body trembled as it filled with a fierce envy.

Meng Hao took in a deep breath. At the moment, he actually wasn't very happy, but instead apprehensive. He had already offended Eccentric Song, and the thought of deeply offending the Violet Fate Sect caused a cold sweat to break out over his entire body. But it seemed that whether or not he wanted to trade... he would have to.

His current appearance, his frown, and the dark look in his eyes, all made the onlookers think that he didn't view the treasures in front of him as valuable enough to trade.

"Elder Brother Meng, I also have a Plateau Charging Pill, useful at the ninth level of Qi Condensation." Ignoring the pain in his heart, Qian Shuihen slapped his bag of holding and produced a pill bottle. "It is very precious. Any Cultivator of the ninth level of Qi Condensation would go crazy upon seeing just one. Even though it can't compare to a Foundation Establishment Pill, it's still very valuable." As he spoke, he didn't even look at Meng Hao, but rather Lu Song.

"This spear..." Meng Hao felt even more conflicted at heart, and he was about to speak further when suddenly Lu Song raised his head to the sky and laughed loudly. He lifted up his hand and pulled a brocaded pouch out of his robe. He turned it over, and a thick, round pill fell out. It was black, and did not emit even a shred of spiritual power. But, seeing how Lu Song treated it with utmost care, it was obviously some sort of treasure.

"Elder Brother Meng, this pill is not reusable. In fact, it is a rare magical pill. When you crush it, it will turn into a hyper toxic black scorpion that can injure a Cultivator of the ninth level of Qi Condensation, perhaps even kill him. This magical pill was bestowed upon me by my clan. Here, take it!" Lu Song's eyes were red, but they weren't looking at Meng Hao, but rather Qian Shuihen. He held the magical pill up in trade, but he was actually using it to threaten Qian Shuihen, as if this were the tie-breaker.

Qian Shuihen's expression changed, and his eyes flashed, filling with killing intent. But he quickly got himself under control, and then casually said, "Perhaps we should both trade for the treasure, then take it back to Elder Wu and let him decide what to do."

Lu Song didn't respond. He didn't actually want to attack. If it were in a remote place where no one could see, perhaps he would. But things were complicated with so many people watching. He had

only wanted to threaten Qian Shuihen. Upon hearing the suggestion, he nodded. Even though it hurt a bit, when he looked at the Plateau Charging Pill in Qian Shuihen's hand, he could only clench his jaw and put his magical pill down in front of him.

Seeing this, Qian Shuihen relaxed a bit. Without asking Meng Hao, he grabbed the iron spear and sped off. Lu Song went with him, also holding the spear. They shot toward the city gate, each of them eyeing the other suspiciously.

The other Violet Fate Sect disciples immediately charged after them, instantly disappearing through the city gate and off into the distance. They appeared to be heading in the direction of the State Shield Mountain chain.

Meng Hao's heart raced. Without hesitation, he flicked his sleeve, collecting all of the various objects. Then he turned and sped off as fast as possible. The eyes of the disciples of the State of Zhao glittered brightly, especially Sun Hua's. His eyes filled with fervor, and he moved to pursue and attack Meng Hao. But Meng Hao waved his right hand and the fan flew out to land beneath his feet. His speed increased rapidly, and he shot off into the distance.

At the same time, the middle-aged man sitting next to the Pill furnace in the Hundred Treasures Pavilion cracked open his eyes. They flashed like lightning as he watched Meng Hao disappearing.

"These Violet Fate Sect disciples get worse and worse with each generation," he said coolly. "They are idiots. Even though they don't have the Spiritual Sense of the Foundation Establishment stage, they should still be able to tell that thing is useless."

Upon hearing this, Qiao Ling and the other girls, who had just watched everything happen, looked incredulous.

"It's just an iron spear," the man said quietly. "That young member of the junior generation, surnamed Meng, he said it himself." He closed his eyes again.

Chapter 57: Was it Worth it?

Meng Hao felt quite conflicted. He stood on the treasured fan he had just acquired, using as much spiritual power as he could muster to flee at top speed. He feared that if he was even the least bit slow, he would be attacked and robbed.

“First I offended Eccentric Song,” sighed Meng Hao, “and then the Violet Fate Sect... But it’s not my fault, they forced me to trade.” In his mind, he was innocent. At the time, he had no choice but to trade the spear.... Sighing repeatedly, he pushed himself to go faster, getting closer and closer to the State Shield Mountain range.

“I need to find a place to hide for a while. If someone catches up with me, I’ll be in great danger...” Meng Hao frowned. The power of the treasured fan faded, and he dropped to the ground, tucking the fan away and starting to run.

“When will I be able to reach Foundation Establishment? Then I’ll be able to really fly!”

Two days passed, during which time Meng Hao didn’t rest at all. He just kept running, thinking about how he hadn’t rested at all since Shanguan Xiu began to chase him on Mount Daqing. But he had no choice. The thought of what would happen if he didn’t was too ghastly to contemplate.

Meanwhile, deep in the State Shield Mountain chain, atop the plateau next to the treasure mountain, Wu Dingqiu held up a Go piece, smiling broadly. After thinking for no less than one hour, he slowly put the piece onto the board.

Eccentric Song’s face was like iron. With a cold snort, he slammed a piece down onto the board.

“Eccentric Song, your Cultivation base is so refined. You shouldn’t allow yourself to be in such a mood.” Wu Dingqiu stroked his beard and laughed. He looked as calm as a cool wind. “Cultivators of our generation should be able to settle our Qi and calm our minds. Even with mountains crumbling around us, our expressions shouldn’t change. But look at you! Are you really so ill-at-ease because of some nobody from the junior generation?”

“If our positions were switched, you would be the same,” said Eccentric Song sourly.

“Absolutely not! If I, Wu, were in this position, I would only offer praise, and would certainly not feel anger. In the Violet Fate Sect, we cultivate our disposition, and would not allow something like this to arouse our anger. No offense, Eccentric Song, but as far as this type of cultivation goes, you really have something to learn from the Violet Fate Sect.” Wu Dingqiu laughed, obviously quite pleased with himself.

“How about this,” he continued. “After we finish this game of Go, you can come with me to the Violet Fate Sect. I will allow you to peruse our Moral Cultivation Manual, and then you will

understand what it means to settle the Qi and calm the mind.” Wu Dingqiu’s smile was so wide that wrinkles appeared on his face.

Eccentric Song harrumphed, refusing to respond and simply looking off into the distance. Wu Dingqiu’s smile grew stronger, and he too looked off into the distance. Shortly, two figures could be seen racing toward them through the forest. It was Qian Shuihen and Lu Song. They gripped an iron spear between the two of them as they made a beeline for the plateau. They were followed by a small group of other Violet Fate Sect disciples.

Qian Shuihen and Lu Song stepped foot onto the plateau and both began to speak at the same time.

“Greetings, Elder Wu. Disciple has accomplished the task. I have acquired the treasured item through trade.”

“Greetings, Elder Wu, fortunately, I have not failed in my mission. I was able to trade for the spear.”

Eccentric Song’s face was grim as Wu Dingqiu’s laughter rang out.

“Excellent. Good job, you two.” He laughed. “I will take it upon myself to promote both of you to the Inner Sect. You didn’t cause any problems for that kid, did you?”

“I am pleased to report that we made a fair trade,” said Qian Shuihen hastily. Next to him, Lu Song nodded fervently, looking excited. “We didn’t cause any problems for him.”

“Eccentric Song, come, let’s take a look at this treasured, divine spear.” Wu Dingqiu laughed. He flicked his sleeve, and the iron spear flew toward him.

The instant it touched his hand, Wu Dingqiu’s expression changed. His eyes flashed as he examined the spear closer. Grim-faced Eccentric Song also took a close look, whereupon, his eyes began to shine. He stared open mouthed, then suddenly smiled.

Wu Dingqiu’s expression grew more and more unsightly. No matter from which aspect he looked at the spear, it was ordinary in nature. Refusing to believe that it was true, he pointed the spear at a random Demonic beast further down the mountain. The creature didn’t even notice.

The expression on his face was unsightly to the extreme. He slowly raised his head, looking coldly at Qian Shuihen and Lu Song.

When they saw the look in Wu Dingqiu's eyes, their excitement faded, and they began to tremble. Blank expressions filled their eyes.

"What did you trade for this spear?" asked Wu Dingqiu, one word at a time.

Looking nervous, Qian Shuihen said, "Disciple gave two thousand Spirit Stones, seven Earthly Spirit Pills, one of the Sect's Hellfighting Spikes, and... and a Plateau Charging Pill."

Wu Dingqiu's face grew dark.

Next, Lu Song spoke: "Disciple gave one thousand, five hundred Spirit Stones, three Heavenly Spirit Pills, a treasured fan, and a magical pill."

Eccentric Song burst out laughing. It was the laughter of release, as if all of his pent up depression from the past few days had suddenly disappeared.

Wu Dingqiu was mad enough, but when he heard the price the two disciples had paid, along with Eccentric Song's peals of laughter, his rage exploded. He suddenly let out a furious roar. "Good-for-nothing fools! This iron spear is a fake!"

It echoed out like thunder, shattering the Go board. Cracks appeared on the surface of the mountain beneath his feet. Qian Shuihen and Lu Song tumbled to the ground, blood spraying out of their mouths. Their heads spun as Wu Dingqiu's single word echoed in their hearts.

"Fake..." They were stunned.

This word thundered out in all directions along with his roar, filling nearly half of the entire State Shield Mountain range and reaching even Eastern Refinement City.

It eventually reached the ears of Sun Hua, filling him with confusion. After a moment, his expression changed, and a look of shock filled his face.

“The spear was a fake?” He looked at his companions, and looks of realization appeared on their faces as well.

“It couldn’t be that the iron spear that was a fake, could it...?”

Inside the Hundred Treasures Pavilion, Qiao Ling was in the midst of introducing a magical item to a Cultivator when she heard the noise outside. Amazed, she thought back to Meng Hao’s iron spear, and a strange look appeared on her face.

Next to the pill furnace, the middle-aged man opened his eyes, and they flickered with a mocking expression. Without a word, he closed them again.

Far away from the plateau in the State Shield Mountains, Meng Hao lowered his head and ran even faster.

Eccentric Song’s splitting laughter undulated throughout the mountains. Wu Dingqiu’s face couldn’t look more horrible. He, an Elder of the Violet Fate Sect, had been hoodwinked by a Cultivator of the Qi Condensation stage. Even though it didn’t directly involve him, he would definitely lose face when word spread.

He wanted to track Meng Hao down immediately. He turned to look at Qian Shuihen and Lu Song, who stood there terrified. He was disgusted, but in his heart he sighed. These disciples had spent all their days within the Sect, and didn’t have any experience dealing with outsiders. They were flowers raised indoors, inexperienced and incapable of dealing with schemes.

With a cold harrumph, he tossed the iron spear to the ground and took a few steps forward, casting his senses about in search of Meng Hao. But then, Eccentric Song stepped forward to block his way, laughing complacently.

“Fellow Daoist Wu, please don’t lose your temper,” he said. “Your Violet Fate Sect stresses the need to settle the Qi and calm the mind, to cultivating one’s disposition. Don’t allow a small matter like this to arouse your ire. When it comes to this type of cultivation, you should really do a bit more research into your Sect’s Moral Cultivation Manual.” Eccentric Song laughed heartily. Earlier, he had been prevented from leaving no matter what he said, so of course now he would do the same thing to Wu Dingqiu.

“You...” Wu Dingqiu’s face grew dark, and he stared fixedly at Eccentric Song. But he didn’t say anything.

“You broke the Go board, so now we can’t finish,” said Eccentric Song with a smile. “How about this: You were going to take me to your Violet Fate Sect, right? Well, let’s go! We can chat and play Go for a few months.” The depression had faded completely from his heart. Seeing Wu Dingqiu like this made him incredibly happy. As far as the treasures Meng Hao had taken, he didn’t care anymore. What was most important to him was the look of outrage and insult on Wu Dingqiu’s face.

He pulled at Wu Dingqiu, clearly having no intention of allowing him to resist.

Wu Dingqiu’s heart was filled with gloom. He glared at Eccentric Song, then let out a long sigh. He knew that the man wouldn’t let him pursue Meng Hao. He stamped his foot angrily, then allowed Eccentric Song to pull him up into the air.

“You useless imbeciles won’t be able to keep up,” said Wu Dingqiu, looking down at trembling Qian Shuihen and Lu Song. “The Inner Sect promotion is a failure. Return to the Sect and immediately go into secluded meditation!” The other disciples watched on, pale-faced.

“Damn you, Meng Hao,” said Lu Song, lowering his head, his face twisted with rage. “I will never forget this, you shameless bastard!” He ground his teeth when he recalled Meng Hao’s bashful expression, and it looked as if his eyes might erupt with flames. He had never met anyone so impudent in his entire life. The spear was obviously a fake. His face filled with pain when he thought of how much he had paid for it. When he thought about the lost chance to enter the Inner Sect, he was so angry that he almost spat up blood.

“Shameless! Despicable!” said Qian Shuihen, thinking about his precious items. He picked up the iron spear. “Meng Hao, you are a complete scoundrel!” As he thought about the failure of the Inner Sect promotion, he really seemed about to go crazy. And then he thought about all the medicinal pills and magical items, and his hatred for Meng Hao ascended to skies.

The two of them looked at each other, sharing a look of pain.

“We will place this spear up inside the Sect to remind us that we must kill Meng Hao!”

Fierce killing intent filled their eyes, and yet, the trial by fire was over, and they were required to return to the Sect. Their rancor and murderous thoughts could only be concealed in their hearts, never to be erased.

Meanwhile, Meng Hao was both scared witless and also felt that he was being accused wrongly. Sighing, he increased his speed, running as fast as he could for seven days straight. Eventually he found an Immortal's cave in the deep mountains. Exhausted, he sat down cross-legged and began to meditate and do breathing exercises.

"Was it worth it...?" he sighed to himself. He was tired from the days of running, but had simply been too frightened of being caught. Now, he was on his last legs.

Two days later at dawn, he opened his eyes and began running again. For half a month, he didn't dare to let anyone see him. Finally, deep in the remote mountains, when he felt it was safe, he used a flying sword to carve out a cave, then sealed himself inside to meditate.

Chapter 58: This is not its World

Two months passed. Meng Hao sat cross-legged in the Immortal's Cave in the deep mountains. Suddenly, a thunderous noise rang out, sending the nearby animals scattering. The large stone slab he had sliced out to seal the cave suddenly shattered into pieces.

Stone fragments showered out in all directions as Meng Hao emerged from the Immortal's Cave. His hair hung down like a cloak around his scholar's robe. His eyes glittered like lightning, and a shocking aura emanated from him, as well as a pleasant, fragrant aroma.

A look of joy filled his face. After having been in secluded meditation for such a long time, he let out a laugh which echoed out and sent the wild beasts running.

"The eighth level of Qi Condensation!" he said, his fists clenched. His eyes shone, which would have been even more obvious were it nighttime.

The two months of meditation had begun with a sense of nervousness and imminent danger. Those feelings disappeared slowly as he practiced Cultivation. He used over ten thousand Spirit Stones to duplicate medicinal pills, which he used in his meditation.

He did not want to be in a position of danger ever again. He needed to become strong, so that he could surpass the people who threatened him.

"I need to become powerful. There is no other reason. I must become powerful!"

He stood outside of the Immortal's cave, breathing the fresh mountain air, his eyes filled with resolve.

He was a simple scholar, a student of Confucianism. But the past three years had caused him to become a bit more inwardly focused. After everything that he had experienced, his personality was very different than it had been. His stubbornness was now much more obvious.

He had been stubborn in his refusal to give up even after failing in the Imperial examinations. He had been stubborn in his struggles in the Reliance Sect. He had been stubborn when he stood up to Wang Tengfei. And now he was stubborn in his hopes for the future.

Becoming powerful is much the same as becoming rich. It is a dream that does not require a reason. If a reason is required, perhaps it is fear of being poor or weak. That is what Meng Hao believed.

"Life is an ever-burning flame, filled with exuberance. In life, one must be strong, and never lower one's head." He looked up into the sky, thinking about the Reliance Sect. He thought about the arrogant conceit of the experts from the State of Zhao. He thought of the coldness of the people who had tried to kill him. He thought of the gaze of that middle-aged Dao Protector who had stood next to Wang Tengfei that night.

"My mother and father disappeared when I was young. If I hadn't struggled to improve myself, I wouldn't have lived down to this day. Instead, I would have resigned myself to the hopelessness. If I hadn't struggled to grow stronger during my time in the Reliance Sect, I would never have become a member of the Inner Sect. Stubborn insistence on self-improvement. That is my path into the future." He let out a very long breath. Then, he lifted his hand and flicked his sleeve. A black beam appeared which solidified into a black spike. Emanating a black glow, it shot toward a nearby boulder.

A boom rang out, and the boulder, which was over eighteen meters tall, collapsed into chunks, interspersed with pieces of black ice. They fell to the ground, emanating an intense coldness.

With a look of satisfaction, Meng Hao waved his hand, and the black spike flew back to him. He moved his hand again, and this time a multicolored beam swirled around him. The sixteen-feathered fan appeared, flying back and forth as it followed the movements of his fingers. Suddenly, there was bang as the feathers separated.

Sixteen beams of light circled around. The sixteen feathers had become like flying swords, swift and fierce. They followed the movements of his hand, moving to spin rapidly around him, making an impenetrable shield, empowered by his spiritual power.

Then the feathers re-formed into a fan and settled onto his hand.

“It’s too bad I didn’t have enough Spirit Stones. The copper mirror really eats them up. Duplicating one Earthly Spirit Pill required one hundred Spirit Stones. Not a bad price. The Heavenly Spirit Pill, useful upon reaching the eighth level of Qi Condensation, required five hundred. Just a bit too expensive...” Thinking about Spirit Stones, he frowned. Of the ten thousand Spirit Stones he’d had, not many were left. During the two months he had spent breaking through from the seventh level to the eighth level, he had consumed over eighty Earthly Spirit Pills. That was nearly two per day before he had broken through to the eighth level of Qi Condensation.

“In the future,” he muttered to himself. “I will require even more spiritual power to practice Cultivation.” A glance inside his bag of holding confirmed that he only had five Heavenly Spirit Pills. He had already consumed one, and had calculated that to reach the ninth level of Qi Condensation he would need roughly one hundred and fifty.

“I know I need a lot of spiritual power. But could it be that my excessive consumption of Demonic Cores has caused my body to begin to reject medicinal pills?” He hesitated, unsure of how to confirm his theory. If he was right, then he might need even more Heavenly Spirit Pills, or perhaps other types of medicinal pills.

“One hundred and fifty Heavenly Spirit Pills... that’s equal to seventy thousand Spirit Stones... Without them, it will take me a long time to accumulate that much spiritual energy. Plus, my latent talent is only ordinary, so that means it will take even longer...” He sighed as he thought about the emptiness of his bag of holding.

He had three more of the extraordinarily large Spirit Stones, but he didn’t dare to use them. The more advanced he became in his cultivation, the more he realized how rash he had been to duplicate the wooden sword all those years ago. The large Spirit Stones were clearly extraordinarily special, otherwise he would not have been able to duplicate the Vorpall Jade Blood Crystals.

“I won’t use these large Spirit Stones unless it’s absolutely necessary,” he said resolutely. “Maybe they will have some other use in the future.” The fan beneath his feet began to shine brightly, and his body transformed into a ray of light which shot off into the distance.

He was quiet as he travelled, circulating his spiritual energy. Eventually, the treasured fan began to fade and take on a more ordinary appearance. As he moved farther and farther away, he began to grow more at ease.

“After all these months, the Violet Fate Sect disciples will surely have moved on.” He was careful as he traveled, eventually emerging from the mountains. He looked off into the distance. If he was right, this area was close to the capital city of the State of Zhao.

Once upon a time, he had yearned day and night to go to the capital city. This desire was second only to his dream of visiting the Great Tang in the Eastern Lands. He sighed emotionally as he thought of his three years of examinations, and three years of failures. He had never even made it to the final examinations in the capital city. Another three years had passed, and now he finally arrived, not as a scholar, but as a Cultivator.

As he approached the capital city, he stopped gliding and began to walk along the public road. He tied up his hair and this, coupled with his scholar’s robe, made him look just like the old scholar that he used to be. Although, while he had then been somewhat short, after years of Cultivation, he was now tall and slender. His skin was still a bit dark, yet vigorous, emanating a strong air.

He walked along absentmindedly. It was March now, which was often a time for snowfall in the State of Zhao. As Meng Hao walked, the darkness of evening began to settle around him, and snowflakes began to slowly fall.

Soon, the ground was covered with whiteness, like a feathered quilt.

The wind blew snow onto Meng Hao’s hair. It didn’t melt, but rather began to collect together.

Everything was still and quiet. As he grew closer and closer to the capital city, a horse-drawn carriage approached from behind him, speeding forward at top speed. It seemed whoever was inside was afraid the city gates would be closing soon.

It passed Meng Hao, kicking up billows of snowflakes in its wake. As it passed, the wind blew open the carriage’s curtain just a crack, revealing a young scholar reading some texts.

Meng Hao looked at him calmly, recalling his own similar appearance years ago. As of now, Meng Hao was clearly about twenty years old. However, inside, he felt much older.

He let out a light sigh. Up ahead, the carriage came to a stop, and the curtain lifted up. The young scholar looked back at him, then stepped down out of the carriage and saluted Meng Hao with clasped hands.

“Brother, are you going to Capital City for the Imperial examinations?”

Meng Hao quickly returned the salute. “Years ago I dreamed of doing so, but those dreams have long since faded. I just want to go take a look at the Tower of Tang.”

“That’s a pity, my Brother,” he said, looking regretful. “Your bearing seems very refined, I thought perhaps we were fellow candidates. Are you sure you wish to give up on your aspirations to become an official?” The young man appeared to be about the same age as Meng Hao.

Meng Hao shook his head silently.

“Well, never mind,” said the young scholar. He looked at Meng Hao’s scholarly appearance and smiled warmly. “It’s starting to snow harder, and it will only become more difficult to travel along the road. If it gets too late, you won’t be able to enter the city. Brother, why don’t you join me in the carriage? We should still have enough time to make it to the city.”

Meng Hao looked up at the sky, then back at the scholar. He bowed respectfully, then stepped up into the carriage.

A fire crackled in a small oven inside, dispelling the bitter cold. This, coupled with the fact that an old family retainer drove the carriage, made it clear that the scholar came from a rich family.

The old driver wore a wide bamboo hat and the knuckles of his hands were large. It seemed he could do some kung fu.

“I am Zheng Yong,” the scholar said with a smile, warming his hands. “Brother, there’s no need to be shy. We’re both scholars, and scholars should help each other whenever possible.”

“I am Meng Hao,” he said with a humble smile. “Many thanks to you, Brother Zheng.” His gaze fell upon the book resting next to Zheng Yong. It was the Book of Rites. It looked very old, and was obviously not a copy, but rather an ancient original text.

“You’re surnamed Meng?” said Zheng Yong, his expression brightening. It was somewhat cramped inside the carriage, but he still managed to stand and give Meng Hao a respectful salute. “Such an honorable family name. So you’re a descendant of Qingfu! I have been disrespectful; please forgive me, Brother Meng.”

Meng Hao stood and returned the salute. “There’s no need to act like this, Brother Zheng. It’s just a surname. My ancestors were resplendent, but as for me, I failed repeatedly in the Imperial examinations, which has left me extremely ashamed.” The two of them sat back down.

“Brother Meng, you spoke incorrectly just now,” said Zheng Yong solemnly. “Your surname will bring you good fortune. It has been passed down to you from ancient times. As a descendant of Qingfu, even if you didn’t pass the Imperial examinations, as long as you have kindness and virtue in your heart, you can still live by the values of Confucius.”

Meng Hao thought silently for a moment, then lifted his head and looked at the scholar sitting in front of him. “Brother Zheng,” he said quietly, “what is the true meaning of Confucianism?”

“Courtesy, benevolence, loyalty, and the golden mean,” he responded unhesitatingly. “This is Confucianism.”

Meng Hao didn’t respond. He looked out through the curtain at the snowflakes filling the air. After a while, he spoke again in a cool voice: “What is the meaning of life?”

“Life?” said Zheng Yong, looking surprised. He hesitated for a while, not saying anything.

The inside the carriage grew quiet, filled only with the sound of falling snow, which drifted in through the window. Meng Hao lifted up his hand and reached outside. Snowflakes gradually accumulated on his hand.

“Snow will only appear during winter,” he said quietly, “and can only exist in the cold wind. Therefore, its life exists only during the depths of winter.” He pulled his hand back into the carriage and held it next to the copper oven. The snow began to melt, turning into water, which flowed through the creases of his palm.

“Snow can only live in the winter. When it nears a fire, it dies. That is its life. It may yearn for summer, but... it can only desire it. In my hand, the snow becomes water, because this is not its world...” He raised his hand back up and brushed the water off outside the window. There, beyond the vision of the young scholar, it once again became snow.

Zheng Yong stared mutely, a deep look appearing in his eyes. Eventually, the carriage entered the city.

“Thank you for allowing me to accompany you, Brother Zheng,” said Meng Hao coolly. “I shall take my leave.” He saluted politely, and stepped out of the carriage, then treaded across the snow-filled street.

“Yearning for summer,” Zheng Yong murmured to himself, “but only able to exist in the cold of winter. Only able to look off into the distance... that is snow.” He watched Meng Hao disappearing into the distance. After a while, he got out of the cart and gave a deep bow in Meng Hao’s direction.

Snow began to cover him, but he knew that as soon as he reentered the carriage, it would die. He would never forget what had just happened, and what he had just seen and heard. Years later, after he became a famous Confucian in the State of Zhao, he would think back to that windy, winter night when the snow slowly melted into water. And he would think of a scholar named Meng Hao.

Chapter 59: Unable to see Chang’an

The State of Zhao was in the southern part of the Southern Domain, which was connected to the Western subcontinent. These two areas were separated from the rest of the lands of South Heaven by the Milky Way Sea, although it is possible that long ago, the lands of South Heaven had not been split in this way.

To state things more clearly, the State of Zhao exists on the edge of the Southern Domain, far from the sea. Only by passing over numerous mountains would the boundless Milky Way Sea become visible.

The State of Zhao was not very large, nor was it heavily populated. However, the capital city was a bustling place. Even though the evening air was filled with falling snow, the houses glowed with lantern light, keeping everyone warm inside.

Anyone who didn’t own a house, who walked about in the snowy night, would feel an indescribable loneliness.

Meng Hao walked down the street beneath the darkening sky. The crowds of people who would normally be visible during the day were nowhere to be seen. Anyone who moved about wore wide bamboo hats, and kept their heads lowered as they hurried along.

Looking off into the distance, Meng Hao could just barely make out the shape of a large, prominent building. It was a pagoda, a tower.

The Tower of Tang.

It was nearly three hundred meters tall, almost like a mountain, capable of capturing the attention of anyone within the city. Snow surrounded it, but could not hide the evidence of the devoted care spent by the King of Zhao, the scholars, and the many other people who had constructed it.

It faced the Eastern Lands, the Great Tang and Chang'an.

Meng Hao had never been to the capital city before, nor the Tower of Tang. He had never even seen it before. But as he walked down the street toward it, he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that... this was definitely the Tower of Tang.

He had always imagined that one day he would become a government official, and then he would be able to climb to its top and stare out across the land.

He looked at the Tower of Tang sitting there amidst the swirling snow. A long time passed.

"Before mother and father disappeared," he murmured to himself, "a violet wind blew outside. People said it was an auspicious sign, and that a celestial being had appeared in the sky..." He walked forward, staring at the Tower of Tang.

He thought about everything that had happened that night. He would never be able to forget. That night, he lost his youth. From that night on, he would never again have a father and mother to rely on. That was when he began to grow strong.

It was then that he started to dream of going to the Eastern Lands, to the Great Tang!

Rumors spread that his parents were dead, but Meng Hao knew that they were simply missing. They were out there, somewhere. He would never forget the violet robe his father had been wearing that night as he stood next to the window, looking out at the violet wind. Nor would he forget how his father had looked back at him, a disturbed look in his eyes.

He would never forget that night, nor the quiet sound of his mother weeping.

He had never spoken of these things to anyone, but had kept them buried deep in his heart.

As the Tower of Tang grew closer and closer, he wondered why he was suddenly thinking about such things from the past. He sighed. The sigh broke to pieces in the snowy wind. It would never leave the capital city, nor the State of Zhao, nor the Southern Domain. It would not cross the Milky Way Sea, nor would it reach Chang'an.

“Maybe it’s because mother would always talk about the Great Tang,” he murmured. “She told me that in the capital city of every nation, there is a Tower of Tang, and people say those towers are the closest you can get to Chang’an without actually being there.”

As he approached the district surrounding the Tower of Tang, he looked up.

The snow fell in heavy sheets, and the winter wind whimpered around him. More and more snow was building up on the tower. From where he stood, he could see clearly that it had been constructed with great care. Its foundation was eight-sided, and it rose up like a massive pagoda.

It was constructed from green material, and looked just like he had imagined it would.

Despite the snow, soldiers patrolled around its perimeter. This area... was a place only highly ranked officials and powerful people could enter, in order to offer sacrifices and perform rites.

But the mortal soldiers didn’t notice as Meng Hao’s body passed by and entered the tower.

An ancient flight of stairs wound up inside, reaching slowly up toward the top. The walls were carved with brightly colored frescos, depicting the Eastern Lands, the Great Tang and Chang’an.

“I remember mother describing the Great Tang to me. I was so small then, that I didn’t really understand what she was talking about. But now that I think about it, the way she described the Eastern Lands, the Great Tang and Chang’an... it was as if she had seen them with her own eyes. If she hadn’t, how could she have described everything in such detail? It was just like these carvings.” He examined them as he ascended the stairs. Eventually he reached the top of the tower, and the end of the carvings. They had depicted life and culture, beautiful scenery, and countless amazing, legendary stories. It was all very moving and inspiring.

Outside, the snow whistled about in the air, buffeted by strong winds. It lay thick on the top of the tower. Meng Hao took a deep breath and looked off into the distance. The only thing he could see was snow. He could not see the Eastern Lands, nor the Great Tang, nor Chang'an.

"So you can't see Chang'an from here after all," he murmured quietly. He stood there quietly, wrapped up in countless thoughts. He was not a government official, here to offer sacrifices to the heavens. He was a Cultivator, a Cultivator of the eighth level of Qi Condensation.

"I walk a different path than before, but the direction is the same." The wind blew his hair about, and the snow stuck to him un-melting, as if it approved of his life, as if he too, were snow.

After a while, he sat down cross-legged and began to meditate quietly.

During the night, the snow fell even harder. The lights shone within the houses of the capital city. From atop the Tower of Tang, everything grew pitch black and quiet. Within the quiet darkness, Meng Hao could see himself years ago, back in Yunjie County, amidst the snow.

The snowy night slowly passed.

At dawn, Meng Hao opened his eyes. It was hard to say whether he glanced at the rising sun, or if the rising sun glanced at him first.

The city came to life with the dawn. Soon, the streets filled with throngs of people. Meng Hao watched the mortal world spread out before him.

He observed silently, all the way until night fell. Another dawn broke. One day, two days, three days.

For seven days, Meng Hao gazed down on everything. At first, his eyes had seemed faint and weak, but then they grew bright, and finally, calm.

Something had changed in his mind. He had achieved a state of enlightenment regarding life itself. At dawn on the eighth day, he looked down to see officials and soldiers arrive at the Tower of Tang to perform a rite. A middle-aged man stood there wearing a golden robe. Behind him were crowds of people, standing neatly in formation. He offered sacrifices to heaven and earth, as did many of the commoners throughout the city.

Meng Hao stood as they began to bow to the heavens. He left the tower, avoiding their obeisance. Stepping onto the treasured fan, he soared forward, knowing that the time had come for him to leave. As he prepared to depart, he looked back toward the tower one more time.

When he did, his eyes grew wide.

He watched as the people kowtowed outside of the Tower of Tang, which then began to glow softly. It was a sparkling glow that the mortals could not see, but someone filled with spiritual energy could.

The light shot upwards, sending the clouds roiling, whereupon a huge vortex appeared. This, also, was invisible to the eyes of the mortals, but not to Meng Hao. He could see the vortex clearly, and it caused him to suck in a breath. He looked shaken.

Inside the vortex, he could see... an endless field of bones and ruins, filled with a ghastly aura and a curling, black fog. He couldn't see very many clear details, but could sense a mysterious and gruesome air roiling out.

His mind was shaken, especially when he noticed that within the black mist of the vortex was an enormous coffin. There, amidst the ruins, sitting cross-legged next to the coffin, was a shrivelled corpse. It suddenly opened its eyes. They were as gray as ash, and within them seven faint spots of light rotated about like stars. The corpse's vision shot out from within the vortex, straight onto Meng Hao.

His heart trembled, and he involuntarily closed his eyes as he felt a stab of pain within them. It felt as if seven stars were about to appear within his own pupils, the same as those within the ash-gray eyes.

Suddenly, withered wrinkles began appear across his body, and a terrible black mist began to seep out of his pores.

Shocked, Meng Hao retreated at top speed. At the same time, the vortex was suddenly sucked up into the clouds. The crushing feeling he had experienced vanished, and everything went back to normal. It was as if what he had just seen had been a hallucination.

And yet, his body was still withered, and faint wisps of death aura continued to seep out of him. His facial expression changed several times. He looked down at the Tower of Tang. The glow was no longer present, but the people continued to pay obeisance. His face grew dark, and without hesitation he pushed the treasured fan to its limits. His body turned into a stream of light and he disappeared into the distance.

He soared out of the capital city, looking back toward the Tower of Tang several times. His eyes scanned the sky, and doubt began to rise up in his heart.

“It couldn’t have been a hallucination. The Tower of Tang... what kind of place is it exactly? Originally I thought it was a mortal place, but that’s obviously not true! What was that place within the vortex...? The ruins, the death aura, all those bones...” His scalp grew numb as he thought about the corpse he had seen amidst the ruins.

Its eyes had been filled with callousness, grim and ghastly, especially the seven stars within the pupils of its gray eyes. As he thought of this, his body grew cold and began to drip with sweat.

“And that... coffin.” Meng Hao took a deep breath, his eyes filled with fear.

“Who is inside that coffin, and why did it suddenly appear within the vortex. Why...? Does it have something to do with the Tower of Tang...? Does it have something to do with the Great Tang in the Eastern Lands?” Meng Hao grew thoughtful, looking back yet again at the Tower of Tang. The sense of awe within him grew stronger. He breathed in deeply again, gliding forward a bit before dropping to the ground and running.

He was starting to think that being stared at by the corpse within the vortex... had been a catastrophe....

Chapter 60: Undispellable Death Aura

The capital city drew further and further away. A long time passed, during which time Meng Hao pushed down the feeling of fear that quivered in his heart. He frowned, scanning his body. It had withered; while before he had been somewhat slim, he was now somewhat emaciated.

That problem was secondary to what really alarmed Meng Hao. His body continuously emanated strands of black mist, as if it were burning. It continued to come out of him, no matter how much he tried to wave it away. It floated high up into the air, making it possible for anyone around to determine his location.

“My body stopped withering, but this weird black aura just won’t stop. It’s really making me stand out too much....” He flew forward as fast as possible, trying to find a place to hide within the mountains. After the black mist finished dissipating, he would come out again.

Two hours later, he sat angrily in the remote mountains. After sealing himself up in an Immortal’s Cave, he’d found out that the black mist could pass through some material objects.

“Dammit, how long will this mist last?” He gnashed his teeth, not daring to stop anywhere. If he did, the mist would gather together above him and become easily visible. Anyone who saw it would definitely think there was some sort of treasured item nearby.

Meng Hao frowned, pushing deeper into the mountains. He kept moving forward as fast as possible. When his spiritual energy ran out, he would consume a medicinal pill. It was only in this fashion that he could prevent the black aura from gathering together. It wasn’t as easy to see when it was spread thin, although it still floated up visibly into the sky.

Seven days passed. Meng Hao was frightened as well as exhausted, having had no chance to rest. The damnable mist was black during the day, then glowed white during the night.

After the seventh day, he could tell that the amount of mist dissipating from his body had grown weaker. In his best estimation, it would take approximately one month for it to disperse completely.

He didn’t dare to stay in the mountains for too long, as he might attract attention. He wasn’t sure whether or not the Violet Fate Sect disciples had actually left. So, he had no choice but to just keep moving forward.

On one particular day, he sat cross-legged on the treasured fan, soaring through a forest. Suddenly, he lifted his head up, his eyes flickering. He could see four shapes speeding in his direction from a distance away.

With a frown, he stopped flying and dropped to the ground. He slapped his bag of holding and a flying sword appeared. It shot toward an old tree, chopping a hole in it into which Meng Hao entered.

He had attempted this method before and found that the mist would not pass outside of the tree. However, after the space of about ten breaths, the tree would wither up.

He had done this several times in the past week in order to avoid the detection of other Cultivators.

Sitting inside the hole in the tree, he waited for the four people to go away. Unfortunately, instead of passing by, they stopped nearby and began to look around carefully. One of them was a young man in a violet robe. His face was expressionless as he leaped to the top of a tree, the power of his Cultivation base radiating out. In his hand he held a white pearl.

The black aura which had been emanating out from Meng Hao was instantly sucked into the white pearl, whereupon it began to turn black.

Meng Hao's heart began to thump when he saw this.

The group of people was made up of three men and one woman. The woman wore a long skirt and was rather beautiful. A mysterious look gleamed in her eyes, a look that others might describe as demonic. "Come to speak of it, it really is strange," she said. "This thick death aura has appeared a lot recently in the mountains."

The two men standing next to her frowned as they gazed around the forest.

"Regardless of what's causing it, we should leave once we finish absorbing the aura," said one of the men, sounding a bit nervous. "Whatever is causing it is something very strange. It's probably better if we don't find out what it is."

"What are you afraid of?" said the woman with a smile. She gave a charming look to the violet-robed young man, her eyes shining with charm. "With Elder Brother Yan here, we're safe from any danger. He's an Inner Sect disciple of the eighth level of Qi Condensation. He can prevent any disasters from occurring. And who knows, maybe we might even have a bit of good fortune."

The young man with the pearl was of the eighth level of Qi Condensation, and was obviously the leader. The others were all at the sixth level.

It didn't take very long for the pearl to absorb all of the black aura. The pearl itself was now pitch black, and didn't seem as if it could even absorb any more. Meng Hao sat there watching, lost in thought.

“Let’s go,” said the man named Yan. He flicked his wide sleeve, and the four of them began to make their way off. As this happened, Meng Hao frowned. They were taking too long, and he had run out of time. The black aura was just now beginning to seep out from the top of the tree.

As soon as it appeared, the man named Yan turned and looked at it, his eyes flashing.

Meng Hao sighed, and then burst out from within the tree. He flicked his sleeve and sped off as fast as possible.

His appearance surprised the four people, as did the black aura emanating from him. The man named Yan stared at him.

“Fellow Daoist, please stay behind a moment,” he called out. His hands flashed in incantation signs, and instantly, a black wind sprang up which formed into the shape of a hideous, grinning skull. It opened its jaw and shot toward Meng Hao.

He had asked for Meng Hao to stop. But this skull carried the full power of his eighth level of Qi Condensation. It moved as swift as lightning, with incredible power.

At the same time, the two other men and the woman, their eyes glittering, attacked. Two flying swords and a jade bracelet transformed into beams of light which shot straight toward Meng Hao. The woman’s jade bracelet let out a buzzing sound as it flew through the air, expanding in size as it prepared to smash him.

Meng Hao frowned. He hadn’t been in a good mood before, having been frustrated to the extreme by the black aura. At the moment, these people had arisen a strong killing spirit within him. He let out a cold snort.

His right hand lifted up, and a roaring Flame Python appeared, twenty or thirty meters long. It shot toward the four incoming magical items, radiating blistering heat.

A boom shook the air. The jade bracelet shattered and the two flying swords melted away. The skull dissipated because of the collision. The Flame Python let out a wail and then vanished.

“Eighth level of Qi Condensation!” said the woman. The two men next to her gasped, their expressions intent. The Cultivator surnamed Yan took a step forward, staring at Meng Hao.

“I am Yan Ziguó, disciple of the Cold Wind Sect,” he said coolly, his eyes flashing like lightning. “Fellow Daoist, you don’t need to be in such a hurry to leave. Could you please explain the thick death aura emanating from your body?” Meng Hao was at the eighth level of Qi Condensation, but so was Yan Ziguó, so he spoke in a voice as cold as ever.

Meng Hao returned his cold stare, and didn’t say anything. He slapped his bag of holding, and in a flash, the treasured fan appeared. He shot away at high speed. Yan Ziguó looked at the fan in astonishment.

“A magic item which grants flight. He’s not of the Foundation Establishment stage, so he can only glide. He’ll be back on the ground shortly.” Yan Ziguó’s heart began to beat faster. The fan was a magical item that only disciples of the ninth level of Qi Condensation might get within his sect. With a cold harrumph, he charged off in pursuit. The other three hesitated for a moment, then followed him.

“Dammit!” said Meng Hao, his eyes growing even colder. His opponent had seen the power of his Cultivation base, as well as his use of magic, both of which were clearly warnings. And yet he still pursued. Meng Hao felt extremely annoyed.

His hand moved in incantation patterns, and then he pointed back at the four pursuers. Instantly, four beams of light shot out, four of the feathers from the fan. They cut through the air like flying swords, heading straight for the four people behind him.

Yan Ziguó narrowed his eyes and smacked his bag of holding. A small wooden shield appeared, about the size of his palm. It quickly expanded to the size of a head as it flew forward to meet the feather. A violent boom sounded out as they slammed into each other.

As for the other three, looks of shock appeared on their faces and they scrambled to produce magical items. Amidst the ensuing explosions, they spat blood out from their mouths and retreated, looking terrified.

Those three feathers weren’t damaged at all. Meng Hao waved his finger, and they shot back toward Yan Ziguó.

Yan Ziguó’s face twisted and he opened his mouth with a howl. A green mist suddenly emitted from his pores, forming a dense fog which circulated around him, turning into a giant green skull. It flew directly toward the three incoming feathers.

Banging sounds rang out, and the skull collapsed. The three feathers no longer glowed, and were now twisted and warped. They flew back to Meng Hao.

“I’m warning you,” said Meng Hao coldly, his eyes flashing, “if you keep pestering me....” Without finishing his sentence, he turned and disappeared into the distance, his body transforming into a prismatic beam.

Yan Ziguo didn’t pursue. He glared at Meng Hao’s retreating form, his hands trembling slightly within his sleeves. Meng Hao was a stranger to him. And yet this stranger had just casually forced him to use a life-saving art.

“That fan is not just a flight-bestowing treasure, but a powerful weapon!” he said to himself, his heart pounding. He turned to look at his three bedraggled companions. “Have any of you heard of someone from the State of Zhao who is at the eighth level of Qi Condensation and has a treasured fan?”

“Someone so young who is at the eighth level of Qi Condensation would surely have made a name for himself here,” said one of the other Cold Wind Sect disciples. “But I can’t think of anyone among the three great Sects who matches his description.”

“Who is he? He can’t be a Cultivator from the State of Zhao, can he?” Yan Ziguo frowned, even more interested in Meng Hao’s treasured fan.

“Elder Brother Yan,” said the female disciple, sounding hesitant. “I remember someone mentioned a treasured fan about a month ago. It was Elder Brother Sun Hua from the Winding Stream Sect. He said that some disciples from the Southern Domain’s Violet Fate Sect made a trade with a Reliance Sect disciple named Meng Hao. One of the items was a feather fan.”

Yan Ziguo looked shocked. He slapped his bag of holding, and a jade slip appeared in his hand. This was an item distributed to Inner Sect disciples. Inside was a depiction of Meng Hao, sealed with orders that anyone encountering him were to feel him out to get an idea of how strong he was.

The orders were several months old, so Yan Ziguo had mostly forgotten about them. Scanning the jade slip, he looked closely at the picture of Meng Hao’s face and, sure enough, it was the same as the person he had just encountered.

“So it’s him!” said Yan Ziguó, his eyes gleaming. His mouth twisted into a cold smile. He was just about to say something when suddenly, the ground trembled and the sky above turned crimson. Something shocking was happening not too far away in the Southern Domain, and the side-effects were spreading out to cover the entire area.