

Unfathomable 341

Chapter 341

“What do you think of the new batch of trial disciples?”

“Hm... there were a few promising prospects, like that youth with the large frame.”

“Ah, the elder has a good eye, his name is Wang Yating, he is already in the late inner aura stage even at such a young age.”

“Yes, yes. He might be able to make it as an inner sect disciple if he gets the right mentor. Is the elder thinking about making him his disciple?”

Two men were walking together. One was a somewhat older-looking old man, while the second was a taller-looking middle-aged man. It was clear that the older man was a more important member of the Thunderball Hall.

“Perhaps, if he shows me that he is worth it...”

The old man rubbed his beard while hoping to snag a promising youth for himself to guide. He was only an outer sect elder and was far too old to progress into the inner sect. The only hope of getting his foot in there was to shepherd a promising disciple.

It would be quite the honor to produce a powerful member of the sect. Even if he wasn't able to make it, he would always be his master.

He wasn't the only outer sect elder that was eyeing the young prospects here. The sect recruitment drive happened rarely and there was a limited number of seats in the outer sect for them. Each elder could take on multiple disciples and even if one made it into the inner sect it would be enough.

“Greetings Elder Yusheng.”

These two were greeted by another outer sect member that was waiting for them. It was time to inspect the youths and send them off on the morning training. Yusheng was responsible for managing several buildings filled with trial disciples.

There were about five hundred new recruits and he was responsible for a third of them. There were two other elders with the same status as him. The three would need to somewhat contend with each other.

From these five hundred youths, maybe one or two would be selected into the inner sect. If one of these outer sect elders would be able to guide such a disciple it was seen as someone that they could brag about.

Thus most of the time, these elders would pit their trial disciples against the other ones. It was seen as a game between the elder generation, the side that had the better disciples would be praised. The losers would in turn have to contend with being laughed at and seen as failures.

“How did the trial disciples fair during the night?”

“There was a fight as usual... one of the disciples showed promise, he managed to defeat multiple opponents in his own realm.”

“Oh, is that so?”

Yusheng asked while chuckling. The first day at the sect was always like this and the sect seniors allowed the disciples to take care of things with their fists. It was a good way to see which of the prospects were fierce enough to come out on top.

The life of a cultivator was a harsh one. The masters of this sect did not want anyone that was unwilling to fight. In the future, they might need these youths to help them in combat. Keeping cowards around would only weaken the sect.

Things were slightly different for the women cultivators though. They had a separate section at the Hall and were managed by their own female elders. The men did not intrude in their affairs too much but this did not mean that they would not be asked to fight when the time came.

“Good, have the disciples line up!”

The old man nodded and the junior that he was talking with entered the barracks. He began shouting and soon the trial disciples started appearing outside. There were supposed to be about forty new prospects here but the number had dwindled by some. This was acceptable as during the night fight some of the youths would be carried away to the infirmary to mend their injuries.

Even with some of them missing there were quite a few, they would all need to meet up with all the other young prospects. They all stood at attention with one youth, in particular, standing out. It was clear that this one was the winner of the nightly rumble, he stood in the front and the other young men were afraid to look him in the eye.

“Hoh, that must be that Wang Yating that you spoke about?”

“I... That’s not him... that young man was much larger and sturdier-looking... I don’t recall anyone like this being here. Don’t worry elder Yusheng, I’ll go ask right away!”

The elder looked to the junior and was now confused. The person that was rounding up the disciples was one of the Martial Masters that was here yesterday, thus a question was posed to him. Yusheng waited for the junior to go ask while the disciples waited without speaking.

“Big news Elder! Something unfathomable happened last night!”

The junior returned and started making a fuss about the previous night. Yusheng was informed about the big turnaround and how the best prospect was now getting his broken fingers mended.

It seemed that there was a hidden gem in the rough here who could easily beat a dual cultivator at the late inner aura level. This of course made this elder’s eyes shine with hope, there could actually be a genius in his batch of trial disciples that could help him raise his status.

“Yes, his name is Dai Rong, he comes from a smaller clan from the south... brother Lin Qiao was the one that brought him over... not much is known about him or his clan...”

The junior was a bit confused as this youth was nothing special. The young man had to have hidden his potential during the scouting process.

“Dai Rong... good... keep a close eye on him, report to me later.”

The elder rubbed his chin while also skillfully handing a spirit stone into this junior member's hand. Time would only tell if this Dai Rong was truly worth investing in. The young members would be taken through some physical tests first.

While this elder was thinking about what the future had in store for him, Zhang Dong was trying to avoid his gaze. He could feel the old man scanning him from head to toe which felt uncomfortable.

The previous night he had lost his cool slightly and beaten up three youths. He felt a bit bad for them but thanks to that the others were evading him now. Some of them were even trying to kiss his ass, calling his senior brother Rong.

The funny thing about this was, that the two from the trio that he fought were kissing up to him as well. They seemed to change their tune rather quickly after getting one-shot by him. He even expected them to want a rematch or say that he was lucky by sucker-punching them. Instead, he was now the top young master.

"Is that it? They just see me as another young master... so they are fine if someone from their group takes over..."

If he was seen as some kind of commoner not even coming from a clan, then maybe they would be playing a different tune. On the other hand, he did have some status, these lesser clans were at similar levels with Martial Grandmasters being a limit. It looked like this would make things easier, at least till the next youth came along to try to steal the crown.

"We will be running today, follow me, whoever can't keep up will not receive any rations for today!"

Finally, the physical training portion of this boot camp was on the way. The person leading them was a Martial Master. With most of these disciples being in the middle inner aura realm, they would have a hard time following after the instructor. For Zhang Dong, this was nothing but a light jog.

He used this opportunity to look around this place. They were situated on the base of a mountain with not much around them. There was a forest further below but there was a protective formation before it.

Some beasts roamed those parts and isolated this sect from the outside. It was a peculiar decision to surround the sect building by untamed beasts but it did keep the lower level cultivators and mortals away. The only way to get it was to be either a strong cultivator or have some kind of flying treasure like those boats.

'I'd need to get closer to this formation... but I don't think that I can disable it with my current cultivation, at least not fast enough for them not to notice me...'

He possessed a lot of knowledge in disabling and creating formations. There were certain ways of opening in backdoors to them. They would require a certain password that he would have a limited time to deduce during an attempt.

This was an invasive process and required him to use his spiritual energy. It was similar to hacking as he had a limited window and power. This protective formation was your usual shield formation at the core formation level.

Luckily for him, this training jog took him through a large chunk of this sect. He was not impressed, this place was lacking in many places.

The buildings here were shabby and the servants seemed malnourished. It didn't seem that the sect cared about these mortals that were probably taken here by force. These people took care of things like cooking and cleaning. They were also responsible for repairing things and keeping the whole place somewhat presentable.

The group of youngsters even passed by a couple of repairs in progress. These mortals instinctively bowed their heads the moment they saw the outer sect instructor.

When he compared this place to his United Element's sect it was night and day. In his city, most of the people were smiling while working for the future in mind. With the merit system in place they had a clear goal ahead of them and were always rewarded for their troubles.

Here on the other hand the future was unknown. Even if they gave their all they would not be thanked. The Thunderball Hall owners probably thought that it was an honor for mere mortals to work for them.

'I hope my sect hasn't changed since I left...'

He was a bit concerned about what trajectory his faction would go towards. There were some people that he didn't see eye to eye with. He also kept to himself not really tying himself down by sect politics. Only when the elders could not come to a consensus would he give his opinion.

'I need to gain access to a cultivation cave... I can't cultivate like this...'

While everyone was trailing behind he remained about ten meters behind the Martial Master. He was clearly showing off his skills while quite a few young masters had to give up while trekking through these snowy paths.

It didn't seem that Zhang Dong would be able to get away from here at a short notice. One problem was the protective formation and the second one was the beast-riddled forest. He needed to weigh his options before making his decision.

For now, it seemed that the Thunderball Hall had gained a genius new disciple that at the inner aura level was able to keep up with a Martial Master. This, of course, brought along some problems of their own...

Chapter 342

'Just as I thought...'

"Trial disciple... what are you doing?"

"Sorry senior, I just needed to pass the spiritual water..."

Zhang Dong stepped out from behind a tree while fixing his robe to seem as if he was peeing behind it. In reality, this was an area where the defensive formation reached up.

This was only the third day of the disciple training and he was smoking the competition. He was the only one keeping up with the instructor. With some time left before the others arrived, he moved over to see if he could pass through the protective barrier without anyone noticing him.

As he feared this was a dome-shaped translucent barrier. When he poked it with his finger it would look like rippling water and he could see its outline in the empty space before him.

This type of protective formation needed some sort of key to open up. Probably the elders and trusted sect members possessed some kind of item that let them pass through it. There was also one main gate where it could be opened by the guards stationed there.

The easiest way to get out would be to get this key from one of the elders. The two that brought him over here didn't seem to possess one of those keys as the Martial Saint that showed up was the one to guide them all in.

Taking the key from that core formation like elder would be a difficult task with his current cultivation. Even if he managed to swipe it, he didn't think he would be able to flee fast enough.

"I know that you surpass the other prospects but you can't make your seniors look bad!"

"I understand, senior."

Zhang Dong performed a little bow while feeling a bit silly. The man before him was an early stage Martial Master, even with his lowered cultivation he could take him out with a slap. He needed to act as a proper junior for the time being.

"Senior... how does one become an inner sect disciple?"

"Inner sect disciple? You should stop thinking about such things and first get past the trial period and become an outer sect disciple! You should stay grounded before looking at the heavens."

The man crossed his hands over one another and started nodding his head while talking. He was telling this young disciple to lower his expectations.

"You really think I'm being unreasonable, senior?"

Zhang Dong asked while moving a step forward and glancing down. There he saw a steep cliff that was at exactly a ninety-degree angle. The rocks were flat and there were not many places that you could place your hands or feet in.

When he focused on his eyes he could see some young cultivators slowly climbing up while trying not to fall. They needed to push through the ice-cold winds, shards of ice and debris falling onto their faces while they ascended this treacherous cliff.

Zhang Dong and the rest of the trial disciples were mountain climbing today. This was a good way for the young men to show off their physical capabilities. Just like the previous days, he was the first one to finish and the next best person would probably need another half an hour to get there.

The Martial Master instructor covered his mouth while coughing. He knew what Zhang Dong was getting at as he was smoking the competition. From Zhang Dong's standpoint, it was strange if he would not be picked up by some elder after showing what he could do.

“I...”

Zhang Dong with Dai Rong’s appearance looked with narrowed eyes at the Martial Master before him. The man might have been saying the right words but he was saying them to the wrong person.

“The junior does make some sense... you show more promise than the rest. Fine, this senior will tell you the ways of attaining high status in the Hall!”

The man was above the age of thirty, getting close to forty. He was still only a Martial Master and being an outer sect disciple was the most he could attain with his current disposition. This didn’t mean that he didn’t know the ins and outs of this sect.

“The easiest way to achieve the inner sect disciple status would be to do well at the disciple contest!”

“Trial disciple contest?”

“Yes, for this you junior would need to first be taken as a disciple of one of the elders. Each year this contest is held and the top three get elevated to inner sect disciple status!”

The explanation continued, it seemed that this was a multi-purpose contest. From the way it sounded, he wondered if it would have been another tournament. It was similar but not quite, there were various ways of attaining the favor of an inner sect elder.

First was the usual way of just being a strong fighter. There was no tournament but more of a challenger type of process. Every disciple that attended could force a higher status disciple to fight them. If they won, they would take their spot.

There was a certain ranking of all the outer sect disciples. If you managed to get in the top three of those, even top ten there was a chance of garnering favor with an elder.

The decision-making process was kind of vague. An elder might not have chosen one of the top three disciples if they were a bad fit for their particular techniques.

Then there was the pill forging competition. There would be one recipe presented to the disciples and they would have to create a pill. The sect would provide all of the resources and cauldrons. If the disciples failed they would have to pay for these resources.

There was even some kind of strange competition of combative dancing for the women cultivators. It was called Terpsichore arts, by moving in certain rhythmical ways these women could enthrall their opponents. It was some kind of strange dancing art that affected the opponent’s mind and left them open for attacks.

Beast taming, formation creation, and even blacksmithing were all the ways that they could show off their skills. The more a disciple stood out the better the chance was for them to advance further.

This sect was quite similar in this as his United Element’s sect. They didn’t see combat as being the only important talent. Making pills and forging weapons was just as important. A powerful treasure or a pill that raised your cultivation faster might have been even more important than combat strength.

“Can a trial disciple take part in this contest?”

“There is no rule against it, but you’d have to get permission from the trial elders. Also, the disciples need to be at least half step into the Martial Master realm, that’s why I advise this junior to stay grounded!”

This made sense as adding untrained youths to the batch would just make the whole contest longer. No one here was at the Martial Master level with the exclusion of him that was hiding his power level. It seemed that he would need to make a breakthrough before this contest started.

“That makes sense... when will this contest be held?”

“In three days, that why it’s better to give up junior. Just complete your training and be accepted as an inner sect disciple, then after a year has passed you can try to achieve the inner disciple status, with your talent you might have a chance! Even if you can’t do it through the contest there are other ways, just cultivate slowly.”

The Martial Master chuckled a bit while giving Zhang Dong’s back a pat. Zhang Dong on the other hand felt like he needed to get into this contest. The other option was to continue the training which would last two more months.

After being chosen as an outer sect disciple he would still not be given his own cultivation abode. Instead, he would be shoved into an even larger barracks building and everything would repeat itself. He would probably need to beat up other sect members and then actually do tasks for the sect.

The new outer sect disciples would be hired by the mortals and the lesser clans. They would be tasked with clearing out beasts or crafting pills to sell at auction houses. It was somewhat similar to the merit system at his own guild but a bit less proficient.

In the way that even when they did great in their tasks they would not be promoted to inner sect disciples unless they did well in the next contest. No one was keeping the disciples to use underhanded tactics either.

The schemers would prosper during this year of waiting while slowly getting rid of their competition. There were many outer sect prospects that vanished during beast subjugations, swallowing poisonous pills or offending senior members.

He did not have the time to be part of any of this. The slowest way to get out of this sect would be to wait till he was an outer sect disciple. Then he could take one of those tasks of killing beasts that were outside the sect. This would probably take from two to three months.

The faster way was to get the attention of an outer sect elder. An elder like that could take him under his wing. Thus he could skip the trial period, he knew that some of those outer sect elders were already salivating over him. This would probably lower the waiting time by a month or maybe two.

This was still quite the lengthy option, the fastest way was to achieve the top of the next disciple contest. To be allowed to get into it, he would probably need to reach the Martial Master stage. The minimum was the half-step realm but he feared that being a trial disciple, he would have a hard time getting into it with just that.

“Junior what are you...”

“Senior, I think our talk has given me important insight, I must cultivate now and create my crystal mountain!”

“Insight? Crystal Mountain? How could you enter the Martial Master realm with that talk...”

The senior member continued talking but he quickly went quiet as he felt this Dai Rong’s aura spiking. It was clearly going over the later stage of inner aura.

“C-could he really be doing it? How can he create his crystal mountain with so little preparations?... It took me ten years...”

The crystal mountain that they were speaking of was something similar to a foundation pillar. The cultivator would gather all of his spiritual energy that he prepared during the inner aura stage and crystallize it. This would take the form of a giant mountain in their dantian. The larger it became the better the prospects of the disciple would be.

Following the creation of the crystal mountain, a crystal palace would be formed. The Martial Master would chisel away at this mountain to fashion it into a mighty palace. When the mountain crumbled and formed a beautiful castle, the person would enter the Martial Grandmaster realm.

This was all knowledge that he lifted from the White Tiger Clan’s library. He had already examined other Martial Grandmasters and Martial Masters. With his own knowledge and his superior hiding skill he just needed to mask his cultivation to look like the one from this empire.

‘I need to play it up...’

While in the lotus position he cultivated. The trial disciples that arrived at the top of the mountain looked in horror as one of their own reached the next level so easily. Other elders gathered as well to see the rise of the next genius, Dai Rong’s name was now slowly being spread through the whole Thunderball Hall, his meteoric rise was about to start...

Chapter 343

“How can this be... Is that the sacred lightning aurora and that color... golden?”

A group of Martial Grandmasters was looking up to the sky. From a certain side peak of this Thunderball Hall, something magnificent was happening. They could feel it, someone was taking their first real step into becoming a true cultivator.

People in this empire were only really considered full-fledged cultivators when they achieved the Martial Master realm. The Inner Aura realm was considered a baby step in the right direction but going further would cement them as a real master.

They were all looking at a particular phenomenon. The heavens were dancing, the clouds gathered and lightning energy crackled as a new Martial Master was born. This was truly a cheerful day for this sect as it was one of their own.

“Who could it be... was there someone from the outer sect disciples that was this exceptional or perhaps it was one of the new recruits?”

While some senior members and elders started discussing, some of them headed for that mountain peak. The direction this spiritual energy was coming from was where the trial disciples went through their training, it had to be one of them.

Elder Yusheng was one of the first ones to arrive. He was responsible for this batch of trial disciples and was quite ecstatic to see who was advancing their cultivation. Two other elders arrived soon after but were halted by Yusheng.

All three of them were standing on flying boats as none of them had achieved the Martial Saint realm.

“Stop, we must not disturb the junior disciple from advancing into the next realm!”

The two elders looked at this Yusheng and then at the person that was radiating the strange Qi. These two elders just like this one were responsible for different batches of trial disciples. The three depending on how the trial disciples did would receive better cultivation resources from the sect as well as more prestige.

Yusheng knew this, he had to protect the trial disciple while he was the most vulnerable. Even though they were all from the same sect, this didn't mean that others would use underhanded methods to gain more power for themselves.

If these two were left along with his disciple he knew that they would try to make him join their sides. Then if he refused they might act rashly, even doing something that would be otherwise forbidden.

“Who is that young man?”

One chubby elder asked while rubbing his second chin.

“Did you give some forbidden techniques to people from outside the sect before they joined?”

Another hooked-nosed elder commented while looking at the youth that was transcending into the Martial Master realm.

“What are you babbling about you old fart? You did that a few years ago and got caught by the sect, now you are trying to accuse me with no evidence!”

Yusheng furrowed his eyebrows. The elders here were highly competitive, they did sometimes sponsor some good prospects in hopes of them achieving higher status later in life.

The sect mostly frowned upon such things as most of those youths grew up with a shaky foundation. Their rise was fast but they quickly found themselves at a bottleneck that they could not easily break.

When one used secret items and many pills to quickly reach new heights without any restraint it would mostly backfire. Thus these two were suspecting foul play and the youth before them just being another tiger with rotting teeth.

To them, it seemed that this elder Yusheng gave the youth some treasure or pill. With this cultivation phenomenon now being out in the open, the boy would garner attention. If he advanced further and became an inner disciple, Yusheng would garner more rewards.

“You want evidence? Do you really think we were born yesterday, how could this youth without a name produce the secret aurora without any help?”

“Yes, hand him over, we will check if he achieved this feat by his own merit!”

Yusheng’s face contorted from bewilderment into a rage. He knew that if he handed the youth over he could end up crippled or even worse, he might get bought out by one of these two idiots.

“You think I was born yesterday? The disciple stays here, if you don’t like that he is under my watch, go discuss it with the high elders!”

The high elders in question were people at the very top of the Martial Grandmaster level and ones even above them. The disciples could not be handpicked by these elders, they were all assigned by higher parts of the sect and these two knew it as well.

“The high elders...”

The two flinched a bit as they knew that they would achieve nothing when talking with the top members of the sect. The two stared glaring at Yusheng while down below the glow started to fade.

“He is done... he truly achieved the Martial Master level and he is not even twenty years of age!”

Yusheng turned around to make his way down to the youth that just achieved the breakthrough. He knew that the two idiots behind him were up to no good but they would not do something stupid while so many people were watching.

“Make way.”

He swished his sleeve as people looked up. The Trial disciples and the instructor were standing around this youth that achieved the breakthrough.

The youths parted to the sides while clasping their hands. By the robe that Yusheng was wearing all of them knew that he was an elder from the sect.

It was clear why he was here as he headed straight for the young man that was still in the lotus position. Suddenly the youth opened up his eyes, they crackled with golden lightning for a second before the glow faded. Even this elder that was a Martial Grandmaster flinched slightly. Even though this power was below him, its quality was far above his own.

“Young man... state your name.”

The young man before him looked up, there was a small pause but soon a very soft-spoken voice followed suit.

“Dai Rong, Elder.”

He slowly rose from his spot and performed the usual small bow while clasping his hands. Yusheng felt that something was off, he was the superior here but for some reason, he felt that this person before him outranked him.

“Ahh... disciple Dai Rong, I must congratulate you on your breakthrough, may I check for any faults?”

“Elder wants to check this disciples’ disposition?”

Yusheng nodded. This was slightly intrusive but the young man before him did not have the right to refuse. He was not a disciple of any elder in particular. In a world where might made right, he needed to go along with the elder’s wishes.

“Yes, I must examine your crystal palace for flaws...”

Dai Rong nodded and Yusheng moved over. He grasped the young man by the shoulder and started to concentrate. The first moment he felt a little jolt that was a bit odd but the feeling subsided within a fraction of a second.

What he saw was a magnificent crystal mountain that reached up high. When he compared it to his old crystal palace when he broke through, then this one was a true mountain while his was more of a small hill.

“Magnificent... such talent and potential.”

What he saw was a giant golden mountain of crystals. Each person had a unique-looking mountain, some were more pointy while others were wider. The more jagged and covered with cracks it was the tougher it would be to produce a good crystal palace afterward.

This one on the other hand looked smooth and pristine. The crystals were nicely packed and without flaws, what kind of palace would be made from this he could only speculate.

‘I must make him my disciple... even if for a while... if he has the time to grow he could even become a high elder... maybe even a star elder!’

The man thought while spacing out, he was snapped back to reality only after Dai Rong spoke out.

“Is everything fine, Elder?”

“Uhh... yes disciple, everything is fine.”

The man coughed into his hand and straightened up his clothes. He then struck a gallant pose and was about to give the youth the master and disciple speech.

“Young man, there comes a time in the life of a cultivator when they have to make a decision...”

Before he could continue the two elders that were looking at everything unfold descended from their flying vessels.

“Halt! Not so fast you rat!”

“Who are you calling a rat, you oversized pig!”

Yusheng turned around, he had characteristic buck teeth and everyone knew that he hated to be reminded of it. The fat elder and the one with the hooked nose gathered around Dai Rong and didn’t even ask before examining his disposition.

“By the Patriarch... what is this... you must become my disciple!”

“Don’t listen to him young man, become my disciple instead!”

The two were quick to start arguing about who would be getting Dai Rong as their disciple. A person was allowed to have more than one master but there was a special meaning behind the first one.

Even if the disciple attained more in their cultivation than their master they were supposed to offer them respect till they died. This was also why these three foxes were salivating about the opportunity of getting this genius to be their disciple.

The other trial disciples looked on with envy as the three old men fought for one no-name disciple. They knew that he was stronger than they were but were still hoping to nab themselves a good master and advance above Dai Rong.

“Elders please calm down, I’m just trying to focus on my cultivation, I’m not sure if I’m worthy of being accepted as a disciple of any of you prestigious elders...”

Dai Rong finally spoke up. He started rubbing the back of his neck while holding his head down as if he was shy. The three elders turned to him, the youth looked quite bashful but then he continued to speak.

“But... it’s hard to focus on my cultivation with all these other trial disciples around...”

“You have a hard time focusing on your cultivation?”

Yusheng asked while eyeing the other two elders.

“Yes, it would be really nice to have a secluded place to cultivate... but I’m just a trial disciple, I’m not worthy enough of such a place...”

The three old masters looked at themselves before each one started shouting.

“The disciple wants a place to cultivate? You can have access to my personal cultivation cave!”

“You can use mine instead, it’s much better!”

“No, you can use mine, I’ll even lend a maidservant to the disciple to tend to his needs!”

The three started to argue once more, at this time Zhang Dong was rather glad that he dropped the facade. He was not getting anywhere by hiding his strength, thus he now decided to show it off instead.

His roots were unknown so he could just tell everyone that he was holding back this whole time. He was now a Martial Master so he wouldn’t need to hide his cultivation as much.

‘Great... I should be able to get a personal cultivation abode thanks to these greedy old farts...’

He was not planning to accept any one of them as his master. For now, he would lead them on and take part in that competition in a few days.

“Great elders please calm down, I’m really not worthy of your time. How about we do this, I’ll come to take a look at all those cultivation caves and decide on one then?”

The elders looked to themselves and nodded. If they continued like this a fight would probably break out.

Soon the trial disciples saw Dai Rong leaving on one of the boats. Their mouths were wide open as they couldn't believe what just happened. The respectful elders fighting like ten-year-old children and the birth of a new genius. It seemed that the name Dai Rong would be spreading far and wide...

Chapter 344

"Hm... I think this one will be fine..."

"I knew the junior disciple has a good eye for quality!"

"Junior disciple Dai... why don't you reconsider, I'm sure I could..."

"Enough with your babbling, the young one has made his decision!"

The three elders that were responsible for the trial disciples were arguing once more. Zhang Dong was now inside a cultivation cave. It was a somewhat spacious cavern drilled into the side of the mountain.

There were several others like this one scattered all over the place where elders and seniors could cultivate in peace. On the ground, there was a guard building that would watch over the cultivators and not let anyone disturb them while they cultivated.

He didn't really care much about which one it was but this elder Yusheng seemed desperate in grooming him into a personal disciple. He felt that he could talk him into lending him this place temporarily.

The other cultivation abodes didn't look much different than this one. The three were quite equal in all regards, this was also probably why they were so serious about nabbing him as a disciple. Not like he would go through the master-disciple ceremony with any of them.

Zhang Dong's plan was to stay here for a few days before the competition started without even mentioning that he would be participating. If he mentioned his plan he feared that the elders would try to block him from entering it.

They would either fear him getting injured during it, thus they would lose the golden ticket out of the outer sect. Then if he achieved greatness he would just be pulled away by one of the higher ranking elders instead.

"Yes Elder Yusheng, I must thank you for letting me stay here, I think I must consolidate my cultivation for at least a week. I also must thank the other elders for keeping up with my selfishness."

He clasped his hands and bowed before the two. It was best to at least let them have some face even when he was refusing their proposal.

"Tsk..."

Both of them clicked their tongues before turning away and leaving. Yusheng just watched at the backs of these two long-time rivals while cackling.

"Young disciple, take your time, stay in there for a month if you have to, reaching the Martial Master realm is not an easy feat! You must slowly reinforce your crystal mountain so it doesn't show any cracks. After it is fortified you may begin the process of condensation."

This process of condensation or compression was a part of going further beyond the Martial Master realm. In this empire instead of producing more and more foundation pillars, the cultivators would compress their crystal mountain into a smaller size.

It was a forceful process that required a lot of spiritual energy. The mountain would go through two stages of condensation, then at the third stage it would be shattered and the crystal palace would be created in its place.

This was quite a unique construction, it was similar to a core formation expert's core. If he was cultivating in this empire he would probably fashion a giant golden castle that exuded lightning energies.

Even when the Martial Grandmaster created their crystal palace successfully, they would not be able to enter it. They would need to shatter its gates before being able to fully utilize it. The further they could get into this castle the closer they would get to the Martial Saint's level.

That was all of the knowledge that he was able to gather from the clan libraries. What would be created to enter the Supreme Saint and the Saint Emperor realm was unclear to him. If it was easier to reach those levels instead of core formation and nascent soul was unknown to him.

Saint Emperor's started out at the level above an early stage nascent soul cultivator so it probably wasn't. But the Supreme Saint level late stage might have been easier on the other hand which was interesting.

"I will then consolidate my cultivation Elder."

"Yes, take your time, when you are done meet me at my private home. I will lend you some of my personal cultivation methods so you can soar above the competition!"

"Thank you Elder, I will Elder."

Yusheng smiled widely while showing off his large front teeth. The old man looked like he had won a million spirit stones. He probably expected Zhang Dong to become his official disciple after he accepted those cultivation materials.

Taking personal techniques from anyone, was already a sign of accepting them as a half-master. Then afterward there was also a ceremony of kowtowing before him, this his own disciples had done a long time ago.

'Finally, I'm alone...'

The cultivation cave had a large thick wooden door made from some kind of spirit wood. It was sturdy and would not break even if a Martial Master kicked it with all of their might.

This door slammed behind him while he inserted some spiritual energy into a little crystal above. It started glowing in a somewhat dim light that could be adjusted.

There was a bamboo mat on the floor and some shelves here and there., not really much to help him cultivate. The only thing that was here was space for when he needed to practice some techniques.

Next to a wall was a thick metal plate with some cracks in it. It was clear that someone was practicing some palming and punching techniques on it. If he compared this to the vast facilities of his own sect, it was rather shabby.

“Well... better than nothing...”

He finally had some time to sit down and remove the contents of those spatial rings. After making sure that Yusheng went away he started taking everything out.

One pile had all the spirit stones he ‘borrowed’, another one had all the weapons and metallic treasures he could use for absorption. Then he tossed the cultivation books to the side as he didn’t have much use for them.

After leaving this place he would try to sell them off at some auction house. He could very well improve on the techniques to get a better price. The first time he tried utilizing that White Tiger Palm he made a blunder but now he had figured out his mistake.

Now he could safely inject his own slightly different spiritual energy into the new techniques and not have them kill the lower realm cultivators. Though now on the other hand he wanted to stand out, he would need to show off some flashy moves during the competition.

He deliberated on trying to get the second or third spot instead of going for the top. This would be the safer option, all things considered, he would get one of the side’s high-ranking elder’s attention while not being taken as the top prospect.

‘Yeah, that’s probably not going to work...’

Another sigh escaped his mouth as he grasped one of the weapons and started to absorb it into his body. After trying so many times not to stand out, he realized that it might be impossible.

During the fights, he feared that he would fail to control his might once more and still end up the one on top. It would save him some time to just go for the number one spot right from the start. He would just prepare himself for that and not be surprised when his big plan of not standing out crumbled into dust as many times before.

The weapons he was taking in didn’t add that much to his body refining skill. It had also evolved and required more. Still, there was a large pile of them, he at least hoped to enter the late stage of his silver body after taking them all in. If he was able to get into the great circle, then that would be even better.

With that amount of body refining, he would be immune to all Martial Grandmaster attacks. Even when facing a Martial Saint he would still be hard to kill in a close-ranged brawl. His body refining didn’t only offer him more resistance, it also raised his all-around strength and agility during hand-to-hand combat.

Most fights between high-level cultivators didn’t happen at close range though. Most of them produced some grand techniques that clashed against each other. Body refinement was mostly seen as a side technique, that was used by mostly stupid brutes.

While he absorbed the metallic objects with one hand he touched the pile of spirit stones with the other.

Spiritual energy detected, do you wish to absorb it Y/N?

The system message popped up as it used to. Even back in his sect days, he didn't use this option as much after his system changed. Without the old shop, he had lost the use for most of these points.

For now, he took in a chunk of the spirit stone till he had enough points to fiddle around with.

'The conversion rate is abysmal as always...'

The first thing he did was try to raise his cultivation with the spirit points. Even while being at this lower realm the requirement was huge. The whole pile that he had here would probably at most push him into the middle foundation establishment realm.

'Not that great with cultivation... how about...'

He picked up a pill from the side that he took from the White Tiger Clan. It was a thunder Qi pill that gave a cultivator a small amount of energy to cultivate their techniques.

While grasping it in his hand he looked at his system screen. He was pleasantly surprised that even without the crafting abode he could somewhat use his spirit stones to upgrade this pill. This would also be better than directly absorbing the points into his cultivation.

Thunder Qi pill [Common, Middle Grade] Do you wish to upgrade it? [100 spirit points]

'Nice...'

He gave up some of the points that he received to upgrade this pill to the higher grade. After a moment he had a perfect grade pill that was giving off a certain aura.

After popping it into his mouth he felt the electrical energies being injected and giving him some energy. It was not nearly enough for him to create a second perfect grade foundation pillar but if he upgraded some pills to a high enough mortal grade, then that could change.

'I'll cultivate for a day, then I must see when that competition is taking place.'

With resources in hand, he started to prepare. It would take him some time to stomach all these pills and weapons. After this was done, he needed to see how to join the competition.

From what the instructor told him, he already met the requirements as he had become a Martial Master. Now he just needed to see if there were some other requirements that he needed to meet. The competition was supposed to take place at the end of the week, which gave him a few days to prepare.

Chapter 345

Name :	Zhang Dong
Affiliation :	Zhang Clan, United Element Sect
Spirit Points :	450
Cultivation Base Qi :	Foundation Establishment [Middle Stage 2 %] [True Divine Golden Lightning Foundation]

Cultivation Base Body :	Foundation Establishment [Middle Stage 87%] (Silver Body+)
Techniques :	True Divine Lightning Path Cultivation Art, Golden Body Arts, Thunderlight Sword, Thunder Movement Art...
Dao :	Dao of Heavenly Lightning, Dao of Smithing and Crafting...
Other :	Senior Aura, Impartation of Knowledge, Mentor's Eyes...

Zhang Dong glanced at his system screen which showed him his status. He felt like he was back to the beginning where this screen actually mattered a lot. Through the years his progress had slowed down and he focused more on understanding the Dao himself instead of blindly using this system.

It was still a great tool to be equipped with. The system was able to scan his body and the bodies of others. Thus it allowed him to prepare strategies to counter some opponents even on the fly.

But thanks to his lessened usage he was now able to cultivate as a proper cultivator. Even without the crafting abode, he was able to upgrade the pills that he lifted off his opponents. With their help, he was able to push his cultivation base into the middle stage.

If he was an average cultivator and with all these improved materials he would easily reach the great circle level, maybe even achieve the core formation-level if he really wanted to force it.

His cultivation technique had improved and paired with his increased soul power he was barely able to push it into the middle stage.

His foundation pillars expanded in number and each one was as large and girthy as the first one. With them giving him power he felt like no one below the Martial Grandmaster really would be able to contend with him.

There was nothing left in the spatial rings that was worthwhile besides the less valuable white tiger clan fighting techniques. The only use that he could have for them would be selling them at an auction house after he got out of this sect. There was not much that the disciples could trade in here and cultivation techniques were not one of them.

This sect mostly forced their disciples to abandon their old ways and be reforged in the dao of lightning. This was also why they only took in people below the Martial Master realm. Before this realm, the young disciples were more flexible.

They would look down on the ones that somehow used more unique techniques that were not approved by the sect. This was only a limit for the Qi cultivation, the one concerning the body was laxer.

His own body refining technique that made his body similar to metal was actually quite beneficial towards his lightning cultivation. It transferred and absorbed electricity quite well with the help of his Lightning Dao; he was almost virtually immune to these energies.

The only way for him to receive damage from lightning attacks would be if a cultivator's Dao of Lightning was above his own. This was not something that was very feasible as he had upgraded it past this world's set limits.

Even with the help of his system, he was unable to push past the Immortal great circle level. Was this something set up by the creator of the system on purpose or was it the actual limit of the person that made it?

‘No use worrying about it, for now, I need to focus on one thing at a time, I need more information about that contest and to sign up.’

The small mountain of spirit stones had decreased as he had used some of them to push his cultivation further. He had left some for payment, if there was a competition like this, the people that did not have any backing would probably need to give something up to participate.

He had spent one whole day in this cultivation cave and only after a week would his new ‘master’ come to bother him. Before he could be asked to become some old fart’s disciple he needed to win that competition. Only then would he be allowed to enter the inner sect and try his luck at that large lightning rod of a tower.

The entrance to this cultivation cave had a large round door. He gave it a push and he could already feel that anyone below the Martial Master level would have a hard time opening this thing.

After the door swung open he was greeted by a cold breeze. The air around here was cold and rather thin, this made it a harsh environment to live for the mortals working here.

With a little step, he descended from this cultivation abode. It was quite high up as well, reaching it without good climbing skills or a flying boat would be hard for the average disciple.

On the ground, he was seen by some of the sect elders. There were a few Martial Master’s keeping watch. They were all mostly composed of older outer sect disciples that didn’t have luck in reaching the Martial Grandmaster realm.

The youngsters with more skills didn’t bother with earning coins or spirit stones this way. This was just one of the many jobs that the sect offered to their disciples. It was a meager-paying job but for the ones, with not much skill it was a way to get by.

“Greetings senior.”

Zhang Dong did a little bow before the middle-aged man before him. The man looked up to the cultivation cave that Zhang Dong left and then back to the young man.

“Greetings junior... Elder Yusheng’s new disciple?”

The man asked while looking at a piece of parchment. On it, he had all the cultivation caves written down and to whom they belonged to.

“Did Elder Yusheng call me that? I’m not his disciple quite yet but maybe in the near future...”

Zhang Dong chuckled a bit while trying to play it off. It was clear that the old man had probably told everyone that he was his new star pupil by now.

“Is that so, are you stepping out?”

“Yes, I’ve gotten a bit hungry, I also need to see some things within the sect, I’ve heard that a competition will be taking place at the end of the week...”

“Ah, Is the junior interested in seeing this year’s contest?”

The man nodded, he probably thought that Zhang Dong here was just interested in seeing the other senior brothers and sisters compete.

“Yes, I’m not sure where it will be taking place...”

“It’s not hard to miss, it’s going to take place at the outer sect. Some competitions will take place in the outer courtyard, while the main bouts will take place in the inner courtyard... Then the competitions for lesser professions will take place indoors...”

The man was quite chatty as he described the structure of this event. Instead of a large arena, it would take place in more open fields around larger outer sect buildings that possessed courtyards surrounded by walls and other structures.

Zhang Dong could recall seeing some of such places at the lower parts of the mountain. It looked like a small city there with all the sect buildings and places where the servants lived.

Apparently, the whole outer sect had about thirty thousand people living in it, while the inner sect had a quarter of that. Even with this disparity in numbers, the inner sect disciples would mop the floor with the outer sect ones in any way shape, or form. Quality trumped quantity here, a person even one small stage above the competition could win against a whole group.

After the long speech, Zhang Dong bowed once and headed out into this sect. These cultivation caves were drilled into the mountain so he had to walk down to enter the thirty thousand large city.

About a third of the population of this sect city consisted of servants, slaves, and even mortals. They were tasked to keep everything clean while the sect members only focused on their cultivation.

The buildings in this outer sect weren’t all that great. They were mostly made from unevenly cut rocks or something similar to cinder blocks. The weather here was rather cold so each of the houses had some kind of chimney.

The peculiar thing about those chimneys was that they were not producing any smoke. Even when the houses lit up in a light that came from firewood, there was no smoke. As he investigated further he could feel that each of those chimneys had some kind of smoke filtering treasure in it.

Thanks to this no smoke was formed which didn’t affect the already thin air. The higher-tier cultivators didn’t actually need to be heated up. He was the same, with his foundation established he would be even able to run around naked without catching a cold.

‘Doesn’t look that bad but neither is it that good...’

He would have to give this place an average score. It looked similar to his old clan before he took over but there were fewer members and lacked a whole city with millions to manage.

With this change in culture, the cultivators here probably had a lot more time to practice and reach higher cultivation levels in a shorter amount of time.

'This should be it...'

After asking for some directions he arrived at one of the outer sect buildings. It looked like an upside-down pyramid with half of it sliced up and balancing on four columns. When entering inside he found a person at a reception area.

There was a small line in front of it and some young men and women were standing in it. This from what he could tell was the place where you registered for this competition.

'Hm...'

To the side, he spotted a little stand with some parchments. Some of the youngsters were picking them up and moving to the side to write in them. After approaching the servant greeted him with a little bow.

"Good day sir, did you also come to register for the competition?"

"Mhm."

Zhang Dong nodded while taking the piece of paper into his hand. The person also informed him about this being the last day for registrations.

To the side, there were some quills and ink. On these papers, a person needed to select which competitions they would be competing in.

At first, Zhang Dong hesitated but soon he started noting down all of them that he thought he would be able to win. Formation creation and disassembly, pill making, forging, there was even one for apprising that he took. The one for combat was also taken which made it five.

He wanted to stick out but there wasn't enough time for him to go through all of the competitions. By looking at the curriculum he would have enough time to go through each one of these competitions and build up his fame.

Everything would culminate on the battle stage, he wanted to garner the attention of all the high-standing elders. With him never having luck with not standing out, he would try the opposite, hiding in the open.

'Well... I hope this doesn't totally backfire...'

After a sigh, he headed over to the line, in his pocket some spirit stones to pay for the entrance fee.

Chapter 346

"Good day brother Yong."

"Greetings brother Ma, you're in a good mood today."

"Why wouldn't I be? The first spot is as good as mine."

"Hah, not if I have something to say about it!"

The young men with fans looked at each other while chuckling. There were in a large room with many strange items on small display podiums. There were large and small weapons, armor stands, pills, and even herbs.

Around these items many people stood, young disciples, while also some older men with white beards.

“Who do you think will win this competition, Elder?”

“I feel like little Yong might be victorious this time, he did study up on all those pills, it was his weak point in the last year’s contest...”

“Yes, there are many various pills on this day but not that many weapons, what a keen observation!”

Two other people were dressed in more ceremonial robes and talking. They had armbands with the words ‘Judges’ written on them.

This was one of the first competitions of this year’s outer disciple contest. Appraising was done here, the young men and women would be given pen and paper. They would then be able to wander around the large hall and look at the items presented there.

Each item had a corresponding number to it, they needed to successfully appraise the items here. Giving the correct name, quality, and any fine details that could affect the price. Then they needed to try to give an accurate estimate of what it would be worth.

It was already hard to precisely gauge the true nature of the weapon from the outer appearance. Getting the correct price would require putting the items against other ones and decide where they stood on their own.

There were also dummy items placed to fool some of the young appraisers. Pills that looked and smelled almost exactly like their more pricey counterparts. Dull-looking blades made from precious metals and even gems that weren’t actually what they seemed.

“I am Elder Hu, I will be the main judge for this competition. Remember juniors, you may not touch any of the items on display, use your eyes and other senses to ascertain the true nature of these treasures!”

The elder listed all the rules for this competition which forbade anyone from touching the items. There was not enough time for everyone to look at the items separately so if anyone was spotted looking at the answers of the others by the judges they would be instantly disqualified.

The main judge here was a Martial Grandmaster level of expert. With this much no junior would be foolish enough to peek, everyone was too afraid to get kicked out. Cheating in a competition like this could even get you banned from the sect. It was not worth the risk.

“With this, the competition starts now, remember you have limited time!”

The elder said while lighting up a somewhat longer incense stick, this would make the competition last about an hour.

The young sect disciples rushed into the open hall and started taking notes. While they were busy with the competition the elders decided to have some tea. They didn’t expect anyone to return for a while as the time needed was quite short.

“Don’t you think that we should extend the time slightly? We have never had anyone fully finish the appraisal before.”

One of the old men chuckled while pouring the green tea into the teacup.

“Then we would have to be stuck in here for even longer, they must also learn how to save time and choose their battles wisely.”

The other elder sat down while taking the cup into his hand and giving it a sip.

“That is true.”

From this elder’s perspective, the winner would be the one that could fully utilize their gift. Some of the appraisers were quite stubborn, they would keep examining one item for long periods of time before coming to a conclusion. There was no time for such a thing, they needed to be swift and also know how to focus their expertise.

“Oh... who is that?”

The main judge narrowed his eyes while looking to the hall where the disciples were looking at the items. It seemed that he was even scoffing and frowning.

“Who do you mean elder?”

“That young man... is he wearing the trial disciple robes? Who allowed a trial disciple to take part in this competition?”

The man spotted a certain youth with long hair scribbling on the paper. He was going from one display case to another and quickly writing something down as if he instantly knew the answer to the question.

“That young man... I have no idea... he must have paid to participate... probably still an inexperienced youth that doesn’t know his place, should I go and take him away, Elder?”

The side judge asked while standing up, if the main judge wished for it he would remove the impudent trial disciple. There was no rule against not allowing them in, but they would really have to be from some prestigious clan for that to happen.

“No wait, let us see him make a fool of himself, we can scold him after the event is finished.”

The main judge waved his hand around while going back to sipping the tea. From his standpoint, this would be a good learning opportunity for the other young appraisers. He could show how inexperienced this young fool was and make the other youths take it more seriously.

The minutes continued to pass but the main judge’s eyes were drawn to this young man. He was a strange one, he went from one stand to another and quickly started writing. It was as if he knew the answer instantly and there was no chance of being wrong.

This annoyed this old man quite a bit. He might have not been the greatest when it came to cultivation but appraisal was his main profession. To him, it seemed that the youth before him had no respect for this sacred occupation.

It looked like the youth just wrote whatever came to his mind and continued to the next one without examining it further. Even the other participants started to notice him as his feet were shuffling on the wooden floor quite loudly.

Before the incense stick could burn to the half mark the youth was at the last item. The young disciple stopped for a prolonged moment before scribbling down something. The item he was looking at was a somewhat useless pendant.

“Is he really done?”

The side judge commented while looking at the young man. It didn't take him long to spot the side where the judges were. The next thing seemed a bit disrespectful as the young man spotted the elders and started strutting towards them as if he owned the place.

“Greetings elders, I would like to present my answers.”

The young man held out the piece of paper in front of the side judge while the main elder's eyebrows were quivering.

“You have finished?”

“Yes, Elder.”

The young man bowed his head while clasping his hands. The main judge didn't speak out yet but it was clear that he was a bit maddened by the fact.

“Are you taking the Appraisal occupation lightly?”

“I would never do such a thing...”

“You wouldn't? What is this then?”

The side judge quickly grabbed the piece of paper and was almost ready to throw this rascal out. Before that, he gave the parchment a quick glance and he was shocked at his realization.

“Huh?”

He started eyeballing the writing, if it was calligraphy then this youth had quite pristine writing skills.

“What's wrong? Did he get everything wrong?”

The main judge asked after the co-judge started acting strangely. He expected his junior to berate this impudent disciple and make more of a scene. This would show the other disciples that the Appraisal profession was not to be trifled with. For some reason, he went quiet instead.

“Wrong...n-no... These are all... correct Elder...”

“Correct? Let me see that!”

The side judge quickly gave the piece of paper to the main judge that started going through the list. He was familiar with the items so he didn't need to consult any writing.

“Physical enhancement pill, common grade... 24% saturation...price two low grade spirit stones...”

“Azure Wood branch, not yet mature... three spirit stones...”

“Mirage Dragon Cauldron, mortal middle grade...”

The judge went through everything one by one and it was all correct. The youth before him seems to have marked everything and even got the market prices right as well. With one exclusion, he had achieved an almost perfect score.

“Who gave you the answers?”

“The answers Elder?”

“Yes! Do you think that I’ll believe that some trial disciple finished this competition with an almost perfect score?”

“Almost perfect score? I’m sure I’ve gotten everything right... could you check again?”

“The audacity! Who is your master?”

“My master? I don’t have one, I’ve joined the Hall a week ago.”

The young man smiled while standing straight as if he was in the right while the elder running this competition grew angry.

“No master? And you claim that you answered everything right? The useless trinket is a three-star phoenix pendant? You want me to believe that an item at the Martial Saint level made it to this competition unbeknownst to me?”

“Oh... Elder doesn’t know about the hidden mechanism in the back?”

“What hidden mechanism?”

The man shouted loudly and also released some of his killing intent. This caused all of the people in this large hall to look in this direction. It looked like the old man was berating a junior that was just standing there with his head not even lowered.

“I can show the elder, if you don’t believe me...”

“You can show me?”

The people here started inching away, it looked like this young man would end up as a corpse soon. The Appraisal Guild leader who was this main judge was known for having quite a temper if he was disrespected.

“Haha... he can show me, fine... show me... but be ready for the consequences...”

The old man seemed to have made up his mind and the two were seen walking to the last display where a silvery pendant was placed. Some of the disciples had already gone past it as it was one of the easier parts.

“That idiot is a goner... why did he have to go and offend that elder...”

The youths moved out of the way while waiting for this scene to be over. It was still the middle of the competition so they wanted this strange disciple to just go away. He had already annoyed most of the people that were here so they were all in agreement for his punishment.

“Well, this item might look like a regular common grade pendant made from plain silver but when you insert your Qi in the correct places then...”

“Hah, then wha...”

The main judge wanted to laugh but his mouth became tongue twisted. After the young man picked up the pendant it started radiating a massive amount of energy. The pale silver exterior switched to bright red in an instant.

“T-this... it really is a phoenix pendant... and a three star one...”

“Some people might not know this, but some blacksmiths like to lock their items behind a special locking mechanism. I have dabbled a bit in blacksmithing so it wasn’t hard to notice...”

The youth smiled while handing the now ruby pendant that had turned from a common grade treasure to an earth grade treasure. This was not something that an elder like this could hope to have in his possession normally but it found itself into his hand now.

“So elder... Did I have everything correct?”

“Huh? Everything correct?...”

The judge started laughing maniacally before stuffing the red pendant into his spatial ring.

“Yes, you did my boy! I knew a talent when I saw one!”

The elder started patting the young man on his back repeatedly while laughing while the other people in the room looked with wide opened mouths.

“Could you give this Elder your name, disciple?”

“Ah yes, my name is Dai Rong...”

The appraising competition was said to have ended early. Its victor had set a new sect record and went down in history as a new appraising prodigy...

Chapter 347

“That’s one... four to go...”

Zhang Dong was looking at a little white bead that he received after being first at the Appraisal competition. Thanks to his system he was able to instantly know what the items on display were, even the ones that had a hidden function.

After he had filled out the participation form he had to pay quite a hefty sum to take part in all of the competitions. The person he gave his paper to looked at him in bewilderment and he had to convince him to let him participate.

After taking care of the formalities he had two days of free time. This he used to locate the outer sect library. Even though he was confident in winning everything, this didn’t mean that he wouldn’t do any research.

As a trial disciple, he had no way of entering this large building. This did not pose a problem for someone with an immortal level disguising technique. He just needed to find one of the elders and shadow him back to his home. Taking out a late stage Martial Master wasn't hard for him.

The old man was put to sleep before he could even realize what was happening. He had enough time to raid the library and gather even more knowledge by tapping the scriptures. The techniques were really mostly following the lightning Dao but they were all inferior to even the basic ones that he came to this world in.

If he had his old cultivation level, this Thunderball hall would probably salivate over making him their grand elder.

Now armed with more knowledge he took part in the Appraisal competition which he won. The main judge after being given that pendant was quick to give him this bead while he himself left the rest of the competition up to the side judge.

'They sure are greedy in this empire... but not like that's any different than my own.'

While thinking about how that elder was trying to hide the core formation level item he moved towards the next competition. This one would be about formations.

Being a formation master was a sought-after position. Together with Pill makers and blacksmiths they made up the three most important crafting professions. Without possessing a large protective formation a sect could not function correctly.

Formations were very similar to magic circles. A formation master needed to draw them out in specific locations while also placing some formation flags at the focal points. Their Qi would also be utilized to somewhat etch the symbols into the earth. After it was done, the formation circles would become hidden.

That was also how to combat formation worked, by having the practitioners focus their Qi to draw out a smaller formation with their spiritual energy. Those were harder to produce as they required the cultivator to focus but if done correctly the formation would activate and function even while battling.

'I guess I'm already gaining some notoriety...'

Zhang Dong didn't turn around but he could feel that some people were following him. After he won the appraisal competition some of the elders and disciples decided to shadow him.

There weren't that many behind him as the competition that he took place in wasn't that popular. Appraisal was mostly a side profession for people that liked to identify items than to make them by themselves.

"I welcome you to the yearly outer sect formation guild competition."

Zhang Dong moved together with a large group of disciples while another elder in a white robe showed up. He started discussing how this trial would go down.

It looked to be some type of course that everyone would have to go through. There would be several challenges that the young formation disciples would need to pass.

There would be illusion formations, imprisoning formations, and even slaughtering formations. The contestants would move in groups and the one that arrived at the end with the best time would win.

Zhang Dong being a trial disciple that had to actually pay to get in here, would need to wait. He was dead last with all of the inner sect disciples that had less than stellar backing. This also meant that probably no one would be paying attention to his run.

'I guess this will give me an opportunity to see how the competition was doing.'

This formation competition took place in a large cavern. The sect actually dug into the large mountain and created many corridors. The whole thing seemed to be a labyrinth with many paths and illusory formations that were there to confuse the disciples.

There was one entrance through which the participants would go in and also one exit. That was right next to the entrance, the many corridors would lead them here and the first one to come out would be treated as the victor.

There were about three hundred participants here and they would be assigned to groups of thirty people. This smaller group would then compete.

He already knew that with rules like this, it meant that on the inside some young masters would probably use some underhanded methods to get ahead. Deaths and injuries did happen from time to time but everyone could always attribute it to the slaughtering formations.

After a set time, if not all of the disciples made it out an elder would go through the labyrinth to fetch them. At that time they would sometimes find bloodied bodies, or youngsters with broken legs or trapped in an illusion they can't break.

This was also the first time Zhang Dong could see female cultivators. The formation master profession didn't require a tough exterior so it was suited for women with high amounts of Qi. Women in this world tended to be less brash and also better at concentrating. They also showed more promise at learning tough formation diagrams than their more rowdy male counterparts.

Thus about a third of the competitors here were young girls between the ages of thirty and twenty. The sect still had a lot more male cultivators so they had the number advantage.

With the genders mixed it brought some more drama to the table. The young men started showing off while using this as a chance. The world of cultivation was mostly one of seclusion which caused the relationships between the two genders to be somewhat rare.

Thus, most of the young men had no idea how to approach the fairy-like jade-like beauties that only got more beautiful as their cultivation increased. Cultivation was a process of bettering oneself and the women of this world focused on the external appearance over pure power.

"This Lai Zhenya will win this contest, beautiful fairy please join me for some tea after the competition is over!"

One flamboyant-looking man in a purple robe and with a fan in his hand approached one of the better-looking young women. This first batch of thirty contestants did have most of the top prospects.

The woman just looked at him without replying but Zhang Dong could spot a little smile hidden under that pale face. Another youth joined in on the conversations soon after.”

“No, I will be the one to take the fairy out for some tea!”

Soon the two started fighting and only did they stop when an elder appeared. Zhang Dong gave out a sigh while standing up against the wall. He would need to wait till these idiots were done with their runs. He was unable to do anything besides waiting.

Time continued to fly and as he had thought there were some injuries. Sometimes some of the kids had to be carried out by the elders with many bruises on their bodies. The competition was harsh and there was minimal help even from the adults. Unless they could gain something in return, it was hard to find a carrying one around.

This all reminded him of the cultivators before he took over. Luckily with him in the driving seat, his sect had stared into a more gentle direction. There was some infighting but not this bad, or at least this was what he hoped.

He mostly took on a hands-off approach, Zhang Dong was not really aware of what was happening in the outer sect area. He only created the merit system that would allow everyone to get into the inner sect. If they worked hard if they used underhanded tactics was unknown to him.

There was the part where the sect scanners didn't allow any evil people in but there were certain ones that would try to gain the system. They were not outright evil but looking out for yourself wasn't really considered evil.

“Okay, you are the last ones left, please go in.”

‘Finally...’

The last group was his when they were done, then the last run would take place. From each group, the top three participants would be allowed to move one. Multiplied by ten, a group of the winners would take a harder course and then only would the winners be announced.

With the group of thirty he entered through the corridor while staying a bit to the side of everyone else. After going through the threshold of the passage he could already feel it, he found himself in a large illusory formation.

This was quite the basic one, it kept the people that were affected from seeing the correct path. What the young participants saw was a cavern with three paths but there was a fourth one. It didn't seem that any one of them could tell as they all headed into one of the other three while he waited and took the correct one.

Little did he know that this was not actually an easy nut to crack. His actions were spotted by the elders outside. They could tell that someone was able to get through one of the more difficult formations that kept all the hidden paths away from the disciples.

These paths were there so that the elders could use them as shortcuts. Only when having a specially crafted item and previous knowledge would they be able to tell the way. Zhang Dong was a special case as he was fully immune to something like mind control due to his oversized soul.

This was also why he found himself at the exit after about only five minutes of walking. He successfully managed to use all the hidden corridors.

“How could this be...”

The main judge called out in surprise after he saw a slightly confused Zhang Dong reach the exit.

‘Did I make myself look a bit too competent with this one...’

He could only shrug while looking at the previous winners, not being able to comprehend how an unknown person like him had managed to beat everyone else. The record set by some formation ancestors from many millennia ago was not this fast.

“Oh, greetings elders, is there a problem?”

He asked while smiling, now all he had to do was beat the other young masters that were resting from their previous run. They all started to whisper, all looked at him and they all couldn’t believe it. It was time to play it up and become the number one prospect that this sect had ever had.

Chapter 348

“Why is everyone making such a commotion?”

An angry-looking short old man with a stocky physique looked at a group of disciples shouting. The place they were in was below ground and many strange-looking furnaces filled with smoldering metal were seen everywhere.

“Elder! You came at the right moment, please look at that disciple there!”

“Junior elder... why are you like this?”

The old man raised his eyebrow while looking at the person he left in charge. This was one of the competitions for the outer sect disciples. This old man here was the most prominent blacksmith in the outer sect. His cultivation wasn’t great but he made up for it with his knowledge about metals and crafting techniques.

This was also the main reason that he was not allowed to venture into the inner sect part. His cultivation journey was cut short by a certain event. Without any prospects to gain further strength he was confined to the outer sect even though he was more talented at the craft than some inner sect elders.

He was required to stay at this competition even though he thought that his skills could be better used elsewhere. Nothing ever happened here and the bad form that all of the blacksmithing disciples had just made him more cranky.

Thus most of the time he left at the start of the competition and returned later when it was mostly over. This year was the same, no one really showed promise and there was even some strange trial disciple buying their way in. Maddened by this fact he decided to get something to eat while the youths competed.

To his surprise when he returned there was some kind of uproar. The usually quiet peanut gallery was talking with each other while glancing in a direction of someone.

“You’ll have to excuse the disciples and other seniors but we think that the Hall might have found a prodigy?”

“A prodigy? Where?”

“That young man over there, look Elder!”

The old man looked to where this so-called prodigy was supposed to be and spotted the trial disciple that he previously saw. At first, he thought that he might be looking at the wrong person and the real genius was somewhere behind this youth but then he noticed it.

“That sword... that’s some good craftsmanship... Did that young man really make it?”

“Yes Elder, I’ve seen it with my very own two eyes! You couldn’t make a finer sword for a Martial Master even if you tried! A Martial Grandmaster wouldn’t feel ashamed when using one either!”

The secondary elder that was left to watch over the young men and women here looked ecstatic. His eyes were sparkling while looking at the youth that had finished the sword.

This experienced elder here could hardly believe it. Almost all of these young smiths here had trouble making a mortal grade item. The youth before him was able to fashion a higher grade one than some of the blacksmiths that were already working for years.

“You there...”

“Me, Elder?”

“Yes you, what’s your name, disciple?”

“It’s Dai Rong, Elder.”

The old dwarf-looking man walked up to this youth and grabbed the sword that he was making. After looking over the item it was hard for him to believe that it was a weapon made by a disciple, it was just too perfect.

It was as if someone maximized a weapon to be just a millimeter from reaching the Martial Grandmaster level. It was as if this young man was just half a step from reaching a point of a grandmaster-level blacksmith.

“Disciple... show me your crafting process!”

“You want me to craft another sword, was this one not good enough?”

The young man looked at the man with a somewhat annoyed look in his eyes but it quickly changed to one of neutrality.

“Not good? It’s more than good, it’s great! This old man just wishes to see how this disciple crafts, if you show me this I will announce you the winner!”

“Can it be something smaller... like a dagger?”

“A dagger? That will be enough!”

The old man just wanted to see the young man's hammering techniques. He missed the show and he would not have a chance to see this young man's talent if he let him go now.

"You there, being over enough spirit metals for a dagger. It will be enough if you just make the blade young man."

Dai Rong just nodded while grabbing the provided metal. The theme of this crafting competition was making swords and there was a limited amount of resources provided. With the metal in hand, Dai Rong got to work.

The old man started watching, from the process of heating up the metal all the way to the precise blows and till the sharp knife blade started taking shape, he didn't miss a thing. Even some of the other elders and disciples that were taking part in this competition looked.

"T-this... how can one be so precise... the hammer blows... the Qi control... not even one wasted movement..."

The old man looked baffled, where did this young man come from, I must make him my disciple were the thoughts running through his head.

"Young man... where do you come from..."

"I'm a member of the White Tiger clan... will this be enough Elder?"

Dai Rong stood with a short blade that only needed a proper handle. Even without the handle, it was clear that this weapon would be deadly and could be sold for a big profit.

"Enough... yes... Listen here disciple would you like to become my..."

Before the man could finish Dai Rong spoke up.

"That's great elder, does that make me the winner of the competition?"

The old man looked around and to the other blacksmiths that were keeping watch over the other disciples. They all shook their heads around to indicate that there was no one even close to this young man's skill level. The old elder here also could not feel any strong Qi from all the other weapons.

"It does seem that you are the winner young disciple but wouldn't you want to become my dis..."

"That's great Elder! Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go to the Pill Forging Hall!"

"Pill Forging Hall? What do you want with those old coots"

"I'm going to participate in their pill-making competition, Elder."

"Pill-making competition? Disciple knows how to create pills?"

"Yes Elder, I don't have much time so I should be leaving, could I take the bead as the winner?"

The old man was shocked that this smithing prodigy was on the way to the pill making elders. The blacksmiths and apothecaries didn't like each other here. They were in a constant battle for more donations from the main sect. Each one wanted to prove themselves as the one that was more worthy than the other.

“Ah yes here you go...”

The old man took out a round bead with a character on it that proved that he was the winner of this competition. The other disciples after seeing how well this young man could craft could not even complain.

“Is that man also this good at crafting pills?”

Another elder asked while talking to this dwarfish-looking man that glanced towards his way.

“It can’t be, maybe the young man just wants to give it a try? It would be better if such a talented smith focused on one main craft!”

The elder started rambling a bit before turning back to the young man.

“Now then, young man, would you like to become my disciple?”

“Ah, he left already, Elder...”

“Huh?”

The old man’s eyes went wide as the young man slipped away while he was busy talking to one of the other elders. He didn’t even notice him leaving; it was as if the young man was able to hide his presence.

“Blast it, I must make him my disciple! What if he is good at pill-making as well! One of those old bastards could snatch him away! Everyone from the Blacksmithing Hall follow me, we must get that young man into our Hall!”

...

Zhang Dong slipped away from the third competition with now three beads in his spatial ring. He snatched the sword and the dagger he made as well, these items would aid his body refining later.

He made sure to produce an item that was at the limits of his recognized cultivation level. He could have easily made something a Martial Grandmaster could use but that would make it look a bit more suspicious.

The old elder made him somewhat mad as he left the spot, then he even had the gall to ask him for another item. Now there were two competitions left, the pill making one and then the battle.

Already he could tell that he was gaining attention. During his third competition, he noticed some people mentioning his previous wins at the appraisal competition and the formation competition.

Even now he could tell that some people were following him. He didn’t blame them, he was an unknown person that was showing a lot of promise. Now with a small crowd with him in tow he made his way towards the fourth competition, there he would try to stick out like a sore thumb.

Even as he moved through the sect, he could hear people whispering. People were surely using their communication jades to give others information. A young genius was spotted in the sect and all of the elders probably wanted to have him.

‘Good, the more popular I become the better chance of getting a good spot at the inner sect...’

The inner sect was locked away behind a separate formation and required a key to pass through. His chances of cracking this key and sneaking in were high but why would he put himself in danger? He could just walk in there as a proper inner sect disciple.

The plan was easy: get attention, make it inside the inner sect, and then find a way to access one of those lightning rods. After that, he would drain the whole mountain of its power.

From what he could tell, the stormy clouds above were formed due to this place's special location. Even if he sucked away all of the current lightning it had, the energy would reform itself later.

He was planning on offering some treasures to the sect elders in the form of pills or weapons that he crafted as an apology. After achieving core formation he didn't feel like he would need to fear any of them. He felt bad about draining this place of its resources but he also needed to get home.

'This is the place... wonder what pill they will want me to make...'

The pill hall was before him, even before entering he could already smell the herbs. With long steps, he entered with a large crowd following his footsteps. With now many people interested in his true abilities they were hoping to see a fourth win of this unknown prodigy.

Chapter 349

"What are all of these people doing here? Did a star elder grace us with their presence?"

A person asked after arriving at the pill-making competition. This sect member was just interested in seeing the disciples compete.

For some reason, there were a lot more people here this year. The pill hall had a large building and the competition would be taking place inside.

There were two parts to this competition. One would be picking out the right materials while the second one would be pill creation. Both were important processes that a pill maker needed to know. They had to have the ability to distinguish the materials while also knowing how to put them together.

"You don't know brother?"

"No, what happened?"

"Well listen well, a new genius has appeared."

"A genius?"

The person nodded while explaining about the new rising star called Dai Rong.

"Won three competitions already? Even the blacksmithing one?"

"Yes, everyone is taking bets if he can win the fourth one!"

While the two were talking a chime sounded which caused everyone to quiet down.

"The pill-making competition will commence now, we from the pill hall wish for everyone to be silent."

The pill hall was one of the greater established places in this sect. No one would be willing to offend them as that meant being banned from getting any pills in the future.

Zhang Dong found himself being stared at. The place they were doing this competition was another large hall building.

It was quite spacious but also somewhat stuffy. There were about a hundred participants. There were many tables in this hall, on them large piles of dried herbs. He instantly knew what this was about. Even before being given the pill to make, they would be tested on their knowledge of materials.

“Welcome to this year’s pill-making competition, this year we will be making the Crystal mountain establishment pill!”

The people around started whispering while the young alchemists looked down. This pill was quite hard to make as it allowed a person to push through a large realm. It was a mortal grade pill but a tricky one to make for these new pill masters.

“When the chime sounds, you will have an incense stick time to pick the herbs. If you don’t know the recipe you will be asked to leave!”

Even before it started a few people let themselves out with heads lowered. This was quite shameful so they were greeted with laughs and smirks.

Zhang Dong was well aware of the crafting process and what herbs he needed to get. This was all thanks to raiding the two libraries.

‘This pill requires a small lesser mortal grade beast core and then various herbs...’

He looked at the piled-up herbs and other materials. For a normal person, it would be hard to pick up the right item. Even an experienced master could make a blunder.

A normal person most of the time needed to take the herb into their hands and check it with their senses. The smell and texture could reveal if the given herb was the right age depending on the pill.

Not every herb increased in quality over time. Some matured early while other ones could take millennia to mature for a few minutes before withering away. A master would need to then be ready to fashion something out of this material before it was wasted.

Zhang Dong on the other hand could just scan the items with his system’s identification skill that he bought all these years before. He was sure to level it up to the maximum, with this he would be able to find any hidden gems in this pile of greenery.

‘After I get the materials I need a pill furnace...’

In this competition to keep it fair, the pill furnaces were provided by the sect. Due to the number of participants, the pill furnaces were rather lacking in quality. This meant that if the pill maker made too many blunders they risked the furnace exploding or ruining the pill.

An important part of these furnaces was the fire. It was a treasure in itself and depending on the rarity the heat varied. These flame tongues could be kept in special spatial rings that kept them suspended in time. Depending on the rarity they could even burn for centuries.

There were various pill forging techniques that worked like magic. The pill maker would push their spiritual energy into this pill furnace and mix the ingredients inside. The special flames would also need to be controlled by their Qi. Infusing more would cause these flames to burn faster but also use up its limited usage.

Just as the furnaces the flames would be provided by the sect. These flames were quite lacking in quality and would not last for long. With this, the pill makers needed to create a pill while the time ticked against them.

While waiting for the elder to finish making his speech Zhang Dong continued looking around. He could tell that there were some Martial Grandmaster realm elders around watching him. This was a bit disheartening as he hoped to get a Martial Saint interested.

With someone of that caliber, it would be guaranteed that he would make it into the inner sect as a disciple. Regretfully there weren't any Martial Saints in the outer sect. All of those elders were experts that didn't need to attend such events. From what he knew only at the battle competition one of them would be forced to attend.

That would be his best chance to gain the attention of the inner sect. There would be other inner sect seniors there but mostly at the Martial Grandmaster level. He could probably safely get in with one of them but he would be in a lesser position than if he was noticed by a Martial Saint that was close to a core formation expert in power.

"You are getting ahead of yourself."

While waiting he heard someone's voice next to him. It was a thin youth in a pure white robe and long dark hair. He looked quite handsome but a bit thin.

"Are you talking to me?"

"Yes you, I don't know who you are but don't think an amateur like you can win over this Jin Ming!"

Zhang Dong didn't answer, instead, he just turned around. He had trouble remembering the names of these young masters he had already met that they just blended with each other. This guy was probably some pill-making prodigy that somehow heard about Dai Rong's rise. No proper young master would be able to tolerate competition, they always needed to stay in the limelight.

"You dare ignore me? Who do you think you are!"

The elder stopped talking and walked back towards his seat, soon the chime would be sounded. The young lord here continued to berate him while Zhang Dong could only try to ignore him.

The lanky man's face went red while others looked from the side. Some chuckled while others were surprised that the trial disciple wasn't showing any respect to his seniors.

The chime sounded and the competition began. It was quite chaotic and every young man and woman was pushing towards the tables with resources. With one exception of the trial disciple that moved to the side and leaned against one of the columns.

While the others were busy fighting with each other like old ladies for products with reduced prices, Zhang Dong just rested. Instead, he just looked at the pill furnace section along with the spatial rings that held the flames in them.

This didn't go unnoticed as the people that had followed him from the other competitions pointed with their fingers. Even the pill-making judges were furrowing their brows, it looked like he had given up.

"What an imbecile, did you already give up before it started?"

The lanky youth passed him with a whole tray of ingredients while scoffing. Only when most of the contestants were finished with picking up their resources did he move to them.

Now with no one here to bother him he reached with both his hands towards the pile of the herbs. He held up a large pile of them before throwing them high into the air. While the herbs were at the apex of their ascension he started to quickly scan them with his eyes.

"This one... and that one... also this one..."

While making a strange scene he started plucking the falling herbs onto his own tray. The people looking from the side were shocked by his picking process. It seemed as if he was just taking out random items but if someone looked closely they would see that he was going for the highest quality parts each time.

Even though he started after everyone else, his tray was full of items within a minute's time. Some of the other contestants that weren't so sure about their choices looked at him in shock as he headed towards a free pill furnace.

"Huh?"

The young master that previously egged him on found himself to his left. He was clearly surprised to spot his nemesis with a full tray of herbs.

"You think you can win with those randomly picked herbs? Are you taking the pill-making profession lightly?"

Some of the judges in the distance nodded their heads as they agreed. Zhang Dong could see that he came off as a haughty young master himself now. This was all fine as he was about to shatter these people's worldview.

"Watch and learn!"

He replied while trying to sound somewhat condescending. Without a reason to hide he could play up a young master's persona.

With a smack to the side of the furnace, the lid flew up into the air. He then gathered spiritual energy into his hand and gave it a twirl. A mini-tornado was created that circled around all the ingredients. The material started sticking to each other while the mini cyclone rumbled with lightning energy.

"Is that the Tempest pill forging technique? How could a young disciple like that be so proficient in it!"

The judges started staring after hearing the sounds of thunder coming from a particular spot. Zhang Dong had many such techniques but this one was one of the more eye-catching and also studied at this sect.

The mini twister started combining the ingredients even before they entered the pill furnace. Within the massive gust of air, the almost finished pill entered the container which he then closed.

With this technique, he could save on time while also conserving the pill furnace's durability as part of the pill creation was done outside of it.

Now with another tap of his finger, the fire to the pill furnace was released. It was normally red in coloring but after coming in contact with Zhang Dong's Qi it turned blue and started radiating electrical energies.

The whole large hall with many pill makers and their students went silent. Anyone with an ounce of knowledge about making pills knew that they were witnessing something special.

"What is this... I've never seen a forging technique like this...will that low-grade pill furnace be able to take all that spiritual energy?"

The lid started rumbling and more sounds of thunder escaped. The whole furnace started glowing brightly and soon the whole large hall was consumed by a flash of light.

As the furnace opened an illusory dragon shot up into the air and coiled itself around the furnace it came from. It gave out a menacing roar before its body started to fade away.

"T-the thunderous roar of a lightning pill dragon... a-a Master!"

'Well... that got their attention alright...'

The finished product landed in the palm of his hand. The pill was radiating quite the strong energy, whoever ate this would surely reach the Martial Master level without any problems.

Chapter 350

"Join my family and marry my daughter!"

"No, marry my daughter instead! Also, become my disciple!"

"Stop it you lot, this disciple is mine! I can offer you a thousand low grade spirit stones!"

Zhang Dong stood surrounded by a group of old men that were involved in a shouting match. After he made a miraculous pill from the ingredients that the sect provided the old fogies went wild.

Not only were the elders from the Pill Hall here but also from the Blacksmithing Hall, the Formation Hall, and even from the Appraisal Guild. The last one didn't really have that much pull here so they had to make way for the top three halls.

He had to commend them on how much a good disciple was worth. They even started offering him their daughters, more than one at a time. If he was looking to maximize his profits he would probably end up with a large harem and a house of his own here.

Still, these people were only outer sect elders and seniors. None of them could guarantee him entrance to the inner sect. Before a fight between these old farts could break out, he needed to stop it.

He wouldn't be surprised if they made some kind of competition between each other. One where he could not refuse after the victor was chosen.

"Please Seniors and Elders, this Dai Rong is truly not worth your time. I'm but a trial disciple, I just wished to pit myself against the other seniors from the sect to see how far I could go. I will not decide on a master before finishing the competition!"

He needed to state his terms, the oldies knew what he was implying and they clearly didn't like it. From their perspective the young man was foolhardy, the last competition was not a cakewalk and a person could get injured.

There were many young masters that fell during the last competition. Anything could happen during a fight, even a maddened elder could jump in to deliver a critical blow to a disciple that was not taken yet. Without the proper protection, this youngster was putting himself in a heap of trouble while not having proper backing. After speaking his mind, it would be a loss to their face to beg and make more offers.

"Is the sect junior resolute in his decision?"

One of the high ranking pill masters asked.

"The junior is, I wish to compete with the other seniors in the last competition."

The old man shook his head before throwing a bead towards Zhang Dong.

"Is that so, I wish you luck. I hope you can be victorious and hope that junior's greed doesn't get the best of him."

Zhang Dong was a bit surprised by this elder who was this pill hall's master. He did not even try to offer him anything to be his disciple. It seemed that even this sect had some people with character. The rest after noticing this old man's speech started clearing out.

The disciples that were in the process of making pills mostly gave up as there was no way of winning this anymore. The lanky youth that made him his rival shrunk back after being blown away by his pill-making technique.

Four down and only one left to go. It was time to take a break as the battling competition would be taking place in the morning of the next day. Even then he had quite the hard time slipping away.

The pill-making elders started asking him about some insights. The same thing happened with the blacksmiths and the formation masters. All of them wished to know how such a youth was this knowledgeable in their arts that they spent their whole life in.

It was strange to see all these old men and women asking him for tips. He looked like a youth that was not even at the age of twenty. Knowledge was power in this world, even the old seniors threw away dignity and asked a junior for help. Advancing in their given skill was more important to some, even more than face.

For some, it was the other way around. Part of the seniors and elders were looking at him with rage. It was clear that Zhang Dong needed to get out of here otherwise, some of them could do something drastic.

'I'll go back to the cultivation cave for now...'

"Excuse me, elders. I need to go to the little cultivator's room..."

He excused himself while some of them had questions. Some of the elders and seniors tried to stop him but he used an evasive technique that made his body move like paper in the wind.

"Please wait disciple...!"

They chased after him but when they got outside he was nowhere to be seen. Zhang Dong lowered his presence and faded into the shadows and made his way back to the cultivation cave. He greeted the person that was stuck looking over the cultivation caves and returned inside.

While trying to prepare a strategy for the coming battles he heard a knock on the large door to this cave.

"Disciple Dai... are you there?"

"Elder Yusheng? Yes, I'm here."

Zhang Dong replied while wondering what the guy wanted. He was not supposed to come back this early.

"Did you leave the cultivation cave? I've been hearing rumors of a particular disciple winning some competitions..."

'I guess he knows...'

Information spread fast here apparently, he thought that this elder was a bit denser but apparently he had some informants. This could throw a wrench into his plans but also not mean much. With the man knowing that he had already been active outside there was no reason to lie.

"Ah yes, I was a bit hungry so I decided to visit the sect and would you know it, there was a competition taking place so I just had to sign up!"

"Junior had enough spirit stones to sign up on his own?"

The sum of spirit stones required for taking part in the competitions as a trial disciple was quite steep. A hundred low grade spirit stones for each competition and two hundred for the main one, this was not something a trial disciple like him should have been able to afford.

"Ah yes, my clan had left me quite a sum but now I've spent it..."

This was a half-truth as most of the spirit stones were absorbed by him to push his cultivation forward.

"Are you planning to take part in tomorrow's competition?"

"Yes I am elder, I wish to see how I will fare against the sect seniors!"

"Is that so..."

After mumbling some words Elder Yusheng went quiet. This was followed by some strange clicking sounds and the use of some kind of Qi technique.

“I think that would be a bad idea, you should rest for a few days disciple, I’ll come to pick you up in a couple of days...”

With that message, he could feel the elder moving away from this location. When Zhang Dong approached the door he knew that the man had locked him inside. With a little knock on the hardwood, he knew that it was reinforced with a formation.

‘A late stage Martial Master would probably not be able to leave this place now...’

It was clear that this elder wanted to keep him here. He was probably thinking that if the prodigy vanishes then he could force him to be his disciple.

‘The inner sect elders are probably too lazy to look into some rumors about a trial disciple winning outer sect competitions...’

High-ranking elders and seniors tended to not care for what happened in the outer sect. Even if they got the information that there was a promising disciple they would not care. They were in a position that didn’t require them to care, it was the disciples that were supposed to fight for their attention and not the other way around.

“I guess this would work on a regular disciple...”

Zhang Dong could easily remove this formation lock that was placed here. It was quite rudimentary and even accessible from this side. He would even be able to force his way out as his true strength was above that of a Martial Master.

‘Let me reorganize my thoughts till then.’

While his escape was already assured he moved to the middle of the cultivation cave. He sat down and started doing some breathing exercises to calm himself.

From the outside, he looked calm and collected but in reality, he was a bundle of worries. There was no way to know how long he would be stuck here. His plan could also backfire even before he reached the inner sect.

This all depended on him being able to absorb all that lightning energy. With it, he would be probably able to access the core formation realm. All those years ago he entered this world at that stage and already then he was able to compete with late-stage core formation cultivators.

Now he was many times more experienced and also his cultivation technique was far superior. With that in mind, he hoped on achieving the strength level of someone around the great circle of core formation.

“That magical world did give me quite the boost to my cultivation, maybe with this I will be able to contend with one of those watchers if they appear...”

This was the biggest bump in the road. He feared that if he was found by one of the people that were part of the system, they might see him as an anomaly and attack. The demon lord was far stronger than

the hero party and anyone that lived in that world. Here that could mean that they could even be on the immortal stage or somewhere between it and the nascent soul realm.

'Well, it doesn't seem like these watchers will care if I don't overstep the boundaries...'

The watcher that was disguised as the human king only came out when he started causing imbalances in that world. Probably unless he started going out of his way to cause havoc these watchers would not show themselves.

This also posed the question of what the endgame in this world was. There was no obvious demon lord to defeat, only sects and the emperors at the top. Was he supposed to become the new emperor of one of the empires? Or maybe he was supposed to reach the immortal realm and ascend to some other realm?

The immortal realm was quite illusory here. There were secret grounds built by long-dead immortals but there was not really any information about how a person could push into it. With the original version of the system, he would probably be able to achieve it by combat.

After eradicating the top sects and clans he might have had enough points to unlock that level of power. Then after reaching that level a new questline would be unlocked.

'Or... it could be the end of the line...'

There was also the possibility that after achieving the immortal realm something life-threatening could happen. A fight with the watcher? Moving to another realm and meeting the person that created this all? Maybe even a return to his original world?

Zhang Dong gave out a sigh as he didn't really care. He would not even be inclined to reach the immortal realm to check. His family was more important, if it meant to remain at the nascent soul level and to never ascend past it, then it was fine with him.

'If everything goes well tomorrow, I'll be at the inner sect... just wait a bit longer, daddy will return soon...'