

Sect Master 91

Chapter 91: Qiaoshou Sect

Zhao Jiudou returned to his seat with a gloomy expression, remaining silent. The Zhao Family disciples nearby noticed that the atmosphere was not right and carefully avoided Zhao Jiudou's gaze.

Originally, he had intended to stand up for his fellow clan members and salvage the family's face. Unexpectedly, that young man turned out to be so formidable. His swordsmanship was indeed remarkable, and Zhao Jiudou found himself unable to deal with him.

In this encounter, not only did he fail to embarrass the young man, but he also elevated the other's reputation. Zhao Jiudou didn't guess wrong; Meng Zhang displayed extraordinary sword skills and fought him, someone with a higher Cultivation Base, to a draw. This scene drew a lot of discussion from the onlookers.

No one had expected that a little-known sect like Taiyi Sect would have such a powerful Sect Master.

Those cultivators who were previously unfamiliar with Meng Zhang began inquiring about his background and experiences. Some who had underestimated Meng Zhang when they first met him were now regretting their assumptions.

Among Twin Success Valley's vassals, there were not many forces with Foundation Building cultivators. These forces typically only had 1-2 Foundation Building cultivators, making them the trump cards of their sects. In situations where Foundation Building cultivators were reluctant to make a move, Refining Qi completion stage cultivators became the pillars of their respective forces.

With the fighting prowess Meng Zhang demonstrated, he alone could support Taiyi Sect's reputation.

Originally, Zhao Dong had a grudge against Meng Zhang, but seeing Zhao Jiudou unable to gain the upper hand, he couldn't help feeling somewhat relieved. He was worried about Zhao Jiudou venting his anger on him.

After some discussion among the lower-level cultivators, Lin Shenpo called for silence. He used the battle between Meng Zhang and Zhao Jiudou as an example to begin a new round of explanations.

Lin Shenpo expounded on the gains and losses of their swordplay in a clear and profound manner. Both Meng Zhang and Zhao Jiudou found it very enlightening and felt they had benefited greatly from the lecture.

Zhao Jiudou's previous gloominess also lifted a bit.

After Lin Shenpo concluded the lecture, the next program was a banquet hosted by Forest Mountain School to entertain the various guests. Xu Yishan personally received the Foundation Building cultivators among the guests.

Forest Mountain School's Sect Master, Xu Chengxian, led the guests to an outdoor banquet venue. After a string of expressions of gratitude to the guests, the banquet entered a phase of free interaction.

The guests mingled and moved around the banquet venue, engaging in conversations with fellow cultivators they encountered.

Meng Zhang's situation now was completely different from when he first arrived at Linshan. Back then, no one paid him any attention, but after the swordplay competition, he became quite popular. Many people came to greet him, hoping to get to know him better.

Everyone understood the principle of not underestimating a youth just because they were poor. With such cultivation at a young age, Meng Zhang's future prospects were bright. As long as he didn't die young or meet a tragic end, he might even have a chance to reach Foundation Building in the future.

However, the enthusiasm of others didn't make Meng Zhang lose his guard. He understood very well why the situation had changed from being ignored to being sought after.

Cultivation Base was the foundation, and he must never relax in his pursuit of strength.

Enduring the slight impatience in his heart, Meng Zhang still warmly interacted with fellow cultivators.

Fortunately, everyone present was a cultivator and therefore more reserved. Even if they had high hopes for Meng Zhang's future, they wouldn't immediately curry favor with him.

Among those who came to greet Meng Zhang, Sect Master Jin Qigu of Qiaoshou Sect was particularly proactive. After introducing themselves, she bombarded Meng Zhang with inquiries about his parents, marital status, and whether he had any romantic interests. Qiaoshou Sect was a sect composed entirely of women. The disciples were skilled in female arts, excelling in weaving and sewing top-quality Daoist robes, cloaks, and armor.

Many forces in the vicinity had their standardized Daoist robes tailored by Qiaoshou Sect. Some special garments and leather armor were even exported to other regions. Relying on these products, Qiaoshou Sect could be considered relatively prosperous.

However, no one should underestimate these women. Qiaoshou Sect's flying needle technique was well-known both far and wide. Their Foundation Building elder, Aunt Jin, was the only mid-level Foundation Building cultivator among Twin Success Valley's numerous vassals. Her combat strength was formidable, and she commanded great respect, even from Twin Success Valley.

Sect Master Jin Qigu of Qiaoshou Sect had keen insight and was not someone easy to deal with.

She assumed the appearance of trying to play matchmaker for Meng Zhang, which made him somewhat helpless. After chatting for a while, he quickly found an excuse to escape.

Jin Qigu didn't persist either because she was also entangled by Sect Master Ruan Xiaodao of Golden Blade Sect.

Meng Zhang had finally managed to distance himself from the crowd when Li Xuan caught up to him.

"Sect Master, Li Shengqi approached several forces, but they all ignored him," Li Xuan reported.

Since discovering that Li Shengqi was hiding something and being targeted by the Zhao Family, Meng Zhang had taken an interest in him. He instructed Li Xuan, who was familiar with him, to keep an eye on Li Shengqi's movements.

Li Xuan's report didn't surprise Meng Zhang. Li Shengqi had approached these forces to seek help against the Zhao Family's pressure. However, the resources he had were too limited, just two shops in Singing Sand City and some remnants of wealth.

Several forces with Foundation Building cultivators wouldn't take such meager offerings seriously. Especially after Forest Mountain School had just been reprimanded by Twin Success Valley, they wouldn't want to get involved in any more trouble.

While Zhao Family didn't have a Foundation Building cultivator, they had numerous Refining Qi cultivators and were considered one of the strongest among Refining Qi sects. Without substantial benefits, no Refining Qi sect would be willing to provoke the Zhao Family.

Even old enemies like Taiyi Sect wouldn't confront the Zhao Family head-on like this. Meng Zhang was merely paying attention to the situation and looking for the right opportunity to intervene. If the opportunity wasn't suitable, he wouldn't act rashly.

"Keep an eye on Li Shengqi and try to find out what he's been up to recently," Meng Zhang ordered, "All of this must be done discreetly without being discovered by the Zhao Family."

Li Xuan nodded in agreement. Just as he was about to leave, his expression changed as he looked at a group of people walking nearby.

At the head of the group was a short, slightly taller than a dwarf, and sly-looking old man with a sly expression on his face. This man was in his fifties, yet his movements were agile. Even in this situation, he was looking around suspiciously, giving off the air of a cunning rodent.

Chapter 92: The Deceitful Man

Meng Zhang noticed the change in Li Xuan's expression and cast an inquiring gaze at him.

Li Xuan suppressed his temper and gritted his teeth as he said, "That treacherous old man is Li Nu, and the people behind him are his lackeys."

Meng Zhang had heard Li Xuan mention this person, Li Nu, before. If he had to describe him in one sentence, it would be "a deceitful man, a truly shameless one."

Originally, Li Nu and his group of cultivators were a gang of bandits who had fled from elsewhere and appeared in this area under the guise of ordinary loose cultivators. Over a decade ago, they spent a considerable amount of spirit stones to buy a First Rank spirit vein from Twin Success Valley, becoming a subordinate force of Twin Success Valley and settling down here.

The spirit vein where Li Nu and his group resided happened to be located near the Li family's Ancestral Ground.

However, Twin Success Valley didn't pay much attention to their meager strength, and they couldn't curry favor even if they wanted to. As a result, Li Nu and his men had no choice but to try their best to please and serve the Li family.

Li Nu was not his original name, and they were not surnamed Li either. To curry favor with the Li family, they all voluntarily changed their surname to Li, and this person went by the name Li Nu, meaning he would forever be a servant of the Li family.

Using various means, they finally managed to gain some favor with the Li family and became a peripheral force of the Li family. However, the Li family, knowing their true nature, never fully trusted them and only used them as tools to carry out tasks that the Li family couldn't do overtly.

With the presence of Foundation Building stage cultivators in the Li family, they could easily control these minions who had willingly come to serve them and had no fear of their schemes.

But two years ago, during the chaos of the sand monster incident, the Li family's Ancestral Ground was breached, and the Li family was annihilated.

After this happened, Li Nu and his group immediately turned against the Li family. They looted the Li family's wealth and slaughtered its cultivators while they were in turmoil. Even Li Xuan, who had managed to join Taiyi Sect in time, was almost victimized by these people's evil hands.

If Li Xuan had been killed, the mortals he had protected, including his family members, would have been sold into slavery by Li Nu and his group.

Therefore, Li Xuan hated Li Nu and his group to the core and wished to kill them.

Meng Zhang also held these despicable people in contempt. If the opportunity presented itself, he wouldn't mind helping Li Xuan vent his anger.

Amidst Li Xuan's resentful gaze, the group of people walked past and slowly approached Li Shengqi's side.

Li Nu wore a fawning smile as he took the initiative to approach Li Shengqi, nodding and bowing, trying his best to please him.

"Ever since Li Nu betrayed the Li family, he has completely fallen out with Li Shengqi and the other Li family cultivators. His current behavior must mean he has some ulterior motive regarding Li Shengqi," Li Xuan made his judgment as he observed Li Nu's actions.

"Don't you want to remind Li Shengqi? Although you've already left the Li family, you should still have some sentiment towards them," Meng Zhang casually asked.

"Sect Master, you're underestimating Li Shengqi. This old fox is cunning and not someone Li Nu can deceive easily."

"If Li Nu underestimates Li Shengqi, he's bound to suffer a big loss."

Li Xuan made his judgment based on his understanding of both parties.

Meanwhile, on the other side, Li Shengqi initially scolded Li Nu with a stern face. However, after a while, his expression eased, and he finally began to converse normally with Li Nu.

The banquet continued for a long time and didn't end until midnight. All the cultivators who attended the banquet returned to their lodgings, preparing to leave Linshan the next day.

Li Nu sent his subordinates back to their lodgings but secretly sneaked into the courtyard where the Zhao family cultivators resided.

Zhao Family cultivators were already waiting for him and brought him before Zhao Dong.

"Greetings, Brother Zhao. I wonder if Senior Jiudou has retired for the night?" Despite being much older and stronger than Zhao Dong in terms of cultivation base, Li Nu still behaved subserviently in front of him.

"Elder Jiudou has retired. Whatever you have to say to him, you can say to me," Zhao Dong replied coldly.

As a cultivator of the Zhao family, he looked down upon treacherous individuals like Li Nu. If it weren't for Zhao Jiudou's orders, he wouldn't even want to have any contact with such a person.

Ignoring Zhao Dong's cold demeanor, Li Nu continued to explain, "I tried my best, but I couldn't gain Li Shengqi's trust, that old bastard. However, he's now in a desperate situation with no one reliable by his side. He hasn't completely turned against me; he probably still thinks I can be of use to him."

"What nonsense! A treacherous man like you, who would trust you?" Zhao Dong reproached him without mincing his words.

"Remember, you must follow Li Shengqi closely and keep track of all his actions. If he shows any unusual behavior, report it immediately without delay."

"I'll remember. I won't let anything important slip through," Li Nu nodded repeatedly.

"As long as you handle things honestly, our Zhao Family won't mistreat you."

Considering that they still needed Li Nu's assistance, Zhao Dong decided to give him some incentives. After scolding him, he insincerely promised him some rewards.

"I am willing to devote myself to the Zhao Family and serve them wholeheartedly," Li Nu humbly replied.

"I have a request, can I make it?" he added.

Zhao Dong was in a good mood because of Li Nu's attitude, so he patiently asked, "What request do you have? Tell me."

"I want to change my surname to Zhao and be a servant of the Zhao Family for generations to come," Li Nu said with extraordinary humility.

"Damn it! What right do you have to be surnamed Zhao?" Zhao Dong retorted harshly. "Get lost! I feel sick just looking at you."

Zhao Dong was truly disgusted by this man and promptly drove him away.

After Li Nu left, Zhao Jiudou emerged from the back room.

"Elder Jiudou, this man is so disgusting. I don't ever want to see him again," Zhao Dong complained.

"Don't underestimate this man; he's a truly cunning person. Deceitful people often put up a good facade, you know?" Zhao Jiudou said pensively.

"So, you mean he was pretending just now?" Zhao Dong asked, feeling a little perplexed.

"When pretending to be genuine, he may actually be genuine; when pretending to be fake, he may actually be fake. Who knows?"

"In any case, this person is not simple and hard to fathom. If we had other options, I wouldn't have chosen to use him."

Zhao Jiudou's tone contained a hint of helplessness.

Li Shengqi carried a great secret, and Zhao Family cultivators had tried various means to uncover it, but all their efforts had been in vain. If they hadn't learned about Li Shengqi's resolute will and his consumption of the Heart-Locking Pill, which rendered him impervious to most mind-reading and soul-searching techniques, they probably would have captured him and interrogated him mercilessly.

With no other options left, Zhao Jiudou had to resort to indirect methods to gradually achieve their goal.

Chapter 93: Interests

Under Zhao Jiudou's instructions, the cultivators of Zhao Family relentlessly pursued Li Shengqi, appearing as if they wanted to corner and annihilate him completely.

However, in reality, the cultivators of Zhao Family still left a margin of safety and didn't intend to take Li Shengqi's life.

Zhao Family had made contact with Li Nu's group in secret, and with their strength, it was easy for them to bring these people under their control and make them work for Zhao Family.

When Li Shengqi found himself with nowhere to turn for help and no one to rely on, Li Nu and his group, who took the initiative to approach him, became his only lifeline.

Even though he didn't trust Li Nu and the others, he had no choice but to use them.

In this way, Li Nu and his companions had the opportunity to get close to Li Shengqi's secrets and then report back to Zhao Family.

As for whether the situation would develop as Zhao Family wished, it was uncertain.

The night passed without incident, and the next morning, the cultivators of various major forces bid farewell to the Forest Mountain School cultivators and returned to their respective homes.

Meng Zhang and Li Xuan rode on Wind Chasing Horses and left Linshan.

Meng Zhang was quite interested in the story between Li Shengqi and Zhao Family.

Zhao Family's Patriarch, Zhao Yanbei, and a group of Refining Qi late-stage cultivators were laboring in Singing Sand Mountain. It was a time of vulnerability for Zhao Family.

If they could seize this opportunity to deal a heavy blow to Zhao Family, even when Zhao Yanbei returned, the pressure on Taiyi Sect would be greatly reduced.

With Zhao Family as their troublesome neighbor, Taiyi Sect couldn't relax.

Unfortunately, Taiyi Sect currently lacked capable and available manpower to monitor the actions of Li Shengqi and the others.

Pondering over this issue all the way back to the sect, Meng Zhang couldn't come up with a good solution.

At the same time, Li Shengqi managed to shake off the pursuit of Zhao Family cultivators and returned to Singing Sand City.

In Singing Sand City, Li Shengqi's personal safety was guaranteed. Not even Zhao Family or other Foundation Building sects dared to cause trouble in Singing Sand City.

After returning to Taiyi Sect, Meng Zhang found that nothing major had happened in his absence; everything was normal.

Wang and his son had already gone to Sweetwater Oasis to prepare for cultivating spirit grains on the newly opened spirit fields.

Spirit herbs and flowers consumed more spiritual energy than spirit grains, so to protect the spirit fields, these crops were generally not planted on newly opened ones. Instead, Taiyi Sect's original spirit fields began to grow more spirit herbs and flowers.

Not long after returning to the sect, a new batch of spirit herbs was harvested, and together with a batch of scarlet copper that had been refined, Meng Zhang decided to make a trip to Singing Sand City himself.

Upon arriving in Singing Sand City, Meng Zhang made his way to a secluded small shop.

This small shop was an ordinary grocery store that engaged in buying and selling various items.

Having had multiple transactions with Shi Weiming, they had established a certain level of trust, and that's why Meng Zhang was informed about this fixed contact location.

Meng Zhang went to the grocery store, familiar with the surroundings, and handed over the spirit herbs and scarlet copper to the shopkeeper.

The spirit herbs were used to exchange for various pills, while the scarlet copper was entrusted to be sold.

Having had many interactions with these people, Meng Zhang had gained some understanding of their background. The wild Alchemist behind them wasn't alone; it was a force of no small significance with well-informed sources.

As their trade relations deepened, their transactions extended beyond just exchanging spirit herbs for pills.

Meng Zhang also entrusted them with the scarlet copper ore secretly mined by the Deep Earth General. After being refined into scarlet copper, they helped him sell it.

Although the price was lower than market rates, it was worth it for the security and convenience, and it kept things discreet.

After completing the transaction, Meng Zhang was about to leave. Just as he reached the entrance of the small shop, the familiar face of Shi Weiming hurriedly arrived.

"Sect Master Meng, long time no see, and you're still as impressive as ever."

Since he started using this contact location, Meng Zhang had indeed not seen Shi Weiming for some time.

After exchanging pleasantries, Shi Weiming entered the small shop, discussing something with the shopkeeper.

Seeing Shi Weiming, Meng Zhang's interest was piqued, so he decided to wait outside the shop.

After a while, Shi Weiming and the shopkeeper finally came out from the shop.

Seeing that Meng Zhang was still there, Shi Weiming was puzzled. "Does Sect Master Meng have something else to discuss?"

Meng Zhang nodded. "Is there a quiet place where we can talk?"

Shi Weiming directly led Meng Zhang to a room behind the small shop.

Once they were seated, Meng Zhang said, "It seems that you have a group of people under your command?"

Shi Weiming didn't respond directly and instead asked, "Does Sect Master Meng need manpower?"

"That's right. I need a group of discreet individuals to help me monitor someone."

"Do you mind telling me who you want to monitor?" Shi Weiming continued asking.

"The person I need to monitor is Li Shengqi from the Li family. The cultivators of Zhao Family are also secretly observing him."

Meng Zhang didn't hide anything and spoke the truth. Concealing such matters would be of no help when seeking assistance.

"As long as you're willing to help, I won't treat you unfairly."

"How much spiritual stones would it cost specifically? Feel free to quote your price."

Shi Weiming contemplated for a moment and declined Meng Zhang's request.

"We are content with doing business quietly and don't have the intention or capability to get involved in local cultivation forces' grudges and disputes."

Shi Weiming's refusal left Meng Zhang somewhat disappointed. He was indeed very curious about the situation between Li Shengqi and the Zhao Family cultivators. However, Taiyi Sect truly lacked manpower, with only the Deep Earth General and himself available for use.

But the Deep Earth General had to manage Sweetwater Oasis and secretly mine scarlet copper; he couldn't get away. Meng Zhang alone would find it difficult to conduct comprehensive monitoring.

As a familiar customer with whom they had dealt multiple times, Shi Weiming offered Meng Zhang some guidance despite refusing his request.

"Sect Master Meng, have you heard of the black market?"

"I had a shopping experience at the black market in Firewell Market."

After that shopping experience, Meng Zhang visited the black market in Firewell Market twice more. His main goal was to see if he could sell the scarlet copper ore secretly mined by the Deep Earth General on the black market.

However, the black market took too large a cut, which Meng Zhang couldn't accept. His scarlet copper wasn't stolen goods, and he wasn't trying to sell stolen property. Why should the black market exploit him?

The black market demanded over half of the proceeds without doing anything, which Meng Zhang couldn't agree to. So he gave up the idea of selling on the black market to avoid exposing the scarlet

copper ore in his possession. Instead, he sold small amounts of scarlet copper multiple times to avoid arousing suspicion.

Later, after becoming familiar with Shi Weiming and the others, Meng Zhang decided to entrust them with the refined scarlet copper to sell. Their commission was more reasonable and fair, far from being as harsh as the black market.

Chapter 94: Guarantee

Meng Zhang knew that Shi Weiming wouldn't mention the black market without a reason.

"In the black market, besides selling various unidentified items, they also act as intermediaries, providing services like espionage and assassination."

"Of course, these services are usually only offered to regular customers."

"If Sect Master Meng is interested, I am willing to vouch for you, so that he can enjoy these services."

Shi Weiming explained the details to Meng Zhang.

Meng Zhang was surprised to learn that the black market not only dealt with stolen goods and prohibited items but also offered such services. The black market was truly a vast enterprise. At the Four Seas Building in Singing Sand City, various tasks were posted for cultivators from different factions. These tasks mainly involved guarding, exploring, and planting, among other legitimate activities.

As Taiyi Sect and Zhao Family were both vassals of Twin Success Valley, their covert conflicts were not suitable to become widely known.

Meng Zhang needed to monitor Li Shengqi discreetly, which required a high level of confidentiality.

The black market was a large and secretive operation, making it a suitable option for Meng Zhang.

After some contemplation, Meng Zhang asked Shi Weiming to act as a guarantor, allowing the black market to provide these services.

Once everything was settled, Shi Weiming and Meng Zhang left Singing Sand City and headed towards Firewell Market.

Singing Sand City was too small to accommodate the black market. Therefore, most businesses related to the black market were concentrated in Firewell Market and its surrounding areas.

During their journey, which took several days, the two of them remained silent.

Upon reaching Firewell Market, Shi Weiming led Meng Zhang through a secluded alley.

While Meng Zhang had traded in the black market before and had some contact with it, he was still largely unfamiliar with its internal workings. Every time he wanted to engage with the black market, he needed someone to guide him.

Shi Weiming seemed to be a regular visitor to the black market and led Meng Zhang directly into a nearby room before entering an underground passage.

After twisting and turning through the passage for quite some time, the two of them finally entered a spacious hall.

In the hall, there were several tables and chairs where a few elderly men were busy with paperwork.

Shi Weiming brought Meng Zhang to one of the elderly men.

"Master Li, I'm bothering you again this time," Shi Weiming said politely.

Li, who was focused on handling documents, glanced up at them.

"You're not the type to visit the Three Treasures Hall without any reason. What brings you here this time?" Li replied.

"Master Li, I want to vouch for Meng Zhang, the Sect Master of Taiyi Sect, to make him a regular customer of the black market," Shi Weiming stated directly.

Li didn't say anything but took out a book and quickly flipped through its pages.

"Taiyi Sect's Sect Master Meng Zhang had previous trading records in the black market and was considered a guest."

"With your endorsement, he can be promoted to a regular customer."

"Sect Master Meng, please hand over the token you obtained in your last transaction in the black market," Li addressed Meng Zhang.

Meng Zhang handed over the jade token he obtained during his last visit to the black market.

Subsequently, Li led Meng Zhang to several places, completing a series of procedures.

Once all the procedures were done, Li handed Meng Zhang a new jade token as proof.

With this token, Meng Zhang could enter any black market location directly.

Moreover, this new token granted Meng Zhang higher privileges compared to his previous one.

While going through the procedures, Li explained many things about the black market to Meng Zhang.

The customers in the black market were divided into several levels.

Meng Zhang's previous trading activities in the black market placed him at the lowest level, as a guest.

Once a guest completed a certain amount of transactions or was vouched for by higher-level customers, they could be promoted.

Meng Zhang's current status was that of a regular customer, one level above a guest.

Above regular customers were familiar customers like Shi Weiming.

Beyond that, there were even older customers, but Li didn't disclose whether there were higher levels beyond that.

Different customer levels in the black market offered different rights and privileges, allowing them to enjoy various levels of services.

As a guest, Meng Zhang could only buy or sell goods in the black market.

Now, as a regular customer, he could access higher-level services.

After completing the procedures and becoming a regular customer of the black market, Shi Weiming bid farewell and left.

Clearly, he was not interested in knowing Meng Zhang's next moves.

With the jade token in hand, Meng Zhang entered a hall.

In the front of the hall, there sat a plump old man. Behind him were several small rooms separated by partitions.

Meng Zhang approached the old man and greeted him respectfully.

"A half-hour costs ten low-grade spirit stones. If it's less than half an hour, it will be charged as a half-hour," the old man said.

Meng Zhang nodded, and the old man gestured, causing the door of one of the small rooms to open automatically.

Meng Zhang entered the room, which was narrow and contained only a chair with a backrest. Across from the chair was a bright screen.

Sitting on the chair, Meng Zhang faced the screen. He gently touched the screen with his finger, and it began to scroll, displaying various pieces of information.

The screen only showed the titles of the information. To view the details, one needed to touch the title again.

If someone wanted to post information, they could simply insert spirit stones into the screen and write or draw on it.

The more content they wrote, the more spirit stones they would need to spend.

Meng Zhang didn't rush to post any information. Instead, he clicked on several pieces of information and began to read them carefully.

The information was diverse and covered a wide range of subjects.

For example, one post was seeking to purchase a hundred-year-old Jade Ginseng. When Meng Zhang clicked on it, the post listed the requirements for the ginseng, such as excellent quality and intact roots.

If Meng Zhang had a hundred-year-old Jade Ginseng that matched the requirements, he could add his offer to the post.

Then, the two parties could negotiate until they reached an agreement, and the black market would act as an intermediary for the transaction.

Of course, the black market would take a certain amount of spirit stones as a fee.

Another post's title mentioned assassinating a Refining Qi Ninth Level enemy. Meng Zhang opened the post, and it provided information about the target's identity, the magic tools they commonly used, their Dual Cultivation cultivation technique, and their proficient spells.

At the end of the post was the reward: five hundred low-grade spirit stones.

If someone accepted the task after seeing this post, the information would disappear.

After completing the assassination, the person could claim their reward through the black market.

Meng Zhang read through several posts, finding a wide variety of information.

Some posts involved tracking someone, monitoring someone, causing severe injuries to someone, and even killing someone. There were quite a few of these types of posts.

Chapter 95: Three People

Meng Zhang read through many messages in a row, gaining a general understanding of the black market's operation and trading methods.

After some thought, Meng Zhang invested three low-grade spirit stones and began writing on the light screen.

Title: High-difficulty surveillance task, requires three professionals.

Content: Three professionals needed, skilled in infiltration, tracking, surveillance, and other abilities, with at least a mid-stage Refining Qi Cultivation Base, preferably not lower than the sixth level of Refining Qi.

Mission objective: Monitor a cultivator at the sixth level of Refining Qi. This cultivator is cunning and alert.

Additionally, the target is being monitored by other cultivators simultaneously. The entire surveillance process must not be detected by any other cultivators.

Hiring period: One month.

Hiring reward: One hundred low-grade spirit stones per person.

Note: If your strength and skills are inadequate, please refrain from bothering. In case of mission failure or exposure midway, a tenfold compensation of the hiring fee to the employer is required.

Once finished, the contents disappeared from the light screen. Then the title written by Meng Zhang began to flow on the light screen.

Meng Zhang quietly waited for others to read the information and respond.

During the waiting time, he absentmindedly clicked on the titles on the light screen, passing the time by reading the contents.

Meng Zhang had carefully considered what he had written. The reward of one hundred low-grade spirit stones per month could hire a cultivator at the Refining Qi late stage. Ordinary cultivators at the mid-stage of Refining Qi couldn't earn this many spirit stones.

As for hiring for only one month, it was because Meng Zhang only planned to invest this much time in this matter. If a month of tracking and surveillance yielded no results, he would have to give up. As a Sect Master, he couldn't stay away from his sect for too long.

As for the compensation terms, they were meant to drive away those without abilities and those who would just pretend to be competent. Only cultivators with true skills would dare to accept these compensation terms and earn the high reward of spirit stones.

Having spent a long time reading the light screen, Meng Zhang was impressed by what he saw. Among these messages, there were even tasks to hire cultivators to gather internal intelligence of various cultivation forces.

Time passed slowly, and after about half an hour, Meng Zhang received a reply to his message.

The response specified a time for both parties to meet in the black market.

Only then did Meng Zhang leave the small room and head out.

Casually tossing twenty low-grade spirit stones to the old man outside, Meng Zhang proceeded to the agreed-upon location.

The meeting place was also located within the black market.

Meng Zhang wandered around for a while before reaching a secluded building.

Inside the building, four people were already waiting.

In the center of the large room stood a long table. Three people stood in a row on one side of the table, and the middle position was occupied by the middleman of the black market. Meng Zhang walked to the other side of the long table.

"Call me Black Horse."

"I'm Grey Mouse."

"I am Jue Ying."

The three introduced themselves one by one.

Their appearances were all very ordinary, the kind that could easily blend into a crowd and not be recognized.

Meng Zhang knew that there was the art of disguise in the Cultivation World. Compared to disguises in the mortal world, the art of disguise in the Cultivation World was far more sophisticated and belonged to the more practical skills among the hundred arts of cultivation.

The art of disguise in the Cultivation World included various spells, illusions, body refinement techniques, and alchemy, among others.

The three people before him clearly had profound attainments in the art of disguise. Even a Foundation Building stage cultivator would have a hard time seeing through their disguises if they weren't careful.

The appearances they presented to the public, including their looks, body shape, height, voice, and even Cultivation Base, could all be entirely false.

After entering the building, Meng Zhang activated his Deception Breaking Eye out of habit and examined the three people on the other side of the table.

Although he didn't completely see through their disguises, Meng Zhang still managed to gather some information about them.

During the time when they were under Meng Zhang's Deception Breaking Eye, except for Jue Ying, who seemed to sense something, the other two were clueless.

It was evident that the three of them knew each other and had probably cooperated before.

Black Horse directly represented the three and negotiated with Meng Zhang.

After some conversation, the three had no objections.

Under the supervision of the middleman of the black market, both parties reached an agreement.

Meng Zhang took out three hundred and thirty low-grade spirit stones and handed them to the middleman of the black market.

After completing the mission, the three would come to the middleman of the black market to receive their rewards. The extra thirty low-grade spirit stones were the commission for the black market's services.

After setting the time and place to meet, Meng Zhang and the three parted ways.

Meng Zhang continued to roam around the black market, but he didn't find anything of interest and left the place.

After leaving the black market, Meng Zhang went to the Firewell Market and browsed around, replenishing some essential items.

The Firewell Market was much busier than Singing Sand City, and it had a wide variety of goods. However, it was too far from Taiyi Sect, and Meng Zhang couldn't come here frequently.

After finishing shopping, Meng Zhang rode his Wind Chasing Horse back to Singing Sand City.

During the journey, there was no conversation, and upon returning to Singing Sand City, Meng Zhang found a lodging at an inn.

For the next month, he would stay in Singing Sand City to facilitate his next move.

During the two days in Singing Sand City, Meng Zhang met with Black Horse and the other two in the agreed-upon teahouse.

He provided detailed information about Li Shengqi, Li Nu, and the Zhao Family cultivator who was secretly monitoring them.

After briefing them about the mission, Meng Zhang left the teahouse. As for how to allocate their manpower and complete the task, that was Black Horse and the others' responsibility.

To maintain secrecy, they would try to avoid direct contact with Meng Zhang in the future. If they made any progress in monitoring Li Shengqi, Black Horse and the others would inform Meng Zhang through message talismans.

After returning to his inn, Meng Zhang devoted himself to cultivation.

He had paid a considerable price to book the courtyard for a month, but the spiritual aura here was not inferior to Taiyi Sect. Meng Zhang didn't need to spend additional spirit stones to cultivate.

During his cultivation, Meng Zhang occasionally wandered around Singing Sand City.

Half a month passed, and there was no news from Black Horse and the others.

If it weren't for their professional ethics, one might suspect they had disappeared somewhere to slack off.

In this half month, even though there were no gains from Li Shengqi's side, Meng Zhang was fortunate enough to find an opportunity in the Ghost Market and earn some spirit stones.

This venture helped replenish his emptying pockets due to the considerable expenses of this operation.

However, Meng Zhang still hoped that his good luck would turn towards the matter concerning Li Shengqi so that he could achieve results as soon as possible.

Chapter 96: Surveillance

Meng Zhang began cultivating the innate secret arts from the "Sun-Moon Wheel Turning Sutra" after advancing to the seventh level of Refining Qi in his cultivation base.

Previously, he prioritized practicing the Earth Escape Spell and didn't have time for these matters.

During his stay in Singing Sand City, he started practicing these secret arts.

His first choice was to refine the Solar True Flame and condense the Lunar True Water.

During the scorching noon, he endured the intense heat of the sun, absorbing the most violent Yang energy. Afterward, he refined it through secret methods.

It took him a full ten days to extract a wisp of Solar True Flame.

At night, under the bright moon, he absorbed the bone-chilling Yin energy and then refined it through secret methods.

It took another ten nights to condense a drop of Lunar True Water.

The Solar True Flame and Lunar True Water not only possessed great power on their own but also played important roles in various areas, including artifact forging and alchemy.

While Meng Zhang was secluded in cultivation, there was no news from Li Shengqi. Li Xuan, who had returned to Taiyi Sect earlier, now came to visit.

Originally, Meng Zhang was worried that involving Li Xuan in their plan to deal with Li Shengqi might cause difficulties for him, so he intentionally didn't invite him.

After Li Xuan met Meng Zhang and heard the whole story, he didn't hesitate and volunteered to gather information.

A month passed quickly, but the three people surveilling Li Shengqi had not received any information. Even Li Xuan's own sources yielded no useful information.

Just as Meng Zhang thought this operation might be fruitless, a turning point occurred quietly.

During his stay in Singing Sand City, Li Shengqi resided in a grocery store owned by the Li family.

Recently, the Li family fell into ruin, and during the chaos, the store was looted by the remaining members of the Li family.

Now Li Shengqi guarded this empty store, without capital or intention to conduct any business.

As a vassal force of Twin Success Valley, the store in Singing Sand City was required to pay taxes every year, even if they closed down. The taxes would only be transferred to the new owner if the store changed hands.

During this time, many people came to persuade Li Shengqi to sell the store, but he refused them all, even when faced with threats from the Zhao Family cultivators.

Every day, Li Shengqi stayed inside the store, rarely venturing outside except to buy some daily necessities.

This made the covert surveillance on him much easier.

Recently, besides those who came to persuade him to sell the store, only a certain person named Li Nu visited him daily, showing a very respectful attitude.

Li Shengqi responded to Li Nu's politeness with indifference, offering only a few meaningless words without divulging any useful information.

The Zhao Family cultivators secretly monitoring him were becoming impatient. They felt like they were wasting their time since nothing was progressing.

However, despite his seemingly leisurely days, Li Shengqi encountered trouble.

Li Zhan, whom Li Shengqi had placed high hopes on to revive the Li family, sent him a secret message through a covert channel.

In the letter, Li Zhan asked Li Shengqi to spare no effort in purchasing defensive and summoning talismans and find a way to secretly deliver them to him.

Receiving this message, Li Shengqi became annoyed. Li Zhan's current actions were crucial to the future of the Li family and its chance of rebuilding.

Li Shengqi had willingly taken the Locking Heart Pill and stayed in Singing Sand City to attract attention, especially from the Zhao Family, so that Li Zhan's plan could proceed smoothly.

Now, with this message from Li Zhan, there was a risk of exposure, even though it came through a secret channel.

If Li Zhan's situation were revealed, the Li family would lose all hope. All the sacrifices Li Shengqi made would be meaningless.

Despite his annoyance, Li Shengqi knew he had to fulfill Li Zhan's request as much as possible. He figured that if Li Zhan had no other choice, he wouldn't risk sending the message to him.

Li Shengqi spent a long time contemplating the situation in the store before formulating a plan.

The next day, when Li Nu came to pay his respects, Li Shengqi surprised him by asking him to bring a group of people to the store early the next morning. He had something to instruct them.

Once Li Nu left, Li Shengqi promptly informed the Zhao Family about this development.

Following that, Li Shengqi went to the Flying Swan Building.

He emptied his last spiritual stone and even mortgaged the Li family's store to barely complete all his plans.

On the third morning, Li Nu arrived at the store with his followers.

Without much ado, Li Shengqi handed him a box slightly larger than a palm and also gave him a map, instructing him to deliver the box to a designated location.

This box was a common item used in the Cultivation World to secretly transfer items. It was sealed with talismans, and if not opened properly, the box and its contents would be destroyed automatically.

Shortly after Li Nu left, Li Shengqi headed to the Four Seas Building and hired a group of cultivators. Disguised, he left Singing Sand City secretly.

As Li Shengqi left on his front foot, all his actions were observed by the Zhao Family.

Around the same time, Meng Zhang received a communication talisman from the Black Horse trio. They met in a predetermined teahouse.

Indeed, the Black Horse trio was skilled; not only did they know every move made by Li Shengqi, but they also managed to keep an eye on the Zhao Family cultivators who were secretly watching Li Shengqi.

After hearing their account, Meng Zhang fell into contemplation.

"Li Shengqi cannot trust Li Nu; what he instructed Li Nu to do should be a diversion to distract the Zhao Family's attention," Li Xuan was the first to give his analysis.

"Should we continue monitoring Li Shengqi?" Black Horse asked.

"With Li Shengqi's cunning, he should know that no matter how much he disguises himself, he cannot evade the eyes of his watchers. His actions seem somewhat deliberate," Li Xuan continued.

Li Xuan was familiar with the situation of the Li family and understood Li Shengqi well, so his words held significant value.

"For the past few days, Li Shengqi only visited the Flying Swan Building and the Four Seas Building; he didn't go anywhere else."

"It seems the key lies in what he did at the Flying Swan Building," Meng Zhang pointed out.

Flying Swan Building belonged to Flying Swan Sect, a dominating power in the surrounding area.

Even the reckless Black Horse trio, who often engaged in dark activities, dared not offend the might of Flying Swan Sect easily.

Chapter 97: Gathering Information

The scene fell silent, and it was Li Xuan who spoke first.

"Sect Master, Li Shengqi, who had been silent for a long time, suddenly made such a move for a reason. I will go and inquire to find out what happened," Li Xuan said.

After Meng Zhang nodded, Li Xuan took his leave.

Meng Zhang pondered for a moment before saying, "To be cautious, Black Horse and Gray Mouse, you should continue to monitor Li Shengqi."

"If the journey takes longer than a month, you may abandon the mission and collect your reward at the black market."

Black Horse and Gray Mouse didn't say much and immediately left after hearing Meng Zhang's instructions.

After the two left, Meng Zhang asked Jue Ying, "Is there something you want to say?"

Earlier, when everyone was silent, Jue Ying had secretly sent a message to Meng Zhang, wanting to have a private chat with him, saying that she might have a way to gather information about the internal situation of Flying Swan Building.

"I have a special channel that can gather information about Li Shengqi's activities within the Flying Swan Building," Jue Ying said.

"But I can't do it for free. In the agreement we reached earlier, there was no provision for provoking the Flying Swan Building," she added with a cold tone.

"Oh? Do you want to raise the price at the last moment? Do you want me to pay extra?" Meng Zhang didn't directly answer Jue Ying's question but instead replied with a question.

Jue Ying didn't immediately respond but asked, "I heard that Sect Master Meng cultivates the Yang attribute's Dual Cultivation Lesser Yang Qi Art. I wonder if you have condensed the Lesser Yang True Fire?"

While Meng Zhang's practice of the Lesser Yang Qi Art wasn't a secret and could easily be known, he had deliberately kept his change to the "Sun-Moon Wheel Turning Sutra" a secret. When he acted outside, he used Solar True Qi, concealing his Lunar True Qi.

Solar True Qi and Lesser Yang True Qi were very similar, with the former being an upgraded version of the latter. Most people would assume that his Lesser Yang True Qi was exceptionally pure and powerful, and only a few perceptive individuals could recognize it as Solar True Qi.

As for the Lunar True Qi within him, as long as Meng Zhang didn't actively use it, no one could detect it.

"That's right. I cultivate the Lesser Yang Qi Art, and I have already condensed the Lesser Yang True Fire. What's the problem?" Meng Zhang seemingly nonchalantly replied.

"As long as Sect Master Meng agrees to help me once with the Lesser Yang True Qi in the future, I will provide you with the information you need," Jue Ying said earnestly.

Meng Zhang pondered for a moment, feeling displeased with Jue Ying's behavior of taking advantage and raising the price at the last moment. However, given the current situation, apart from Jue Ying, he had no way to gather the necessary information.

"Is this favor dangerous or unethical?" Meng Zhang asked.

"Helping with this matter is absolutely safe, and it's an act of assisting others, not doing harm," Jue Ying quickly replied.

"Alright, I agree," Meng Zhang reluctantly agreed but secretly took note of the favor.

After receiving Meng Zhang's response, Jue Ying got up to leave.

"We are alone here without any witnesses. Aren't you afraid that I might agree now but go back on my word later?" Meng Zhang suddenly spoke up.

"I've never had anyone renege on a debt owed to me, Jue Ying," she said with an unexplainable confidence.

Meng Zhang wanted to slap her. How dare a mid Refining Qi cultivator act so arrogant in front of him? If he didn't need her right now, he would have taught her a lesson to let her know that not everyone could act so arrogantly in front of anyone, for such arrogance would be met with lightning strikes.

After Jue Ying left, Meng Zhang returned to the inn where he was staying.

Late in the evening, Li Xuan, who had been busy for most of the day, returned to the inn looking somewhat tired.

His hard work for the day hadn't been in vain, as Li Xuan brought important news.

Two days ago, a messenger had managed to evade all surveillance and secretly handed a letter to Li Shengqi.

No wonder Li Shengqi had acted afterward; it turned out he had received a letter.

Almost simultaneously, Zhao Family also got wind of this information.

Ever since Li Shengqi had instructed Li Nu two days ago, Zhao Jiudou, who had received this news, rushed to Singing Sand City to oversee the situation.

"No wonder Li Shengqi made a move. It seems he had to act after receiving this letter," Zhao Jiudou also made the same judgment.

Regarding Li Shengqi's actions, Zhao Jiudou and Meng Zhang had a similar assessment.

Li Nu's journey should have been a diversion to distract their attention.

However, to prevent Li Shengqi from playing tricks—wherein the real may seem fake and the fake may seem real—although this possibility was small, Zhao Jiudou still instructed Li Nu to follow Li Shengqi's orders and arranged for Zhao Family disciples to secretly follow him from behind.

After all, Zhao Family had a large number of cultivators and was not as short-handed as Meng Zhang.

Zhao Jiudou was also closely monitoring Li Shengqi's actions in Flying Swan Building.

Unfortunately, Zhao Family had no means or courage to directly inquire about the internal situation of the Flying Swan Building.

With no other choice, Zhao Jiudou had to focus on monitoring Li Shengqi himself.

Zhao Family cultivators secretly followed Li Shengqi as he left Singing Sand City, keeping a close eye on him throughout.

Zhao Jiudou also visited many friendly cultivators in Singing Sand City based on Zhao Family's network, hoping to gather information indirectly.

Zhao Family didn't have any intentions toward the Flying Swan Building; they just wanted to know about Li Shengqi's actions. That was Zhao Jiudou's explanation in front of these cultivators.

While Zhao Family cultivators were on the move, Meng Zhang and Li Xuan were still waiting in the inn.

Apart from arranging for Black Horse and Gray Mouse to secretly follow Li Shengqi, they couldn't do much else; they had to wait for Jue Ying's message.

Jue Ying didn't disappoint Meng Zhang. After midnight, she arrived at the inn where Meng Zhang was staying.

Li Xuan welcomed Jue Ying into the courtyard and brought her to Meng Zhang.

"Li Shengqi entrusted a commercial caravan of the Flying Swan Building to deliver a box to a designated location," Jue Ying straightforwardly shared the information she had worked hard to gather.

"Do you know which caravan it is, when it departed, and the route it took?" Meng Zhang asked several questions in one breath.

Jue Ying nodded. "I have already investigated all the information."

With Jue Ying's information, as long as he tracked that caravan, Meng Zhang should be able to find his target and learn about Li Shengqi's ultimate purpose.

However, tracking a Flying Swan Building caravan was risky. These caravans were heavily guarded, extremely vigilant, and constantly aware of their surroundings. If Meng Zhang were to expose his whereabouts and be discovered by the caravan guards, Taiyi Sect would be in big trouble.

For a moment, Meng Zhang didn't speak and felt somewhat troubled.

But giving up at this point was something he absolutely couldn't do.

Apart from the time and resources invested, his curiosity alone made him want to know what Li Shengqi was up to and why Zhao Family had been monitoring him all this time.

Chapter 98: Tracking

Perhaps sensing Meng Zhang's thoughts, Jue Ying took the initiative and said, "I can track that merchant convoy. You just need to follow the marks I leave along the way and keep a distance behind."

Meng Zhang glanced at Jue Ying with some wariness, thinking that she might propose new conditions.

Understanding Meng Zhang's expression, Jue Ying explained, "This time, I'll do it for free. Consider it compensation for the additional conditions I brought up earlier."

"I just hope that when you need my help in the future, you'll be wholeheartedly committed."

After hearing Jue Ying's words, Meng Zhang's impression of her improved significantly.

After careful consideration, he decided to follow Jue Ying's plan.

After discussing how to stay in contact, Jue Ying left voluntarily.

According to Jue Ying's information, the merchant convoy would depart before dawn, so she needed to prepare as well.

The next day, early in the morning, Meng Zhang and Li Xuan left Singing Sand City together.

Following Jue Ying's agreement, she discreetly left various marks along the way.

Meng Zhang found these marks and followed at a distance behind Li Xuan.

Riding wind chasing horses, Meng Zhang and Li Xuan didn't travel too fast, deliberately controlling their speed to avoid getting too close to the convoy.

The journey took two full days, during which they headed north without encountering any unexpected events.

On the morning of the third day, a transmission symbol flew in from the horizon and landed in Meng Zhang's hand.

The information on the transmission symbol instructed Meng Zhang and his group to meet up ahead.

Meng Zhang and Li Xuan spurred their wind chasing horses and hurried towards the designated meeting point. It didn't take long before they saw Jue Ying standing quietly beneath a sand dune.

Meng Zhang and Li Xuan stopped next to Jue Ying. Before Meng Zhang could speak, Jue Ying quickly recounted everything she had observed.

It turned out that Jue Ying had been tracking the merchant convoy and monitoring their every move.

The previous night, after the convoy camped, the person in charge of the convoy left to meet a stranger at the foot of a desolate hill. They handed a storage bag to this person.

After the exchange, the person who received the storage bag left in a different direction.

Jue Ying decided to stop tracking the convoy and instead followed this individual.

After shadowing them through the night, the person entered a cave in the distance just before dawn.

Jue Ying left the area and sent a message to Meng Zhang and the others.

Listening to Jue Ying's account, Meng Zhang understood Li Shengqi's scheme.

The old man used diversions to distract the watchers while secretly employing the Flying Swan Building merchant convoy to help him deliver the goods.

No one dared to mess with the Flying Swan Building convoy in this territory.

Even if the watchers somehow managed to gather information, the recipient of the goods would have left long before, making it impossible to trace.

Thinking of this, Meng Zhang was very satisfied with Jue Ying's performance.

Jue Ying timely gathered information and didn't miss the merchant convoy.

After the convoy's handler completed the exchange, she gave up tracking them and followed the true target in a timely manner.

Although Jue Ying was a woman, her abilities were truly remarkable.

Such talents were exactly what Taiyi Sect lacked at the moment.

With the intention to recruit her, Meng Zhang's previous grievances with Jue Ying disappeared.

However, Meng Zhang didn't rashly attempt to recruit her. The timing wasn't right, and trying to do so now would likely result in failure.

Setting aside the idea of recruiting Jue Ying for the time being, Meng Zhang said, "Lead the way in front and take us to that cave you mentioned."

Jue Ying nodded and walked ahead, leading Meng Zhang and Li Xuan to the foot of a small hill.

There were countless small hills in the surrounding area, and they would never have thought there could be anything significant hidden within this particular one if Jue Ying hadn't guided them.

Jue Ying pointed ahead and said, "There's a secret entrance covered by yellow sand."

"The entrance is extremely well-hidden and has no magical prohibitions; it's purely a construction by mortals."

Meng Zhang nodded. Without magical prohibitions, there would be no magical fluctuations or spiritual leakage, making it an excellent way to keep it secret.

Meng Zhang used his Deception Breaking Eye and looked in the direction Jue Ying indicated.

Beneath the yellow sand, there was indeed a stone door. Behind the door was a deep passage that seemed to extend indefinitely.

After confirming there were no traps, Meng Zhang walked up to the door and released his flying sword, slicing open the stone door and revealing the dark passage inside.

Meng Zhang took the lead and entered the passage. Li Xuan followed closely behind him.

Jue Ying had already completed her task and should have left, but for some reason, she followed behind them into the passage.

The passage was pitch black with no light. However, cultivators had some night vision ability, so the darkness didn't hinder the three of them.

After advancing a certain distance, Meng Zhang used his Deception Breaking Eye to check for ambushes or traps, ensuring they wouldn't encounter any unexpected dangers.

They walked for quite some time, winding and turning, for what felt like half a day without encountering any accidents. However, they didn't know how deep the passage went or when they would reach the end.

Suddenly, a painful groan came from up ahead. Meng Zhang carefully looked and saw a person lying in the passage, immobile and weak, except for the occasional groan.

After confirming it wasn't a trap, the three of them approached the person.

Li Xuan felt that he recognized this person, but it was too dark to see clearly.

He used his Light Technique, causing a glowing light to appear in his hand. He held it above the person's head and almost couldn't help but exclaim in shock.

Chapter 99: Secret Treasury

"Zhang Zhanlin, why are you here, and how did you get injured?" Li Xuan said, trying to contain his mixed feelings of shock and anger.

So this person is Zhang Zhanlin. Meng Zhang thought to himself.

After Li Xuan joined the Taiyi Sect, he disclosed much of his past with the Li family to Meng Zhang. It turned out that Zhang Zhanlin was an old friend's son.

Years ago, when this old friend went on an expedition to seek treasures, he returned severely injured. Before he passed away, he entrusted his only son, Zhang Zhanlin, to his loyal friend Li Xuan.

Li Xuan treated Zhang Zhanlin as his own, nurturing and raising him by his side. Over the years, their bond grew deeper, akin to that of a true father and son.

When Li Xuan was running a shop in Singing Sand City, Zhang Zhanlin was his most reliable assistant.

After the Li family was annihilated by the sand monsters, Li Xuan couldn't bear leaving his family behind, so he returned to the Li family before finally joining the Taiyi Sect. By that time, a considerable amount of time had passed.

Once Li Xuan settled his family, he also tried to find Zhang Zhanlin in Singing Sand City. However, Zhang Zhanlin, along with some other members of the Li family, mysteriously disappeared. No matter how much Li Xuan inquired, there was no trace of them.

Initially, Li Xuan thought that Zhang Zhanlin, like the other Li family members, had been secretly eliminated by the family's enemies.

This saddened Li Xuan greatly, and he regretted arranging for Zhang Zhanlin to stay at the Li family's shop.

Unexpectedly, Li Xuan had now encountered Zhang Zhanlin in this place, and seeing him on the brink of death filled Li Xuan with immense pain and regret.

Zhang Zhanlin was too weak to answer Li Xuan's questions; his consciousness was fading, leaving only some instinctive reactions.

Zhang Zhanlin's face was pale, devoid of any color. He had a large hole in his abdomen, exposing his internal organs, and several vital points had been pierced from front to back.

It was evident that Zhang Zhanlin not only suffered severe injuries but had been in this state for a considerable time without receiving any treatment.

Meng Zhang hesitated for a moment and then took out a jade bottle, from which he retrieved a green pill the size of a pea.

Meng Zhang had conducted a long period of alchemical exchanges with Shi Weiming. Besides obtaining some pills to enhance Cultivation Base for the sect's disciples, he also acquired some healing pills for emergencies.

Among them, the Vitality Restoration Pill was one of the most precious.

Meng Zhang infused true qi into the pill, causing it to release a green smoke. With Zhang Zhanlin's faint breaths, the smoke entered his mouth and nose, rapidly spreading its medicinal power throughout his body.

A strong vitality surged within Zhang Zhanlin, temporarily stalling the dissipation of his life force.

Although not a professional healer, Meng Zhang had gained some knowledge of medical arts from the inheritance he received. He could manage the injuries with some basic treatments.

Meng Zhang was about to take action when Jue Ying spoke up, "Let me handle this; I'm good at dealing with these types of injuries."

Having known each other for some time, Meng Zhang had developed a certain level of trust in Jue Ying, so he let her take over. Jue Ying didn't boast; her healing skills were exceptional, and she had considerable accomplishments in various aspects of cultivation and medical arts.

With her rich experience and skilled techniques, she quickly applied several medicinal pills, stabilizing Zhang Zhanlin's injuries.

Encountering such a severely injured person like Zhang Zhanlin, the three of them didn't rush to move forward. Instead, they stayed back for a while to observe his condition.

After taking the medicine, Zhang Zhanlin's condition began to improve noticeably. His injuries started to heal, and he fell into a deep slumber.

After half an hour, Zhang Zhanlin slowly regained consciousness.

Upon awakening and seeing Li Xuan before him, Zhang Zhanlin thought he was dreaming.

After a while, Zhang Zhanlin's mind cleared completely.

Seeing that Zhang Zhanlin was very weak, Jue Ying fed him a bottle of medicinal water and performed a few simple techniques on his body, reviving his spirits.

"You'd better keep it brief. Once he gets through this critical period, he'll fall back into a deep sleep to recover from his injuries," Jue Ying warned. Li Xuan, focused on the present situation, asked Zhang Zhanlin to briefly recount what had happened.

As Zhang Zhanlin weakly narrated, the events that had taken place after he parted ways with Li Xuan gradually unfolded before them.

After the Li family was exterminated by the sand monsters, following the initial chaos, someone finally stepped up to take charge of the situation.

Li Shengqi had been the deputy of the elder responsible for gathering external intelligence for the Li family. Although his cultivation base was only at the Refining Qi Sixth Layer, he possessed great cunning and scheming.

Faced with the hopeless situation of the Li family's fall from grace, Li Shengqi knew that it was impossible for the Li family to rebuild there.

The only chance for the Li family's revival was for its members to leave and start anew somewhere else.

Many ancient and powerful cultivation families like the Li family would leave hidden measures behind. After the family's decline, these measures would come into play, preserving the family's legacy.

The hidden measure left by the Li family's ancestors was the construction of a secret treasury in this place, meant for future generations to rebuild the family after facing calamities.

Naturally, this secret was strictly kept among only a few high-ranking members of the family.

Unfortunately, the Li family's destruction had been too abrupt, and all of the high-ranking members perished during the sand monsters' attack.

Li Shengqi only learned about this secret by a stroke of luck.

Knowing that he was too big of a target and that he could no longer escape the pursuit of the Zhao Family, he arranged for his son, Li Zhan, and a group of family members to disappear mysteriously while he stayed in the open to attract the Zhao Family's attention and buy time for Li Zhan.

Li Zhan and the others were supposed to seize the opportunity to take the treasures from the family treasury and immediately leave, escaping the Zhao Family's sight.

Unfortunately, there was a Second Rank puppet guarding the family treasury.

Without the family's heritage token, Li Zhan and his companions couldn't control the puppet.

The puppet had no intelligence, only following predetermined commands.

Its mission was to guard the treasury and kill anyone who tried to steal the treasures within.

Helpless, Li Zhan and the others had no choice but to forcibly attack the puppet.

As a Second Rank puppet, it possessed the combat strength of a Foundation Building stage cultivator. Of course, a puppet without intelligence would not be a match for a Foundation Building cultivator, but it had overwhelming power against a group of Refining Qi stage junior cultivators.

Thankfully, Li Zhan and the others were not too foolish; they knew the puppet was driven by spirit stones. They didn't need to confront the puppet head-on; instead, they slowly depleted its strength. When the puppet's internal spirit stones ran out, it lost its fighting ability.

Chapter 100: The Puppet

In their first attempt to besiege the puppet, the group lacked experience and didn't manage to inflict any significant damage on it before being repelled.

Fortunately, the puppet's main task was to guard the treasure vault, so it didn't kill anyone among the group nor pursue them.

Learning from their failure, Li Zhan, last night, somehow acquired a large number of talismans, and the group attacked the puppet once again.

Initially, using the talismans to summon a large number of creatures, they barely managed to trap the puppet.

However, after a while, it seemed that they triggered some kind of reaction mechanism in the puppet. Suddenly, the puppet became ferocious and started to slaughter the surrounding attackers.

Zhang Zhanlin was not a member of the Li family; he was brought along by Li Zhan due to his unique vision and ability to identify valuable items after years of training under Li Xuan.

Li Zhan had planned it thoughtfully. After obtaining the treasures in the secret vault, he needed a reliable person to help identify them.

When the puppet unleashed its power, Zhang Zhanlin, being a non-Li family member, was the first one Li Zhan abandoned, using him as a shield.

Severely injured by the puppet, Zhang Zhanlin managed to use his last breath to activate a life-saving secret technique and escape the battlefield.

The Li family members, who were still battling the puppet, paid no attention to him. After reaching this place, Zhang Zhanlin could no longer hold on and fell unconscious.

If it weren't for the timely appearance of Meng Zhang and the others, Zhang Zhanlin would probably have met his end.

After listening to Zhang Zhanlin's account, Li Xuan's face turned grim with hatred towards Li Zhan and the other members of the Li family.

Meng Zhang finally understood the whole situation. The secret treasure vault of the Li family was something Li Shengqi was willing to protect at all costs, and it was also the target of Zhao Family cultivators.

The goal was right in front of them, and Meng Zhang didn't waste any more time. He left Li Xuan to take care of Zhang Zhanlin and continued forward with Jue Ying.

The two of them turned a few corners in the passage, and suddenly, they saw a large hall ahead.

In the center of the hall, a pile of storage bags was stacked together, looking quite conspicuous.

In front of this pile of storage bags, there was a large and majestic lion-shaped puppet, battling a group of cultivators.

The ground was already covered with severed limbs and incomplete corpses.

Five cultivators were still standing in the arena, each holding a stack of thick talismans and facing the puppet together.

They would occasionally release a talisman, and then a wooden puppet, a stone golem, or a fire elemental would appear on the ground.

After a burst of light, defensive spells like Golden Armor Technique, Stone Skin Technique, Golden Light Shield, and Earth Shield appeared on these summoned creatures.

With their enhanced defense, these summoned creatures rushed towards the puppet from all directions.

The Second Rank puppet with Foundation Building level combat strength was indeed extraordinary. It effortlessly tore apart these seemingly powerful summoned creatures with a casual wave of its claws.

The cultivators continued to release talismans, summoning more creatures to attack the puppet.

Among the cultivators, a young man who looked exactly like Li Zhan, as described by Zhang Zhanlin, was leading them. He kept encouraging everyone.

"Hold on, this puppet's movements are getting slower. It's running out of spiritual stones."

"As long as it runs out of spiritual stones, no matter how powerful the puppet is, it will be useless."

"At that time, I will not only obtain the treasures from the secret vault but also obtain a Second Rank puppet."

Under Li Zhan's encouragement, everyone fought with renewed determination against the puppet.

It was unclear whether Li Zhan and the others would exhaust their talismans first or the puppet would run out of spiritual stones.

Another issue that couldn't be ignored was that using talismans also consumed the cultivators' true qi.

Although the true qi consumption for each talisman was negligible, continuously releasing so many talismans was definitely not an easy task for the five cultivators in the arena.

Meng Zhang and Jue Ying had been hiding in the passage all this time, not rushing into the hall.

Such opportunities to watch a tiger fight from the mountain were rare.

They would join the fight only after the result between the two sides was decided.

Moreover, Meng Zhang knew that even if he teamed up with Jue Ying, they might not be able to defeat a Second Rank puppet. He hoped that the Li family cultivators could put up a good fight and consume the puppet's strength.

The five cultivators in the hall had already focused all their attention on the puppet, with no spare energy to notice others, let alone detect Meng Zhang and Jue Ying hiding in the passage.

The Second Rank puppet was no longer just a rigid lifeless object but had developed certain combat skills.

After defeating the summoned creatures of the enemy, the puppet would take the opportunity to attack the cultivators in the arena swiftly.

A scream rang out as the lion puppet pounced and tore one of the cultivators into two. The array of protective talismans on him seemed as weak as paper before the lion puppet's claws, offering little defense.

With one person dead, the psychological barrier of the other cultivators collapsed.

A cultivator shouted, "Everyone, run! We can't defeat this puppet!"

While saying this, he tried to flee outside.

Li Zhan cursed, "Worthless," but he was helpless too.

When one person ran away, the entire situation became chaotic, and the cultivators' side collapsed. All their previous efforts and sacrifices were in vain.

Li Zhan knew that the overall situation was lost, and he was also preparing to escape.

Unfortunately, facing a Second Rank puppet, it wasn't something one could just walk away from.

The cultivator who ran first turned his back to the lion puppet and lost all his responsiveness. He was easily caught up by the lion puppet and torn to shreds. Only Li Zhan and another clever fellow managed to escape to the edge of the hall during the chaos, preparing to enter the passage in front.

Meng Zhang held the Fire Seal and sprayed out a flame.

The two escaping cultivators didn't notice that there were others in the passage. Confronted with the sudden burst of flames, they had no choice but to stop their escape.

By stopping, they sealed their fate.

The lion puppet caught up from behind, and with a few bites, turned their bodies into a bloody mess.

At the same time, Meng Zhang also made his move against the puppet.

He kept injecting true qi into the Fire Seal.

One after another, flames spurted out, turning into thick fire serpents and rushing towards the lion puppet from all directions.

Meng Zhang acted decisively because he noticed that the puppet's movements were starting to become sluggish, indicating that it was running out of spiritual stones.

He didn't need to defeat the lion puppet head-on; he just needed to hold on for a short time, and victory would be his without fighting.