

## Walker 31

### Chapter 31 - A Unique Beast

With the idea of getting some bait, Lin Mu went towards the traps and checked them for any beasts that may have been caught in them. He checked all six traps and was able to find two Thorn-tailed rats. He killed them and stored them in the ring to be used as bait later on.

Lin Mu then changed his path and entered the deeper part of the forest. The forest seemed eerily silent today, and even the wind seemed to have stopped blowing. Lin Mu began his hunt for prey by first searching around clearings where some beasts lived.

He checked multiple clearings, but could not find anything near them. He then decided to check around the ponds in the area where the beasts came to drink water. He was able to find some small bird beasts, but they were not worth the effort to catch, so he left them.

Lin Mu had spent two hours searching for beasts but still could not find any. Coming to the conclusion that he may not be able to find them this way, he took out one of the Thorn-tailed rat corpses and slit its belly to spill its blood.

He spread the blood around, letting its scent spread, and dropped the corpse on the ground. Lin Mu then hid behind a large rock and waited for a beast to appear. He had to wait for an hour before he saw the beast appear.

The beast was a large ox with unnaturally long and sharp teeth. This was a Razor-maw Ox, a rather dangerous beast of the northern forest. It had large curved horns and its hooves were shiny as if made out of polished metal. Its blue and black patterned fur made it stand out very easily.

Lin Mu gulped his saliva upon seeing the beast. He knew that it would be a daunting task for him to hunt this beast. The Razor-maw Ox was the strongest beast he had tried hunting until now and was a high tier beast. It was stronger than the Steel-back wolves as well as the Yellow-tufted panther. Its strength was roughly equivalent to a 9th stage body tempering realm expert.

Even a 10th stage body tempering realm expert would find it nearly impossible to hunt it alone, so there was little chance Lin Mu could kill this beast. The charging attack of the beast was enough to split trees in half and its hooves could crush rocks.

Lin Mu wisely stayed silent and waited for the beast to eat the Thorn-tailed rat and leave. A few minutes later he could no longer hear any noises, so he peeked to take a look. Once he confirmed that the beast had left, he came out from behind the rock.

Lin Mu checked the direction the Razor-maw Ox had gone towards and went opposite to that, as he most definitely did not want to encounter it. He walked for a few minutes and found a good place that was good for ambushing an unsuspecting beast.

He once again slit the belly of a Thorn-tailed rat and let it bleed out on the ground. This time it did not take long for a beast to appear, after he had hidden behind a large tree. He peeked to take a look at the beast and found it to be a beast that resembled a coyote.

The beast largely resembled a normal coyote, except that it was pitch black and had bone spurs covering his body. They extended from the top of his head along the spine, all the way towards the end of its tail. Lin Mu did not know the name of this beast as this was the first time he had seen it.

He had never seen any hunter bring such a beast corpse to the town before.

'This could be a rare beast, and I can probably get quite a bit of money from selling its materials.'

Thought Lin Mu.

Lin Mu waited for the beast to come closer to eat the Thorn-tailed rat. The position of Lin Mu was perpendicular to the beast, giving him the advantage to strike first before the beast could react. He wanted to use the boulder collapsing fist to kill the beast in a single strike.

Lin Mu waited for the wolf to come to the right position and entered the stance for the boulder collapsing fist. As soon as the beast was in the position, Lin Mu shot forward and executed the boulder collapsing fist, punching the beast on the side of its head.

The moment Lin Mu's fist connected to the beast's head, he could feel the intense recoil and pain travel along his hand. The beast's skull was tougher than the steel-back wolf and did not shatter. Lin Mu had expected to finish off the beast in one hit, but was surprised when he did not.

The beast let out a yelp filled with pain but did not die and was only dazed as it fell to the ground. Seeing that the beast was stunned, Lin Mu unsheathed the short sword and chopped at the beast's neck. The blade went through the flesh, only to be stopped by the beast's spine.

Lin Mu drew back the sword and jumped back. He waited for the beast to die before coming closer. Confirming that the beast was dead, Lin Mu stored it into the ring. He finally had something he could sell in the town tomorrow.

Lin Mu then went back to the hunting shack, as the sky would turn dark in an hour. He did not skin the beast as he did not know which materials could be used from the beast. Lin Mu intended to keep the beast whole and let the person who bought it, prepare it. He would sell all the materials and keep the meat for himself.

Lin Mu set some meat on the large stove outside the hunting shack to cook, while he continued his training. He practiced the boulder collapsing fist until the meat was done cooking. He then sat down to eat the meat. While eating he felt like someone was watching him, so he looked around for them. He did not find any person but found a small four-legged silhouette standing near a bush.

Lin Mu went closer to take a look, but the silhouette disappeared behind the bush when he came near it. After losing sight of the silhouette, Lin Mu went back to finish his dinner. After dinner, he continued his training until it was time for sleep.

While he was about to sleep he had a thought,

'Huh, the spatial rift hasn't opened today, is it not gonna appear today?' Thought Lin Mu with a slightly confused expression on his face.

He lied down on the bed and waited for the spatial rift to open. He must've waited for an hour before he eventually slipped into sleep, as it did not appear. Lin Mu appeared in the Sleepscape and continued his training. While he was training, he thought about the two unique beasts he had seen today.

'I don't think the Razor-maw Ox beasts live in that part of the forest. They are high-tier beasts and, from what I've heard from the hunters, they are found in the western part of the forest.' Thought Lin Mu.

'Even the coyote beast is something completely new that I've seen. I'm sure it's not native to this part of the forest either. Why are these beasts appearing in this part of the forest?' Lin Mu questioned himself.

Understanding that nothing would come out of pondering on these thoughts, Lin Mu pushed them to the back of his mind and continued his training. After a while, he suddenly felt a burst of pain in his head and then on his back.

'Why is pain suddenly arising in my body?' Was the last thought Lin Mu had before his consciousness disappeared from the Sleepscape and he woke up.

Lin Mu opened his eyes and found himself lying on the ground, with his head stuck to the door of the hunting shack. His right hand was extended upward against the door and was currently being pulled towards it, but was being obstructed by the door.

It took a moment before Lin Mu understood the situation.

'The spatial rift! it opened while I was asleep.' Thought Lin Mu.

He struggled to open the door, as his head was stuck against it, and made it awkward for him to move his other arm. With a little effort, Lin Mu was able to move the latch, opening the door. As soon as the door was opened, his hand was pulled outside and his body along with it.

He was able to clumsily stand and walk towards the location where the ring was pulling him to. Lin Mu had to walk along the edge of the forest for 100 meters before the spatial rift finally opened. When his hand entered the spatial rift, he felt that the rift differed from before.

Lin Mu felt as if his hand was dipped in a flowing river. It was the same feeling that he got when he obtained the Four vessels restoration pills along with the fragrant agarwood box. He now felt excited at the idea of finding something valuable again.

### **Chapter 32 - Spirit Stones**

With excitement on his face, Lin Mu searched the spatial rift. He did not have to search for long as the object itself found him, or rather hit his hand. The object was quite hard and felt painful to him when it hit him. He pulled his hand out once the object was stored inside the ring.

Lin Mu withdrew the object to examine it. The object this time was a pouch that seemed to be made out of high-quality beast leather. The texture and feel of the pouch made Lin Mu think that it was something only nobles or rich merchants would use.

He opened the pouch to take a look inside. The first thing that caught his eyes was the glow that came from inside the pouch. As it was still nighttime and there was barely any light except for the stars, Lin Mu could not figure out what was inside the pouch as the glow covered the items inside it, making it hard to distinguish them.

Lin Mu went back to the hunting shack and lit a lamp to illuminate the place. Once there was sufficient light, Lin Mu poured the contents of the pouch on to the table that was inside the shack. Small stones started to pour out from the pouch and soon formed a pile on the table.

The stones were translucent and were glowing with a pale white light. There were nearly a hundred of them in the pile, with each stone being the size of a fingernail. Lin Mu's gaze was locked onto the pile of glowing stones. He picked one up and felt a comfortable feeling coming from his hand that was holding the stone.

"This is... this is a spirit stone!" Exclaimed Lin Mu.

"And... and there are so many of them." Thought Lin Mu out Loud.

Lin Mu had once seen a spirit stone before. It was two years ago when he had visited the Wu Lim city to watch the annual martial competition. The top three prizes of the martial competition were spirit stones. One of the top hunters of the northern town had participated in it at that time and won the third prize.

The third prize was a single spirit stone. The hunter who had won it back then showed it off to many people during the celebration party that was organised in the northern town. Lin Mu had the opportunity to observe it back then.

That hunter who had won the third prize became a cultivator six months later by obtaining a cultivation manual. Though no one knew where or from whom the hunter obtained the cultivation manual, as the hunter never answered those questions. That hunter is one of the only two hunters of the Northern town who are cultivators.

There were numerous thoughts that were going through Lin Mu's head, so much so that he had to chant the calming heart sutra to forcibly calm himself down. Once he calmed down, Lin Mu systematically went through the multiple points he had thought of before.

He first checked the pouch in which the spirit stones came, for any symbols or insignias which could tell where it came from or whom it belonged to. Lin Mu inspected the pouch inside out and could not find anything that could point to the ownership of the pouch.

Second, he thought about the origin of the spirit stones.

'The Four vessels restoration pills came from the Tri-cauldron peony sect, so could these spirit stones have come from there as well?' thought Lin Mu

'The only other place it could come from would be Wu Lim city, only the rich families or the mayor could own such a large amount of spirit stones.' He thought next.

Third, Lin Mu thought about the value of the spirit stones. He counted the spirit stones and found that there were 103 of them exactly. Even though he knew that there were at least a hundred of them, the sheer amount of them still shocked Lin Mu.

Even in the martial competition that Lin Mu watched, the first prize was only 5 spirit stones, which a person from the city had won. He could not imagine how many gold coins would be equivalent to the

spirit stones he had now. The closest thing that could compare to their value would perhaps be the four vessels restoration pills.

Fourth, Lin Mu thought about what would be the best way to utilize these spirit stones. The most obvious method would be to use them for his own cultivation, but for that, he would have to wait until he obtained a cultivation manual. The other straightforward method would be to sell them, but this method will definitely invite trouble on his head. Lin Mu directly discarded this thought.

Lin Mu then took a deep breath and stored the spirit stones in the pouch before storing it in the ring.

'Whatever I want to do with the spirit stones, first I'll have to be very careful. At the very least I need to reach the 8th stage of the body tempering realm before I think of anything further.' Concluded Lin Mu, ending his brainstorming session.

Lin Mu took a look at the sky and saw that it was still dark. So he lied down on the bed and went back to sleep. He later woke up three hours later when it was already bright outside. Lin Mu started his morning routine of training and eating breakfast.

Today was the day that he had to go to the town to inquire about a room at the inn. Lin Mu hoped that he will be able to find a room to stay in for the winter so that he can stop worrying and focus on his training.

After he was done with his morning routine, Lin Mu prepared for his trip to the town. He withdrew the sled he had made and put the corpse of the coyote beast on it and covered it with the large sack. He then started his trip to the town.

The journey to the town was uneventful, and he did not see many people. After the merchants had left the town, the number of travellers coming to the town had significantly decreased. When he passed by the spirit apple orchards, Lin Mu felt a little surprised as he sensed a familiar feeling coming from the spirit apples.

He tried to remember the feeling and found it to be of spirit qi. The spirit qi he had felt from the spirit stones was a little similar to the one that the spirit apples were giving off, the only difference being that it was much more concentrated in the spirit stones.

'I wonder how the small purple spirit fruit I found would compare to the spirit stones.' Thought Lin Mu.

Lin Mu entered the town and observed the absence of the merchants. All the stalls and shops that were present three days ago were nowhere to be found. The aura of the town had returned back to how it was before.

Lin Mu thought about where he should sell the corpse of the coyote beast. Now that the merchants had left the town, he would have to sell it to a shop in the town. He remembered the incident from last time and decided against it.

'If I try to sell it to a shop, many people will see it and some of them will definitely want to try to steal from me again.' Thought Lin Mu.

As he was thinking about this, Lin Mu had unknowingly reached the main street of the town. An idea suddenly struck his mind, and he determined where he could sell the beast corpse.

'That's it, I can sell it at Jing Wei's emporium. That woman and the old man will definitely not bother me, and I can also buy more weapons there.' Thought Lin Mu.

Thus he changed his path and walked towards the desolate alley which housed the dusty shop. Once he reached the shop, Lin Mu put the sled to a side and then opened the door of the shop, which was still hard to open, and creaked loudly on opening.

After the door was open, he picked up the beast corpse and walked inside the shop. He saw that there was no one at the counter, so he rang the small bell that was kept on it. Lin Mu waited for five minutes before the woman Duan Ke walked out of the door behind the counter.

Duan Ke was dressed in a light pink dress and had a small hairpin in the shape of a lily in her hair. Seeing this, Lin Mu wondered how many types of hairpins she owned. Duan Ke looked at him the same as before, with her signature poker face.

She walked up to the counter and asked,

"What do you want today?"

"I want to sell a beast corpse, I wonder if that's fine?" said Lin Mu with a polite smile on his face.

"That's fine. Show me the corpse." Replied Duan Ke.

Since Lin Mu had slung the corpse of the beast on his back, Duan Ke could not see it clearly. Lin Mu pulled the corpse from his back and put it on the counter. He then turned his eyes on Duan Ke's face and saw surprise on her face for the first time.

### **Chapter 33 - Mutant Beast**

Lin Mu had seen Duan Ke multiple times, but this was the first time he had seen her break her composure and show such a surprised expression. For this very reason, he felt that something was wrong or he may have done something wrong.

"Is there something wrong?" Lin Mu asked cautiously.

Duan Mu came to her senses and realised that she had shown a surprised expression. When she saw Lin Mu's concerned face, she understood that he had noticed it this time. She forcibly controlled her emotions and spoke,

"How did you kill this high tier beast?" Duan Ke asked, trying to covertly justify the reason for her expression.

If Lin Mu was first confused because of Duan Ke's expression, now he was confused due to her words.

"What do you mean high tier beast?" questioned Lin Mu.

"This beast, it's a high tier beast of at least 9th stage body tempering realm." Replied Duan Ke.

Lin Mu's expression slowly changed from confusion to that of fear, once the words of Duan Ke sank in. He had avoided hunting a high tier beast, the Razor-maw Ox, which was also equivalent to a 9th stage body tempering realm expert. But somehow had ended up hunting and killing another beast of the same strength.

Lin Mu could not understand how he was able to do this daunting task successfully. He then remembered how the Steel-back wolf's skull was crushed in his one hit, but the coyote beast's didn't. But he still could not understand why the beast did not react when he attacked. If it really was a high-tier beast, it should have detected him the moment he exposed himself.

The only reason he was able to kill the steel-back wolf back then, was because the beast was focused on the mercenaries, along with it being injured and exhausted. There was no way the same tactic would have worked on it, if it was in its optimum condition, not to mention a beast even stronger than it.

Cold sweat covered Lin Mu's forehead and back. Duan Ke could see the dread and fear on Lin Mu's face.

'Don't tell me this boy did not even know the strength of this beast before hunting it.' Thought Duan Ke.

"Did you not know the strength of this beast beforehand?" asked Duan Ke.

Lin Mu, who seemed to have become a mute, finally came to his senses upon hearing Duan Ke's question.

"No, I don't even know the name of the beast." Replied Lin Mu.

Duan Ke just kept on staring at the beast corpse after hearing Lin Mu's reply and did not speak anything. Seeing that she was not replying Lin Mu asked,

"What... what's the name of the beast?" Lin Mu asked.

"It does not have a name, at least not until now." Duan Ke spoke without moving her gaze from the beast corpse.

"What do you mean, why does it not have a name?" asked Lin Mu, while wiping the cold sweat from his forehead.

Duan Ke stayed silent for a minute before shifting her gaze from the beast corpse.

"This beast... it's a mutant. This is not its natural form." Replied Duan Ke.

"A mutant? What's that?" asked Lin Mu curiously.

"Some beasts, if they consume or come in contact with certain substances, can change their nature and physique under the influence of that substance. Though more often than not, these beasts cannot reproduce and thus end up becoming a unique specimen; the only member of their species." Explained Duan Ke.

This was completely new information to Lin Mu. He had never heard of such a thing, not even from his father, who was rather very knowledgeable about beasts and was also a hunter himself. Seeing that Lin Mu was engrossed in digesting the information she had just said, Duan Ke waited for a minute before speaking.

"So, how did you defeat a beast that was much stronger than you?" Duan Ke asked.

"The beast did not react as it should have. I ambushed it and was able to kill it in two moves." Explained Lin Mu.

"Care to explain more?" replied Duan Ke.

"I set some bait and waited for the beast. I was hiding the entire time and only attacked when the beast was in the right position and could not see me. My first hit stunned the beast, making it fall to the ground, and with the next attack I slashed its neck." Lin Mu explained thoroughly.

"Did the beast not finish its mutation completely? But this aura, it's very similar to that 'thing'" muttered Duan Ke.

"Umm, sorry what?" Lin Mu asked upon hearing Duan Ke mutter.

Duan Ke stopped and looked at Lin Mu, before she spoke curtly,

"It's nothing of your concern."

Lin Mu was a little surprised with Duan Ke's curt tone, but did not mind it.

"So you want to sell this beast corpse?" Duan Ke asked, changing the topic.

"Ah no, not the entire beast. I want to keep the meat." Lin Mu replied.

"Why didn't you prepare it before coming here then?" Duan Ke asked with annoyance in her voice.

"I... I did not know what parts of it can be sold. So... I kept it whole." Said Lin Mu embarrassingly.

"Hmm, okay then. You can come to collect the money and the meat three hours later. And I'm charging you extra for dissecting the corpse." Spoke Duan Ke with a straight face.

Lin Mu was a little taken aback at the last part of the sentence, but nodded anyway and left the shop. He did not even ask how much money he would be getting, as he understood that the fierce woman was already annoyed with him.

After Lin Mu left the shop, Duan Ke's eyes suddenly turned fierce. She waved her hand and numerous runes materialised on the door of the shop. If a person looked at the shop right now from the outside, they would only find a plain wall. There was no sign of the shop ever existing in the desolate alley.

Duan Ke gestured with her hand and made the beast's corpse float. She walked through the door behind the counter, which automatically opened for her. The beast corpse floated behind her and followed her inside the door.

Duan Ke entered a small room that was illuminated by a lamp hanging on the roof. There was no other entrance or exit to that room except for the one Duan Ke had come in from. She then snapped her fingers and the lamp illuminating the room was extinguished. But instead of turning dark, the room started to fade into a white background, Duan Ke disappearing along with it.

Duan Ke soon appeared in what looked to be an enormous courtyard. There were elaborate ponds, rivers, streams, and fake mountains. Intricately designed bridges spanned over the rivers and streams. Beautiful and charming fishes could be seen swimming in the water.

On the other end of the courtyard, one could see a manor that was adorned with exquisite decorations consisting of statues, paintings, and calligraphy. Just in front of the manor was a small pavilion surrounded by hundreds of spirit flowers, which were emanating a pleasant fragrance.



An old man was currently sitting in the pavilion. He was drinking a cup of tea that was emitting an aroma that calmed one's senses. This old man was none other than the owner of Jing Wei's emporium, Jing Wei himself, and also the grandfather of Duan Ke.

Duan Ke gently walked towards the pagoda and arrived behind Jing Wei. The old man was facing away from Duan Ke and was currently enjoying his cup of tea.

"Grandfather" Duan Ke called out affectionately.

The old man finished his cup of tea in one gulp and turned around to face his granddaughter.

"You're back from the shop. Was it that boy Lin Mu again?" Jing Wei asked, as he enjoyed the taste of the tea with his eyes closed.

"Yes, grandfather. He... he brought something unusual." Replied Duan Ke with a little uncertainty in her voice.

Jing Wei opened his eyes upon hearing Duan Ke's words.

"Why, what did he bring?" He asked with a reassuring tone.

Duan Ke gestured with her fingers, and the corpse of the coyote beast came in front of her and rested on the ground. She pointed at the corpse and spoke,

"This beast corpse."

Jing Wei's gaze focused on the beast's corpse.

"Hmm, a mutant. That too having a strength of a high tier beast." Jing Wei spoke to himself.

"He killed this beast himself?" Jing Wei asked Duan Ke.

"Yes, that's what he said, and it did not seem like he was lying either." Duan Ke replied.

"It shouldn't be possible for him to kill this beast." Said Jing Wei.

"That's not what's bothering me, grandfather. The beast did not complete its mutation, it could not react to the boy's attack in time." Explained Duan Ke.

She then took a pause and continued,

"This beast's aura, it's very similar to that 'thing' from last year."

"I thought you cleared all of its traces back then, even the ones that could not be cleared by the disciples of Tri-cauldron peony sect." Jing Wei spoke with a questioning tone.

"I did, but now this beast appeared. I think it probably mutated due to the influence of that 'thing'." Duan Ke spoke with a lost expression on her face.

### **Chapter 34 - Booking A Room And Buying More Weapons**

Duan Ke went silent, and Jing Wei was lost in thought as well. Both of them stayed the same for an incense sticks worth of time until Jing Wei spoke.

"What did he want to do with the beast corpse?" asked Jing Wei.

Duan Ke broke her silence and looked up at her grandfather.

"He wants to sell the materials from the beast corpse and keep the meat for himself." Duan Ke replied.

"Hmm, you can't give him the meat, we don't know what effect it could have. Besides, if it is as you say, we have to investigate further." Jing Wei spoke.

"So what should I do grandfather?" Duan Ke asked.

Jing Wei thought for a moment before replying,

"Find a beast of equivalent strength and give its meat to him. As for the cost of the materials, you can decide that yourself."

"Yes, grandfather. I'll do as you say." Duan Ke replied.

Jing Wei turned back and walked towards the manor. As he reached the door of the manor he stopped and spoke,

"Refine the beast corpse and use it to investigate any new traces that may turn up. We don't want a repeat of last year's incident."

Duan Ke did not speak and only nodded her head in acceptance. Jing Wei had entered the manor and disappeared from her view. Knowing what she had to do, Duan Ke waved her hand to make the beast's corpse float. She then gestured and a small formation array appeared over the beast's corpse.

Slowly flames bloomed on the corpse and the formation array started to turn.

"Refine!" Duan Ke spoke out loud.

The beast's corpse was being reduced to a pool of blood. Once the entire corpse turned to blood, Duan Ke threw four small stones the size of pearls, which started to revolve around the pool of blood. The stones spun faster and faster, making the pool of blood to swirl as well.

After five minutes the four stones had stopped revolving and the pool of blood was converted into a small dark red marble. Duan Ke withdrew the four small stones and picked up the dark red marble floating in the air.

Done with the refining process, Duan Ke snapped her fingers and appeared in the small room behind the shop. She walked out of the door and waved her hand to remove the formations placed on the shop's door. She then exited the shop and saw the crude-looking sled kept at the side. Ignoring the sled, she looked around for people. Seeing that there was no person nearby, she withdrew a paper talisman and tore it.

As soon as the paper talisman was torn in half, Duan Ke turned translucent and eventually invisible. The Invisible Duan Ke withdrew a sword that floated in front of her. She jumped onto the sword and flew away towards the Northern forest.

Duan Ke flew at such a speed, that if she was visible, she would only appear as a blur to the human eyes. She reached the depths of the forest in a couple of minutes. This was the region where spirit beasts

were in abundance. No Hunters would ever dare to come this far, only a handful of cultivators would be able to survive in this region of the forest. One could hear the roars and howls of a myriad of beasts. The forest was dark and dense, sunlight could barely penetrate its canopy.

Duan Ke hovered over the forest and sent out her spirit sense to search for a suitable beast of the 9th stage body tempering realm. It was but a second later that she found one. She did not even descend on the ground and only gestured with her fingers, and a spirit qi dagger the size of palm was condensed in the air.

She pointed to the location where the beast was located and the spirit qi dagger shot forward. No cries of the beasts could be heard the moment Duan Ke released the spirit qi dagger. It was as if they were all too frightened to utter a single sound. The spirit qi dagger returned after five seconds, and along with it the corpse of a beast that was around the same size as the coyote beast.

Duan Ke waved her hand and the beast corpse was dissected in a second. She stored the meat in her spatial treasure and took out a wooden disc. The wooden disc had a circular groove at its center.

Duan Ke then withdrew the dark red marble she had refined from the coyote beast's corpse and put it in the groove that was present on the wooden disc.

Once the dark red marble was slotted into the wooden disc, it started to glow. The wooden disc floated from Duan Ke's hand and then flew towards a direction, with Duan Ke flying behind it.

Lin Mu was unaware of all this and was currently checking out the inns in the town. He had inquired in nearly half of the inns and had still not found a single one to stay at. He was standing in front of another inn right now. This inn was located close to the exit of the town and was of a lower quality than the previous ones.

"Let's see if I can find a room here." Lin Mu spoke to himself as he entered through the door of the inn.

He walked up to the front desk and spoke to the clerk sitting there.

"Do you have a room available for the winter?" Lin Mu asked.

The clerk looked towards Lin Mu with a polite smile on his face and replied,

"Yes, we have a room available. But you will need to pay in advance and then you'll be able to stay in that room in five days from today." The clerk replied.

Lin Mu had expected for the clerk to reject, so he was a little joyful upon hearing his words. He did not mind that he would have to wait five days to stay in the room, nor that he would have to pay in advance.

"I would like to book that room then, for the entire winter." Said Lin Mu with a pep in his voice.

The clerk nodded and took out a register.

"Please pay three gold coins and I'll add your name to the register." The clerk said.

Lin Mu took out 3 gold coins which he had prepared beforehand and passed them to the clerk.

"What's your name?" asked the clerk as he dipped a brush into the inkwell.

"My name is Lin Mu."

The clerk took out a small wooden plate on which the name of the inn was carved. It spelled 'Northwind inn'. Lin Mu took the wooden plate and stored it in his pouch.

"Come back five days later and show this to whoever is sitting here on the counter, they will take you to your room." The clerk explained.

Lin Mu nodded to the clerk and turned around to leave the inn.

'I should return to the shop, it's been around three and a half hours since I left it. Duan Ke said to return in three hours, so she should be ready now.' Lin Mu thought.

Lin Mu walked back to the shop and reached there in 10 minutes. He saw that his sled was still kept at the side of the shop.

"Guess no one would even bother to steal such a crudely made sled." Lin Mu spoke to himself with a little mirth in his voice.

He then opened the creaky door of the shop and entered the shop. He walked up to the counter and was about to ring the bell when the door of the shop opened. Lin Mu turned around to look and saw Duan Ke entering the shop.

'Huh, why was she outside?' Lin Mu questioned himself.

"I'll bring the meat, wait here." Duan Ke spoke to Lin Mu as she passed by him and entered the door behind the counter.

She returned a minute later with a sack that seemed like it was completely full. She put the sack on the counter, gestured to Lin Mu, and spoke.

"Here's your beast meat. As for the money..." But before she could complete her sentence, Lin Mu interrupted her.

"Umm, instead of coins, I want some weapons." Lin Mu spoke.

"You want more weapons? Are you not satisfied with the short sword?" Duan Ke asked.

"No, I like the short sword. I just want more weapons in case I lose the short sword in a fight or something. And I also want to learn to use more kinds of weapons." Lin Mu explained.

Duan Ke nodded and said, "As you wish, look around the shop and pick whatever you want. But if you want to get a proper appraisal, it will cost you extra."

Lin Mu went around the shop and picked up whatever caught his fancy. In the end, he had chosen 12 items from the shop. He brought them all and placed them on the counter. The total weight of all the weapons was nothing to Lin Mu, now that he had reached the 6th stage of the body tempering realm.

The weapons he had chosen were of multiple types. He had chosen a pair of battle gauntlets, a long sword, a slim and flexible sword, a normal broad sword, a large axe, a small hatchet, a buckler, a large shield, a spear, and three different types of daggers.

Duan Ke was a little surprised by the varied choice of weapons but did not show it on her face.

"Is that all?" Duan Ke asked.

"Yes, how much would this all cost?" Lin Mu questioned.

"It should be around the same price as the cost of the materials of that beast." Duan Ke replied.

Lin Mu nodded happily and piled all the weapons on the large shield before putting it on the sled outside the shop. He then carried out the sack of meat and left the shop. Duan Ke watched him leave.

'He's a little dumb, isn't he? He didn't even ask how much the materials exactly cost.' Duan Ke spoke to herself before waving her hand and sealing the door with formations.

She then entered the door behind the counter and left the shop.

### **Chapter 35 - 8th Stage Of The Body Tempering Realm**

Duan Ke appeared in the elaborate and large courtyard. She crossed the streams and rivers to reach the manor that was standing at the end of the courtyard. Her eyes looked around for her grandfather but could not find him nearby.

Finding that her grandfather was not outside, she went up the steps of the manor and entered through the large twin doors. The inside of the manor was so luxuriously decorated that it would even put a king's palace to shame.

Duan Ke walked towards the left and entered an enormous library. There were more books than one could count in the library, along with a multitude of scrolls, bamboo slips, and jade slips kept on different shelves.

At the centre of the library, one could see a table and a few chairs. Unlike the rest of the manor, the table and chairs did not look luxurious or expensive, rather they looked very simple and could be found at any commoner's house. Duan Ke walked up to the table and saw her grandfather sitting at it on a chair.

The old man was reading a book that looked like it would wither and break any moment. The book was old and damaged, yet the old man was able to flip its pages with no problem. Once Duan Ke came up to the side of her grandfather, Jing Wei spoke without moving his eyes from the book.

"Did you find anything?"

Duan Ke waved her hand in response to her grandfather's words, making twelve corpses appear. These corpses belonged to both fierce beasts as well as spirit beasts. Even though the corpses belonged to different types of beasts and had different physiologies, they all had one thing in common. They were all pitch black in colour and emitted an unnerving aura.

Duan Ke then carefully withdrew a box that looked to be made of glass. In that box, a pitch-black blob the size of an orange was kept. The pitch-black blob was emitting an even greater unnerving aura, it was at least 10 times the intensity of the aura emitted by the strongest beast corpse.

Jing Wei turned to look towards the glass box in Duan Ke's hand.

"So, it was that 'thing' indeed." Jing Wei said.

"I found these twelve beasts in the northern forest. They were mostly spread around the deeper regions of the forest, but some of them were even present at the outer parts of the forest, with one wandering around near the edge of the forest." Duan Ke said.

Duan Ke stayed silent and let her grandfather examine all the beast corpses. Jing Wei looked around at the corpses for half an hour, after which he finally came up to the glass box.

"Where did you find this piece of that 'Thing'?" Jing Wei asked Duan Ke.

"I found it near the centre of the northern forest. It was lying inside a small pond and had tainted the water." Duan Ke replied.

"That pond was the source of the mutations then, no other traces anywhere?" Jing Wei questioned.

"Yes, that's likely it. I could not find any more traces of it, only this." Duan Ke answered.

Jing Wei nodded upon hearing Duan Ke's answer.

"Destroy it." Jing Wei declared.

Duan Ke did not speak a word before pointing to the black blob inside the glass box, which then started to burn. It burned for a minute, after which not even ashes were left behind.

Once the black blob was destroyed he turned to his granddaughter and spoke,

"Did that boy come back?"

"He came back just before me. I passed the meat of a 9th stage body tempering realm beast to him. Though he did not ask for money in exchange for the materials." Duan Ke replied and took a pause.

Jing Wei raised his eyebrows in question.

"He wanted more weapons in exchange for the materials. I let him choose some weapons from the shop. He picked a large variety of them." Duan Ke added.

Jing Wei sat down on the chair and placed his hand on his chin. He thought for a minute before asking,

"Did he not like the short sword?"

"He liked the sword. He said he wanted the weapons in case he ever lost the short sword during a fight." Duan Ke replied.

"And how did he come to that reasoning?" Jing Wei asked curiously.

Duan Ke had a slight smile on her face as she spoke this sentence.

"Your old short sword has tasted a man's blood once again, after decades."

"Oh, so he had his first kill. That was faster than I thought, but still, it's good for him that he experienced it early on and even learned a lesson from it." Jing Wei spoke with nostalgia in his eyes.

|

|  
|

Lin Mu was currently pulling the sled that had the weapons, and meat placed on it. It took him 20 minutes to exit the town before he could store everything in the ring. Once everything was stored in the ring, Lin Mu sprinted all the way to the hunting shack.

Once he was at the shack, he withdrew all the new weapons he had bought. He wanted to wield all of them, to get a feel for them.

'I need to practice them too now.' Lin Mu thought as he swung an axe.

He practiced using the weapons for three hours until it was time for sunset. Even though Lin Mu did not have proper training methods for each of the weapons, he still tried whatever he had seen other people do before, whether it be the town guards or the hunters.

Lin Mu then started practicing the boulder collapsing fist before cooking the new beast meat he had got today. The aroma of the 9th stage body tempering beast meat was richer than the other meats he had eaten before. Once it was completely cooked he ate it deliciously.

Done with the meal, Lin Mu sat down cross-legged to chant the calming heart sutra. He could feel the dense, vital energy being spread from his stomach. The energy was slowly spreading over his body and assimilating into his skin and muscles, with a minuscule amount assimilating into his blood vessels.

45 minutes later the vital energy had not stooped being assimilated and Lin Mu felt like his skin was completely saturated with vital energy.

'This is it my skin can't assimilate any more vital energy, it's time for me to enter the 8th stage of the body tempering realm.' Lin Mu decided.

Lin Mu focused on the small trickle of vital energy that was entering his blood vessels. The vital energy was giving off very faint waves. He focused on these very faint waves and tried to amplify them. He tried applying his experience from learning the Boulder collapsing fist and willed for the vital energy to increase.

He did not succeed in the first try. Lin Mu repeated the same procedure over and over until finally, it was like a dam had broken. A large surge of vital energy that was stored in his stomach surged out all at once and was assimilated into his blood vessels. An electrifying feeling passed through his blood vessels and he broke through to the 8th stage of the body tempering realm.

"Yes, finally success!" Lin Mu exclaimed and jumped up in joy.

The 8th stage of the body tempering realm was a bottleneck. After breaking through it, a qualitative change happened in the body. The muscles that are tempered in the early stage of the body tempering realm become stronger and tougher, but they can't exert their full potential as they don't have the required supply of blood.

A similar situation occurs with the skin during the middle stage of the body tempering realm, but when a person finally enters the 8th stage of the body tempering realm, his vessels can finally provide the blood required to the muscles and skin.

A person who enters the late stage of the body tempering realm can exert greater strength, has increased speed and agility.

'Let's see what I can do.' Lin Mu thought.

Lin Mu started sprinting and found that he could run twice as fast as before. He then withdrew the large rock from the ring and let it fall on the ground. He tried lifting it but could not; it was still too heavy for him. Lin Mu then tried pushing it and was able to push it with some effort.

"At least I can push it now." Lin Mu thought out loud as he wiped the sweat on his brow.

'Now to try the boulder collapsing fist.' Thought Lin Mu.

Lin Mu entered the horse stance and used the breathing technique. Once his breath harmonized he started the fist routine. As soon as he reached the perfect coordination, he executed the boulder collapsing fist. A stream of energy entered his right arm and started spinning, forming a stable spiral. Lin Mu willed it and punched forward. A powerful gust of wind shot forward, shaking the trees and bushes. Leaves fell down from the trees and a whistling sound could be heard.

Lin Mu had finally mastered the boulder collapsing fist.

### **Chapter 36 - Consuming The Spirit Fruit**

After he executed the boulder collapsing fist, the energy that was coursing through Lin Mu's body faded away and was replaced by numbing fatigue. Lin Mu slumped down on the ground in exhaustion. He did not expect that a severe exhaustion of energy would be accompanying the successful use of the boulder collapsing fist.

'Why is the exhaustion of vital energy harsher than before?' Lin Mu wondered as he laid down on the ground.

Lin Mu thought that the exhaustion of energy was due to the boulder collapsing fist not being mastered and losing energy in the process. He did not know that once he mastered it, the exhaustion would only increase.

Before he mastered the martial technique, he was able to execute it twice. But now that he had completely mastered the martial technique, he was only able to use it once before being nearly incapacitated.

'I will have to use the boulder collapsing fist only in the situations when I'm sure of my victory or when I have no other choice left.' Lin Mu thought.

Lin Mu laid on the ground for half an hour before he was able to recover some part of his stamina. He then stood up and decided to hunt. He returned later in the evening just before the sunset. He had been able to hunt a Hook-winged swan and a Six-pronged stag.

Lin Mu would never have been able to catch up with an adult Six-pronged stag had it not been for the increase in his speed after reaching the 8th stage of the body tempering realm. He was able to outrun the Six-pronged stag with ease and swiftly ended its life with one swing of his short sword.



After coming back, he cleaned and prepared both of the beasts before eating some dinner. Lin Mu then continued his practice with the different weapons he had bought yesterday till midnight when the spatial rift finally opened. He found a torn piece of a silk ribbon in the spatial rift this time.

Lin Mu examined the torn piece of silk but found it to be ordinary, so he kept it in the ring. He then went to sleep and entered the Sleepscape. In the Sleepscape he practiced the boulder collapsing fist. Now that he had mastered the boulder collapsing fist, he didn't find practicing it to be of much use, as he did not know where he could improve more.

'The booklet mentioned that the advanced stages of the boulder collapsing fist involved increasing the number of energy spirals when using the technique.' Lin Mu remembered.

Lin Mu could not practice the martial technique fully in the Sleepscape, as he could not use the vital energy in his body. He could only practice the form and coordination.

'I wish I could practice using the weapons at least.' Lin Mu complained to himself.

Lin Mu had no more things he could do in the Sleepscape anymore, unless he could find a new technique to learn. After understanding that he couldn't do much about it, Lin Mu just sat down and thought about things that he can improve on. By the time he had woken up from sleep, Lin Mu had made an entire mental list of goals he wanted to complete.

First of all, he wanted to become a qi cultivator. Second, he wanted to obtain enough money to buy back his property that was seized from him. Lastly, he wanted to explore and experience the world.

Lin Mu's desire for exploring the world came from his mother, who used to tell him stories from the travelogues and books she had read. She told him of breath-taking places, ferocious beasts, dazzling kingdoms, and beautiful princesses. Though the stories that caught Lin Mu's attention the most were the ones about immortal cultivators and their legends.

All of his goals were linked and completing one goal would beget others. Becoming a cultivator would allow him to obtain a lot of money, which would allow him to buy his property back. He would be fulfilling his filial duty of taking care of his ancestral property and also the familial graves that were located there.

Once Lin Mu completed these two goals, he would be free to wander and explore the world. He was looking forward to seeing the places he had heard in the stories.

After waking up, Lin Mu started preparing his breakfast and practiced the Boulder collapsing fist. He tried forming two spirals while using the technique, but could not as the vital energy would dissipate as soon as he tried pulling another strand to form the second spiral.

Lin Mu stopped practicing the martial technique after multiple failures and ate his breakfast. He chanted the calming heart sutra and assimilated the vital energy as always. He could tell that the rate of absorption had gone up by at least twenty percent, and he could absorb even more vital energy.

After he was done with the assimilation of vital energy, he practiced using the different weapons. While practicing Lin Mu came to the conclusion that he was more comfortable with swords, daggers, and the spear. He practiced with the axes but found them to be awkward to use and the shields did not matter much, as all he could do with them was defend.

While with the gauntlets, he found that he could use them in tandem with the boulder collapsing fist. The gauntlets were made of tough and hardened leather that was studded and reinforced with metal plates. They were okay to wear during a fight, but Lin Mu couldn't bring himself to wear them all the time, like he was doing with the leather armour he had looted from the thief.

While Lin Mu was training he was reminded of something now that he was in the 8th stage of the body tempering realm. He stopped and withdrew the grape-sized purple spirit fruit he had obtained by risking his life. As soon as he withdrew it, he could feel the dense spirit qi stored in it. The spirit qi was much denser than the spirit apples and was comparable with the spirit stones.

'It should be fine for me to eat it now.' Lin Mu thought.

Lin Mu had been waiting to enter the 8th stage of the body tempering realm so that he could become a cultivator. Even though he would need a cultivation manual to become an official cultivator, he could still eat a spirit fruit now.

Lin Mu made up his mind and proceeded ahead. He took a deep breath and popped the small fruit into his mouth. He bit the fruit in his mouth and felt a pleasant sweetness spreading in his mouth. After savouring the fruit for a moment, he swallowed it. Since the fruit was only the size of a grape, it was gone in one bite and gulp.

For the first minute after eating the fruit, Lin Mu did not feel anything, making him think whether he was mistaken, and it was a fake spirit fruit that he just ate. But after a minute passed, it was time for him to be in agony.

A scorching pain rose from his stomach and spread through his body. It coursed through his blood vessels, muscles, and skin until it reached the bones and touched his marrow. That was when he screamed out in pain.

"AAGHHHH!"

Lin Mu's agony filled scream echoed through the forest, scaring the birds into flying away. The spirit qi spread into what Lin Mu thought were his blood vessels until he determined they were something else completely. These vessels were similar to blood vessels and were located along with them side by side, with some spreading away from them as well.

Lin Mu finally understood what these vessels were. They were none other than the spirit meridians he had heard about from the stories and other people. The pain coursed through his meridians and reached his abdomen where it settled for a moment before rising up again, forming a cycle.

Lin Mu was too exhausted to even scream now. He was covered in sweat from head to toe and his grey clothes were drenched wet. After a few minutes of agony, he could sense the vital energy that was stored in his body multiplying. The spirit qi from the fruit was being absorbed by his body and used as a fuel to generate vital energy.

At this point, Lin Mu was finally able to gather some of his will and chanted the calming heart sutra. Inside the mysterious ring, there existed the ethereal altar that was made of mystical runes. The altar had been glowing ever since Lin Mu had eaten the spirit fruit and was becoming brighter and brighter by the minute.

When Lin Mu chanted the calming heart sutra, the ethereal altar started resonating and gave out its own pulses of energy. Suddenly Lin Mu could hear thundering chants of a thousand monks in his head. The esoteric chants were incomprehensible to Lin Mu, yet he could somehow understand their underlying meaning.

Under the influence of the thunderous chanting, the rampaging spirit qi was finally tamed and stabilised. The spirit qi stopped being unruly and settled down in Lin Mu's abdomen. He felt that the place it settled down was two inches above his navel and felt like it was intangible. Lin Mu was able to determine that the place was his dantian.

### **Chapter 37 - A Shocking Series Of Events**

The grueling process was finally completed after an hour, at the end of which Lin Mu could not maintain his consciousness anymore and was pulled into the Sleepscape.

Once he was in the Sleepscape, he could not feel the fatigue and was free. Though as soon as he entered the Sleepscape he was in for another storm. Currently, the Sleepscape was undergoing a great upheaval.

The ethereal altar within the mysterious ring was still pulsating with energy. This time the energy was rising from the ring and reaching the Sleepscape. The Sleepscape was no longer dark, instead a dazzling blue sky had replaced the pitch-black sky and grass had sprouted on the ground.

Lin Mu was left in awe upon witnessing all the events. The grass was spreading around from where Lin Mu was standing, and so was the blue sky. Lin Mu started walking towards the front as he saw a sapling grow into a tree within the blink of an eye.

He got closer and examined it, as he found it to be rather familiar. It was but a moment later that he understood why. This was the very same apple tree he had been playing around since he was a child, had fallen asleep under when he left the town, and found the mysterious ring on.

The same tree had somehow grown in the Sleepscape. He went ahead and touched the trunk. The rough bark of the tree felt real, and so did the rustling of the leaves. Lin Mu walked around the tree and tried to get a measure of the place.

He touched the grass and tried pulling it out. The grass was pulled out but soon disappeared from his hand. Even the place from where the grass was pulled out from returned back to as it was before.

"Huh, so I can't change the environment here." Lin Mu thought out loud.

As he wandered and explored, he figured out the characteristics of the Sleepscape. He found that the radius of the entire Sleepscape was roughly around 200 meters. If he kept on walking ahead, he would just end up in front of the apple tree. He took the apple tree as the centre and mapped the place in multiple directions, but found the result to be the same.

'I end up in the same place after walking straight. So this place should be a circle, ah no, a sphere to be more accurate.' Lin Mu concluded.

Only after he had explored the entire place, did he realise the biggest distinction that existed between the Sleepscape and the actual world. He looked up and noticed the absence of the sun in the sky. There were no clouds in the sky either, yet somehow the sky was still blue.

'Will there be night in here?' Lin Mu wondered to himself.

The only way he could figure out if the night would fall, would be to just wait and observe. Lin Mu waited and waited, but still could not see the day turn into night. Eventually, his consciousness disappeared from the Sleepscape and returned to his body.

Lin Mu woke up in a daze and looked around to check his whereabouts. He was still at the same place he had passed out from exhaustion. He looked at the half-moon that was staring him in the face and broke out in a light laugh.

"Things just get more and more exciting for me, don't they?" Lin Mu spoke to himself.

He tried to stand up and found that his entire body felt sore. Lin Mu was drenched in sweat before and felt sticky, so he wanted to clean up. He stumbled down to the stream and took a bath that felt comfortable to him, even though the water was icy cold, a sign of the approaching winter. While bathing, his gaze wandered to the apple tree.

'So it's still there. I guess the tree in the Sleepscape is just a replica.' Lin Mu thought.

After he was done bathing, he walked up to the apple tree just to verify his claims. He touched the tree and plucked some leaves and apples. Unlike before, these did not disappear and stayed with him.

After he had verified his claims, Lin Mu walked back to the hunting shack. He was no longer stumbling like before, even though he still felt sore. After he reached the hunting shack, he set some meat to cook on the stove as he was starving.

While he waited Lin Mu tried to remember the distinct sensations, he experienced after eating the purple spirit fruit. He was able to remember the different paths the spirit qi had taken, which helped him figure out the pathways of his meridians.

He focused on his abdomen and sensed the faint wisps of spirit qi floating inside his dantian. Lin Mu tried to see if he could control them or not. In the early attempts, Lin Mu could not even make the wisps of spirit qi twitch, but later on, he was able to command them to move within his dantian.

Only now was he able to understand the size of his dantian. If he considered the wisps of spirit qi as locks of hair then his dantian was roughly comparable to the size of the hunting shack. Lin Mu did not know if this was considered as large or small, as he had no one else to compare it with. Neither did he have proper information about the subject.

His dinner was ready while he was playing around with the spirit qi. As Lin Mu felt like he was starving before, he ate his dinner with gusto and devoured all the meat he had prepared. After he was done with the dinner he followed his usual routine and started chanting the calming heart sutra to assimilate the vital energy.

It was now time that Lin Mu experienced the next shock of the day. The vital energy that was absorbed from his stomach assimilated entirely within ten minutes. The process which used to take him 45 minutes now only took him 10. Only when all the vital energy was absorbed did he figure out the reason for it.

Lin Mu's blood vessels had expanded a little bit and had become way tougher than before. He examined the density of vital energy within his body and found it to be nearly twice as dense as before.

"I... I... I'm in the 9th stage of the body tempering realm! That too at the very peak!" Lin Mu exclaimed out loud.

The vital energy in his blood vessels was saturated to the very limit. Signaling his imminent progress to the 10th stage of the body tempering realm. He didn't know how long it would take for him to enter the 10th stage, but he knew that he will surely be entering it.

Before Lin Mu ate the spirit fruit, the only expectation he had was to enter the 9th stage of the body tempering realm and never higher than that, as he would focus on finding a cultivation manual. But now that he was already in it and was even close to the 10th stage, he could not believe his fortune.

An hour later Lin Mu calmed down and was able to think straight again.

'I can try and see if the calming heart sutra can help me control the spirit qi wisps.' Lin Mu thought.

Acting on his thoughts, Lin Mu sat down cross-legged to chant the calming heart sutra and focused on his dantian. The calming heart sutra helped him focus and gain clarity. After a few more failures, Lin Mu was able to pull out a single wisp of spirit qi out of his dantian.

But as soon as Lin Mu pulled the wisp of spirit qi out, he lost control and the wisp travelled into his right arm and was sucked by the ring. The mysterious ring hummed and before Lin Mu could think of anything, he disappeared from the shack.

When Lin Mu's vision returned, he found himself staring at a dark sky that was filled with flickering streaks of silver and grey colour. In the far distance, he could see a familiar glow.

'I'm back in the ring?' Lin Mu questioned himself.

He walked towards the glowing light and reached the ethereal altar that was made out of mystical runes. The altar was thrumming with power, as if it was beckoning Lin Mu to come and touch it. Lin Mu responded to the altar's yearning and walked closer. As he progressed step by step, Lin Mu could see the altar glow more and more as if it was responding to Lin Mu's presence.

Soon Lin Mu was in the very front of the altar, which had turned nearly corporeal due to the intense glow it was emitting. But as soon as Lin Mu touched the altar, it stopped pulsating and became silent. In the very next moment, it glowed with an even more intense light and a cacophony of chants sounded within Lin Mu's mind.

"Sharpen thy will as a blade, slay your mortal bindings and become unyielding in the face of worldly tribulations - Behold the Severing Heart Sutra."

### **Chapter 38 - Testing The New Skills**

The second part of the Nine divine heart sutras was finally unlocked. The esoteric chants of the Severing heart sutra were currently being carved in Lin Mu's mind. As the chants resounded within his head, a sharp stabbing pain accompanied them.

For Lin Mu, it was as if every passing second was equal to a day. When the entire process was complete Lin Mu could not figure out how much time had passed, for the intense pain had robbed him of his sense of time.

When the pain subsided, Lin Mu could see that the ethereal altar had dimmed down considerably. It was still pulsing, but not as intensely as before. He once again felt like he needed to touch the altar, and that's what he did.

Lin Mu had braced for the next bout of pain that could be arriving, but it did not. Instead, a very gentle stream of energy was released from the altar that travelled to the mysterious ring and then to Lin Mu's head. Once the energy entered his head, additional new information appeared in his mind.

There were only two things that were transmitted to him, and these two were skills. They were called 'Flicker' and 'Blink'. Lin Mu understood that the mysterious ring had transmitted the information about these skills to him and had told him that these were some of the innate skills that originated from itself.

"Why would I receive these skills only now and not before? Could it be because of spirit qi?" Lin Mu wondered.

After receiving the skills, the ring hummed again, expelling Lin Mu into the hunting shack. He looked around and confirmed his location. Lin Mu had experienced too many shocks today, thus he sat down to chant the calming heart sutra again to get his thoughts in order.

After half an hour, Lin Mu was able to make the heads and tails of the entire situation.

"I unlocked the Severing heart sutra, and the ring imparted the two skills called Flicker and Blink to me." Lin Mu concluded in one sentence.

The first thing Lin Mu wanted to test was the Severing heart sutra. He wanted to see how it compared to the calming heart sutra and if it could help him in his cultivation. So, in order to test it, Lin Mu sat down cross-legged and began chanting the severing heart sutra.

The chants of the severing heart sutra were different from the calming heart sutra. While the calming heart sutra made one feel tranquil, the severing heart sutra made one empty.

The closest way Lin Mu could describe his feelings was as, nothing. He felt completely devoid of everything. He did not feel any desire, nor did he feel any emotions. He focused on the vital energy within his body and found it to be the same as before. It did not enhance his perception as it did with the calming heart sutra.

Lin Mu then tried sensing the spirit qi within his dantian. Before he was able to control a single wisp of spirit qi with the help of the calming heart sutra, but he could not exactly measure how much spirit qi he had in his dantian. But once he used the severing heart sutra, he found that he only had around five percent of his dantian filled with spirit qi.

He tried to count the number of spirit qi wisps he had and estimated them to be around 100. He could not get an exact number as the spirit qi mixed and melded together.

'If only five percent of my dantian is filled then, it means that I can store nearly 2000 wisps of spirit qi.' Lin Mu thought.

After this, he tried to control a wisp of spirit qi and was able to do it successfully. He tried going further and controlled the spirit qi to move towards the meridians. He willed it, and the wisp of spirit qi entered the first meridian.

Getting the spirit qi into the meridians was the hard part for Lin Mu. Now that it was in the meridians, it only had one path to follow. Soon under the control of Lin Mu, the wisp of spirit qi completed its first complete circulation cycle.



After Lin Mu successfully completed the first cycle of qi circulation, he could feel his body's pores open, as a tiny amount of energy was absorbed from the air and refined into a new wisp of spirit qi that settled down in his dantian.

'Is this how a person is supposed to cultivate?' Lin Mu questioned himself.

Lin Mu did not know, but what he had just accomplished would have shocked any other cultivator if they knew about it. He had successfully refined spirit qi without the use of a cultivation manual. Even though it was a minuscule amount and was not comparable to the efficiency of an actual cultivation manual, this single feat of his was still earth shaking.

Lin Mu stopped chanting the severing heart sutra and stood up. Once the effects of the sutra wore off, all his emotions returned. Only now did he understand how disturbing it felt to be devoid of emotions.

'This feeling, or the absence of it, is unexplainable.' Lin Mu thought to himself with a perplexed expression on his face.

The next thing Lin Mu wanted to test was the two new skills he was imparted by the ring. He instinctively knew how to use these skills. The first skill Lin Mu tested was the skill called   Flicker'.

He knew how to use it but did not know what it actually did. He would have to experience it himself, to understand it. Thus Lin Mu took a deep breath and triggered the skill. Automatically a small wisp of spirit qi rose from his dantian and entered the ring.

After the spirit qi was consumed by the ring nothing happened, which made Lin Mu confused about whether he was making a mistake or not. He tried again and another wisp of spirit qi was consumed, with no results. He tried again and again with no sign of success until he noticed his hands when he used the skill.

Lin Mu observed that whenever he used Flicker, his hands would turn blurry for a moment. To test his hypothesis, he tried it again and indeed found it to be true. In his later attempts, he found that not only were his hands turning blurry, but his entire body was also turning blurry.

A stroke of insight struck Lin Mu, and he remembered his first fight with the two thieves. A similar thing had happened then, and the attacks of the two men had passed through his body as if it was made of air.

"So it was this skill that saved my life then." Lin Mu exclaimed.

He wanted to test the skill out further, so he held the table with his hand while he used Flicker. As soon as he used the skill Lin Mu's hand passed through the table as if it were air. Lin Mu was awestruck and stared at his hand. He tested it out with many things and found it to work the same.

But while testing, he also found the limitations of the skill. The skill only turned his body immaterial for a second, after which it solidified. While it was possible for his hand to pass through thinner objects such as the table, it could not pass through the wall of the shack, or of course the ground itself. A handful of soil and small stones could fall through his hands when he used the skill, but he could not push his hand through the earth.

'But if the limitation of the skill depends on the thickness of the objects, how was I able to dodge the axe of that thief?' Lin Mu wondered with a puzzled look.

Lin Mu thought for a bit and understood that there may be more factors that influenced the skill. He withdrew the short sword and held it in his hand while he used Flicker. He had expected it to fall through his hand, but it did not. He then held it flat against his left hand and swung at it. This time it passed through his left hand but was still held in his right hand.

'So the thickness of an object, as well as the speed at which my body moves through it, decides whether the skill would work or not.' Lin Mu concluded and felt proud of himself inwardly.

At only this point did he notice that he had depleted nearly all of the spirit qi in his dantian. This also gave him an idea of how many times he could use the skill 'Flicker'. He consumed one wisp of spirit qi to use the skill once, thus could use it at least a hundred times before stopping.

'Guess I'll have to test the second skill tomorrow then.' Lin Mu thought.

After all the experiments, Lin Mu had once again become tired and sleepy. He laid down on the bed and fell asleep. This time though, Lin Mu did not enter the Sleepscape but instead fell asleep normally.

### **Chapter 39 - First Cultivation Session**

When Lin Mu woke up, it was already the afternoon. He felt much better as this was the first time he had slept normally in a long time. He stretched to relieve the stiffness and walked out of the hunting shack.

The bright sunlight blinded him for a moment, making him cover his eyes. A moment later, when his eyes got used to the brightness, he was able to see the difference in his vision. Everything he looked at, whether it be trees, clouds, flowers, or the grass, looked vivid to him. Lin Mu also found out that he could look at faraway objects much more clearly now.

"Is this the effect of spirit qi? It enhanced my vision too. Wait, that's not it. My sense of smell is enhanced as well." Lin Mu spoke out loud.

Lin Mu was able to smell the fragrance of flowers that were far away in the forest. He could even smell the very faint smell of the grass beneath his feet. It was a completely surreal experience for him.

Lin Mu then started his morning routine, but instead of training, he sat down to sense his dantian. He saw that nearly half of his spirit qi has been restored.

'A part of my spirit qi is restored every time I sleep, it seems.' Lin Mu thought.

Lin Mu wanted to restore as much spirit qi as he could before he tested out the second skill he got from the ring. Thus he sat down and chanted the severing heart sutra. The loss of all emotions made Lin Mu feel empty, but it also made his perception sharper.



His consciousness entered his dantian and took control of a wisp of spirit qi. Lin Mu guided it into the meridians and circulated it according to the path he had discovered. The first cycle was completed in two minutes. The single wisp that he had circulated had become more refined, and another wisp of spirit qi had been absorbed from the air and condensed into his dantian.

'So not only does circulating the spirit qi condense more wisps, but it also refines the previously existing spirit qi.' Understood Lin Mu.

In the qi refining realm, a cultivator primarily increases the amount of spirit qi they have and then refine it to make it more pure and condensed. The qi refining realm is divided into four stages- early-stage, mid-stage, late-stage, and peak-stage.

In the early stage of the qi refining realm, a cultivator condenses spirit qi and fills up half of their dantian. In the mid-stage, their entire dantian is filled with wisps of spirit qi. In the late stage, a cultivator starts to refine the spirit qi wisps into liquid form, while in the peak stage they would completely fill their dantian with liquid spirit qi.

Lin Mu completed multiple circulation cycles and found out that the more he circulated, the faster he got. An hour after he started, his efficiency had nearly doubled. He continued cultivating for another hour, after which he had completely recovered his spirit qi and had actually exceeded it by a small amount.

Lin Mu stopped at this point and let out a breath of foul qi, ending his first proper cultivation session. He could feel his improvement and understood that this was the path he had to follow.

Lin Mu heard his stomach rumble and went to eat his breakfast. After eating breakfast, he chanted the calming heart sutra and assimilated the vital energy from the meat he had eaten. Another thing he noticed was that in addition to vital energy, a minuscule amount of qi was also being absorbed into his body.

'Does beast meat have spirit qi in it too? Or is it because I'm eating the meat of a 9th stage body tempering beast?' Lin Mu pondered.

Now that he had eaten his breakfast and his qi was replenished, Lin Mu was ready to test out the second skill he had obtained from the ring.

The second skill was called 'Blink'. Lin Mu triggered the skill and in an instant, ten percent of his entire qi reserve was consumed, but nothing happened. He looked at his body to see if there was a change or not, but could not deduce anything.

Lin Mu used the skill again, consuming another ten percent of his qi. This time he focused on his body to see if there was anything different. He could not sense anything different from his body again.

He used the skill for the third time but focused on the environment. In this attempt, he was successful and found out that his vision turned hazy for a moment when the skill was triggered.

'Why did my vision turn hazy? But it did not do that when I looked at my body, though.' Lin Mu questioned himself.

In the quest to find out the function of the skill, Lin Mu used it multiple times until his entire dantian was empty and exhaustion filled his body. He stopped as he was out of qi and rested for an hour. Lin Mu chanted the severing heart sutra once again to cultivate more qi, but discovered that the vital energy in his body was being converted to spirit qi.

He focused deeper and sensed that the ratio of conversion between vital energy and spirit qi was highly unequal. It took a large amount of vital energy to produce a single wisp of spirit qi. Around half of Lin Mu's vital energy was depleted before it stopped being consumed.

'This means that once I deplete my spirit qi, my vital energy will be consumed to produce it.' Lin Mu learned.

For Cultivators who were in the qi refining realm, it was difficult to recover spirit qi once it was entirely depleted. They needed at least a single wisp to be able to produce more spirit qi. Thus in order to recover spirit qi, a cultivator's body would consume its own vital energy to replenish it. Only when a cultivator entered the core condensation realm, could he freely absorb spirit qi from the air.

#### **Chapter 40 - Discovery**

Upon gaining knowledge about the aspects of spirit qi, Lin Mu was enlightened. He understood that he cannot deplete his entire store of spirit qi or it will debilitate him in a battle. Now that he had some spirit qi in his dantian, Lin Mu continued chanting the severing heart sutra and circulated the spirit qi.

After two hours, Lin Mu had nearly replenished his spirit qi up to the previous capacity. He opened his eyes and saw the darkness had descended. The sky had turned black, with the clouds hiding the stars and the moon.

"It's already night, and I did not even notice. Is this what the legends mean when they say 'time is but dust to cultivators, can't notice it until it settles down.'" Lin Mu spoke to himself.

Lin Mu stood up and felt his stomach groan with hunger. He had consumed half of his vital energy to regenerate spirit qi, thus he was feeling quite ravenous. He took out the remaining portion of the 9th stage body tempering beast's meat and slathered it with spices and condiments. Then he set it on the big stove outside the shack and let it roast.

In fifteen minutes the meat was ready, and Lin Mu could not hold back anymore. He ate it like a beast and did not even notice when he had consumed all the meat. There were no bones in the meat, thus it was very easy for him to eat the meat.

Once he was done with his meal, he sat down to assimilate the vital energy within it. While he was chanting the calming heart sutra, Lin Mu heard a rustling sound coming from behind him. The sound came from far, yet it was as if he had heard it right beside him. Spirit qi had enhanced his hearing as well.

Lin Mu stopped mid-way and opened his eyes. He snapped back in a flash and glared at the source of the sound. He was able to see much better in the dark due to spirit qi and observed that there was a silhouette of a small four-legged beast standing amongst the bushes. He rushed forward, but the beast had noticed him the moment he had turned around and had run away.

'If it ran away due to me looking at it, then it should not be a strong beast.' Lin Mu figured.

Pushing the disturbance to the back of his mind, Lin Mu continued chanting the calming heart sutra. His speed of assimilating vital energy had increased by a large margin ever since he broke through to the 9th stage of the body tempering realm, thus he was done after 15 minutes.

All the vital energy that he had depleted was replenished, and the total capacity was also increased by a small amount. It would not take him much longer to break through to the 10th stage of the body tempering realm.

By now the clouds had been blown away by the wind, and Lin Mu could see the half-moon in the sky. He observed its position and estimated that it should be around 8 pm.

'I didn't get the chance to go hunting today and I've finished the 9th stage body tempering beast's meat as well. I still have the steel-back wolf's meat left so I can eat that, but I'll have to complete testing the skills before it's finished too.' Lin Mu thought.

Lin Mu wanted to gain a complete understanding of his skills before he enters the forest, as he wanted to be prepared for any unexpected situation. He had already become slightly paranoid ever since he saw the Razor-maw Ox and killed the coyote beast. He knew that he would not be this fortunate every time. If he encountered a spirit beast by any chance, it was likely that it would spell doom for him.

Lin Mu withdrew his short sword and started practicing with it. After the short sword, he practiced with the other weapons he had bought as well. He practiced all the way until midnight when he suddenly remembered something.

'The spatial rift, it has been more than a day. Why has it not opened yet? This has not happened before.' Lin Mu wondered.

Ever since Lin Mu obtained the mysterious ring, the spatial rift has opened every day. Sure, it opened at different times, but it was never more than a day. Lin Mu was confused and did not know the reason for this.

'Could it be? Is it because of spirit qi, that the condition for it to open changed?' Lin Mu questioned.

As Lin Mu thought about the spatial rift, he lifted his right hand and observed the ring on his middle finger. But as he was observing it, he noticed a small black dot hovering in front of him. Lin Mu was surprised and focused his attention on it.

When Lin Mu focused on it, the small dot started expanding. But along with the expansion of the dot, Lin Mu's spirit qi was also being consumed. When almost five wisps of spirit qi were consumed, the small black dot had turned into a spatial rift.

Lin Mu's eyes were wide open, as he saw the newly formed spatial rift. He noticed the difference this time, though. Unlike before his hand was not pulled towards the spatial rift, neither was it sucked into it. He did not feel any compulsion to touch it either.

'Why is it different this time?' Lin Mu thought as he approached the spatial rift.

Lin Mu put his hand inside the spatial rift and searched around for whatever object that was hiding inside the spatial rift. He had searched for nearly 10 minutes when the spatial rift started to destabilise.

After the rift started shrinking Lin Mu pulled his hand back in defeat. For the first time ever, he was unsuccessful in finding anything inside the spatial rift.

'The spatial rift has never closed like this before. It only closed when I found the object hiding inside it.' Lin Mu thought.

Reeling from his failure, Lin Mu was about to return to his practice, when he saw another black dot floating in the distance. The black dot was hard to spot due to the flickering of the flames from the stove. Thus Lin Mu picked up a burning branch and used it as a torch.

He walked towards the flickering black dot with the torch in his hand and gasped.

"Can it be?" Lin Mu whispered as he extended his right hand towards the black dot.

Lin Mu's guess was right, as the black dot started expanding into a spatial rift. Another five wisps of his spirit qi were also consumed in the process. He put his hand inside the rift and tried finding something inside it again. Five minutes later his hand touched something small, and the item was stored in the ring.

Lin Mu pulled his hand out and observed the spatial rift. Usually, the spatial rift would stay open until he found something and then immediately close. But right now the spatial rift was still stable and showed no signs of closing. Lin Mu decided to wait and see, for how much time would it stay open.

It was not until five minutes later that the spatial rift started to close up.

'It seems that the spatial rift will now stay open for around ten minutes, whether I find something in it or not.' Lin Mu assumed.

After the spatial rift had closed Lin Mu withdrew the object he had found inside the rift. The object he had found was a small nail that looked very mundane and normal. Observing that it was another useless item, Lin Mu stored it back into the ring.

'I seem to be finding more and more useless items.' Lin Mu thought as he continued practicing with the weapons.

While practicing he had moved a little farther away from where he had started. Lin Mu was thrusting the spear when he saw another black dot in front of him. He was surprised by this and got closer. By now, Lin Mu had gotten an idea about how to open the spatial rift after doing it twice.

But he did not open the spatial rift as his attention was pulled towards another black dot that was floating to his right. An idea struck his mind, and he pulled out a branch from the ring and lit it up. With the help of the light from the burning branch, Lin Mu searched around for more black dots in the surroundings.

Lin Mu must have scoured a radius of around 100 meters, within which he found seven floating black dots. He could actually see more of them in the distance but did not bother checking them as he had already understood the situation well.

'So the ring now allows me to see the spots where I can open spatial rifts. Though it does not seem like I will be able to find objects hidden in every spatial rift.' Lin Mu concluded.

Lin Mu had the idea of opening every spatial rift he could find, but then rejected that idea as it would require him to consume his spirit qi. Right now Lin Mu's first priority was to gain an understanding of the new skills, and for doing that, having sufficient spirit qi was a must.

While Lin Mu had discovered another new function of his ring, the disciples of the Star catching peak of the sky precepts sect were currently in shock once again.