The Mirror Legacy (Vol. 5: The Light Beyond the Dying Night)

Ji Yueren

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Figure 1: Cover

Chapter 655: Secret

Pingya Island.

Brilliant sunlight streamed through the grand hall as Li Zhouwei sat in the master's chair, a jade slip in his hands. Golden rays swept across the lacquered crimson pillars and spread across the spacious floor.

Since returning from the lake, Li Qinghong had retreated to her cave dwelling to await Xi Zikang's arrival in seclusion. His father Li Chengliao was also in closed-door cultivation, polishing his abilities in preparation for his Foundation Establishment breakthrough. Once again, the reins of power had fallen into Li Zhouwei's hands.

Li Zhouwei didn't mind the responsibility. Advancing too quickly in cultivation would only invite suspicion, so he planned to focus on perfecting his techniques while tempering his foundation—it wouldn't interfere with family affairs anyway.

His hand rested on the desk as pale golden light flowed across the jade slip, revealing several small characters.

"Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light"

With Xi Zikang not yet entered into their hidden realm, Li Zhouwei couldn't access the other movement technique, *Flowing Sun Refraction,* for now. Over the past year, while dispatching people into the mountains to contact Bai Rong, he had dedicated himself to studying this technique and made some progress.

His spiritual consciousness dove into his body, where he observed the Juque Palace shrouded in hazy mist. Only a single point of light flickered like a bean flame, continuously absorbing the dharma power within his body. Nothing particularly mystical was apparent to the naked eye.

Yet Li Zhouwei straightened his posture, lowering his gaze to the jade slip with deep contemplation as he gently caressed its surface.

The reason was simple—this was the first time the Li family had encountered, or even heard of, a technique that formed within the Juque Palace. Even more unheard of was how this "Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light" would compress from the Juque point, fly to the Shenyang point between the eyebrows, then emerge to battle enemies.

'It's commonly said that Foundation Establishment occurs in the Qihai, while the Shengyang governs divine abilities. But what exactly is the Juque? Moreover, without achieving Purple Mansion realm, only the Qihai among the three apertures is visible. The Juque Palace seems redundant in the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao…'

He could tell the technique's circulation routes and pathways were completely different. He could only determine that this technique was incredibly ancient—perhaps even predating the Purple Mansion Golden Core path. This led him to a certain expectation:

'Since the casting process is so elaborate, it probably can't be unleashed quickly. It would require deep concentration and calm focus—truly bearing the style of ancient times.'

As he pondered this, footsteps hurried into the hall. Chen Yang, clad in armor, knelt on one knee before the hall, his voice cold and deep.

"My lord! The Eastern Mountain Yue rebellion has been quelled. Li Jiman has come to pay his respects and waits outside the hall."

A year had passed since the events at the lake, and all remained peaceful except for some unrest in Eastern Mountain Yue. Li Jiman's son had failed to poison his father and fled the city, stirring up considerable chaos.

Li Zhouwei had sent Chen Yang on a trip. Descending from the sky, he had removed the prince's head, and Li Jiman had come crawling back with his tail between his legs.

This mountain chieftain knelt at the hall's entrance, his weathered face covered in cold sweat. Eastern Mountain Yue had essentially become indistinguishable from the eastern people now, dressed in refined clothing. Li Jiman's ceremonial cap had toppled to the ground, sitting askew.

Li Zhouwei glanced once at the old man, who wailed,

"Your humble servant greets… the Grand Concord of Radiance!"

The mountain tribes had always addressed him this way, and Li Zhouwei paid it no mind, continuing to read his jade slip while waiting for the man's self-defense.

Li Jiman's current position was extremely awkward. Li Yuan Ping had elevated him to the throne, making him essentially part of the first branch. But now power had shifted to the second branch. Although Li Xicheng and Li Chengliao harbored no factional prejudices, this remained an indelible mark against him.

He had always kept a low profile, but who could have known that his rebellious son, after forty years as crown prince, finally couldn't contain himself? When encouraging his father to break through to Foundation Establishment failed, the prince had turned to colluding with outsiders to poison him…

Now kneeling in the hall, he couldn't voice his grievances. After rambling through various explanations, he heard Li Zhouwei's light, dismissive response.

"Eastern Mountain Yue isn't large—keep a better watch over it. If your strength proves insufficient, the family will send people to assist."

Li Jiman could only kowtow in response. Chen Yang escorted him out, then returned to the hall, speaking in a low voice:

"Your Highness, this crown prince's actions seem unwise… there may be injustice involved. Could it be Di Liyoujie's doing?"

Eastern Mountain Yue and Northern Mountain Yue had always been at odds, so Chen Yang's suspicion was understandable. Li Zhouwei set down his jade slip and replied:

"Even if there is injustice, it's still Li Jiman's incompetence—at his age, unable to control even his own son… Dili Youjie fought alongside me through life and death, after all. He wouldn't choose to court death at this moment."

Rising from behind his desk, he continued in a low voice:

"Open and covert struggles between various houses and factions are commonplace in the family. Since Li Jiman and Dili Youjie refuse to choose sides, naturally someone wants to replace the Mountain Yue king. Take one, release another—next time there's a reckoning, it won't stop with just Li Jiman."

"Don't worry about these matters."

He strolled to the front of the hall, withdrawing a letter from his sleeve. It contained a series of recent changes in Azure Pond Sect, recorded in dense detail across an entire page.

Azure Pond Sect had been turned upside down this past year. Chi Xunxiao had comprehensively promoted Chi Fubo's faction, making them dominant within the sect. Si Yuanli remained in seclusion behind closed doors, while the Si family faction had completely collapsed—barely anyone retained their positions.

Even the deeply-rooted Lingu family had lost several members from their Southern Sea positions. Li Xizhi had been missing for a year without trace, while Ning Hejing made major moves in the East Sea. There were even rumors that Li Xizhi had been eliminated by the Chi family.

The letter's conclusion mentioned that Azure Pond Sect's envoys had already arrived at Moongaze Lake with rewards. Li Zhouwei couldn't help but smile and shake his head:

'Azure Pond Sect is truly chaotic enough. The rewards for the North-South conflict were delayed for a full five years… only now do they mention rewards.'

Actually, aside from the Li and Lingu families, the other houses had received theirs years ago. These two families were told "your contributions are so great, they still require deliberation." This deliberation had lasted five years.

He calculated the dates—it should be today. After waiting a while, An Siwei indeed came forward to report respectfully:

"Your Highness, people from Azure Pond Sect have arrived!"

"Let's go welcome them."

He stepped outside, with the two men following behind as they headed out of the hall together.

Azure Pond Sect hadn't sent a Heavenly Glow Dawn Cloudliner, but rather a spirit boat. Two people stood at its prow, both wearing pleasant expressions. Seeing Li Zhouwei approach, they both descended from the boat and offered respectful bows.

The leader appeared quite bold and spirited, his robes interwoven with blue and white, his eyes full of kindness and his tone quite courteous:

"I am Li Quantao. I greet the family head!"

Chi Fubo was clearly not a petty, foolish man. Since this was about bestowing rewards as favors, he wouldn't play games by sending someone to create difficulties. The person in charge of this matter was none other than Li Encheng's son, Li Quantao!

Li Zhouwei had heard this name before and understood that the family's relationship with this man was quite good. He said softly:

"Please, honored envoy!"

Li Quantao seemed to have fared well these past days. His demeanor appeared much more mature, and his bearing showed considerable presence. The several people behind him treated him with great respect.

Chi Fubo truly lacked capable subordinates, so he had reactivated many previously neglected talents. Li Quantao's faction had offended Chi Wei, but Chi Fubo couldn't care less—he promptly promoted him. Li Quantao's current position was quite elevated now.

He laughed heartily and entered together with the others. Once seated in the hall, he said earnestly:

"We're both Wei Li—I won't bother with all those twists and turns. Let's get straight to the matter!"

This man's manner was bold and generous. With a wave of his sleeve, his subordinate quickly brought forward a large box, holding it with both hands at the bottom. As dharma power flowed into it, the jade box opened by itself.

"Whoosh!"

The fragrance of pills rushed toward them. Five Essence Gathering Pills were visible, embedded in grooves—grayish with patterns, radiating flowing light. Behind him, An Siwei quickly lowered his head, not daring to look further.

Above were two smaller jade boxes and one elongated jade box. Li Quantao opened them one by one, saying softly:

"No need to elaborate on the Essence Gathering Pills—these five are extremely potent and greatly beneficial for Foundation Establishment. As for these two jade boxes, one contains the rare lightning-attribute pill 'Thunder Heart Union,' while the other holds 'Nine-Stamen Spirit Lily.' "

He held one up and opened it, revealing a pale purple heart and lung covered in dense black veins, faintly pulsating atop several flower petals.

Li Quantao chuckled and said:

"This item is easy to preserve, but you must never remove it during thunderstorms. If it's taken from the box during thunder and rain, it will transform into lightning and escape, scattering all its essence. Only Purple Mansion Realm cultivators can pursue it."

"This is very beneficial for lightning cultivators—it's for Senior Qinghong."

He closed this box and put it away, but didn't open the other jade box, introducing it through the container:

"This is 'Nine-Stamen Spirit Lily'—it can heal damaged foundations, congenital deficiencies, unstable cultivation, and unsteady immortal foundations. It cannot see light, or it will wither upon exposure."

Chi Fubo was quite generous after all. These two treasure medicines were both rare and valuable items. Li Quantao placed them together in the box, then took the longer jade box, opening it with a flip:

"This is a 'Bone Tree Yin Radiance Branch'—a rare Supreme Yin magical artifact…"

He raised his eyebrows to look at Li Zhouwei, sighing deeply before saying in a low voice:

"The sect master originally designated a Yang attribute magical artifact, but Master Ning repeatedly submitted memorials blocking it. This matter was delayed again and again, and in the end, that artifact couldn't be obtained, so it was changed to this one instead."

"I see!"

Li Zhouwei nodded, glancing at the jade box. Inside lay a jade branch the length of a forearm, half bone and half jade, clear and pristine white. Several forks hung with pure black leaves, sparse and scattered, shrouded in an aura of Yin energy.

'Bone Tree Yin Radiance Branch—such an unpleasant name… though its appearance isn't bad.'

After Li Zhouwei finished looking, he smiled and said:

"The envoy is too kind. Whatever the sect bestows is what it is—no need to trouble the sect master over it. My family accepts this gesture."

This magical artifact was definitely unusable for Li Zhouwei. Not just him—probably most cultivators couldn't understand how to use it properly. It would likely only show its true brilliance in the hands of the Veiled Yin Kingdom or the Pure Unity Dao Gate.

But he felt Ning Hejing's actions made no sense whatsoever.

"I wonder what madness seized Ning Hejing. For the Pure Unity Dao Gate, this is a treasure, but I can't use it myself—can't I trade it for something else?"

An Siwei accepted the jade box. Li Zhouwei noticed Li Quantao still showed regret, and his mind turned:

'Ning Hejing is at least someone governing a region—he shouldn't be foolish to this degree. He probably just spoke up to dissuade Chi Xunxiao from rewarding Yang attribute items, fearing our family would grow too powerful… It seems someone added fuel to the fire, wanting our family to hate Ning Hejing…'

Li Quantao only felt the young man before him had a somewhat domineering appearance, so he spoke more politely, never imagining that this youth's mind had raced through so many thoughts. Following him into the hall, he dismissed everyone around them and finally showed worry on his face.

He said in a low voice:

"Family head… have you heard any news of Xizhi? He and I are close as brothers… During his disappearance, the Earth Abyss has changed dramatically, and his soul lamp within the sect has grown extremely dim… I'm deeply worried!"

His anxious expression didn't seem feigned. Li Zhouwei shook his head, saying softly:

"If even the upper sect has no news, how would my family know!"

Li Quantao could only sit frowning in his seat, unable to relax for a long time. He said gravely:

"Your noble family may not understand the severity of this matter. The Earth Abyss is filled with Dry Qi and Lesser Yang Light—both permeate throughout, blinding and harming the spirit. One year is already enough to be fatal!"

Li Zhouwei appeared thoughtful, slightly narrowing his eyes before raising his head with unease showing on his face. But inwardly, his heart pounded.

Li Xizhi's jade token in the family showed no changes whatsoever—in fact, it remained as bright as ever!

'Is the jade token imprecise… or are they testing me with words!'

Li Quantao and Li Xizhi shared a life-and-death friendship. Li Zhouwei didn't quite believe Li Quantao would conspire with Azure Pond Sect to deceive him, but fooling Li Quantao wasn't difficult at all. Using false information to stir true emotions really wasn't a challenging scheme.

Seeing his silence, Li Quantao thought he was wavering and said in a low voice:

"Xizhi has an excellent relationship with Master Si, and the senior died following his orders. You could inquire—there would surely be a response! He's constantly in seclusion and sees no one, so I can't meet with him… otherwise I would have asked personally!"

Li Zhouwei nodded with apparent realization and said happily:

"Good! I'll write a letter right away!"

Inwardly, he chuckled and thought:

'So that's the plan!'

Ask Si Yuanli? Si Yuanli was merely Foundation Establishment—how could he possibly know about events in the Earth Abyss thousands of miles away? They simply wanted to ask Si Boxiu!

'Si Yuanli has shown weakness for so long, and now with all his power lost, Chi Fubo has become suspicious, truly wondering if Si Boxiu is in seclusion while Si Yuanli acts for him in private!'

If Si Yuanli truly had the secret support of Daoist Master Yuanxiu, even if this letter contained no specific news about Li Xizhi, it would at least reveal that Li Xizhi was safe and sound, preventing the Li family from losing hope… And if Li Quantao, who knew the information, showed any signs of relaxation, Chi Fubo would immediately have grounds for judgment!

Li Zhouwei only showed a solemn expression, bowing to Li Quantao with gravity:

"Senior shared life-and-death bonds with my family's elders—I trust you completely! But this matter of my writing to inquire must absolutely not be known by others! If there's a reply letter, send someone to deliver it, but senior must never let others know… I fear something might happen!"

He added fuel to the fire, making Li Quantao nod repeatedly and swear several oaths. Li Zhouwei understood his good intentions, but if Chi Fubo was making this test, he definitely had ways to learn about their conversation—it was just a matter of belief or disbelief.

Seeing this matter settled, Li Quantao sighed with relief. Before long, he took his leave, and his group departed on clouds. Li Zhouwei escorted them out of the lake, watching them disappear into the distance.

He rode radiant light back, landing in the great hall, and pulled writing paper from his desk, casually tossing it aside.

Write to Si Yuanli? Communicating so openly—even if Si Yuanli dared to respond, Chi Fubo wouldn't dare believe it! From start to finish, Li Zhouwei never intended to write to Si Yuanli.

'News that comes so randomly and without direction… would truly seem like the result of secret communication between the Li and Si families through confidential letters…'

He calculated the timing—after about a month, he could reply to Li Quantao. But sending letters openly to the sect… how could that convince Chi Fubo?

"With Li Encheng and Li Enxi both dead one after another… the original channel has been severed…"

Li Zhouwei contemplated for a while, then lightly brushed the formation array on his desk. After waiting briefly, a young man entered the hall, wearing outer robes of blue and inner garments of white—it was Li Chenghuai.

Li Zhouwei's voice was extremely low:

"The Deng family left us a secret communication method years ago… Can that shop still be found? Please trouble clan uncle to make a trip to the market and contact the Deng family people. When the time comes, help me send a letter to the sect."

Li Chenghuai asked no questions, acknowledged the order, and withdrew. Li Zhouwei turned the jade slip in his hand, quietly gazing toward the brilliant jade boxes in the sunlight:

'For clever people… the more secretly something is heard, the more worthy of belief it becomes… To deal with clever people, act foolish; to deal with fools, act clever—nothing more than this.'

Chapter 656: Meeting Heyun in the Abyss

Li Zhouwei calculated the days in his mind before stepping out from the main hall. As he walked through the corridors, An Siwei was already waiting in the side chamber, bowing respectfully.

"Your Highness, will you be visiting Madam Chen today…"

"With Kongheng protecting her, there's no need for daily visits. Let's see the eldest young master instead!"

Madam Chen had been with child for some time now, and Li Zhouwei had been visiting her more frequently. However, calculating the days, he realized it had been quite a while since he'd seen Li Jiangqian. The boy was already six years old—nearly time to begin his cultivation training.

"The eldest young master is still on the island, Your Highness, please…"

Li Zhouwei raised his head slightly and asked in a gentle tone, "What's he doing on the island?"

"The various branches throughout the island have gradually settled down. The eldest young master said he wanted to see the clan members before coming to pay his respects to Your Highness."

Li Zhouwei nodded and stepped outside. As they reached the great hall's entrance, he spotted a bustling crowd surrounding the child as they approached. Servants trailed behind carrying book boxes and large umbrellas, busy and flustered. Li Zhouwei turned back with a chuckle.

"Those junior members certainly follow him around every day."

This laughing remark sent chills down An Siwei's spine. He quickly whispered,

"Your Highness, the young master is from the maternal An clan after all. The entire An family takes great pride in this honor. When the young master comes to the island for leisure, it's only natural that several people would attend to him…"

"Mm."

Li Zhouwei bent down and lifted the approaching Li Jiangqian into his arms. The crowd that had been chasing behind immediately fell to their knees in a mass. The child turned around in his embrace, and Li Zhouwei asked,

"Qian'er, how was the island?"

Li Jiangqian looked up, his face still carrying traces of lingering joy as he replied cheerfully,

"What a bunch of people, father! You took me to see the shores, but it's really no different from the island proper. Once you step out of this great hall, everything looks the same."

Li Zhouwei carried him toward the hall while An Siwei and the others remained waiting outside. Father and son walked into the sunlit main chamber, and the child continued,

"Father speaks of close relatives, but I don't see how close they really are. They're all just common people, all wearing the same expressions. As for the cultivators… we've built the framework, and they hang from it."

Li Zhouwei glanced at him sideways and said softly,

"That's order. Though people have emotions, they're also driven by profit. This framework that distributes benefits—that's order, whether large or small, good or bad."

Li Jiangqian lowered his head in thought for a moment, then suddenly looked up.

"Qian'er doesn't understand. How can there be good and bad distinctions?"

Li Zhouwei smiled, a hint of appreciation rising in his eyes as he spoke gently,

"For our Li family, if this framework benefits the common people, then it's good. The other clans also take this as their standard, maintaining the strictest control—this is where our family's laws and principles reside. Some noble families think our punishment and oppression of direct-line commoners,

minor branches, and collateral members with different surnames is too harsh. That's because their order exists to serve the cultivators."

Li Jiangqian stared at him blankly, words reaching his lips only to be swallowed back down. His intuition told him he shouldn't ask, so he could only murmur inwardly,

'But what use is being good to them… common people are useless anyway…'

He averted his gaze, listening as Li Zhouwei continued softly,

"This framework uses profit as its skeleton, bound and adorned with kinship and favor—only then can it remain stable and unbroken."

Li Jiangqian nodded as he listened. After chatting for a while longer, Li Zhouwei waved for someone to take the boy away. He sat alone on the steps as the sun moved westward, its rays falling across his dark red robes.

The fine golden embroidered patterns caught the light and gleamed. Li Zhouwei finally withdrew his gaze, paced a couple of steps, and Chen Yang hurried up from outside the hall. Li Zhouwei asked, "Still no news from the mountains?"

Chen Yang looked somewhat disheveled as he replied quietly, "No news…"

Li Zhouwei's voice grew heavy. "Even if we can't find the fox clan, that deer demon Lu Ken in the demon cave should have some information… Are you telling me you can't even find that deer demon?"

Chen Yang clasped his fists respectfully. "Your Highness, the demon cave in the southern foothills of Mount Dali is tightly sealed, and we haven't seen any lesser demons coming or going. Elder White Ape captured some passing demons to question them, but several didn't know anything. Only recently did we hear that Lu Ken has gone out."

Li Zhouwei frowned and turned around, thinking to himself, 'Whether he's truly gone out or just pretending—perhaps Dingjiao's matter is too difficult to handle… He knew in advance and refuses to meet.'

This situation was becoming quite troublesome. Although Dingjiao had shown considerable sincerity, Li Zhouwei had responded cautiously, saying only that he would help pass along the message. But now they couldn't even catch sight of a demon's shadow…

After pondering for a moment, he replied, "Continue investigating."

Chen Yang acknowledged and withdrew. Li Zhouwei made his calculations, 'If there's no news for the next few years, then most likely Lu Ken refuses to meet. I'll just have to tell the truth. After all, our family made no advance promises, so we shouldn't offend the dragon clan.'

Li Zhouwei put away the several reward items from the jade box. Looking at the five Essence Gathering Pills, they were indeed all dull and gray—he couldn't tell whether they were made from humans or demon beasts. He organized everything properly and sent it to Mount Wu for his seventh great-uncle Li Ximing to examine.

'It seems seventh great-uncle still has two Essence Gathering Pills that the Ning family gave him. We can use those first.'

According to Li Ximing, those two were almost certainly refined by the Xiao family, both filled with pure spiritual energy. Li Zhouwei dispatched An Siwei to make a trip to Mount Wu to inquire, while he pondered the situation.

Quite a few people in his family could use these items.

His father Li Chengliao and younger uncle Li Chenghuai both had cultivation levels ready for secluded cultivation at any time. Those with slightly lower cultivation included his aunt Li Minggong in the great desert, An Siwei just now, and Li Wen who stood guard outside the hall with his golden hammer…

Though their cultivation was described as "slightly lower," after taking a talisman pill, they too would have sufficient cultivation to attempt Foundation Establishment. Li Zhouwei only had two usable pills in his possession.

He calculated quietly, 'Father and younger uncle definitely need one reserved.'

Li Zhouwei planned to give at least one Essence Gathering Pill to someone outside the family. After careful consideration, he thought, 'Essence Gathering Pills are spiritual medicines that assist with Foundation Establishment—extremely attractive… Being able to give out Essence Gathering Pills versus not being able to is completely different treatment… As long as one is given out… the rest will eagerly await their turn!'

Since Li Zhouwei knew that the Xiao family could also refine Essence Gathering Pills now, rather than them being monopolized by the Azure Pond Sect alone, he felt more relaxed. Even if those five Essence Gathering Pills had problems, the losses wouldn't be too great—at worst, he could compensate with other items and trade with the Xiao family.

After waiting like this for a while, An Siwei approached from outside the hall, carrying a jade box and speaking respectfully, "Your Highness, the items have been delivered. Master Ximing wasn't in deep seclusion, and these two spiritual pills have been retrieved."

Li Zhouwei casually put them away, dismissed An Siwei first, calculated the days, and decided to distribute these items when the time came for sacrificial ceremonies. He then began reading technique manuals in the hall. As light and shadow alternated several times, Li Wen from outside the hall approached with some urgency, calling out in a rough voice, "Your Highness! The Shen clan from north of the river has come calling!"

…

Eastern Sea.

The Earth Abyss stretched in gray-black darkness, with points of rainbow light shuttling through it. Li Xizhi rode the rainbow light through the surging Dry Qi and evil qi until he stopped before a stone wall.

He transformed into rainbow light and slipped through a crack in the wall, shuttling through the deep darkness for a while before stopping in a somewhat cold cavern.

Drip.

The clear, cold sound of water echoed as something massive and black coiled at the cavern's ceiling. Pure black pupils opened as a hissing serpent's voice emerged.

"Young Master."

Li Xizhi nodded slightly, the jade bottle in his hand flashing with brilliant light. He chuckled and said warmly, "Quite good luck. I searched through the earth veins for a while and discovered a stream of **Deep Sea Radiant Essence**. Though this substance has been extinct for many years and its uses have gradually been lost to time, it's still a rare treasure."

"Congratulations, Young Master."

The black and red qi within the jade bottle moved like water, gently rippling. Li Xizhi was obviously quite satisfied as he flipped his hand to put it away. Li Wushao spoke in his hoarse voice, "News has come from the Si family. Please have a look, Young Master."

Li Xizhi had arrived at this place just as the earth veins shifted. Dry Qi and Lesser Yang light drifted about, impacting the spiritual qi within his body and intertwining with the immortal foundation in his qihua acupoint—an extremely dangerous environment.

Fortunately, the talisman he'd received was **Rainbow Pierce Skyway**. When this dense and overbearing Dry Qi and Lesser Yang light impacted his body, it was quickly and easily dissolved, allowing him to get by reasonably well in these earth veins.

But while he could endure it, Li Wushao was suffering terribly from the burning, his entire body sizzling and smoking. Li Xizhi had no choice but to protect the old demon, following the earth veins until he found a relatively safe cave where he first settled Li Wushao.

Upon arriving here and checking the Golden Feather Sect's maps, he discovered a water vein nearby that connected directly to the Eastern Sea above. Li Xizhi's mind turned, and he understood much immediately.

So he settled the old demon here to carefully guard this water vein while he went out to collect spiritual materials. Now that he'd returned, he'd indeed received news from the Si family as expected.

Li Wushao's voice was low but carried considerable admiration as he spoke, "After Master went out for several days, a spiritual talisman came flowing down this water vein, rushing straight toward the cave dwelling. I intercepted it."

Li Xizhi took the spiritual talisman from his hands and sighed, "Daoist Master Yuanxiu truly hasn't entered seclusion—this is wonderful!"

No matter what, Li Wushao was still a century-old demon. How could he not hear the change in tone? This scared him out of his wits, and he was secretly horrified, 'Yes… to be able to calculate that we're here, it must be Si Boxiu's handiwork. This spiritual talisman's origins are unclear—I mustn't speak carelessly!'

He immediately understood and fell silent. Li Xizhi took the spiritual talisman and indeed found it contained much information, written in Si Tongyi's tone. After reading through it generally, he began to think.

'The Si family retreats steadily… it seems they're no longer a significant force… With me missing and Southern Sea demonic cultivators in chaos, the Lingu

Family can barely take care of themselves… The situation is truly excellent for them…'

'Chi Fubo is still cautious, still unwilling to act rashly, replacing his trusted subordinates bit by bit… But Ning Hejing can't hold back anymore…'

The letter mentioned that Ning Hejing had frequently left the Eastern Sea in recent months, privately moving in and out of the sect, having long conversations with Chi Xunxiao's trusted followers.

'I wonder if Chi Fubo knows—it's like placing a sword at Chi Fubo's throat…'

Besides these two pieces of news, there was also information about Li Quantao going to the Li family. Li Xizhi didn't mind this: 'Quantao has no cunning—he won't harm my family. At most he'll be used by others. My family's heir has already achieved Foundation Establishment Realm. The only ones in the Azure Pond who could scheme against him are Purple Mansion Realm cultivators. Though Chi Fubo has some schemes, he's isolated and can't accomplish great things.'

Another piece of news made Li Xizhi furrow his brow: 'Uncle Yuanqin… left the sect once and met with someone unknown.'

For Si Yuanli to obtain such timely information about these matters, his control over the Azure Pond probably hadn't truly weakened much. Li Xizhi wasn't worried about this—his only concern was for this uncle Li Yuanqin.

'I just hope he won't be accidentally harmed…'

After searching through the spiritual talisman several more times and finding no other functions, Li Xizhi crushed it—this served as a response to Si Tongyi on the other end. He asked gently, "How are your injuries?"

"Still manageable…"

Though Li Wushao had a foul mouth and often cursed, serpents were actually extremely patient by nature. The impact of two types of evil qi and Lesser Yang light within his body wasn't something that could be easily endured.

Li Wushao only said in a hoarse voice, "Though painful, it's much lighter than Merging Fire and Converging Water injuries. Our clan is often tormented by dragons, and Converging Water injuries are commonplace."

Li Xizhi's talisman qi only worked on himself and was helpless against the injuries within Wushao's body. After giving him medicine, he said gently, "Ning Hejing is overbearing—I don't dare leave you behind. Fortunately, there's no Dry Qi here, so rest well."

"Young Master should go as you please and needn't mind me. When the earth veins shift and the two qi and one light gush forth, it's also when treasures are most abundant. Since Young Master isn't afraid, don't waste this opportunity."

The old snake lowered his head and stopped responding. Li Xizhi had no choice but to transform into rainbow light and fly from the cave. He casually sealed the cave entrance and plunged back into the intense Dry Qi, heading eastward.

After traveling over a hundred li, Li Xizhi suddenly frowned. Colorful light flashed between his pupils as his gaze penetrated the dense Lesser Yang light, and he suddenly spotted something.

In a patch of Lesser Yang light, evil qi rolled and churned. Lying in the earth vein was a feathered beast, large as a table—a beautifully formed, brilliantly colored fish with wings extending from beneath its ribs. It had a large round head, a flat fish snout, and orange feathers on both wings that kept flapping as if struggling.

Li Xizhi cautiously stopped, slightly frowning as he thought, 'A Dawn Rayfish? That's one enormous Dawn Rayfish!'

Li Xizhi wasn't unfamiliar with Dawn Rayfishes—he'd seen one before, but they were only palm-sized. He'd never heard of one as large as a table. Seeing this Dawn Rayfish lying motionless on the ground, he became alert and observed carefully.

As time passed and noon arrived, the Lesser Yang light weakened, with some even transforming into sunlight within the intense spiritual energy. Li Xizhi felt a chill by his ear as a faint, calm, and elegant voice arose:

"What is Fellow Daoist Xizhi waiting for?"

Such a sentence suddenly emerging in the utterly silent earth vein, spoken in such a calm tone, was enough to frighten an ordinary cultivator's soul from their body—especially when two qi and one light were currently rampaging about, and even Foundation Establishment cultivators wouldn't linger here long.

'Purple Mansion?!'

Li Xizhi was greatly alarmed. The radiant light on his body instantly rippled outward, and several phantom figures scattered from his body, fleeing in different directions. Orange-red coloration flew up from these figures.

Gold in Cloud!

The orange-red light points Li Xizhi had transformed into leaped through the air several times before materializing. He swept out a sleeve of rainbow light, turned to draw his long sword, and indeed found someone already standing behind him!

"Oh?"

This person seemed surprised by his casting speed and appeared quite astonished, yet didn't move at all, standing with hands behind his back. When Li Xizhi saw who it was, he immediately relaxed and smiled wryly, sheathing his sword and politely cupping his hands in respectful greeting.

"Greetings, Senior Heyun!"

The person before him had bright, piercing eyes, elegant and natural bearing, with hair bound neat and tidy, sleeves and collar perfectly pressed, even the hems on both sides symmetrically aligned. This was none other than Dongfang Heyun!

Dongfang Heyun nodded politely, performing a standard return bow that would put cultivators from south of the river to shame, and smiled. "We haven't met in years—Fellow Daoist has truly advanced greatly in strength!"

Chapter 657: Seventh Cloud

Dongfang Heyun maintained his usual elegant and dignified appearance. This first wisp of cloud energy expelled when the Dragon Monarch achieved his divine position often acted in unexpected ways, harboring an obsession with his own appearance and being extremely particular about propriety. He stood respectfully at a measured distance, smiling warmly.

"Fellow Daoist, you have truly made remarkable progress. When I first met you, a single spell required several breaths to complete. Now I see you accomplish the same in but a single thought."

"Senior flatters me!"

Li Xizhi replied respectfully. Dongfang Heyun flicked his sleeves and stepped forward, approaching the Dawn Rayfish in just a few strides. He lifted it with one hand, turning it over to reveal the creature's bloodied belly, its eyes still wide and watchful.

Dongfang Heyun bowed slightly, speaking in gentle tones.

"This beast came from the north, crashing into Converging Water Sea's Forge Mountain'1. Several dragons were playing in the waters, chasing and frolicking about. I happened to be passing by when it fell into my hands."

"You contributed to the Touba Chongyuan affair and were injured in the process. I brought this along as compensation."

He chuckled softly before continuing.

"After circling around, I discovered you were here…"

Dongfang Heyun paused, and Li Xizhi quickly demurred.

"This junior merely fulfilled his assigned duties to the best of his ability, doing nothing more than preserving his own life. It was Senior's assistance that resolved many future troubles for me."

Dongfang Heyun shook his head, pacing closer as he spoke.

"Simply accept it."

His voice gradually lowered, a flicker of confusion crossing his features. He took two steps in place before speaking softly.

"I have something I must ask you, Fellow Daoist."

"Please speak freely, Senior!"

Li Xizhi responded immediately. Dongfang Heyun spoke in measured tones.

"Within this Earth Abyss, two energies and one radiance—malevolent qi, Dry Qi, and Lesser Yang light—permeate everything. They invade the physical body and course through the meridians. Ordinary people cannot resolve such influences. Even those monks from the north cannot remain here for extended periods."

He paused, his eyes slowly meeting Li Xizhi's gaze as he spoke quietly.

"Yet Fellow Daoist Xizhi seems entirely unaffected?"

Li Xizhi understood his question halfway through and felt alarm bells ringing in his mind.

Li Xizhi knew that Purple Mansion Realm cultivators were monitoring his family, but the Earth Abyss was formed from the Lesser Yang Demon Monarch's transformation. At most, those in the Purple Mansion Realm could calculate his general location but couldn't observe specific details, nor would they necessarily watch him constantly.

Despite all his calculations, he never anticipated Dongfang Heyun would be waiting for him here. Waiting would have been one thing, but the fact that he had observed from nearby for quite some time and noticed Li Xizhi showed no adverse effects had exposed his unusual nature.

'How can I explain this… A cultivation method? Secret technique? Spiritual treasure?'

His mind raced for an instant before he replied in low tones.

"Replying to Senior, the rainbow light of my immortal foundation within my energy sea possesses the ability to neutralize malevolent energies that enter the

body. Though it has limited effectiveness against the two energies and one radiance of this place, it can provide some relief."

"Additionally, there is a nearby cavern free from radiance and malevolent energy intrusion. This junior often takes shelter there to purify his spiritual qi, thus managing to survive."

Li Xizhi delivered his explanation in one fluid breath, his tone steady and respectful. Dongfang Heyun listened carefully, remaining silent for a moment.

Though immortal foundations each possessed unique effects, their specific details often varied considerably. Li Xizhi could only attribute his resistance vaguely to his foundation, his heart gradually growing heavy with worry.

Dongfang Heyun remained quiet for quite some time before laughing and responding.

"If you put it that way, Fellow Daoist Xizhi, it's because that master of Mount Luoxia gathered the northern dao lineages, embracing all with inclusive acceptance and preserving most of the northern immortal dao. Thus, the Radiant Glow Dao developed the ability to neutralize other dao methods."

Dongfang Heyun always spoke with natural elegance. Li Xizhi couldn't discern his true intentions or even tell whether he was being sarcastic or seriously elaborating. He could only respond quietly.

"This junior has learned much."

His response was deliberately ambiguous, acceptable whether interpreted positively or negatively. Dongfang Heyun chuckled twice, pressing two fingers together and pointing them at the Dawn Rayfish's head before flicking outward.

Within the dense radiance and malevolent energy, layers of mist suddenly appeared, with several blurred light shadows weaving through them. After Dongfang Heyun recited just a few incantations, he produced something glimmering bright, simply saying.

"Keep this safe!"

This was naturally the creature's spiritual essence. As a spiritual demon himself, Dongfang Heyun found extracting spiritual essence quite effortless. He required no spiritual artifacts or formations, simply drawing it out with ease and transferring it to another's hands—something likely beyond Foundation Establishment Realm capabilities.

Li Xizhi observed everything carefully, raising his estimation of the man's strength another notch as he accepted the essence into his brow center. Dongfang Heyun looked back at the Dawn Rayfish with a smile.

"Do you understand? Just follow him properly. I know you possess many techniques and your spiritual essence may not necessarily be easily bound, but if you don't serve well, the Dragon Monarch won't lack for rayfish delicacies."

The Dawn Rayfish nodded, turning its body over. Its voice rang clear as it replied.

"This little demon understands."

Dongfang Heyun straightened his sleeves and bowed politely before looking toward Li Xizhi with a smile.

"If the opportunity arises, please give my regards to Fellow Daoist Qinghong. I await her in the grotto heaven."

Li Xizhi's eyebrows shot up suddenly. Just as he was about to speak, Dongfang Heyun had already vanished from sight, leaving only scattered cloud fragments that dispersed cleanly in the bright Lesser Yang light.

The moment Dongfang Heyun disappeared, the Dawn Rayfish that had been playing dead immediately leaped up, transforming into a youth in colorful feathered robes. His face was small and slightly round, with clear, bright eyes and fine orange plumage at his temples. He called out in ringing tones.

"Seventh greets his lord!"

Li Xizhi's mind was heavy with concerns, feeling no joy at gaining a Foundation Establishment Realm Dawn Rayfish subordinate. He nodded silently and spoke gently.

"You're injured. Don't linger too long in this place. Come with me quickly to that area free from malevolent energy and radiance to rest and heal your wounds properly."

"Yes."

The youth followed behind him, circulating his radiant spiritual qi throughout his body to resist the penetrating light and malevolent energy. Li Xizhi's face remained calm, but his heart churned like turbulent waves, filled with worry and apprehension.

'Dongfang Heyun was teaching me… that explanation was quite reasonable, but what exactly is he thinking?'

He flew through the earth channels, his thoughts swirling.

Even now, Li Xizhi couldn't clearly discern Dongfang Heyun's exact status among the dragon clan. He could only continue flying silently, composing his emotions before landing back at his cave dwelling.

"Young Master."

Li Wushao was clearly somewhat surprised but didn't ask many questions, simply offering a greeting. Li Xizhi nodded, seating the colorfully dressed youth and providing him with healing pills before speaking softly.

"It's inconvenient to speak freely outside. This place is more secure. How serious are your injuries? If they're manageable, tell us about your background."

The youth nodded and replied respectfully.

"This subordinate was born in the North Sea, originally gathering radiance and absorbing energy with many brothers. We encountered the great upheaval of the heavenly breach and falling waters, gaining the opportunity to break through to the Foundation Establishment Realm."

"Our clan was already sparse to begin with, and breaking through to Foundation Establishment was typically a one-in-ten-thousand chance. Unexpectedly, when heaven released its great waters, we broke through by following the momentum. After circling the waterspout in the sky once, most of us were captured, with only nine brothers successfully achieving Foundation Establishment."

"This subordinate is the seventh."

Li Xizhi nodded lightly. This matched his expectations quite well. To produce such Dawn Rayfish, nine times out of ten it was indeed due to that heavenly breach. The Dawn Rayfish continued.

"After our breakthrough, we scattered in all directions—east, south, west, and north. I wandered the Eastern Sea for two years before hearing that my eldest brother had become the spiritual beast of Sword Immortal Kufu. Wishing to seek him out, I journeyed all the way to the North Sea."

"Who knew I'd reveal my whereabouts at the North Sea's edge? After chasing and fleeing, running east and west throughout my journey, everyone I encountered would pursue me for hundreds of miles. Finally, I fell into the hands of the dragon clan… leading to today."

Li Xizhi nodded gently and asked.

"A North Sea Sword Immortal?"

"Precisely."

The Dawn Rayfish replied respectfully.

"My lord should have been in this area for some time. Over half a year ago, news came that North Sea's Kufu achieved enlightenment at the Jade Sea's Feather Dissolution Ground, thus gaining sword intent. The North Sea shook, and his fame spread across all four seas!"

Li Xizhi felt somewhat moved, nodding silently as he spoke softly.

"Sword intent… no wonder. What cultivation level is this Sword Immortal?"

"That I don't know…"

The youth shook his head gently, his orange plumage trembling slightly with the movement as he replied respectfully.

"I fear it won't be too high. When those dragon beasts brought me before Lord Heyun, we discussed this matter. They said that nowadays, those who comprehend sword intent are almost all before the Purple Mansion Realm, before divine abilities… I wonder what secrets lie within this."

Li Xizhi nodded lightly. His own ancestor had indeed comprehended sword intent during the Foundation Establishment Realm. He pondered silently.

'Since True Monarch Shangyuan achieved the dao, there should still be three Sword Immortals in Jiangnan, though none show themselves now. Excluding that one from Ten Thousand Radiance Sword Gate'[1], the others are in Wu State. Among all the world's Sword Immortals, there probably aren't enough to count on ten fingers.'

He helped the youth to his feet, examined him carefully, and inquired thoroughly. This Dawn Rayfish's cultivation had only just reached the middle Foundation Establishment stage, but his speed was terrifyingly fast. If he exerted full effort, he could probably match a Dawn Cloudliner.

Li Xizhi spoke amiably.

"Since you're the seventh and were sent by Senior, you shall be called Li Qiyun. From now on, we're all family—no need for excessive courtesy."

"This subordinate obeys!"

Li Qiyun bowed in acceptance, quickly producing healing pills to treat his injuries in silence. Li Xizhi sat cross-legged beside the pool in the cave dwelling, quietly staring at the water's surface.

Li Wushao didn't know how this youth had appeared but didn't ask questions, silently closing his eyes to heal. Li Xizhi furrowed his brow.

'At least Dongfang Heyun had no intention of exposing me… Those in the Purple Mansion Realm cannot detect the mysteries of talisman energy. He still wants to use me, probably thinking it's some Purple Mansion Realm master's technique…'

After waiting a moment, Li Wushao asked.

"Young Master, will you be going out again?"

Li Xizhi smiled faintly. Though he felt no fear of the radiance and malevolent energy outside, he still needed to maintain the lie he'd just constructed. He replied.

"I'm feeling somewhat overwhelmed. Let me first neutralize the radiance and malevolent energy within my body and rest for a while before deciding."

The cave immediately fell quiet as everyone focused on cultivation, while the radiance and malevolent energy in the earth channels grew increasingly dense.

Thick radiance and malevolent energy coursed through the earth channels, flickering bright and dim. An elegant youth sat quietly upon a crimson boulder, one pristine hand resting on the other side, gently tapping.

If Li Xizhi were here, he would naturally recognize this person as Dongfang Heyun, who had not departed but remained lingering in this place.

"Such upheaval… West Yan'1 must be fighting someone."

Dongfang Heyun's eyes had lost their playful concealment, appearing more profound and seemingly caught in some dilemma.

"The Dawn Rayfish matter went unnoticed… delivering it to Li Xizhi was perfect timing, sparing this chess piece infiltrating Azure Pond Sect from suffering losses while thinking I only use him."

"It's just that he harbors quite a few secrets… can 'Universal Dawn Mist' truly neutralize radiance and malevolent energy?"

Dongfang Heyun was quite advanced in years. Though this type of spiritual demon maintained a youthful mentality, he had witnessed enough events and studied enough cultivation methods to rival an immortal sect's entire dao repository.

"Azure Pond Sect's 'Universal Dawn Mist'—Lingu Xia practiced it in his time, and it had no neutralizing effects… but Li Xizhi's ancestors were the Wei Li clan, masters of absorbing light and capturing flame. Neutralizing radiance and malevolent energy seems reasonable enough…"

He hesitated for a while. Indeed, he hadn't detected any signs of Li Xizhi using spiritual medicines or techniques—merely sitting cross-legged in meditation. That nagging suspicion finally began to recede. After waiting some time without seeing Li Xizhi emerge, he finally rose and headed deeper into the earth channels, lost in thought.

"Yingze spared Kuaili rather than killing him. Though Lesser Yang is difficult to judge for good or evil, Yingze is no pedantic fool. There must be other considerations."

Dongfang Heyun's figure gradually faded as the thunder above the sea grew louder.

…

Pingya Island.

Li Zhouwei entered the great hall as Chen Yang led three people from a side chamber—two women and one man. The leading woman wore white robes, her expression serene and bearing elegant, clearly indicating noble birth. She spoke softly.

"Jiangbei Shen clan's Shen Yanqing greets the family head."

Shen Yanqing was Daoist Master Zipei's disciple and a legitimate daughter of the Shen family. Her noble status went without saying, and her conduct was quite proper as she nodded toward Li Zhouwei.

The second woman wore yellow feathered robes and was somewhat petite, glancing around with a smile.

"Purple Smoke Gate's Wei Danying greets the family head."

The final man silently bowed, appearing to be a guard of sorts, lowering his head without a word. Li Zhouwei treated the group with reasonable courtesy, speaking gently.

"With distinguished guests gracing us, I failed to welcome you from afar—this is our family's oversight."

After exchanging pleasantries, Shen Yanqing took a seat nearby, offered some compliments, then spoke softly.

"Might I ask where Senior Qinghong is?"

Shen Yanqing had mentioned visiting the Li family long ago, but the northern and southern conflicts had erupted, with fierce battles raging along the river for a long time. Li Zhouwei knew she had come to see Li Qinghong and replied.

"I've already sent someone to request her presence. If Grand-aunt isn't in death-door seclusion, she'll arrive shortly."

Shen Yanqing nodded slightly, chatting about other matters while thinking to herself.

'With Eastern Sea affairs drawing closer, Senior shouldn't be in death-door seclusion.'

She sought conversation topics, speaking softly.

"I originally planned to come with my father to meet your noble clan, but unfortunately, he entered seclusion some days ago to break through to the Purple Mansion Realm and couldn't make the journey."

After chatting briefly, Shen Yanqing noticed that Wei Danying from Purple Smoke Gate beside her hadn't spoken a word and quickly turned to look. Wei Danying was staring straight ahead with a rather complex expression.

'This…'

She discreetly nudged the girl. Wei Danying finally snapped back to attention, lowering her gaze to the tea on the table.

Wei Danying tightened her sleeves, awakening as if from a dream as she pulled her gaze away from the youth at the head seat. Only then did a belated sense of fear arise in her heart.

'Ordinary men must expend considerable effort to attract women… yet he requires no effort at all. He can captivate women with merely a glance. At such a young age, where did he learn this intoxicating demeanor?'

She steadied her mind and looked at the youth again, finding that captivating quality had completely vanished. Breathing a sigh of relief, she sipped her tea, but in that dazed moment, something vicious and aggressively pressing emerged. Wei Danying broke out in cold sweat, terror filling her heart.

'How terrifying! That such a person exists in this world!'

Chapter 658: Stirring the Waters

After a few words were exchanged, a soft clap of thunder echoed through the air, and a woman strode into the hall. At her entrance, everyone rose to their feet. Shen Yanqing hurried forward and spoke gently.

"It has been many years, Senior!"

Shen Yanqing was already aware of the grotto-heaven affair, so her smile lacked its usual warmth. Li Qinghong, however, wore a pleasant expression and nodded.

"It has been some time."

They ushered her to a seat. Shen Yanqing spoke softly, "Junior should have visited sooner, but I was delayed by various matters. With the chaos in Jiangbei, my family couldn't remain untouched. Now that the situation has stabilized, I came to see you."

She retrieved a jade box from her sleeve, placed it gently on the table, and said, "I've brought the Celestial Thunder Ritual I mentioned before. My family's thunder arts originate from the Dao of the Northern Palace of Profound Thunder, one of the twelve great paths of the Zhou Era."

Li Qinghong listened intently. "I assume the Thunder-Guiding Cloud-Anchoring Dao is not among them?"

It was no secret that her family practiced the Thunder-Guiding Cloud-Anchoring Dao. Since the teaching came from the Yanyang Temple Palace, it was unlikely to be one of the ancient Zhou Era paths. As expected, Shen Yanqing shook her head.

"It is not. The Thunder-Guiding Cloud-Anchoring Dao was established in a later age. The twelve thunder palaces were originally orthodoxies that monitored the good and evil of the world, but they have all been annihilated. Most of their teachings are lost, with only a few scattered techniques remaining."

Beside them, Wei Danying sighed softly. "If the twelve thunder palaces still stood, the world would not have fallen into such a state."

Li Qinghong remained silent at her lament, but a strange expression crossed Shen Yanqing's face. After a moment of hesitation, she replied, "My sect's teachings hold the thunder palaces in high esteem… but according to the information my family has gathered over the years, the truth may be different."

Seeing their puzzled looks, Shen Yanqing lowered her voice. "According to the surviving records, the thunder palaces were tyrannical. Their thunder chariots patrolled the domains, and wherever their envoys passed, thunder would roar, killing thousands…"

She paused before continuing. "Worse, the thunder palaces controlled the Human Tribulation. They would seek out cultivators on the verge of a breakthrough and strike them down with profound thunder. Surviving the agony was one thing, but those deemed to have heavy sins would lose their lives entirely… The world had long suffered under their yoke."

"Later, when the lord of the Northern Palace ventured beyond the heavens, a great uproar ensued. From the lofty Purple Mansion cultivators down to the common people, no one wished to endure the oppression of the thunder palaces any longer. Nine of the twelve palaces fell… Cultivators stormed their halls, dragged out the thunder arts, and burned them together. Soon after, their entire tradition vanished without a trace."

Li Qinghong listened in silence. Wei Danying, who had only ever heard a completely different version of events within her sect, was visibly shaken. Shen Yanqing sighed.

"The technique I brought was secretly preserved by a rogue cultivator of that era. In his records, he wrote that the fall of the thunder palaces was met with universal joy. They were called the Twelve Epochs of the Thunder Yoke that had shackled the world's cultivators and common folk. With their fall came a new age of freedom—to think, to dream, to write, and to speak without fear."

When she finished, a heavy silence filled the hall. The Li family members had known little about the thunder palaces, so they were less affected. But for Wei Danying, whose beliefs had been deeply ingrained, the revelation was hard to process. "How could this be?" she whispered. "I was only ever told that the thunder palaces patrolled the world and that no one dared to cultivate demonic arts under their watch… How did it become a story of shackling the world?"

Shen Yanqing hadn't come to debate the morality of the thunder palaces. Her goal was simply to give Li Qinghong a different perspective. "Just think of it as a rumor," she said soothingly.

She turned to Li Qinghong and smiled. "Senior, please take a look."

Li Qinghong accepted the jade box and took out the slip within. It did indeed record a celestial thunder ritual, one quite different from her own. In return, Li Qinghong passed over the Secret Primal Art of Purple Thunder. The thunder technique she had obtained from the Green Pine Temple's grotto-heaven was the Empyrean Cloud Thunder-Questioning Method, which was only a cultivation art. This was the only comparable item she could offer. Shen Yanqing accepted it and said softly, "I hope I might have a chance to discuss the secrets of this art with you in detail, Senior."

Li Zhouwei took the hint and invited the others to a side hall, leaving the main hall empty. Shen Yanqing lowered her voice.

"Senior, I've heard that several thunder-cultivating families from the North Sea, the Miao family from the South Sea, and those two Daoists from the East Sea… they are all preparing to head to the East Sea. Have you made arrangements?"

"I am aware," Li Qinghong said, her expression serious. "I will be leaving soon."

"The dragon kin have been planning this for a century, spreading the technique like seeds. They view this matter with extreme importance, so of course, I must go."

Hearing this, Shen Yanqing sighed inwardly. "Senior… the dragon kin cast a wide net. Many who cultivated the Thunder-Guiding Cloud-Anchoring Dao have perished prematurely, and the dragon kin never made a move. That's why none of the great families could guess their intentions at first… It was only when traces of the grotto-heaven began to appear that they started to form theories."

"But now, you are one of the most outstanding practitioners of this path. You have no choice but to go."

Seeing Li Qinghong's calm demeanor, she continued, "My Daoist Master said… there will be another kind of battle inside the grotto-heaven. He urges you not to hold back…"

Li Qinghong was surprised. "I understand that, of course. In a matter of life and death, how could I hold back?"

Shen Yanqing said, "That includes Xi Zikang of the North Sea."

Li Qinghong's eyebrows rose. It seemed she truly had no secrets from these Purple Mansion cultivators. Shen Yanqing's voice was a mere whisper. "His mastery of thunder arts is exceedingly high, second to none among those entering the grotto-heaven. If you can eliminate him, you will remove a major threat."

Li Qinghong had some friendship with Xi Zikang. Though she was straightforward, she wasn't so naive as to miss the meaning behind the Shen family's—or rather, the Purple Smoke Gate's—words. She was silent for a moment before speaking. "Ultimately, we must all enter the dragon's belly. Why must it be like this? I am no fool; I have killed for treasures before… but those were enemies… From what I've seen, Xi Zikang is an upright young man who has treated me with warmth. I cannot bring myself to strike him down."

Shen Yanqing fell silent as well, then said through gritted teeth, "What if, once inside, life and death are no longer certain?"

Slowly, Li Qinghong turned her head, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. Her silence deepened. "So you are asking me to choose," she said softly.

Shen Yanqing could only say that she wouldn't dare presume. A gentle smile touched Li Qinghong's lips as she shook her head. "If I cannot bring myself to do it, then I suppose I am destined to die."

Shen Yanqing pressed her lips together. "Junior understands…"

She paused, then quickly changed the subject. "My master has already been reincarnated. If any news arises on the lake or within your clan's territory, please inform us. We will reward you generously!"

Li Qinghong had expected this and nodded in agreement. Shen Yanqing then took her leave, heading to the side hall to rejoin her companions. Only then did Li Qinghong lean back in her chair, lost in thought.

Her initial interpretation of Shen Yanqing's words was that the Purple Smoke Gate wanted her to help ambush Xi Zikang before entering the grotto-heaven. But on second thought, that couldn't be right.

'The Thunder-Guiding Cloud-Anchoring Dao has been spread far and wide. If everyone feared being targeted inside and started attacking others beforehand,

how could the dragon kin sit idly by? If it were that simple, the Purple Mansion clans like the Miao would have acted long ago.'

'This is a warning. She's telling me that even if I ally with Xi Zikang… I must be wary. Even if I don't ambush him, I should expect a confrontation in the end…'

She sat quietly for a time before Li Zhouwei entered from outside. He didn't press her about her conversation with Shen Yanqing, instead saying gravely, "The time for the Jiangque generation's first Talisman Seed reception is approaching. Since you have come out of seclusion, my lord, perhaps you would like to observe."

"Alright."

Li Qinghong had become a woman of few words recently, and her reply was concise.

Azure Pond Sect.

In the main hall of Azure Pond Peak, magnificent turquoise bricks lined the floor and white mist coiled in the air. A young man leaned against the side of the immortal throne, his cyan robes adorned with shimmering gold patterns. The sword at his waist pulsed with spiritual qi.

His features were not exceptionally handsome, but his expression was full of youthful vigor. Beside the table, a woman in a colorful dress watched him with beautiful eyes.

"Sect Master…"

This was Chi Xunxiao, the young Sect Master of Azure Pond. He was looking down at a document on the table. When the woman spoke, he replied gently, "The recommendation I sent for my second uncle… has he responded?"

At the mention of Chi Fubo, a flash of resentment crossed the woman's eyes. "Lord Fubo did not approve it," she said in a low voice.

For Chi Xunxiao, a Sect Master, to not only be unable to appoint his own staff but to have a mere recommendation rejected by Chi Fubo was undoubtedly humiliating. Yet, he only smiled faintly. "Very well… It seems I was inconsiderate. Please bring the jade slip back. I will review my uncle's comments and carefully reconsider before seeking his guidance again."

The woman sighed. "Yes, yes…"

Chi Xunxiao glanced at her, a smile in his eyes. "What is troubling you now?"

"My lord wasn't even asking for a significant post! Just a few minor positions… and Chi Fubo still refused! On what grounds? Who is the real Sect Master here…"

She muttered for a moment before Chi Xunxiao shook his head. "I am still too young and often fail to consider things clearly. How can I blame my elder? I understand that Ning Hejing suffered overseas, but you cannot let your personal feelings cloud your judgment."

The woman immediately fell silent, wondering to herself, 'Does he truly not understand, or is he just pretending?'

Just as they finished speaking, a disciple reported that Chi Fubo had arrived to see him. Chi Xunxiao immediately rose to greet him, walking all the way to the front of the hall. "Second Uncle, you've come!" he said respectfully.

Chi Fubo walked in slowly.

Years of holding power had stripped Chi Fubo of his youthful immaturity, and his expression was much calmer. Chi Xunxiao personally led him to a side seat and arranged the mat for him. "It has been too long, Secod Uncle!" he said with reverence.

This display of respect was more than enough to satisfy Chi Fubo's pride, and he found it difficult to maintain a stern face. He smiled. "The plan from a while ago has borne fruit. My agent on Fuchen Peak reports that Li Quantao has become increasingly restless and is venturing out more often… The Li family's message must have arrived."

Chi Xunxiao nodded. "Young Uncle's insight is profound… There has been no word from the Si Clan. Either the Li Clan cannot contact them… or they have tried and failed."

"Si Yuanli would never abandon the Li family," Chi Fubo stated with conviction. "Don't be fooled by his cunning and patience. He is merely riding the tide of the situation. His past actions show he possesses a soft heart… He is a sword cultivator, after all, incapable of resorting to any means necessary."

"If not for that, Li Xuanfeng and the others would never have persuaded him back then. When you commit to something, you commit. There is no room for

heeding others in such a great undertaking… much less is there room for failing to reassure the Li family."

A hint of joy appeared on Chi Xunxiao's face. "Could it be… that Daoist Master Si is truly in seclusion, and Si Yuanli is acting on his own?"

"It probably makes no difference whether he is in seclusion or not… He fears our Daoist Master."

Chi Fubo took a deep breath, studying him thoughtfully for a moment before waving a hand to take his leave. Chi Xunxiao saw him all the way out of the hall. Chi Fubo smiled as he departed, but his expression grew heavier once he was out of sight.

He walked with his hands behind his back, a headache brewing. 'Of all things, he had to be this clever… this courteous… Even I am starting to find this difficult…'

Chi Xunxiao's behavior had surprised everyone in the sect. The young Sect Master not only publicly supported Chi Fubo and did his utmost to mediate the conflict between the Chi and Ning factions, but he also proved to be an understanding, magnanimous, and wise leader. Over the past few years, his reputation within the sect had soared.

Chi Fubo saw it all, and the awkwardness was his to bear alone. The recent appearance of Chi Buzhi in the East Sea was another source of mixed feelings. To put it nicely, Chi Buzhi was a Purple Mansion of their clan. To put it bluntly, he was an elder from the First Branch…

His heart heavy, Chi Fubo forced a smile as he returned to his own hall, where a young man in black robes was waiting for him.

"Yuanqin."

The plan to install Chi Xunxiao as Sect Master was slowly deviating from its original purpose, showing signs of becoming a very bad idea. But Chi Fubo was a discerning man. He showed no displeasure toward Li Yuanqin, the one who had proposed the scheme, and spoke amicably. "Have the others been giving you trouble?"

Chi Fubo could see the truth, but not everyone in the Chi family could. The higher Chi Xunxiao's reputation grew, the more resentful glares Li Yuanqin

had to endure, both openly and behind his back. But Li Yuanqin simply replied calmly, "Brother Fubo, I have the information."

Chi Fubo understood and led him inside. They sat down at a table, and Li Yuanqin spoke in a low voice. "Ning Hejing has indeed colluded with Buddhist cultivators—a Dharma Aspect of the Void Path… He plans to scheme against Li Xizhi and Si Yuanli… The baleful light in the Earth Abyss has been thickening these past few days. Li Xizhi won't be able to hide for much longer. The moment he leaves the abyss, Ning Hejing's men will be waiting."

"The intelligence is limited, but I am certain he has a way to pin the blame on us. Lord Zhihu is still in the East Sea; I suspect he is the intended scapegoat."

Chi Fubo was silent for a moment. "You mean…"

"His schemes all lead to one goal: to provoke a complete breakdown between our clan and the Si Clan so that he can reap the rewards. That can only be achieved with bloodshed. Even if we can't guess his exact method, it requires the death of either Li Xizhi, Si Yuanli, or Lord Zhihu."

Chi Fubo's silence deepened, a chill creeping into his heart. 'Ning Hejing alone couldn't stir up such a storm! I fear some other Purple Mansion experts, unhappy to see the Chi and Si Daoist Masters staying out of the fray, are secretly fanning the flames to worsen their relationship.'

Li Yuanqin stared at him intently. "Yuanqin thinks the same. But it is precisely because a Purple Mansion expert is providing cover that even if Si Boxiu isn't in seclusion, he would most likely be unable to divine this matter!"

Chi Fubo narrowed his eyes. "What do you propose we do?"

"Li Xizhi is difficult to kill, and any move against Si Yuanli would likely be detected. They will probably target Lord Zhihu first…"

Chi Fubo's expression did not change. "Oh? Should I recall him then?"

Li Yuanqin shook his head. "In my view, it would be best to let Lord Zhihu die. We will wait quietly on the sidelines. The moment he is dead, we strike, capture Li Xizhi, and lock him away in the sect!"

His tone was ice-cold. "As long as we frame him perfectly, the Daoist Master will have no grounds to object! We can use this to force Si Yuanli to hand over those positions he has been withholding, and then we release him from the sect!"

Hearing the plan to sacrifice his own grand-uncle, Chi Fubo actually smiled slightly. “And what if he refuses?”

Li Yuanqin replied respectfully, “Then the Li family will have no choice but to seek refuge with us to save Li Xizhi’s life. The remaining Ning family members will be ours for the taking, will they not?”

“Excellent, excellent.”

Chi Fubo’s smile widened as he stared intently at him. “Since this plot is so well-concealed that it can even deceive Si Boxiu while he is in seclusion… a Purple Mansion expert must be involved…”

“So how did you find out?”

Chapter 659: The Whole Pill Dao

Li Yuanqin clasped his hands, his voice low.

"Brother Fubo, you may not be aware," he began, "but that Eastern Yue barbarian, Fei Luoya, though ostensibly one of the Ning family's people and claiming our Li Clan seized his territory, still holds some lingering loyalty to my father. He deliberately revealed his whereabouts to me in private…"

He recounted the sequence of events that had led to his discovery, presenting his case in a clear, logical manner. Each point was supported by evidence. A smile of dawning comprehension spread across Chi Fubo's face, but inwardly, he remained unconvinced. After hearing the full story, Li Yuanqin added softly, "There are still those among the Purple Mansion cultivators who are friendly to our cause… and Daoist Master Changxiao is a master of such schemes. Who's to say this wasn't his intention?"

Only then did a thoughtful expression flicker in Chi Fubo's eyes.

"Ultimately," Li Yuanqin concluded, "it's likely that one of the Purple Mansion masters used this situation to send me a signal, hoping we would intervene and deal a blow to the Si family."

"The situation is still developing, and many details remain unconfirmed. I will leave the final decision to you, Brother Fubo!"

He bowed and retreated. Chi Fubo nodded, watching him go before turning back to his desk.

'This is not a simple matter,' he thought, a knot of anxiety tightening in his gut. 'I fear it's a trap. And even if it isn't… why would Si Yuanli possibly concede? No matter how you look at it… Yuanqin is still maneuvering to take control of the Li Family…'

A wave of frustration washed over Chi Fubo. He couldn't bring himself to blame Li Yuanqin, though. It wasn't just him. The elders, like Chi Zhihu, and even

many of Chi Fubo's own siblings were itching for action. He alone had been holding them back.

"It's far too soon."

Chi Fubo had reached a point where he could no longer satisfy the ambitions of those around him. Yet people like Li Yuanqin and Chi Zhihu were growing impatient.

'It's like a wild horse breaking its reins. If I can't stop it, I'll be the one thrown into the abyss and dashed to pieces!'

Li Yuanqin's proposal had starkly illuminated his precarious position, and a chill crept into his heart.

"I have read countless classics and always found my predecessors to be reckless, foolish, and impulsive. Now, acting myself, I find my hands are tied at every turn. Perhaps they acted not out of choice, but out of necessity."

Panic began to set in. He downed several cups of wine, but the image of Chi Xunxiao surfaced in his mind. His grip tightened on the jade cup, a bitter resentment rising within him.

"What terrible luck… Why did he have to be such a clever child! If only he'd feigned stupidity, or truly been a fool, I wouldn't be in this wretched position."

Pingya Island.

The golden light of dawn scattered across the lake's surface. Li Zhouwei rode the wind south until he reached the territory of Lijing Prefecture. The buildings here, clustered around the lake, were the oldest, with walls of gray brick and roofs of dark tile. The disciples who once filled the alleys were long gone, but several of the large stone houses were still maintained.

Sunlight dappled the stone steps as Li Zhouwei entered one of the houses, with the monk Kongheng following behind. In the center of a courtyard, a pool of water lay perfectly clear. He continued through to the rear hall, the clanking of chains echoing from within.

Clang…

The rear hall was a grim chamber of iron cells. The faint bleating of a goat could be heard. As Li Zhouwei stepped inside, he saw a completely naked boy kneeling on the floor. His face was covered in white scales as he sucked greedily at the neck of a fallen goat, whose cries were growing weaker.

Li Zhouwei watched his son, his expression unreadable. He stood in silence for a long time as the boy tore into the goat, devouring it raw. Kongheng, unable to bear the sight, closed his eyes and began chanting sutras.

The day after achieving the Foundation Establishment Realm , Li Zhouwei had come here with Kongheng to see his eldest son. They had examined him thoroughly but were utterly powerless to help.

Li Jiang'ao was not afflicted by some illusion that clouded his mind, nor was his soul disturbed. He simply lacked the consciousness of a normal person. There was no cure. Perhaps, after several hundred years of cultivation, he might develop a rudimentary, beast-like awareness.

'Look at him now. He can't even learn to read. How could he possibly accept a Talisman Seed?'

Li Zhouwei had even considered finding a remote mountain or a vast lake and releasing him to live on his own. But there were too many risks, too many taboos. He could not let him go. And so, year after year, he kept his firstborn son locked away in this cage, visited only by himself or Li Xuanxuan.

'Jiang'ao is like a beast. Jiangqian, though intelligent, has an extreme and deceitful nature… I fear none of my sons are of good character.'

Li Zhouwei's third son, publicly his secondhad been born a few days ago. He was named Li Jianglong, and he too possessed golden eyes. But this time, Li Zhouwei felt little joy. He had only to look around to see that another of his consorts was already with child.

"Venerable Master," he said, turning.

Kongheng immediately looked over.

"You previously mentioned a method of suppression using the Veiled Yin ," Li Zhouwei said quietly. "I was wondering if we might try it, to see if I can sire a child *without* the golden eyes… I have heard that the sons of the Undefeated

King of Brightness were all demons who were eventually subjugated. My children's eyes are like mine. If their fortune and virtue are shallow, I fear it will bring them ruin."

Kongheng gave him a thoughtful look and replied softly, "This humble monk will do his best to try."

Li Zhouwei nodded. He cast one last look at his eldest sonthe child in whom he had placed so many hopes while he was still in the wombthen turned and walked away. As he ascended the stone steps, the last glimmer of hope in his heart died.

He rode the wind back to the main hall on the island, where Kongheng discreetly took his leave. Li Qinghong and Li Xuanxuan were waiting inside. Seeing him arrive empty-handed, Li Qinghong flicked her sleeve, releasing the [Chongming Profound Insight Screen] to conceal the room.

"Where is Jiang'ao?" she asked gently.

For this round of bestowing the Talisman Seed, Li Xuanxuan had thought to let Li Jiang'ao participate, hoping some opportunity might arise for him even if he couldn't recite the incantations. But Li Zhouwei had returned alone.

"He is completely devoid of intellect," Li Zhouwei said gravely. "I fear he would only disturb the sacred treasure. It is best to forget it."

Seeing his resolve, Li Qinghong could only nod. "How many children are ready to receive a Talisman Seed this time?"

Li Zhouwei paused. "Quite a few, I'm afraid."

There were not many cultivators in the Zhou generation of the Li Clan, and only two who were having children. But after generations of accumulation, the number of mortals in the Zhou generation was vast. As a result, there was no shortage of children with spiritual apertures in the Jiangque generation. Their talents, however, had not yet manifested, making it impossible to distinguish between them.

Gathering all of them in the hall, teaching them the incantations one by one, and testing them individually was no longer as simple as it once had been. Moreover, as the clan grew in size and prominence, any large-scale activity risked attracting spies.

Li Xuanxuan voiced these concerns, and Li Zhouwei replied, "Now that the Immortal Mirror's spirit roams the Great Void, we can try altering the prayer. It might allow for a more discreet process."

The Great Void.

Lu Jiangxian's divine consciousness drifted, lingering for a long time over the lands of the Purple Smoke Gate.

Ever since he had gained the ability to roam the Great Void, he had made it a point to never probe directly into the headquarters of any immortal sect, preferring to observe from a distance. The breakthrough of the Purple Smoke Gate's new Purple Mansion cultivator was the most detailed and complete event of its kind he had witnessed.

He had even seen the agent from the underworld from afar and overheard their entire conversation.

'Daoist Master Zipei is dead.'

Contrary to the speculation of many Purple Mansion masters, Daoist Master Zipei, Kan Xuyu, was truly goneher soul scattered, with no chance of reincarnation.

'The Shen Clan and the Purple Smoke Gate are sending people everywhere to search for Zipei's reincarnation. It must be a bluff…'

After all, Zipei had been a formidable figure. Having a powerful cultivator with a metallic essence supposedly reincarnated and at large was a useful deterrent for both the Shen Clan and the Purple Smoke Gate.

"And the other peak Purple Mansion master, Daoist Master Zimu, vanished long ago. The Purple Smoke Gate has to resort to some trickery to maintain its standing."

But Lu Jiangxian had watched the entire ritual performed by the underworld agent and was certain that the 'True Qi' of the metallic essence had never appeared. This meant Daoist Master Zipei had never used it at all.

'Such a treasure… where could it be?'

With no immediate leads, Lu Jiangxian set the matter aside for now, making a mental note to remain vigilant. Another matter, however, came to mind.

'The dragons consuming lightning…'

He had been keeping a close eye on this phenomenon. He had even been present when Dongfang Heyun met Li Xizhi in the Eastern Sea. His Supreme Yin Profound Light had been aimed at the spirit cloud the entire time; had the dragon monarch made a move, Lu Jiangxian would have killed him without hesitation.

Though nothing had come of it, he was left with many questions.

'It's truly strange. Dongfang Heyun seems to have a favorable impression of Li Xizhi, and he has always been polite to Li Xuanfeng. Where does this come from? And that dragon child, Dingjiao, fawns over Li Zhouwei… It seems the entire dragon lineage is fond of the Li Clan.'

'Could it really be because of Emperor Gong of Wei?'

Lu Jiangxian didn't believe a word of Dingjiao's story. The Li Clan had seen its share of ups and downs. If the dragons truly had such a deep friendship with the Wei Li, protecting a few branches of the clan would have been a trivial matter for them.

He made a circuit of the Great Void, confirming that no Purple Mansion or Golden Core masters were spying on him, before returning to his perch on Mount Wu. Inside the grand array, he watched for a time as Li Ximing practiced the secret art, Jewel Steps.

"We of the Moongaze Li Clan, with reverence and offerings of pure wine, fine foods, and sacrificial meats, do humbly petition for the Profound Light for our descendants, that their fates may be settled and their spirits calmed for the path of cultivation… May their merits be proclaimed in due time, their faith rewarded, and upon the burning of this talisman, may their mortal selves be given unto the Supreme Yin."

The words from the mortal world reached his ears, and his consciousness snapped back from the Great Void to the lake below. On Pingya Island, within a hall shrouded by a screen of light, the prayer was being chanted, though no figures could be seen.

Lu Jiangxian accessed the records of his divine consciousness, instantly understood the situation, and swept his awareness across the lake region. A sense of relief washed over him.

'I've waited so long. The Jiangque generation is finally ready. I can bestow those Purple Mansion cultivation arts…'

Among the many techniques at his disposal, Lu Jiangxian was most partial to those of the 'Whole Pill Dao'. The *Golden Book of Divine Attendance* was a true sixth-grade cultivation art, a full grade higher than the Li Clan's own *Radiant Essence Scripture*!

'The *Radiant Essence Scripture* is such an anomaly…'

It possessed a full nine secret arts, yet was only rated at the basic fifth-grade level for a Purple Mansion technique. Out in the wider world, this would be nonsensical. How could a technique with nine secret arts be a mere fifth-grade art? Only Lu Jiangxian, cheating with his immortal methods and metallic essence, could have written such a thing.

When it came to the secret arts for breaking through to the Purple Mansion Realm, the *Golden Book of Divine Attendance* was naturally inferior to the *Radiant Origin Scripture*, which was born of the Bright Yang golden nature and immortal formulas. But it was by no means weak. It had five secret arts, and mastering them all would increase one's chances of reaching the Purple Mansion Realm by a full twenty-five percent.

'Furthermore, the Whole Pill Dao belongs to the Ancient Merging Dao lineage. While not excelling in combat, its practitioners can achieve feats far beyond those of cultivators at the same level. And what of a cultivator trained in a sixth-grade art?'

Whether in transformation, healing, array-breaking, or stealth, the Whole Pill Dao was far superior to contemporary magical arts. Qiushui of the Golden Feather Sect was a practitioner of this path, and her divine abilities were so profound that she commanded universal respect.

The only drawback was that the technique was rather conspicuous. Fortunately, by the time a descendant could cultivate it to a significant level, the Li Clan would have its own Purple Mansion masters, making it much easier to conceal its origins.

'As for who shall receive the Talisman Seed…'

'The elder brother is fierce, the second is evil. Li Jiangqian's talent is undeniable, so he must receive a Talisman Seed to restrain this vicious beast. If I don't give him one, he will surely cause a great disaster in the future!'

Even in an empire as vast as the Wei, with multiple Golden Core masters presiding, bloodshed still stained the palace courts. How could Lu Jiangxian not take precautions? He had long ago designated a Talisman Seed for Li Jiangqian, a tightening hoop for this monster.

'The Whole Pill art… I have already considered it, and he is not suitable. Nor should he cultivate the Bright Yang art any further. I fear it would only make him more wicked. One day, he might achieve a sudden epiphany, see through the follies of the mortal world, and a red-eyed white cicada would burst from his chest… and take flight. That would be no laughing matter…'

This was no idle fancy on Lu Jiangxian's part; it was a very real possibility. As Li Zhouwei's cultivation grew, eventually breaking through to the Purple Mansion Realm, the influence on his second son, Li Jiangqian, would become ever more profound.

His eldest son, Li Jiang'ao, was a lesser concern for now. Lacking intellect, he couldn't cultivate, and any changes in his condition would be centuries away.

With the lessons of the Wei kingdom fresh in his mind, Lu Jiangxian paid extremely close attention to the brothers Li Jiang'ao and Li Jiangqian, having considered every possibility since the day they were born.

'It would be best to give him this 'Radiant Fire' technique I obtained from the grotto-heaven. It is a sixth-grade art of Radiant Fire. Bright Yang and Radiant Fire are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Nothing could be more suitable!'

The full name of this sixth-grade cultivation art was the *Scripture of Heavenly Radiance and the Waning Sun*. Its foundational stage was the 'Great Scripture of Radiance'. The fact that Anhuai Heaven had seen fit to include it in their collection was a testament to its power and quality.

'It has four secret arts, increasing one's chances by twenty percent. That's better than the vast majority of Purple Mansion techniques in the Jiangnan region.'

He embedded the *Scripture of Heavenly Radiance and the Waning Sun* into the Talisman Seed destined for Li Jiangqian, but did not bestow it immediately.

His divine consciousness roamed, circling the shores of the lake until it found a particular household in Lijing Town, a place he remembered from his past.

The house was not small; its ancestors had clearly known prosperity. But now, the red lacquer on the gates was almost completely peeled away, revealing the mottled brown wood beneath. The two stone lions at the entrance were covered in dust, obviously untouched for a long time.

Despite its faded glory, the household was clearly run with an iron fist. Everything was neat and orderly, a sign that the master of the house held himself to an exacting standard.

Lu Jiangxian's consciousness flew through the gates and into the main courtyard, where he found a young girl. With red lips and fair skin, dressed in a traditional blouse and skirt, she looked to be about six or seven years old.

'The timing is perfect.'

This child was the one Lu Jiangxian had chosen to receive the Talisman Seed, the one selected to cultivate the Whole Pill art! He had taken notice of her on the day she was born and had simply been waiting for the Li Clan to conduct their ritual.

And in his divine sight, he could see a spiritual aperture slowly forming at the center of her brow, like a third eye, subtly drawing in the spiritual energy of the world. Lu Jiangxian praised inwardly:

'With her aperture at her brow, her soul is far stronger than a normal person's. At last, a child has appeared who can cultivate the *Shamanic Talisman Dao*… She is the perfect match for this sixth-grade *Golden Book of Divine Attendance*… The ancient Whole Pill Dao has an affinity with shamanistic arts. It could not be a better fit!'

Chapter 660: Two Talisman Seeds

As Li Zhouwei finished his prayer, a clear light suffused the hall. Plumes of white mist churned within the Chongming Profund Insight Screen, and from the void, two points of white light emerged. They spun once before blossoming into two white flowers, which hovered in the air as golden characters materialized beneath them.

One read:

"Li Jiangqian."

The other:

"Li Shuwan."

Li Zhouwei and the others gave their thanks. He raised an eyebrow, glancing over at Li Qinghong, and saw a flicker of shock on her face. As the two white flowers drifted down, she immediately reached out and caught them.

"Two Talisman Seeds…"

The name Li Jiangqian brought a sense of relief, but the second name was completely unfamiliar. The three of them froze, puzzled. Only Li Xuanxuan seemed to be searching his memory.

Li Qinghong's expression was complicated. Li Xuanxuan, his brow deeply furrowed, had already retrieved a jade slip from his storage pouch to consult it. The old man was sentimental and often worried about which family lines were dying out and which branches could be used to continue them. As such, he kept the clan's annual registers on hand.

After a pause of two full breaths, a look of realization dawned on Li Xuanxuan's face. "So, she is one of my descendants," he said. "Quite a distant one… from a minor branch now."

He let out a hearty laugh, turned the jade slip over, and handed it to the other two. "This couldn't be better!" he whispered.

Li Qinghong breathed a sigh of relief. She took the jade slip and scanned it, quickly finding Li Shuwan's name. As she traced the lineage upward, her brow furrowed again. "Li Yesheng… Li Xiewen… Li Pingyi… Hmm? Isn't this from Uncle Xiewen's line? Grand-Uncle, are you sure you're reading this right?"

At the mention of this, a flash of pain crossed Li Xuanxuan's eyes. "This matter," he began softly, "goes back to your eldest brother."

Li Qinghong's eyebrows shot up. "Brother Yuanxiu?" she murmured.

Li Xuanxuan sat down nearby, gathering his thoughts before speaking. "Uncle Yesheng didn't have many children, and Xiewen was the main heir. The others were no good. They opened a gambling den and got involved in debauchery. Your brother caught them, killed one, branded the rest, and banished them from the town. They were struck from the clan records, leaving only Xiewen…"

"Xiewen had three daughters and one son, Li Pingyi. At a young age, he…" Decades had passed, but Li Xuanxuan's voice still choked with emotion as he spoke of it. "He took his own life out of guilt over the Yu family's thunder-fire incident… and so the line was broken."

"With no heir and his brothers exiled for their crimes, Xiewen was left alone. For old times' sake, I had my seventh grandson's second son, who was a mortal and already part of a minor branch, adopted into his line. Since both were minor branches, it made little difference…"

"I see…" Li Qinghong fell silent for a moment. "Well," she said softly, "now that the line has produced a child with spiritual aptitude, it's time to welcome them back into the main clan."

Li Zhouwei listened quietly from the side. Li Xuanxuan said, "I'll go bring her back right away."

Li Qinghong smiled and nodded. "Let me go. This shouldn't be delayed. By my calculations… she's only six. We shouldn't draw any unwanted attention. I'll go under the cover of night and see what this little girl is like."

Li Zhouwei agreed. "I'll bring Jiangqian here."

In an instant, Li Qinghong vanished from the great hall. Li Xuanxuan picked up the two white flowers, not daring to touch them directly. He levitated them with his spiritual qi, his spiritual sense gently probing them.

The flowers each had twelve pure white petals. Inside, the pistils flickered like phantoms of light, shimmering in and out of focus. They emitted a rich, sweet scent of osmanthus, which invigorated the old man. He looked up and asked, "Minghuang, do you know what these are?"

Li Zhouwei shook his head. Sensing the incredibly dense Supreme Yin power within the blossoms, he took out two jade boxes and placed the flowers inside. "I'm afraid this is another long-extinct spiritual treasure," he said softly. "When I have the chance, I will seek out ancient records from the dragon or fox clans to try and identify them."

The Li family possessed other Supreme Yin treasures. Years ago, when Yu Muxian visited the lake, the Immortal Mirror had stirred, causing a branch of osmanthus and a white flower to fall. Li Yuanjiao had carefully preserved them, but even with the clan's best methods, the items couldn't be perfectly maintained and had been fading year by year.

A small portion had been used to supplement Li Wushao's life-source, but the rest had completely dissipated over the decades. Li Zhouwei sealed the boxes carefully. "They seem difficult to preserve," he murmured. "They may be treasures that cannot be exposed to the world. If we can't identify them, or if we do and find they are too precious, it would be better to use them. Elder White Ape suffered many grievous injuries in his youth. Using these two items to fortify his life-source should be enough to restore his foundations."

"Mm…" Li Xuanxuan cared deeply for his old brother-in-arms, but he couldn't help but cringe at the thought. To a Supreme Yin lineage like the Pure Unity Dao Gate, these flowers were likely countless times more precious than a Radiant Sky Stone.

'Our family is using them to supplement a life-source… It's like using Supreme Yin moon essence to practice the Xuanjing Wheel technique…' The old man didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Still, he turned the jade boxes over and over in his hands before carefully tucking them away.

Lijing Prefecture, Lichuan Entrance.

The night wind was chilly. Rain dripped from the low-hanging branches of the loquat tree in the courtyard. Li Baotuo, shivering from the cold, pulled on two extra layers of clothing. In the yard, a group of children were laughing together.

"What's all the racket!" he grumbled, buttoning his coat as he pushed the door open. He rubbed his hands together. The weather was indeed growing colder by the day, but Li Baotuo's heart burned like hot coals.

'Heaven be praised… after generations of mortals, we finally have a cultivator…' The day before, his daughter, Li Shuwan, had managed to condense a wisp of spiritual energy after reading a cultivation manual distributed by the clan. The achievement had sent Li Baotuo into a state of sheer ecstasy.

Li Baotuo's line had never produced a cultivator, so they were far down the list for the clan's spiritual aptitude assessment. There were far too many mortal families like his, and countless six-year-old children. It was impossible to check them all individually. The usual practice was to hand out a copy of the most common Embryonic Breathing technique for families to test on their own.

Li Baotuo's ancestors had seen better days, and they weren't lacking for such a basic manual. The moment Li Shuwan turned six, he hadn't even bothered to queue up, simply retrieving their own copy to let her try. The result nearly made him faint with joy.

"Shuyuan!" His face broke into a wide smile as he saw his daughter approach. Once all his children were seated at the table, he assumed a serious posture and announced, "This is a matter of great importance. I have gone to see Clan Uncle Chengzhi… and asked him to find a cultivator to assess Shuyuan! By my reckoning, they should be arriving soon. Everyone be on your best behavior."

Li Shuwan propped her chin on the table, her eyes darting to the meatballs in her bowl. A meal like this was a rare treat.

The past glory of Li Baotuo's ancestors was just that—in the past. Their current life was quite meager. They had a large house, but anything of value had been sold off by previous generations. If they sold the house itself, they would have nothing left.

The entire family depended on the few boats Li Baotuo and his eldest son operated on the lake. It was a permissible livelihood, and when the Clan Justice Hall occasionally came to inspect, Li Baotuo naturally had a clear conscience.

'But how can that compare to cultivation?' To put it bluntly, if Li Shuwan's talent was sufficient, the entire family could move onto the lake. The stipend they would receive would be more than enough to live out the rest of their days in peace and comfort.

'As for Shuyuan… after decades of cultivation, when she comes back to see us, she probably won't even recognize us.' That's what the operas always said. Li Baotuo had heard plenty of rumors about how cultivators lived in a world apart. He figured he wouldn't see much of his daughter for the rest of his life. The thought filled him with both pride and a touch of sorrow.

Li Baotuo quickly pushed the feeling aside and began discussing with his sons how to set the table and notify their relatives for a proper banquet. Now that Li Shuwan had spiritual aptitude, everyone—those who had looked down on them and those who hadn't—would come bearing smiles. The nearby cultivator branches would even send representatives. This was the time to build connections for his daughter.

He waited for a while, his anxiety mounting, until he finally heard a call from outside the courtyard. "My dear nephew! I've brought the Guest Elder!"

Li Baotuo shot up from his seat. His sons scrambled to their feet and followed him in a rush to the front of the courtyard. "Greetings to you, honored elders!" they chorused.

The man in the lead was his clan uncle, Li Chengzhi. Though a mortal, his bloodline was prestigious. Li Baotuo's ancestor and his had been as close as brothers, and Li Baotuo had even met him as a child. "Clan Uncle, it has been too long!" he exclaimed. "This nephew has missed you dearly!"

Li Chengzhi laughed heartily. He was a shrewd man who knew how to curry favor. As the son of Li Ximing, even as a mortal, he had managed to befriend many cultivators. He had a good impression of Li Baotuo and had immediately brought a cultivator over.

He gestured to the old man in brown robes beside him. "This is Guest Elder Hu! A high master of the Qi Refinement Realm!"

"Qi Refinement!" Li Baotuo was stunned. He wasn't entirely ignorant; he knew that such figures held positions of power on the prefecture peak. That Li Chengzhi could bring such a person here thrilled him. "Greetings, Senior!" he said deferentially. "My home is humble… please forgive its simplicity!"

Guest Elder Hu was perfectly courteous to Li Chengzhi, but not so much to someone like Li Baotuo, whose branch had been reduced to a minor mortal line for who knew how many years. For Li Chengzhi's sake, he gave a slight nod. "No need for formalities."

Li Baotuo didn't take offense. He nodded repeatedly, leading them into the courtyard. He caught Li Chengzhi's meaningful gaze and instantly understood. 'He's helping me find a patron for Shuyuan!'

'But… is this appropriate?' If Li Baotuo had been from an ordinary minor branch, he would have shamelessly seized the opportunity. But he had inherited some knowledge of the clan's affairs and knew that the sixteen prefectures were not a place of perfect harmony.

'This is Lijing Prefecture… the territory of the old four families. If we're going to align with anyone, it should be one of them. I don't even know which prefecture this cultivator Hu is from. Getting involved with him… we might offend the four families…'

Besides, Li Baotuo knew his own situation. While his line appeared to be an ordinary minor branch, they were actually an offshoot from the main clan via adoption. If one of their descendants proved to be exceptional, they might even have a chance to return to the main clan. If so, there was no need to get entangled in factional rivalries!

A thousand thoughts raced through his mind. He pulled his daughter forward with a smile. "Shuyuan! Greet the two seniors!"

Li Shuwan tilted her head to look. She noticed six points of light flickering around the man in brown robes, and a chaotic swirl of energy surrounded him. It was slightly different from the people she had seen flying in the sky before, and she couldn't help but stare.

Guest Elder Hu, however, merely glanced at her briefly before nodding and striding past. 'Li Baotuo's family has been mortals for generations,' he thought with an inward sigh. 'How good can the talent of their first cultivator possibly be? Li Chengzhi wants me to offer some guidance… what a hassle.'

He put on an air of importance, his eyes sweeping over the table. Finding nothing to his liking, he said coolly, "Tea will suffice."

The elaborate feast Li Baotuo had prepared went untouched. Wiping sweat from his brow, he ushered the guest into the inner hall and seated him. At first, Guest Elder Hu deigned to respond when Li Chengzhi spoke, but the moment Li Baotuo opened his mouth, the man in brown fell silent, staring at the floor.

Even a fool could see Guest Elder Hu's disdain. The food on the table grew cold. Li Baotuo's wife stood helplessly at the back of the hall. In the end, what could a mortal like Li Baotuo possibly have to talk about with a cultivator? He was so embarrassed he couldn't speak.

Though she was only six, Li Shuwan saw it all, and her heart ached. "Father, I'll be going now," she said softly.

Li Baotuo let out a breath, about to stop her, but Li Chengzhi cheerfully let her go. After she had left, Guest Elder Hu, sensing Li Chengzhi's displeasure, asked casually, "How long did it take your esteemed daughter to condense her first wisp of spiritual energy?"

Li Baotuo felt his awkwardness ease slightly. "About two hours, I believe," he whispered.

Guest Elder Hu stared, then saw Li Baotuo's clueless expression. A wave of shock crashed through him. 'What?'

While the adults talked in the hall, Li Shuwan wandered into the back courtyard. A few loquat trees stood in the overgrown yard. As she walked, she remembered the helpless looks on her parents' faces and couldn't stop herself from wiping away a tear.

"This guy…" She took a few more steps and nearly collided with someone standing in the courtyard, making her jump.

"Ah…" Li Shuwan gasped, but her fear was instantly replaced by fascination. Her eyes were glued to the woman before her, completely unable to look away.

The woman wore a long robe of elegant feathers. Her black hair was coiled up, adorned with a small, simple white flower pin. The hem of her cyan-patterned skirt pulsed with faint points of purple light. Her eyes, hazy with a purple shimmer, looked down at her with a warm smile.

"You…" Li Shuwan was so stunned she couldn't speak. The woman reached out and naturally stroked her cheek, letting out a soft laugh. Her voice was clear and pleasant. "Li Shuwan?"

"Yes…" Li Shuwan nervously clasped her hands behind her back. She knew this person had to be a cultivator and didn't dare move. She snuck a peek and noticed that this woman didn't have the six points of light like the other man, only a rippling expanse of purple.

The celestial-looking woman nodded, her purple eyes glancing past the girl toward the courtyard gate. Her tone grew cold. "This Hu Jingye… he certainly plays his cards well. The moment he sees your extraordinary talent, he starts with threats and promises, trying to betroth you to his youngest son…"

It was strange. The woman in white had merely stopped smiling and added a chill to her voice, but her entire aura had transformed. An awe-inspiring authority settled on her features, and in the clouds above, thunder seemed to rumble and roll.

Li Shuwan looked up and thought she saw a faint purple tinge to the clouds. She quickly whispered, "But my father said he's very powerful… a big shot from the prefecture peak…"

The woman was taken aback by her words, and the coldness on her face vanished instantly. She had almond-shaped eyes that seemed to melt like ice in the spring wind. She let out a clear, bright laugh. "A big shot, indeed!"

Chapter 661: The Jiangque Generation Receives Talisman Seeds

"About two hours? For your child?" Guest Elder Hu chuckled, inwardly mocking the man's ignorance of cultivation. "Ha! Do you think she's the clan heir or a prodigy like An Jingming?"

He suppressed his laughter and adopted a more serious tone.

"I'll ask you just one thing. From the moment you gave her the cultivation manual to the moment she claimed to have produced her first wisp of spiritual energy, how much time passed?"

Li Baotuo paused, thinking for a moment before answering, "Honored elder, it was two days and one night."

"Two days and a night!"

At this, Li Chengzhi, who had been listening quietly, finally sat up straight, a flicker of surprise in his eyes.

"Though Lijing is the ancestral seat of a prominent family, its spirit vein ranks among the lowest of the nine prefectures," he murmured. "To achieve that in two days and a night… that's quite a high aptitude!"

He left the rest unsaid, but a thought sparked in his mind.

'If she had enough resources, she might have a shot at being selected to return to the main island in five years. And if Li Baotuo can raise a disciple of the main sect… that would be a solid connection for me on the island!'

As Li Chengzhi's mind raced with possibilities, Hu Jingye was just as quick on the uptake, already thinking of his own son. "Oh?" he said, his voice now carefully neutral. "Her talent is acceptable."

Hu Jingye was a mere Qi Refinement cultivator, but his young son showed some promise. If Li Shuwan could become a cultivator of the main sect, it would be an incredible boon for him. He adopted a stately posture. "It's difficult for your daughter to return to the island, but her talent is quite good for the surrounding prefectures…"

His tone had softened considerably, but fearing Li Baotuo would see his intentions, he kept his expression stern. "Chengzhi is here, so we're all family. I won't mince words. When Shuwan's talent is reported, the clan will provide corresponding resources and techniques… but there's still a gap to overcome to return to the island. I can help bridge that gap… It will all depend on her effort."

He maintained his dignified air, the shift in his attitude mostly seamless. But Li Baotuo had received some education in his youth and had seen much of the world from his ferry on the river. He understood immediately.

'Damn it, the old fox changed his tune fast,' he thought. 'My Shuwan's talent must be truly high. What an act.'

Outwardly, he simply beamed, the picture of a simple, honest farmer. He nodded and agreed with a series of smiles but gave no concrete answer. Seeing him play dumb, Hu Jingye didn't shy away and stated his purpose directly.

"My youngest son is eight this year and also has decent talent. If you wouldn't mind, Baotuo, do me this favor and let's arrange a childhood betrothal. I have some savings that can support Shuwan's cultivation, and I will personally see to it that your family returns to the island."

He was, after all, a Qi Refinement cultivator. Before him, the other two were no more than ants. For him to lower himself like this put both Li Chengzhi and Li Baotuo in an awkward position.

Li Baotuo glanced at Li Chengzhi, who grimaced in frustration. The terms weren't exactly predatory, so it was difficult for him to object. He hesitated, taking a sip of tea. The clan rules were strict, and the direct line feared nothing more than being accused of "bullying others with power." Li Chengzhi was always polite to everyone, and his relationship with Hu Jingye depended entirely on the elder giving him face—face as thin as paper. He couldn't risk tearing it.

Seeing no help from his clan uncle, Li Baotuo resorted to stalling tactics. "I… I know nothing about this 'returning to the island'… I fear wasting your lordship's resources. How could I agree so rashly? My daughter is still playful and young, I'm afraid she might…"

"What are you saying, Baotuo!" Hu Jingye frowned. "My Hu family may not be one of the old Four Surnames, but we have a reputation in Wutu Prefecture. When I say I will provide resources, I will. You needn't worry."

Seeing Li Baotuo lower his head, he took a step back. "I'm not trying to pressure you. We can settle this for now. If things change in the future, if Shuwan has other ideas… it's only an engagement. At worst, we can dissolve it. The friendship between our families will remain, won't it? By then, Shuwan will be a disciple of the main sect. Do you think she'll have trouble breaking off a minor engagement?"

'This is bad!'

As he spoke, Li Chengzhi saw a flicker of consideration in Li Baotuo's eyes. His heart sank.

'It's not that simple!'

As a disciple of the main sect himself, Li Chengzhi knew how strict the Clan Justice Hall was. If Li Shuwan were to break the engagement later, she would be in the wrong. It would reflect poorly on her and greatly affect the Hu family. Her reputation would suffer, and word might even reach Qingdu Peak… Who knew what the elders would think upon hearing of such a thing!

Li Baotuo remained silent. Li Chengzhi couldn't sit still any longer. He averted his gaze, frowning at a distant corner of the room to signal his disapproval.

"My lord… my family is truly unworthy of such an honor!"

Whether he understood the signal or had never intended to agree, Li Baotuo finally sighed and shook his head, making his decision clear. The words struck Li Chengzhi with a mix of shock and relief, while the smile vanished from Guest Elder Hu's face. For a long moment, there was silence.

The rejection was a resounding slap in the face. Hu Jingye could no longer maintain his composure. His expression darkened, and he shot to his feet.

"You invited me here to see your daughter, and now that I have, you treat me with contempt! Is this how you conduct yourself? It's completely unreasonable!" he boomed. "I, Hu Jingye, have cultivated for years between Wutu and Lijing. Who doesn't give me some measure of respect? Li Baotuo, you are utterly insolent!"

Li Baotuo had not expected such a sharp tongue. Flustered, he scrambled to his feet. "I invited you to see my daughter, my lord, but I never imagined you would demand a marriage arrangement on the spot! I may be a mortal, but I love my daughter… I know nothing of your honorable son. How could I be so rash as to agree? What parent doesn't fear their child might be thrown into a pit of fire!"

In his haste, he misspoke. Hu Jingye erupted in fury. "Are you insulting my Hu family's upbringing, boy!"

As a Qi Refinement cultivator, his anger manifested physically. His shout was like a crack of thunder, shaking dust from the rafters that rained down on them. Li Baotuo's sons, standing outside, could only watch, their faces tight with anger they dared not voice.

"How dare you!"

Li Chengzhi and Li Baotuo were pinned in place by his spiritual pressure, unable to move. Hu Jingye flung his sleeves back and stormed out of the house. Li Baotuo's legs trembled violently, and his wife crumpled by the doorway in despair, too frightened to move.

Seeing the terror he had caused finally soothed Hu Jingye's bruised ego and blazing anger. He paused at the threshold, his back to them. Li Chengzhi leaped from his seat. "Are you mad! What are you saying!"

He grabbed Li Baotuo, who stumbled and scrambled out of the house. Seeing that Hu Jingye hadn't yet flown away, Li Chengzhi knew the man was still posturing, using threats to get his way. He gathered his robes and hurried out. "Guest Elder Hu! He didn't mean it!"

Li Baotuo, who had never experienced anything like this, was truly terrified. He practically crawled outside, his breath coming in ragged gasps, his vision swimming. Just then, a clear, crisp voice floated down from the air.

"My, what authority, Lord Hu."

The cold, sarcastic tone nearly scared the life out of Li Baotuo. He forced his stiff legs to stand and saw a woman at his doorstep, holding his precious daughter by the hand.

His mind went blank. The woman was an immortal, clad in feathered robes of azure and white. Her hair was black as ink, adorned with a single white flower, and her eyes held a misty, violet hue. Before he could see more, he heard a soft thud.

Thump!

His clan uncle, Li Chengzhi, whose composure had been unshakable until now, looked as if his face had shattered like a dropped vase. An expression of infinite horror spread across it. His legs gave out as if the bones had been pulled from them, and his head hit the ground with a dull crack, bumping into Li Baotuo's waist and sending them both tumbling.

The world spun. Li Baotuo saw his clan uncle leap past him like a frog and prostrate himself again, crying out, "Chengzhi pays his respects to the Elder!"

A moment later, Li Baotuo caught sight of Hu Jingye's face. The old man's blustering rage was gone, replaced by a vacant confusion as he collapsed to the ground like a pile of mud.

Guest Elder Hu had, of course, seen Li Qinghong before.

He had been watching from the shore when she triggered the formation's lightning to open the island in the lake, doubting he could even survive a single bolt from her. He never imagined he would have any interaction with such an exalted figure, let alone be the target of a phrase like, "My, what authority, Lord Hu."

The words struck him like a bolt of white lightning, leaving him utterly terrified and losing control of his senses. His mind felt shattered as he lay paralyzed on the ground.

But Li Qinghong didn't spare him a single glance. Her eyes fell on the sweating Li Chengzhi, and after a moment's thought, she spoke softly. "Chengzhi?"

"This junior's father is Lord Ximing," Li Chengzhi replied respectfully.

"Ah, so you are Ming'er's son."

Li Qinghong's casual use of the familiar name "Ming'er" was what truly terrified Li Baotuo. He pressed his forehead to the ground, his vision blurring. He finally believed it—this was the woman who commanded the lightning over Qingdu Peak. Her next words were delivered with a light, almost casual air.

"I was merely passing by and happened upon quite a show."

Hu Jingye had recovered enough to speak, though his lips trembled and his face was ashen. "Elder… Elder, it's a misunderstanding."

'He's lucky it was me who came,' Li Qinghong thought. 'Great Uncle dotes on the clan members the most. If he had been here, this man named Hu would have been decapitated by now.'

Her voice was light and melodic. "I found this child endearing and spoke with her for a moment, and you were already planning her marriage to your son. Hu Jingye, you truly have a talent for scheming. Do you dare to meddle in the marriage affairs of our main sect?"

She paused, her voice taking on a dangerous edge. "Perhaps the clan's Justice Hall has been too strict… so much so that you think our direct line are all spineless weaklings? Hmm?"

"E-El… Elder!"

The softer her voice became, the more palpable her rage was to Hu Jingye. Li Qinghong was known for her good temper; no one in the Li family had ever truly angered her. Hu Jingye was the first, and he was paralyzed with fear.

He stammered, unable to form a coherent sentence, his eyes rolling back as if he were about to faint. With a flick of her finger, Li Qinghong sealed his cultivation base. "Chengzhi," she said calmly, "send him to Chenghuai."

Li Chengzhi scrambled to call men over to carry Hu Jingye away.

"Baotuo's branch has been away from the clan for many years," Li Qinghong continued. "My Great Uncle has missed them dearly. Bring them all to see him."

Li Chengzhi bowed deeply in assent. As Li Qinghong held the young girl and vanished in a flash of lightning, Li Baotuo remained kneeling. On the ground, Hu Jingye lay with cold limbs, staring blankly at the sky.

"Congratulations, Baotuo!"

As if he hadn't seen Hu Jingye at all, Li Chengzhi stepped over him and smiled as he helped Li Baotuo to his feet. Streaks of light began to descend from the sky, one after another, and Li Baotuo, feeling as if he were in a dream, vaguely heard a chorus of congratulations.

On Pingya Island.

When Li Shuwan landed on the peak, her face was a little pale. She had heard stories of the Great Lake since she was a child, but she never knew Moongaze Lake was so vast. They had crossed its endless waves in an instant, arriving on the island in the blink of an eye.

She had never seen such a palace before. Before she could take in the details, she saw an old man sitting in the main hall. Seven points of azure light glowed on his body, and he had a kind, benevolent air. He approached with a warm smile. "Ah, Wan'er has arrived."

Li Shuwan responded politely. She noticed a youth standing on the other side of the hall, clad in dark red robes threaded with gold. He was turned sideways to her, and when sunlight spilled over him, the sight was so brilliant it made her eyes sting and water.

Li Xuanxuan assumed she was frightened and soothed her with a few gentle words. Li Qinghong sighed softly and recounted the events she had witnessed. "Uncle, the clan's rules are, in the end, a bit too strict. The main sect disciples are fine on the island, but the minor branches in the prefectures often suffer greatly."

Li Zhouwei looked thoughtfully at the girl before raising his head to reply, "Uncle-Master has mentioned this matter before. But the rules are like a binding hoop; they cannot be easily loosened. Li Baotuo is from a minor branch, but if not for that status, how could he have even summoned Hu Jingye? Would others have had a chance to even speak to the man? They receive certain privileges, so they must accept certain restrictions. It prevents them from oppressing others."

Li Xuanxuan placed a book scroll in Li Shuwan's hands and gently guided her to a side hall to memorize it. In his heart, he sympathized with his clan members and tended to agree with Li Qinghong, so he remained silent.

Li Zhouwei continued gravely, "The gap between cultivation realms is insurmountable. If we relax the rules here, they might not be bullied by other cultivators, but they will be more inclined to oppress other mortals. This would create another level of hierarchy among mortals, which would not be a good thing."

Li Qinghong nodded. "I will leave it to your judgment. Our family has always strived for fairness. Inevitably, some will feel wronged, but we shouldn't let our disciples become disheartened. My actions today were also intended to invigorate the various branches, which is why I was somewhat severe."

Their discussion came to a close just as Li Shuwan returned from the side hall. "Seniors," she said in a small voice, "I have memorized it."

"So quickly!" Li Xuanxuan smiled and nodded. The selection criteria for the Talisman Seed were becoming more and more stringent, and the children chosen were increasingly exceptional. He tested her with a few questions, and she answered them all correctly.

Li Zhouwei turned to an attendant. "Please invite the Young Master."

Li Jiangqian soon arrived in the hall. The boy greeted all three elders warmly before turning to call Li Shuwan "little sister." Li Qinghong smiled and brought out the Chongming Profound Insight Screen, and the two children began to recite the incantation.

Li Zhouwei's gaze remained on Li Shuwan. As the two children sat cross-legged to receive the Talisman Seed, he took a step forward, the dark red and gold threads of his robes shimmering faintly. "This child's soul seems… unusual," he murmured. "She seems able to perceive the secrets of others."

"Mm," Li Qinghong agreed, having noticed it as well.

The three of them waited with bated breath. After a full night had passed, a point of light bloomed within the screen. The two children opened their eyes at the same time, both wearing expressions of wonder.

Li Jiangqian's face showed more comprehension. He clapped his hands, stood up, and bowed. "I have received the talisman. Thank you, elders, for your protection!"

Li Shuwan, however, was filled with shock and curiosity. She watched her new "brother" bow and quickly followed suit. But when she lifted her head, she found all four of them staring at her, stunned.

Li Qinghong shot to her feet. On the girl's brow, a point of orange brilliance was slowly emerging. It was shaped like a flower petal, large as a pearl, and pulsed with a clear, bright light. It flashed three times before slowly fading away.

Chapter 662: The Bulwark

"What kind of cultivation method did you receive?"

This was the moment Li Xuanxuan looked forward to most each year. A flicker of astonishment crossed his eyes as he leaned in and asked in a low voice. Li Jiangqian, being very familiar with the three elders, answered quickly.

"A sixth-grade Purple Mansion method, the *Scripture of Heavenly Radiance and the Waning Sun*!"

"Excellent!"

Li Xuanxuan was instantly energized, joy flooding his features. A Purple Mansion cultivation method was a treasure of the highest order. Li Zhouwei nodded, a faint smile touching his lips. "It really is Purple Mansion-grade… How many secret techniques?"

The text of a Purple Mansion method was vast. Li Jiangqian considered for a moment before answering respectfully, "Father, there are four."

"Four."

Li Zhouwei nodded in understanding. Taking advantage of the pause in conversation, Li Shuwan spoke in her small voice. "Reporting to the elders, Shuwan received a sixth-grade Purple Mansion method, the *Golden Book of Divine Attendance*, which contains five secret techniques, along with a text called *Shamanic Talisman Dao*."

Li Zhouwei had expected as much and mulled over the names of the techniques. Li Xuanxuan, however, let out a soft laugh. "Wonderful… It seems the arts granted by our Talisman Seed… are different from the ones we received in the early days! This is a welcome change!"

Li Zhouwei nodded, his thoughts still lingering on the five secret techniques of the *Golden Book of Divine Attendance*.

'My *Radiant Essence Scripture* came with nine techniques, and Jiangqian's has four… but Shuwan received five,' he mused. 'Could her aptitude be even a step above Jiangqian's? That would be a good thing.'

Li Zhouwei knew his second son well. The boy had a difficult personality, though thankfully he wasn't prone to lashing out at others. Having a peer among the younger generation who could keep him in check would prevent him from acting too willfully.

He cleared his throat and spoke in a deep voice. "Jiangqian, Shuwan, first, write down the cultivation methods you have received."

Two small writing desks had already been prepared in the hall. Li Jiangqian was clever and had started writing at a young age, but Li Shuwan didn't know many characters. Fortunately, the methods were contained within the Talisman Seed, so she only needed to copy the shapes of the characters like drawing a picture.

As the two children wrote furiously at their desks, Li Zhouwei stood by, watching quietly. The sky outside gradually darkened, and a frown began to crease his brow.

"These two cultivation methods," he said in a low voice, "are vastly different from the *Radiant Essence Scripture*."

Li Xuanxuan leaned closer as Li Zhouwei continued, "Back then, it took me only an hour to transcribe my method… Two hours have already passed for them. The texts of these two methods are far longer."

Li Xuanxuan stroked his beard. Just then, Li Qinghong felt the light of the screen behind her tremble, and An Siwei's respectful voice came through.

"Elders, Xi Zikang is waiting on the island."

"Very well."

Li Qinghong reacted as if it were a routine matter. "Please ask Fellow Daoist Xi to wait in the side hall. I will be there shortly."

Hearing this, the joy on Li Xuanxuan's face faded.

"This transcription won't be finished anytime soon," Li Zhouwei said. "Elder, if you would please watch over them, I will accompany her."

Li Xuanxuan was torn. He wanted to see Li Qinghong off, but he couldn't bear to leave the two children.

"There is no need to see me off, Uncle," Li Qinghong said softly. "It will only upset you."

Li Xuanxuan sighed and turned his face away. Unwilling to linger, Li Qinghong passed through the screen of light and stepped out. Li Zhouwei escorted her through the winding corridors to the side hall, where Xi Zikang had been waiting for some time.

The youth, dressed in silver robes, greeted them with a bright smile. His round face was full of spiritual energy, and his cheerful, polite demeanor made it difficult for anyone to feel ill will toward him. "Senior Qinghong!" he exclaimed.

He held out a jade slip, which was clearly the *Secret Primal Art of Purple Thunder*. Li Qinghong took it at once and unlocked its seals. Li Zhouwei, in turn, handed over two jade slips. The youth accepted them and said, "I have troubled you all these past few years. My thanks to the family head."

Xi Zikang was impeccably polite. Li Zhouwei took the returned jade slips and exchanged a few pleasantries. The youth simply smiled. "Only your esteemed clan knows the truth of the matter. I have heard of the seniors' reputation even in the north; you are known as paragons of the righteous path. If not for that, I fear others would have long ago found an opportunity to kill me for what I carry. Even with a protective talisman, I would not have dared to enter your array."

"Fellow Daoist jests," Li Qinghong said, her expression somewhat complex. She walked with him out of the main hall and asked softly, "Fellow Daoist Xi, will you have enough time for your journey to the East Sea?"

"Of course, it's no problem at all!" Xi Zikang seemed to have no fear of the road ahead. "I'll travel and sightsee along the way. When the time is right, I will naturally be guided into the grotto-heaven. There's no need to rush to any particular place."

"I see."

Li Qinghong nodded and turned to Li Zhouwei. "The Han family of the Eastern Sulphur Islands has fallen on increasingly hard times, to the point where they are besieged on their main island. Their two elders died in an incident connected to our family, so we cannot simply ignore their plight. On my way to the East Sea, I will resolve their siege for them."

She continued, "With my dragon-aspect destiny, ordinary Purple Mansion cultivators would not dare to plot against me. I won't use our family's name. I will

just break the siege and help their descendants escape. This can be considered settling the matter on behalf of Xizhi."

The memories of her return from the East Sea were still vivid in her mind; she clearly had not forgotten the Han family. She took a jade pendant from her sleeve and sent a secret message. "This was taken from Wang Fu. Before he died, he held a great deal of resentment toward that Daoist Master, all of which is recorded in this pendant. The Daoist Master cannot peer inside that great array, so perhaps this will be of some use. Keep it safe."

Li Zhouwei accepted it.

"Also," Li Qinghong added, "in the Quanwu Mountains of the Yue State, there is a spirit persimmon tree. I was fortunate enough to encounter her in my youth. Her cultivation was still shallow then; she said she had another thirty-seven years of Qi Refinement to go. By my calculations, she should only have three or four years left. If you have the chance, please go and check on her."

Li Zhouwei carefully noted the location and agreed to everything.

"Minghuang," Li Qinghong said with a smile, "I leave matters here to you."

"Rest assured, Elder."

Li Zhouwei nodded silently and escorted the two of them off the island. He watched as two streaks of lightning vanished into the distance, then turned and flew back. The night wind was cold, and a thin layer of ice had formed on the lake's surface, crackling softly as the wind blew over it.

Moonlight washed over the vast island, bathing it in a silvery-white glow.

'Now,' Li Zhouwei thought, 'it is my turn to serve as the bulwark.'

Li Zhouwei landed back in the hall, the cold wind still clinging to him. It was the dead of winter, and the hall felt desolate. The two children had taken pills to stave off hunger and were sitting obediently. Perhaps because copying characters was slower than writing from memory, Li Jiangqian was the first to finish, handing over two thick stacks of paper.

Li Zhouwei took them, his spiritual sense sweeping over the pages. The contents appeared in his mind, and a look of pleasant surprise crossed his face. "It even has an appendix of spells… No wonder the text is so long!"

Li Xuanxuan had already read it and was now using his spiritual sense to inscribe the text onto a jade slip. The old man looked weary, but speaking of the cultivation method brought a bit of life back to his expression. "It's a good thing," he said, his voice raspy. "None of these spells are subpar."

Li Jiangqian was not naive. While he didn't fully grasp how precious these spells were, the sheer number of high-grade techniques told him they were extraordinary.

"The sixth-grade Scripture of Heavenly Radiance and the Waning Sun," he recited respectfully, "includes the fifth-grade movement art Tread on Flames, the fifth-grade escape art Heavenly Fire's Crimson Shine, the sixth-grade spell Great Radiance of White Brilliance, the fifth-grade spells 'Wall of Primordial Radiance' and 'Sun's Resonant Radiance Art,' as well as three fourth-grade spells and several third and second-grade spells…"

Li Zhouwei nodded, his expression relaxing. He had already skimmed the text with his spiritual sense.

'These techniques are all related to the Sun or Radiant Fire. While they are a perfect match, they don't seem to originate from the same source as the scripture itself.'

He examined it more closely. The manual contained no information about its origins; the entire text was remarkably concise.

Li Zhouwei's perception was sharp. The spells originally appended to the Scripture of Heavenly Radiance and the Waning Sun were mostly famous; using any of them would almost certainly lead to being identified. For this reason, Lu Jiangxian had painstakingly removed them, replacing them with techniques carefully selected from tens of thousands of other spells, choosing ones that lacked any distinct sect signature. This was the version of the sutra they now possessed.

As he was contemplating this, Li Shuwan hurried over to present the *Golden Book of Divine Attendance*. Li Zhouwei read it as well and exclaimed, "What a difficult method!"

The 'Whole Pill' attribute was inherently of extreme difficulty; otherwise, the lineage of Changtian Peak at the Azure Pond Sect would not have died out. For the *Golden Book of Divine Attendance* to be a sixth-grade method on top of that, its difficulty was staggering. It shocked even Li Zhouwei. Li Xuanxuan found it utterly incomprehensible; he understood every character, but strung together, they were a bewildering fog.

The *Golden Book of Divine Attendance*'s appendix was sparse, containing only a fifth-grade escape art called 'Scattering White Falling Feather' and a few ancient arts. Most of its pages were filled with mystical, esoteric descriptions of the transformations of various material properties.

"Ah!"

As he read, there was a sudden muffled explosion. A burst of fire erupted on the desk before Li Shuwan. The girl flinched in fright. Before she could speak, Li Zhouwei had lifted her away. "What happened?" he asked with a frown.

White flames blazed on the desk, and several furry insects, which had appeared from nowhere, writhed on the floor. Li Xuanxuan had already pulled Li Jiangqian behind him for protection. Li Shuwan, after composing herself, said in a childlike voice, "Reporting to the elder, I was just about to transcribe that shamanic art… I had only written the beginning… and the paper caught fire on its own…"

"Oh?"

Li Zhouwei was taken aback, and Li Xuanxuan was even more surprised. "It seems the grade is too high," he murmured, "or perhaps it has some connection to an immortal…"

"Indeed." A look of anticipation appeared on Li Zhouwei's face. He muttered to himself, " 'Whole Pill'… white fire… shamanic talismans…"

He soothed Li Shuwan. The night was late, and the children had been writing for over a day and were utterly exhausted. He sent them to rest, then with a wave of his hand, turned the two piles of paper to ash.

"Elder," he said quietly, "these are two Purple Mansion cultivation methods."

Li Xuanxuan sensed he had more to say and turned his gaze to him.

"This junior has read the clan's history," Li Zhouwei continued softly. "Our ancestors blazed a trail through hardship. Over time, the requirements of the Talisman Seed have become stricter, and the cultivation methods granted have become better. Why is that? In my opinion, it may be related to protecting the common people. The more people our family shelters, the better the methods we are granted… and the harsher the conditions for receiving the talisman. We obtained a Purple Mansion method when we gained control of half of Moongaze Lake. Now that the entire lake is ours, we have even received a full set of accompanying spells…"

Li Xuanxuan nodded.

"This is merely a guess, for now," Li Zhouwei concluded. "The future will reveal the truth. I've noted that the embryonic breathing sections of these two methods are quite profound, so their cultivation speed should not be slow. We can let them begin their training."

Neither Li Jiangqian nor Li Shuwan had been taught the *Supreme Yin Breathing Meridian Nourishment Sutra*. Both of their Purple Mansion methods began from the embryonic breathing stage, so their training would not require much of Li Zhouwei's direct supervision. He set the matter aside for the time being.

"The spells of the 'Whole Pill' attribute can only be practiced by those who cultivate the 'Whole Pill'," Li Xuanxuan said. "However, most of the techniques in the Radiant Fire series can be practiced by cultivators of various methods. The second and third-grade techniques could be added to the clan's collection."

"Let's be cautious," Li Zhouwei said, looking troubled. "None of these techniques have a known origin. We don't know if some other cultivator might recognize them. I will review them first. Those based on common principles can be distributed for practice, but the more unique ones should be held back for now."

Li Xuanxuan's thoughts were clearly still with Li Qinghong, and he couldn't shake his worries. He nodded and rose to his feet. Li Zhouwei helped the old man up and watched as he stroked his beard.

"Minghuang, you go on with your work," he said, his voice slightly hoarse. "This old man is going for another walk."

Li Zhouwei watched him leave, then picked up the scrolls on the desk. After a moment of hesitation, he picked up his brush and, in a quarter of an hour, finished approving them. An Siwei came in to report.

"Your Highness, Lord Chengliao has already entered seclusion for his breakthrough."

Li Zhouwei paused for a moment. "I am aware," he said. "He informed me earlier… Make a trip to the great desert… and invite Aunt Minggong to return."

Winter.

Snow fell heavily over the lake. Li Zhouwei had been busy for over a month, practicing his techniques in his spare time. The *Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light* was finally beginning to take shape. At the same time, Chen Yang, after years of diligent work at the northern foot of the Mount Dali, finally returned to the lake with his retinue.

He entered the main hall in high spirits, clearly bearing good news. "Your Highness! There is news from the northern demon cave! That Lu Ken has returned from visiting a friend and has re-entered the cave. He received our message and apologized profusely, saying he was delayed on a trip to the Helin Mountains."

Li Zhouwei had been prepared for the possibility of never finding the demon. This sudden turn of events was a pleasant surprise. "Good," he nodded. "I will pay him a visit at once."

Chen Yang cupped his fists, bowed, and quickly retreated to make the necessary preparations. Li Zhouwei set down his vermilion brush and pressed his hands on the desk, his mind already piecing things together.

'So, he wasn't afraid because of the Dingjiao affair, but because of the thunder-swallowing affair…'

The Li family had searched for the deer demon for years without a trace. Yet, just one month after Li Qinghong's departure, Lu Ken conveniently "returned from visiting a friend" and re-entered his cave. The meaning was obvious.

'This deer demon… or rather, the faction behind him, was afraid that our family would be tactless enough to trouble him about the thunder-method grotto-heaven. A refusal would have damaged the relationship between our families… But they are quite interested in the Dingjiao matter. They were afraid we would report back too soon, which is why he rushed back after only a month.'

No matter how cunning the demons of the grotto were, they were still a step behind humans who specialized in such intrigues. Li Zhouwei saw through it all as clear as day. He felt no particular emotion about it, only a slight sense of satisfaction.

After all, a dragon swallowing thunder was an event of monumental importance. Li Zhouwei was not so foolish as to go asking a fox demon for help; he had never even considered it. The fact that the fox clan was keenly interested in the Dingjiao affair made his position as the intermediary much easier.

He stepped out of the hall into a world blanketed by heavy, white snow. Kongheng, Elder White Ape, An Siwei, and others were already waiting.

Li Zhouwei surveyed them. "The family cannot be left without a Foundation Establishment cultivator on guard. Elder Ape, you will watch over the lake. Kongheng and I will go..."

He hesitated, then considered the poor relationship between fox demons and Buddhist cultivators. The demonic nature of Elder White Ape might actually make it easier to interact with the fox clan. He changed his mind, deciding to take the ape instead. Without any further delay, they set off into the depths of the northern foothills.

Chapter 663: The Nature of Demons (Part 1)

Crack.

The snows of the North Sea never melted. Amidst an endless expanse of white, gale-force winds scoured the mountain peak where an old man sat in silent stillness. A fishing rod of pure white jade extended from his hands into the vast sea of snow, its crystalline line pulled taut, disappearing into the boundless ice sea far below.

Xiao Chuting had remained here, motionless, for decades. Wind and snow swirled past him, yet not a single flake ever touched his robes. His hands, holding the rod, were as steady as if they had been cast from iron.

A series of soft sounds cut through the howling wind as a figure descended, riding the currents of air. Two medicine pouches swayed at his waist, and his hair was threaded with white. It was Xiao Yuansi, his voice warm and sincere as he spoke.

"Greetings, Perfected Master."

"Ah, Yuansi, you've come," Xiao Chuting acknowledged, his voice deep. His hands remained perfectly still as he asked casually, "Did you deliver the medicinal pill to the Li family?"

Xiao Yuansi had long understood that none of his actions or thoughts could ever be hidden from this ancestor. He bowed respectfully. "I did, Perfected Master. In my sentiment for my former disciple, I acted without first reporting to you. Please, forgive my transgression."

"Good."

Xiao Chuting's expression remained placid. "You've always thought me heartless," he said gently, "but you handled this poorly. Sometimes, ruthlessness

is the only way to save someone. In this, you see things less clearly than Tu Longjian."

"Junior…"

Xiao Yuansi started to speak but fell silent. Xiao Chuting gave him no chance to continue.

"I've known for a long time that the Li family possesses a Purple Mansion cultivation method," the old man said softly. "When the Eastern Fire Grotto-Heaven fell, the secret records of the Dongli Sect fell into the hands of the Three Sects and Seven Gates. Their secrets were laid bare for all to see. Although the Grotto-Heaven itself contained little of true value, its legacy was rooted in the Wei-Li lineage, and the details alone were deadly."

"When Li Ximing achieved Foundation Establishment, the celestial phenomena were unusual. Si Boxiu paid a visit. By cross-referencing the Dongli Sect's records, he not only determined the grade of the technique but even identified which Purple Mansion method it was!"

Xiao Yuansi remained silent as the old man continued, "It is the fourth-grade *Golden Hall Radiant Origin Art*. It requires a specific spiritual qi—the Golden Sun Radiant Origin Qi. That is why the Li family holds onto that old city wall beyond West Screen Mountain so fiercely. They are simply harvesting qi."

"Of course, Si Boxiu doesn't care whether the Li family's method is complete or not. A Purple Mansion cultivator in the Li family would be a welcome development, but their absence is hardly a loss… None of that is the real issue. It's of little consequence if they have the method. How many who follow such a wild path ever truly succeed? Even if one did, they would be another Changxi at best. The problem… is Li Zhouwei."

Xiao Chuting sighed. "He is a Purple Mansion Seed, and that is no mere pleasantry. His bloodline is extraordinary, surpassing even Chi Buzi's. He is no Changxi! Do you have any idea how many eyes are on him!"

"And as for the Radiant Sky Stone, few in Jiangnan want to see it used on Li Zhouwei. While they may not act openly against him, none of them wish him well."

The old man's voice dropped lower. "Tu Longjian, for all his cunning, is not old enough. He could never outwit Tianwan. The moment he made that wager with her, countless people would have conspired to harm Li Xijun. Even if

he had won the Radiant Sky Stone, with Li Xijun dead, it would have been as useless as not having it at all! That's why Tianwan dared to let those two rogue cultivators act. She knew someone would help them from the shadows…"

Xiao Yuansi let out a deep sigh. "This junior… I do not understand."

Xiao Chuting said, "Look at the situation now and you will. Li Qinghong has gone to the Eastern Sea, and Li Xijun is dead. Who can restrain Li Ximing now? He is a man driven by the pursuit of immortality. Do you truly believe he won't use the Radiant Sky Stone to attempt a breakthrough himself? Who could resist such a temptation? How could it possibly be saved for Li Zhouwei?"

"My goal, and Changxi's, was to apply pressure on Li Ximing. He understood this himself. But with the pill you delivered, he can no longer sit still! His attempt at a breakthrough is a path to certain death, and it will exhaust the family's resources…"

Xiao Yuansi bowed his head, saying nothing. He too understood the overwhelming allure of the Purple Mansion realm. Li Ximing's final words to him had almost certainly been a pretense.

The old man before him sighed again. "Right now, the other Purple Mansion masters are likely hoping Li Ximing attempts his breakthrough. One more or less makes little difference to them, and he is almost guaranteed to fail. He has no concept of the true dangers involved. He sees the cultivators of the Three Sects and Seven Gates succeed and assumes the odds are as simple as they appear."

"I deliberately created obstacles for you, hoping to delay the pill's refinement until after Li Ximing went into seclusion. My intent was for it to be delivered to Li Zhouwei. But you… you pushed yourself to the point of injury just to get it there in time…"

The old man gave him a long, deep look and sighed. "So be it. Let your bond as master and disciple be fulfilled."

For a full quarter of an hour, Xiao Yuansi stood frozen, unable to utter a single word.

"You may leave…"

Xiao Yuansi departed, his spirit crushed. Xiao Chuting remained, his fishing rod held high. Only when his junior's presence had faded completely did the raging

snowstorm around him begin to calm. In that instant, the look of disappointment vanished from his face, replaced by a deep, calculating calm.

'Yuansi is sincere and kind, and he's one of our own,' he thought. 'How could the other Purple Mansion masters possibly suspect him? Their attention will only be drawn to probing Li Zhouwei.'

He gave the long rod a slight lift, yet it seemed to weigh more than a mountain. The entire snow-covered peak trembled, and in the next moment, sheets of snow began to slide, gathering momentum into a thunderous avalanche. Far below, from the depths of the ice sea, a single point of light began its slow ascent.

Mount Dali

The peaks of Mount Dali were cloaked in white. Under the moonlight, the forest was a sea of silver trees. Li Zhouwei gazed into the distance at the undulating mountain range. A few plumes of black smoke rose against the snow, where small groups of patrolling demons stamped their feet and laughed around crackling bonfires.

Mount Dali was situated in the far north of Jiangnan. It snowed every year, but never for long, and the locals treated it as a beautiful, fleeting sight. The old White Ape standing beside Li Zhouwei looked out and spoke, his voice ancient.

"Your Highness… it's been a hundred years since a human was eaten on Mount Dali. The yao here have grown simple. They have forgotten the taste."

"That is a credit to our ancestors," Li Zhouwei replied with a nod.

They descended onto a snowy peak, the snow crunching softly underfoot. A group of demons was gathered around a fire pit before the entrance to a deer demon's cave, warming themselves.

Their arrival startled the group, but instead of fleeing, a demon with the face of a deer and enormous ears stepped forward. Its cultivation was only at the fourth layer of Embryonic Breathing, yet it could already speak human words.

"Hey, you there!" it called out with a strange accent. "Are you here to gather herbs? Come, warm yourself by the fire…"

Before it could finish, the tiger demon leading the patrol nearly jumped out of its skin in terror. It grabbed the deer demon, forcing it to its knees, and cried out in a panicked voice, "This lowly one greets the two great lords!"

The tiger demon was a Qi Refining leader and had already developed its spiritual sense. It recognized the two newcomers as Foundation Establishment cultivators. A single glance from the White Ape had nearly scared the life out of it, and it prostrated itself on the ground.

"Go and announce us," the old ape said, his voice deep and resonant. "The Li family has come to visit the Cave Master."

Li Zhouwei paid the commotion little mind. As he waited before the cave, the deer demon's words echoed in his thoughts. 'It's been a hundred years. My family has come and gone from Mount Dali, trading spirit rice for spiritual items, gathering herbs, and extracting essences. The demons here haven't preyed on humans for a long time; they've become naive and trusting. Our cultivators, needing their help, have often treated them with courtesy, leading to such harmony.'

"Your Majesty speaks the truth!"

Just as the thought crossed his mind, a howling spiritual wind gusted from the cave. A middle-aged man wrapped in a robe emerged, his dark hair unbound and his eyes a deep brown. A large shield was strapped to his back. "This lowly one greets the Great King!" he boomed.

He bowed deeply. Li Zhouwei frowned and moved to help him up. Lu Ken had always addressed his elders as a 'Fellow Daoist,' and such a deep bow disrupted the established seniority between them. "Senior, what is the meaning of this?" he asked, surprised.

Lu Ken rose, a wide smile on his face. "We can discuss that later. When we see the White Qilin, we must first pay our proper respects. Hence, the bow."

Though his face was all smiles, the reverence in his eyes was unmistakable. It was clear he shared the same sentiment as the Dragon Prince, Dingjiao, and saw him not as a man, but as the White Qilin.

The deer demon wasted no more words, leading him into the cave. The interior was vast, its stone walls as smooth and white as jade, with clear, elegant veins running through them. Lesser Demons bowed along the sides, and the ground

was covered with cushions made from the pelts of beasts—mostly wolves and tigers.

'A deer demon as the cave master,' Li Zhouwei mused. 'The wolves and tigers of the northern yue must be on the verge of extinction…'

After they were seated in the place of honor, Lu Ken's brown eyes glanced at the White Ape, and he immediately began to apologize. "I've been visiting a friend in the Helin Mountains for the past few years… we traveled together to the Southern Borderlands. The journey back and forth took years. I only just returned to the mountain. My apologies for the delay."

Li Zhouwei didn't believe a word of his excuses but acknowledged them politely before getting straight to the point. "My family has sent a number of letters recently, which I'm sure you have seen. We wish to meet with Senior Bai Rong. Do you have any news from the Demon Cave? We would ask you to contact him for us."

"It's already been arranged!" Lu Ken laughed, clasping his fist. "Fellow Daoist, rest assured. The moment I returned, I reported to the Demon Cave and received a message. They were merely waiting for your arrival. I will send for him at once."

He lowered his voice. "Over the past few years, my master has gained the great favor of a Great Demon, and his status in the cave has risen. After accumulating his foundation for so long, his innate talent blossomed after he reached Foundation Establishment, and he has won the allegiance of many Demon Generals. He is a great lord now!"

It was clear that Bai Rong's rise in status had brought Lu Ken considerable benefits. His face beamed with pride and joy as he ordered the other demons to prepare a grand banquet, while sending another to the Demon Cave to summon Bai Rong.

The White Ape observed the preparations and commented softly, "Cave Master, this is quite a magnificent feast. A great deal of meat."

Although Lu Ken didn't recognize the White Ape, he quickly surmised the old ape's considerable age. "Fellow Daoist, may I ask your age?"

"Four hundred and sixty-some years…"

The answer clearly surprised Lu Ken. "Impressive," he said with admiration. "To answer your question, although we are deer demons, a meal with meat is always better than one with plants. Even mortal deer… have a habit of eating birds, snakes, and insects…"

"It is all instinct," he continued, then hesitated. "Besides…"

Lu Ken couldn't bring himself to say, 'most demons also eat humans,' but Li Zhouwei understood the unspoken sentiment. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, silently acknowledging that in Lu Ken's eyes, he too was one of the demons. Otherwise, the deer demon would not have caught his words at the last second.

"Lu Ken!"

Just as the White Ape and Lu Ken were chatting, a loud call came from outside the cave. A streak of purple fire shot through the air and solidified within the cavern, revealing a youth dressed in a wide-sleeved, blue-green robe. A string of brilliant silver beads hung around his neck. His features were sharp and narrow.

"I'm here!" he announced.

Lu Ken hurried to bow. The youth strode forward, his smile fading slightly as he studied Li Zhouwei with a hint of confusion. "You're the White Qilin… right. I heard Li Xijun died, too…"

"Li Xijun was my grand-uncle."

"Oh!"

With that, Bai Rong seemed to sort out the generations. "Ah… I go into seclusion for a bit, and in the blink of an eye, decades pass. Your family's cultivators just keep changing… It's said that humans have short lifespans, but from what I've seen, disaster at the hands of others is a far greater threat than the limits of nature."

"Your family truly are the descendants of the Bright Yang. The lords in the demon cave have spoken of you, called you a White Qilin. Looking at you now, I see they were right."

Bai Rong warmed up quickly, his manner becoming relaxed and open. He glanced at the deer demons below, who were all staring up at the food with eager eyes, and said with some exasperation, "You've really picked up bad

habits from those humans. Must you put on such a show just for me? They're already dying to start eating. Hurry up and send them out so they can have their fill."

Lu Ken bowed respectfully and, understanding his master's meaning, quickly dismissed the lesser demons, herding and kicking them out of the main hall. He then thoughtfully sealed the heavy stone door and stood guard outside.

Once the door boomed shut and the cave's defensive array began to hum, Bai Rong smiled. "There aren't many people left in your Li family that I know. I remember a little old fellow… from Tongya's nephew's generation. Last time I visited the lake, he was the only one I could really talk to. Is he still around? If he's gone, I can't be bothered to visit anymore."

"The elder's health is still robust."

Li Zhouwei knew he was referring to Li Xuanxuan. So many years after Li Tongya's death, the bond between their two families had naturally weakened. That Bai Rong still remembered was a testament to their former friendship.

Bai Rong didn't delay. He asked about the purpose of the visit, and Li Zhouwei stated it plainly.

"This junior had been cultivating in the Eastern Sea. I have come at the request of the Dragon Prince, Dingjiao, to seek your assistance on behalf of the Dragon Kind in the matter of Listening to the Abyss."

Bai Rong chuckled. "I know… The dragons put some thought into having you act as their messenger."

His expression turned serious. "My ancestral grandmother and Dongfang You were never on good terms. They weren't enemies, but they certainly didn't get along! If Dongfang You weren't already dead, and if my master wasn't on good terms with the dragons… Hmph, that Dingjiao fellow would never have dared to ask."

Li Zhouwei remained silent, listening.

"He may not have told you everything," Bai Rong continued in a low voice, "but I can guess. He wants to go to the Southern Sea."

"As foxes, we are forbidden from entering the sea. But since the Dragon Prince has asked… this matter is not too difficult. I don't mind making a trip on my master's behalf."

Li Zhouwei felt a wave of relief. He didn't covet the spiritual tool Dingjiao had offered; in fact, he had no intention of accepting it. Forging a good relationship with the Dragon Kind was far more important.

As Li Zhouwei considered this, Bai Rong let out a laugh. "Then it's settled. White Qilin, you will accompany me to the Southern Sea."

"Hm?"

In this affair between the dragons and the foxes, Li Zhouwei had always seen himself as a neutral messenger. He had been careful not to favor either side, but now the winding path of this matter had led directly back to him.

"This junior's cultivation is shallow, and I know nothing of these ancient affairs. I fear I will only slow you down, Senior."

Li Zhouwei raised an eyebrow, but Bai Rong was just smiling at him. In his human form, the youth still possessed a foxy aura, and his voice was tinged with a subtle sharpness.

"White Qilin, Dingjiao wants more than just to Listen to the Abyss. He wants to befriend both of us. If you don't go… the whole thing falls through."

"Besides," he added, his expression growing solemn. "With Li Qinghong gone, you won't be safe on the lake for long. You'll have a much easier time with me and Dingjiao… At our side, at least no one will dare to get any ideas."

Chapter 664: The Nature of Demons (Part 2)

Li Zhouwei remained silent for a long moment, carefully weighing the fox demon's words.

The Demon Cave of Mount Dali had always been on friendly terms with his clan. Favorable rumors, true or not, often circulated, but the bond between Bai Rong and Li Tongya was clearly something Bai Rong held in high regard.

After a moment of hesitation, he spoke. "Thank you for your guidance, Senior. You and my ancestor shared a profound friendship, and we of a later generation naturally treat you with the utmost respect. Since you have spoken, I know you would not wish me harm, and I will follow your advice."

A look of pleasure washed over Bai Rong's face at these words, a hint of nostalgia in his eyes. Li Zhouwei paused, then feigned confusion. "But… while my innate talent may be decent, my clan has fallen into decline. It makes sense for the Dragon Prince Dingjiao to befriend you, Senior, but why would he extend such kindness to me?"

Beneath his robes, Bai Rong's tail gave a slight swish. He tossed a piece of fruit into his mouth and pointed a finger at Li Zhouwei. "You are a White Qilin," he said softly.

Then, he gestured to himself. "I am a white fox."

Seeing Li Zhouwei nod, he stated plainly, "And Dingjiao is a white flood dragon, is he not?"

A thoughtful expression crossed Li Zhouwei's face.

Bai Rong chuckled. "That's just how the dragon lineage is—proud, arrogant, with the hearts of kings. It started a thousand years ago… they began uniting the demon clans, offering generous aid to declining demon races. You must

understand, the dragon lineage has always dreamed of becoming true dragons. And what is a true dragon? Their ambition is boundless. They see themselves as demon emperors, and all demons of a single color as their subjects. Having a White Qilin under his banner would naturally be to his advantage."

He paused, a thoughtful look on his face as he murmured, "I seem to recall a Daoist Master mentioning years ago that some fellow named Guo… Shen… something… also received a great deal of help from the dragon lineage."

Li Zhouwei nodded in understanding, though a sliver of doubt remained in his heart. For now, he could only accept the explanation. After a moment of silence, he finally let out a breath and said in a low voice, "But I am human."

Bai Rong snorted, the smile slowly vanishing from his face. His tone grew solemn. "White Qilin," he whispered. "There is no difference."

His voice echoed through the cave. The old ape lifted his head to look at him.

Bai Rong's voice became a little sharper. "You've reached the Purple Mansion Realm. This is merely a physical shell. An ordinary Purple Mansion cultivator can discard their body at will, choosing to be male or female as they please. If you no longer wished to be human, sculpting a body of a bird or a beast would pose no problem. In the Dao of transformation and divine arts, the beast is me, and the man is me. What is the difference?"

He studied the young man before him intently. "And you are even more unusual. You carry the Wei-Li bloodline. To put it bluntly, you are the descendant of a True Monarch. When your cultivation reaches its peak, you *are* the White Qilin. With your innate arts, if you simply will it, you can transform into a true White Qilin in an instant."

"How can a mere human body compare to that of a White Qilin? Back in the day, none of the Wei-Li imperial family thought otherwise. They often walked the world in their demonic forms, only assuming human shape when it was inconvenient, much like any other demon."

His foxy eyes blinked as he took a sip of fruit wine. "The distinction between human and beast was never so great to begin with, especially for a descendant of a Golden Core cultivator. And he was a True Monarch!"

"A True Monarch is a cosmic position, a being that transcends the boundary between human and beast. The moment they achieve that realm, they are no longer human! You carry their blood, so you naturally carry their form!"

The fox demon laughed twice and pointed upward. "Take that Pristine Water True Monarch, for example. Is he truly just a man? His every thought is the clear green water of the world, a single blink can ripple across every pond from north to south. He is the water, the pond, the spring, the dew… he is even the feathered serpent, the azure flood dragon, the talisman, and the incantation. His few centuries of life as a human are as thin and insignificant as a single drop in that pond."

Li Zhouwei listened in silence.

When he finished, Bai Rong said softly, "Do not dwell on it. In the end, all cultivation comes down to one's nature and one's destiny. If you can one day seek out your Metallic Essence, you will grasp the profundity of this even more deeply."

"I have learned a great deal, Senior."

Li Zhouwei acknowledged the lesson, a contemplative look on his face. Bai Rong nodded, his solemn expression melting away into a grin. "That's what my master always says, anyway," he added with a chuckle. "I just listened carefully and thought I'd share a thing or two with you."

"Then please, thank your master on my behalf…" Li Zhouwei said.

"Well then, let's not delay," Bai Rong said, his smile widening. "We'll go to the Flood Dragon Palace together. The Azurewater Scale-Beasts are incredibly fast; it'll save us the trouble of flying."

"Please wait a moment while I arrange matters at home," Li Zhouwei replied. "I will join you shortly."

But Bai Rong was already brimming with enthusiasm. He sprang to his feet, shaking out his blue-green robes. "No trouble at all! I'll go with you. I can see that old fellow of yours while I'm at it."

The waves of the Eastern Sea crashed endlessly.

Two streaks of light, one silver and one purple, shot across the sky. The silver-robed young man gazed down, seemingly admiring the unique beauty of the Eastern Sea.

"Senior," he said with a smile, "I've heard that there's a Miao family in the Southern Sea whose lightning arts are quite unique. Do you know of them?"

Li Qinghong, who had her own history with the Miao family, replied softly, "I've crossed paths with them twice. They are formidable. I was still inexperienced at the time and suffered a small setback. I might even run into them again in the Grotto-Heaven. They are a peculiar clan, and their cultivation of demonic arts makes them truly one of a kind."

She and Xi Zikang had been flying for over half a year to reach the Eastern Sulphur Islands. The landscape below was a scorched patchwork of red and black. The smoke of war that had choked the skies for so long had finally begun to thin, as most of the islands had already been conquered.

The islands were charred black, with no mortals in sight. The few tattered grand arrays that remained were now controlled by cultivators, and wreckage was strewn everywhere.

The main island of the Eastern Sulphur chain was still holding out. Though it had been under siege for five or six years and its defensive light was incredibly dim, it had not yet collapsed. The ring of cultivators surrounding it seemed to be in no hurry, taking turns to attack, slowly grinding down the array.

The mainland sects, having once been the pillars of the righteous path, would have ended such a conquest quickly. They rarely let a siege drag on for years. But in the Eastern Sea, concepts like reputation and restraint held little sway. Here, profit was the only law, and slowly wearing down an enemy was the most practical approach.

Li Qinghong and Xi Zikang flew to the edge of the main island completely unnoticed. The few Foundation Establishment cultivators standing guard were clearly not of high caliber—lucky survivors pushed forward by elixirs and grueling, life-or-death cultivation. They hadn't cultivated any ocular arts and were completely oblivious to the two figures in the sky.

Xi Zikang observed the scene with her for a moment before smiling. "Senior, do you intend to intervene? My cultivation is respectable enough; I can offer some assistance."

"They're just a group of rogue cultivators… there's no need."

Li Qinghong wasn't worried about them. The cultivators besieging the Han family were clearly a loose alliance of several nearby powers, disunited and

weak. Otherwise, the Han family would never have been able to hold out for so long.

She was contemplating the best way to resolve the situation, preferably without a fight. Xi Zikang, however, had already sensed her hesitation.

"This isn't difficult," he said with a smile. "I'll drive them away. You can go and free the people, Senior."

Chapter 665: The Heart of all under the Heavens

The young man was brimming with confidence, as if dispersing this motley crew of rogue cultivators was the easiest thing in the world. Li Qinghong was slightly taken aback.

"Fellow Daoist, what are you…?" she began softly.

Xi Zikang gave a soft chuckle and shook out his silver-white sleeves. He produced a small, gleaming silver chariot, no bigger than his palm. Two tiny blue-and-white flags, inscribed with runes, were planted on it. He intoned a command:

"By the authority of the Profound Thunder Division, by the command of the Northern Palace, ride the chariot, command the lightning, save the world and cure its ills!"

The thunder chariot trembled and instantly sprang to life. It leaped with the powerful, heavy momentum of a pouncing tiger, swelling in an instant to the size of a house. The two blue-and-white thunder banners fluttered high, crackling with silver lightning that stretched over a hundred feet in the wind.

"My Profound Thunder path whips the wind and commands the storm… scattering a few cultivators is nothing!"

Thunderclouds roiled in the sky as a storm began to churn the sea below. Xi Zikang landed on the chariot, gripped the silvery reins, and ascended with the tempest. "Senior," he called out, his voice clear and resonant, "I only need ten breaths."

The sea was already being torn apart by a raging gale. Darkness fell, so thick and gray you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. The only light came from the magnificent, ancient thunder chariot, which blazed with a dazzling silver brilliance. Its two banners trailed behind it like a pair of lightning serpents.

Clad in his shimmering silver robes, Xi Zikang looked like a god commanding the thunder, an image of awesome might.

'Of course,' Li Qinghong thought. 'He's from one of the North Sea's most renowned Purple Mansion immortal clans. His lineage must trace back to the Thunder Palaces… he's no ordinary cultivator.'

The boy was young, friendly, and respectful, with no extravagant adornments. For a moment, she had forgotten his noble origins. But now, seeing the majesty of his chariot, she realized it rivaled even the one Tuoba Chongyuan once possessed.

'The great lightning-wielding clans and sects of the North Sea are truly remnants of the old Thunder Palaces,' she mused. 'This magnificent chariot is proof enough.'

In a flash, Xi Zikang had driven the storm forward. A deep gloom fell over the Eastern Sulphur Islands, plunging the assembled cultivators into blinding darkness. They all looked up just as silver lightning rained down from the heavens, sending them scattering in chaos.

This group was a patchwork force from various powers to begin with. Seized by terror, they broke apart. The three Foundation Establishment cultivators among them shot into the air, ready to hurl curses, but the words died on their lips when they saw the noble, domineering chariot. Their expressions changed, and they hesitated, not daring to approach.

Xi Zikang, however, simply formed a seal. He tore a length of lightning from the sky as if ripping a bolt of white cloth and casually smashed it down on the three men's heads. "The Eastern Sea is full of demonic cultivators, after all!" he said coldly.

The three were rogue cultivators of the Eastern Sea. One reeked of blood qi, the other two of turbid energy. How could they possibly withstand such pure Profound Thunder? They were scared witless, crying out in misery as they turned to flee.

But the spell, though seemingly casual, was of an extremely high grade. The lightning was inherently swift. The three cultivators were instantly overwhelmed, trailing thick black smoke as they escaped.

Xi Zikang was momentarily stunned, thinking to himself in surprise, 'Their cultivation is pathetic… The Eastern Sea is vast, but it's the domain of the dragon

lineage. The endless treasures of the deep are inaccessible, and they're isolated on these few islands… What good resources could they possibly have?'

He had misjudged. The three had no intention of fighting him. Most who survived in the Eastern Sea were cautious. Seeing such a grand display and such a luxurious vehicle, anyone could tell he was the direct descendant of an immortal clan. They didn't dare say another word, simply fleeing for their lives and praying he wouldn't give chase.

He had only meant to pin them down but had underestimated his own strength. Now, they had vanished in a puff of smoke, leaving the entire sea around the Eastern Sulphur Islands deserted. He circled twice in his thunder chariot before sheepishly recalling it.

"Impressive, Fellow Daoist."

Li Qinghong approached with a smile. Xi Zikang looked slightly embarrassed. Just then, the grand array below them flickered, and an old man in a red robe flew out. He glanced around cautiously before calling out from a distance.

"Which senior graces us with their presence?"

This was a Li family matter, so Xi Zikang remained silent, turning his head slightly. Li Qinghong simply nodded without replying. The old man looked at them for a few seconds, and then understanding dawned. He flew closer in a rush.

"So it is—"

"Ah," Li Qinghong cut him off. The old man caught his mistake and, upon reaching them, lowered his voice. "Seniors, please, come into the array to speak!"

Li Qinghong didn't want to waste time. "There's no need," she said gently.

The future of this sea voyage was uncertain. She had not only left the Chongming Profound Insight Screen behind but even the Six Thunder Profound Punishment Talisman. She murmured something to Xi Zikang, who nodded in understanding. He then took a small, apricot-colored pagoda from his sleeve and activated it, enveloping them in a barrier that sealed them off from the outside world.

The action startled the red-robed elder, but he gritted his teeth and stood his ground, allowing the pagoda's light to surround them. Only then did Li Qinghong speak.

"May I know which Fellow Daoist you are?"

"This humble one is Han Shihai! I had the honor of meeting the Immortal once before…"

"It's you!"

Li Qinghong actually recognized him. This was the man who had received her during her last visit to the islands. But back then, he had been a middle-aged man. Now, his hair was white, and his aura was completely different.

A look of profound gratitude filled Han Shihai's eyes. "I have exhausted my lifespan maintaining the clan's array. I must be a laughable sight to you, Immortal…"

Han Shihai had reached the end of his rope. Tears streamed down his aged face as he poured out his story.

Han Shizhen and his servant had been the pillars of the Han family. After their abrupt deaths in the dragon lineage's territory, the family's strength had plummeted. The situation was already perilous when the Han family's patriarch, who had been in seclusion trying to break through to the Purple Mansion Realm, was caught completely off guard by the celestial phenomenon of "water falling and thunder rising." He was cultivating the 'Returning to Earth' path of Earth Virtue. He lasted only a year before his own breakthrough failed, transforming into another celestial omen.

Neighboring powers had immediately pounced. The remaining Foundation Establishment cultivators of the Han family had been killed one by one, leaving only Han Shihai and a female cultivator. They were trapped, prepared for the clan's utter destruction, hoping only to escape with their lives.

Han Shihai could never have imagined, not in ten days and nights of thinking, that Li Qinghong would be the one to save them. Overwhelmed by joy and sorrow, tears flowed freely, and he nearly fell to his knees.

Li Qinghong held him up. "Your family has operated in the Eastern Sea for many years," she said in a low voice. "Do you have any information on the Miao family of the Southern Sea?"

Without asking why, Han Shihai searched his storage pouch and produced a jade slip. "My benefactor," he said solemnly, "the Miao family once had business dealings with us. Everything we know is recorded here."

Li Qinghong accepted it but didn't look at it immediately. "Good," she said softly. "We have only scared these people off for now. You must hurry and arrange for your clansmen to evacuate. If you delay, they will surely return the moment we leave."

"Ah?"

Han Shihai was utterly confused. He had already prepared himself for the Han family to be absorbed by the Li family and had been acting with the deference of a subordinate. Li Qinghong's words shattered all his assumptions.

'But! But why would they help us for no reason at all!'

His century of experience surviving in the Eastern Sea failed him completely. He stared blankly at Li Qinghong and stammered, "Immortal, you first covered for my family before the great sects, and now you have saved us from ruin… How could we possibly just leave…"

Li Qinghong laughed. "You are a cultivator of the Eastern Sea, yet you speak such words. I told you to go, so go. Did you think I came here just to take a pound of flesh from you?"

Seeing the deep confusion on the old man's face, she grew serious. "The deaths of your family members were connected to my clan's affairs… and our friendship still stands. It is a small thing to lend a hand now that your clan has fallen on hard times. Say no more, Senior. Go, quickly, and take your people."

Han Shihai could now hear the sincerity in her voice. He choked back a sob. "Immortal, your kindness is as immense as a mountain. My own lifespan is spent; I will be gone in a few days and can never repay this debt… This grace of rebirth, the Han family will remember it… If there is a next life, we will repay you, even if we must serve as horses or dogs…"

Saving the Han family was a matter of fulfilling an obligation, but Li Qinghong didn't want to become too entangled. "My clan is also treading on thin ice," she replied softly. "I likely won't live to see that day. Go now, and find another path for survival. Do not mention my Li family, lest you bring disaster upon your own."

Han Shihai was overcome with grief. He covered his face and bowed his farewell, then shot back to the island like the wind. Spirit boats rose into the air, and a procession of people departed in a flurry of activity. Only after they

had vanished from sight did Li Qinghong and Xi Zikang ascend on a bolt of lightning.

The young man was visibly moved. He flew in silence for a long time.

"Fellow Daoist," Li Qinghong began, "do you know about the matter of the Thunder Palaces? The whole world seems to be in an uproar…"

"Of course, I know!" Xi Zikang answered, a little distractedly. "The Immortal Lords left this world, and two new Earth Virtue True Monarchs ascended at the same time. The sects and clans had been suppressed for too long. Heaven and Earth were of one mind, so the Twelve Thunder Palaces naturally collapsed. There's not much more to it."

Seeing her thoughtful expression, he seemed to know her next question. "As for the common people suffering under the Thunder Palaces for ages… Earth Virtue represents the state and the people's livelihood. 'The people hear what I hear, the people see what I see. My heart is the heart of the world.' With the world in turmoil, is their rebellion not normal? It was all decided in a single thought!" he said dismissively. "I know what you're thinking. I've heard all the arguments against the Thunder Palaces. I just smile and say nothing."

'My heart is the heart of the world… How utterly terrifying!'

Having lived on the mainland in the current era after the great changes, Li Qinghong had hardly ever met a proper Earth Virtue cultivator. The only one of any note was Changxi, a Purple Mansion cultivator who focused purely on arts and techniques. This was the first time she had heard of the true divine arts of the Earth Virtue path, and she was secretly horrified.

'If that's the case… it's no wonder that only the arts and techniques of Earth Virtue remain… A single thought to command the will of the people—which power could ever tolerate that?'

A heaviness settled in her heart. She was silent for a long time, other speculations forming in her mind. 'Qingxuan is also of the Earth Virtue path, but he doesn't seem to follow the way of state and people. Perhaps only two of the five types of earth possess such divine power.'

Of the Five Virtues, the Five Waters, Five Fires, and Three Metals were well-known, but the others were obscure. Li Qinghong tried to probe for more information, but Xi Zikang either didn't know or wasn't willing to say.

'I wonder what technique the Han patriarch was cultivating. Was the 'water falling and thunder rising' that killed him intentional or a coincidence? Only people like Xi Zikang would know such secrets…'

She was lost in thought. Xi Zikang, however, was still pondering Han Shihai's words. After a long silence, he said in a low voice, "I always thought that those who practiced demonic arts were all unpardonable villains. But to think they could have such devotion, to burn away their own lifespan to protect their kin… My clan practices the righteous laws of Profound Thunder… but it would be hard to find many who are like him."

Li Qinghong said softly, "The Eastern Sea is rife with Blood Pills. Demonic arts and techniques are widespread. Even a normal cultivator's hands are stained with blood. That is why they all seem like villains in your eyes…"

Xi Zikang paused, a pained look on his face. "But he consumed the Blood Pills. He cultivated the demonic arts. No matter how devoted he was, no matter his reasons, he cannot wash away the turbid blood in his veins. While I admire the man, if I were to meet him in the Northern Sea, I would still have to strike him down with my lightning."

"My clan's Daoist Master once said that the fault is not theirs, but the evil is. Even if we lack the power to cleanse the world of all demons and right all wrongs, we cannot turn a blind eye to the evils we can subdue."

Li Qinghong opened her mouth to speak, then fell silent. She didn't know how to respond. A dark thought crossed her mind. 'His ancestors followed the Dao of the Thunder Palaces. It seems they weren't as villainous as the Shen family's texts claimed, but they lacked compassion all the same. The entanglements of the ancient past are a mess. The Wei-Li name is no better… There's nothing to be said…'

She changed course, turning toward Yuezhou Island, the home of the Profound Peak Gate. 'This news is too important. I'll use the Profound Peak Gate to send a letter home.'

Moongaze Lake

Li Zhouwei had finished setting his affairs in order. With his father, Li Chengliao, in seclusion, he had arranged for his elders—Li Minggong and Li Chenghuai—to oversee things before heading to the main hall.

Bai Rong was wandering barefoot through the hall, with Li Xuanxuan following beside him. The old man seemed to be in high spirits, laughing and chatting.

There were very few people Li Xuanxuan could truly open up to. He loved to speak of the past, but there was almost no one left who could share those memories with him. By now, it was only Li Qiuyang, Chen Donghe, and An Zheyan.

But Li Qiuyang had been grievously injured and then burned by the Merging Fire; he now looked ancient beyond his years. When Li Xuanxuan visited, they could barely exchange a few words. Chen Donghe and An Zheyan were always too respectful to speak freely.

But this fellow Bai Rong, with his grumbling and muttering, had somehow managed to get Li Xuanxuan talking. From outside the hall, Li Zhouwei could hear peals of laughter and felt reluctant to interrupt.

He waited only a few moments before Bai Rong came scurrying out. After bidding the old man farewell, Li Xuanxuan, who would never dream of hindering the younger generation's business, saw them off with a smile.

Once they had taken to the air and left the lake behind, Bai Rong said grimly, "My white fox clan has some ability to read the hearts of men. That old man carries a great deal of sorrow. His later years have not been easy."

A rare shadow of gloom fell over Li Zhouwei.

Bai Rong began pulling artifacts out of his sleeves as he muttered, "You had better cultivate properly. Don't go out looking for fights. The hot-headed ones all die sooner or later. And don't be like those elders of yours, throwing their lives away for the clan… Live a long time, so you don't break that old man's heart again."

"I understand, Senior," Li Zhouwei replied with genuine sincerity.

Bai Rong tossed a spirit boat into the air. In an instant, it transformed into a simple, unadorned wooden pushcart. Its two wheels were crooked, the bark was crudely peeled in uneven patches, and a few branches still stuck out here and there.

Bai Rong introduced it with great pride. "This is my demon carriage! I used it to ferry the kits in my clan back in the Northern Foothills! When I came to the cave, I refined it into a proper vehicle. You are the very first White Qilin to ride it!"

"Right…"

Li Zhouwei found the situation rather bizarre. It was the first time he had ever seen anyone travel by pushcart. He sat cross-legged in the cart as Bai Rong settled beside him, grinning for reasons unknown as he summoned a gust of green wind.

"Let's go!"

Chapter 666: The Southern Sea

Bai Rong's cart, though unassuming in appearance, was anything but slow. In little more than a month, they had plunged deep into the Southern Borderlands, riding a gale of cyan wind that never paused for a moment.

Only when they ventured into the depths did a few demons dare to block their path. The leader was a wolf demon with a green face, long fangs, and hair like crimson flames—a starkly different appearance from the demons of Jiangnan. Bai Rong barked at them twice.

"Elder here is the White Fox of Mount Li! Who's the blind fool blocking my path!"

The wolf demon's expression changed at his words. His lupine face, already ugly, contorted into a frown. He blinked his four eyes and stammered, "So it's Elder Fox! My apologies, my apologies! Now that you two Elders have crossed the ridge, why not stop by my king's place for a visit? This humble demon will heat some tea and serve you a few blood buns."

Bai Rong glanced at him skeptically. "And which backwater mountain does your king rule that he dares invite me for a visit?"

The four-eyed wolf demon replied respectfully, "He is the Black Ape Great General, serving under the Bifeng Mountain Lord. He resides on Black Lacquer Ridge..."

"Get lost! Such nonsense!" Bai Rong's face fell at the mention of the Bifeng Mountain Lord. With a wave of his hand, he sent the demon flying a dozen yards. "Just a monkey, and far too much trouble!"

The two demons were sent tumbling by the demonic wind he kicked up. They yelped in pain, but scrambled back to their feet and shouted after him, "Be careful, Elder! There are shapeshifting shamans near the ridge, and they're treacherous creatures..."

Bai Rong had already sped several miles away, the two demons still calling out "Elder" as they saw him off from their mountain. Li Zhouwei wore a thoughtful expression. Bai Rong stole a glance at him and said, a little awkwardly, "I don't know those local demons at all! Don't overthink it. It's just custom for one of my kind to announce ourselves when passing through another's territory…"

"I see."

Sensing the odd tone in Bai Rong's voice, Li Zhouwei's golden eyes swept over the forest below. After a brief pause, he asked, "This Bifeng Mountain Lord must be a Purple Mansion Realm demon, I presume? What is his background?"

"Well…" Bai Rong fumbled in his robes, pulling out a few fruits to offer him. But he was too slow to change the subject. He had no choice but to answer. "The Bifeng Mountain Lord… is called Can Lufu. He is a descendant of the True Hornless Dragon's nine sons, tracing his lineage back to the Eighth Prince… whose corpse is still stuffed at the bottom of the Vermillion Sea."

"That's why, even though Can Lufu is a Flood Dragon, he never dares venture into the Eastern Sea. He just holes up here in the Southern Borderlands, lording over his domain and colluding with the other great demons. He's an old one."

'Can Lufu…'

The name struck Li Zhouwei like a thunderclap, and he finally understood the source of Bai Rong's discomfort.

'The Demon King of the Southern Borderlands, the peak Purple Mansion Realm Bifeng Mountain Lord, Can Lufu.'

'It was he who refined my own ancestor…'

Bai Rong knew full well that one of Li Tongya's own brothers had been refined by Can Lufu, which was why he had immediately tried to put distance between them and the demon's territory. Only now that they were far from that mountain range did he dare to speak in detail, his voice low.

"Can Lufu is a great demon on the same level as my master. He was also an ally of Chi Wei's back in the day… As a descendant of the Eighth Prince, he is incredibly powerful."

Li Zhouwei watched the mountains recede into the distance, etching the name of the Bifeng Mountain Lord into his memory. His tone, however, betrayed no emotion. "Is his true form an Azurewater Flood Dragon?"

"Indeed." Seeing his calm demeanor, Bai Rong let out a sigh of relief. "If the dragon lineage hadn't disowned him, he might be calling himself a Dragon King by now. He's also skilled in alchemy, which gives him some influence in the Southern Borderlands."

"Four hundred years ago, he was already at the mid-stage of the Purple Mansion Realm… Around that time, he led an attack on the newly established Azure Pond Sect. Chi Wei must have met him then."

Li Zhouwei committed this to memory. Bai Rong tried to placate him. "It was hundreds of years ago… Let it be… Can Lufu is an ancient demon, a true powerhouse among Purple Mansion cultivators. Even my master would be no match for him."

Li Zhouwei smiled and nodded in agreement. Only then did Bai Rong truly relax. He pointed at the distant forests and patted his chest. "Ordinary cultivators have to go by way of the Eastern Sea to reach the Southern Sea, but you won't need to. In the future, if you wish to come here, you can just ride the wind straight through. If any of those mountain lords or valley generals try to stop you, just swat them aside!"

Li Zhouwei said softly, "Wouldn't that offend them?"

"Of course not!" Bai Rong laughed heartily. "You saw it yourself. Did a single minor demon we passed not call us 'Elder'? These lesser demons who have gained sentience have no hope of reaching the Foundation Establishment Realm; they're nothing but errand runners. And that's only because I'm of the fox tribe. If you were a tiger or a leopard, you could snatch one up and command it at will."

The ocean gradually appeared on the horizon, dispelling the oppressive atmosphere. Bai Rong's mood brightened. The waters of the Southern Sea were a deeper hue, and the climate was hot. The great continent of Lufang was already in sight, its trees a shade of dark green, soaring into the clouds.

But Bai Rong veered eastward. The seawater slowly turned a shade of turquoise, a clear sign they had reached the Vermillion Sea.

The Vermillion lay at the southernmost edge of the Eastern Sea and the eastern edge of the Southern Sea. True to his lazy nature, Bai Rong stopped at its border. He casually grabbed a passing minor demon, dispatched it to inform the sea patrols, and then turned his cart back around.

"That Dingjiao fellow will find his own way here. We'll go on ahead."

He steered the cart back on its windy course. Li Zhouwei gazed out at the landscape. The eastern part of the Lufang continent was dotted with countless islands, yet they were sparsely populated. Though covered in dense jungle, he saw no cultivators flying about.

'How different from the East Sea.'

In the East Sea, not a single island would be left vacant. Who would let such prime real estate go to waste as they did here in the Southern Sea? Bai Rong glanced at him and explained quietly, "In the Southern Sea, cultivators build their immortal caves and manors at the bottom of the ocean. These islands are the private gardens of major powers, protected by formidable formations. They're used for cultivating spiritual resources, gathering Qi, and converging spiritual veins…"

"As for mortals, they live on the large continents like Lufang and Songzhou. They're scattered about, but the continents themselves are probably as large as the Yue State."

Li Zhouwei nodded in understanding. The floor of the Southern Sea was not occupied by the dragon lineage, making it vastly more expansive than the surface. It was a world unto itself, so there was no need to live on the islands.

Furthermore, the Southern Sea's connection to the mainland was not as strong as the Eastern Sea's. The Southern Borderlands stood as a massive barrier. To gather Qi from the mainland, one would have to cross nearly the entire Vermillion Sea—a journey fraught with unimaginable danger. This made preserving the local islands for Qi gathering all the more critical.

"Further south is Danrong Wuluo, a region with a high concentration of Buddhist and demonic cultivators…"

The name Danrong Wuluo jogged Li Zhouwei's memory. Li Qinghong had once mentioned that a certain elder of their clan was cultivating there… an illegitimate son from Li Yuanqin's generation, if he recalled correctly.

'Once this business with the dragon lineage is settled, I should make a trip to Danrong Wuluo to meet this elder… I wonder if he knows that the family's patriarch has fallen.'

Li Zhouwei and Bai Rong traveled for the better part of a day, heading deep into the sea. Ahead of them lay a vast expanse of white seabed, dotted with coral, glowing as brightly as if it were daytime. A dense network of houses and streets spread across it, bearing a striking resemblance to the Tailend Kingdom of old.

A thin, shimmering barrier enveloped the seabed, marking it as a marketplace. Bai Rong, his eyes alight with excitement, immediately put away the cart, threw on a cloak, and descended toward the city.

Li Zhouwei followed him down. The market's grand formation served only to part the seawater. As they passed through it, no one came to greet them. The streets were bustling with people moving to and fro.

"Let's look around. The dragon lineage will be here within three hours at most!"

Bai Rong eagerly looked around, buying shells here and coral there. The cloak he wore concealed both his cultivation level and the fact that he was a demon, allowing him to move through the crowd like a fish in water.

Li Zhouwei wandered about more casually. He first bought a map. The vendor, seeing his Foundation Establishment cultivation, presented the item and then scrambled away, not even daring to accept the spirit shells offered in payment.

Li Zhouwei studied the map for a moment. "What a coincidence. This is the Miao Family's territory!"

According to the map, the Miao Family's domain was immense, ranking them among the top powers in the Southern Sea. Even the Zhulei Market they were in, and the Zhulei Cave beneath their feet, belonged to the Miao.

'Thunder arts truly are a powerful tool… Most cultivators in the Southern Sea practice demonic arts, all of which are suppressed by thunder arts to some degree. Though the Miao Family's direct lineage isn't large, their territory is vast. The advantage thunder arts have over demonic arts is simply too great!'

He glanced around. Nearly everyone he saw was a demonic cultivator, and items made from blood essence were everywhere. Looking closer, he noticed that nine out of ten of these items were refined from demons. Pills made from humans were so expensive as to be completely unattainable.

'The Southern Sea has few people but many cultivators—a mix of Buddhist, demonic, immortal, and shamanic practitioners. Humans are a rare commodity here… The major demonic arts have all been modified over time to use demons as sustenance.'

He took another look around and noticed many mortals moving through the market, smiling and addressing cultivators as "lord." In a corner, two children were chattering away, casually discussing the divine abilities of Purple Mansion cultivators.

It dawned on him in an instant.

'The mortals of the Southern Sea live within underwater formations, and most of them are related to cultivators in some way… On one hand, their population is small, so their lives are not in peril. On the other hand, their connections to cultivators protect them from being harvested.'

The land in the Southern Sea was nothing like the mainland. In Jiangnan, an acre of land could support a family. Even the laziest farmer could simply toss seeds on the ground and not worry about food. This abundance was what sustained the yearly losses of the Three Sects and Seven Gates.

The Eastern Sea also had few people and many cultivators, but it received a massive influx of spiritual grain and blood essence from the northern and southern cultivators of the mainland, so it was of little concern. The Southern Sea was in a much more difficult position. Aside from a few large continents, the rest of the mortals could only survive in underwater formations, living side-by-side with cultivators.

'So… the Southern Sea, renowned throughout the world for its demonic cultivators… actually has a remarkably stable social order… Mortals rarely face mortal danger, their lives are closely intertwined with cultivators, they have a clear understanding of cultivation, and their role is to serve the cultivators…'

A sarcastic smile touched his lips. 'The people of the Buddhist lands are sallow and gaunt, hoping for death from the moment they are born. The common folk under the Immortal Sects are ignorant and unenlightened, waiting quietly to be culled. Yet here, in this southern demonic sea, people know why they live and why they will die. The Great Dao of cultivation is right beside them.'

As the lord of his own lake, Li Zhouwei was no stranger to the complexities of human nature. He had always heard that the Southern Sea was overrun with

demonic cultivators, but seeing it with his own eyes, the discrepancy sparked a revelation. He immediately came to a realization.

'But these people only refrain from preying on humans because there are too few to be worth the trouble… They were forced to capture demons for alchemy, and it gradually became a habit. If they ever had the chance to go to the mainland or the Eastern Sea, where humans are as common as gold, they would likely be more ferocious killers than anyone.'

He was silently observing the Southern Sea's extreme system of cohabitation between immortals and mortals, looking for something he could adapt for his own use, when Bai Rong returned, his arms laden with shells and coral. He picked out a glittering blue conch and pressed it into Li Zhouwei's hands with a grin.

"I have many little foxes back in my cave. It's not often I get to go out, so I have to bring them back some treasures. I couldn't leave you out!"

Li Zhouwei accepted it with a small smile. The conch was merely an Embryonic Breathing-level artifact, capable of stirring the seawater a bit. He thanked the fox, not wanting to refuse the kind gesture, and tucked it into his robes.

Bai Rong beamed, humming contentedly. He leaned in and whispered, "My great-grandmother told me that when she came to the Southern Sea back in her day, there weren't so many demonic arts and blood-essence techniques. This area was quite desolate. It was only after the Miao Family rose to power that demonic arts suddenly proliferated throughout the entire sea—and high-quality ones at that."

"Oh?" Li Zhouwei immediately sensed something unusual. He frowned. "I had heard that the Southern Sea has long been known as a sea overrun by demonic cultivators…"

Bai Rong scoffed. "A long time ago, while they were demonic arts, they were just common, low-grade stuff. There were also plenty of wood, earth, and water-based cultivation methods… There were even several immortal sects. Now, you can't find a single one. And isn't that the Miao Family's handiwork!"

Putting the pieces together, Li Zhouwei finally understood how the Miao Family had established their immense power in the Southern Sea.

'What a ruthless method. Disseminate high-grade demonic arts in a place like the Eastern or Southern Sea, where everyone is struggling to survive… Once those arts take root, things are no longer so simple…'

'Nearly half of all demonic arts don't even require one to gather Qi… as long as one consumes enough blood essence.'

'The Miao Family controlled the thunder-art cultivation methods and Qi-gathering techniques, allowing them to rest easy. Then, they spread various convenient, low-barrier, and fast-cultivating demonic arts across their vast domain. This immediately squeezed out all other cultivation methods until no one practiced them anymore…'

'Then, their own direct descendants could rely on their abundant resources to cultivate thunder arts. When they went out, which of them couldn't completely dominate their opponents?'

He shook his head, thinking, 'No wonder they say the Miao Family is a clan of thunder arts, yet also people of the demonic path. Whether they themselves consume blood essence or not, I don't know… but this single strategy reveals the depths of their cunning.'

As Li Zhouwei was pondering this, Bai Rong began to mutter again. "Kid, the demonic calamity in Jiangnan mostly originated from the Blood Asura Scripture, and that technique also belongs to the Miao Family… The Golden Feather Sect borrowed it from them… That Golden Feather Sect… they're all a bunch of schemers too. Just look at their rise to power. They're now the unrivaled leader of the Three Sects, and the Seven Gates fear them like tigers. That alone shows how formidable they are!"

Li Zhouwei understood immediately from his words. 'He's giving me a roundabout warning…'

The Golden Feather Sect didn't actually have any major conflicts with his family; in fact, their relationship was quite good. The Li family had gathered Qi in the great desert for many years without anyone daring to disturb them, which Li Zhouwei was certain wouldn't have happened without the Golden Feather Sect's tacit approval.

Furthermore, it was rumored that Li Tongya and Zhang Yun were good friends, and the disciples of the Golden Feather Sect had always been polite to the Li family…

But Bai Rong had given the warning, and Li Zhouwei could only take it to heart. He said humbly, "This junior will remember!"

Bai Rong glanced at him, seemingly worried his pointed words might have caused offense. He asked a few cheerful questions, but just then, a roar echoed from the sea. Turquoise waves surged, and the clanking of iron chains rang out.

BOOM!

A colossal Azurewater Scaled-Beast slowly materialized above the seabed. A resplendent and luxurious palace floated in the ocean, its immense black shadow swiftly blanketing the entire marketplace. Even the luminous pearls that lit the city dimmed.

The cultivators in the streets all looked up, staring dumbfounded at the scene in the water above. The sound of a conch horn boomed, and a familiar cry echoed from the sea:

"The Clear Seas and Serene Pools Azure Dragon Prince's honored chariot is here—"

Chapter 667: A Plea for Some Respite

'Dingjiao really puts on a show…'

The entire street beside Li Zhouwei was now cast in shadow. A crowd of cultivators scattered in all directions, fleeing beyond the grand array. In an instant, the area was empty. Bai Rong muttered, "This Dragon Prince…"

The surroundings were in an uproar as people fled. The two mortal children from before had long since vanished. Before Bai Rong could finish his sentence, a silver-white bolt of lightning leaped out from the marketplace. It danced across the ocean a few times before flying toward the Azurewater Scaled-Beast, and a man's resonant, powerful voice called out:

"Miao Ye of Thunder Island pays his respects to the Dragon Prince of the Clear Seas and Serene Pools, Inheritor of the Azure!"

Li Zhouwei had met this man before. He had come to Moongaze Lake years ago demanding the Duruo Spear. His strength was considerable, and after some private inquiries about his ancestors, Li Zhouwei learned he was now stationed in the Southern Sea.

Miao Ye placed his hands on his knees and knelt in the water. He withdrew his hands, went down on one knee, and bowed three times in succession, his gaze lowered, too terrified to speak.

Li Zhouwei activated his ocular art, his vision exceptionally sharp. He could see that the one cracking a whip atop the Azurewater Scaled-Beast was a demon general with bulging gills and black armor. His expression was foul. He flicked the long whip and barked, "This has nothing to do with you! Get to the side and wait!"

Miao Ye looked as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He stepped aside and stood by, ordering someone to bring up a meal of blood-food. The black-armored demon general shouted them away, saying impatiently, "The Dragon Monarch's birthday is approaching! No blood is to be seen in the

Eastern Sea. Take that foul stuff away. If the master sees it, there's no telling what trouble you'll be in!"

The Dragon Monarch's birthday was still half a month away. How could Miao Ye not know this? Why else would he have brought up blood-food? It was clear the other party was just looking for a reason to berate him. He bowed and scraped, thanking the general for the reminder, and waited respectfully to the side.

Miao Ye repeatedly apologized. Bai Rong and Li Zhouwei watched as they made their way out of the marketplace. The fox sneered. The area around them was now completely empty; all the cultivators had cleared out.

Li Zhouwei exited the water barrier and looked around. The surrounding waters were murky. The vast, yellowish-green seabed had once been covered in coral and seagrass, with glowing yellow spiritual items nestled beneath. Now, it was nothing but turbid sand and stone, likely swept away by a violent squall.

"The Miao Family only harvests these things once every few decades, and now they're all gone…"

The dragon race was known for its domineering nature, but there was no need to humiliate the Miao Family so thoroughly. Li Zhouwei found it a bit puzzling. Bai Rong looked at him with a smile and whispered, "Thunder Island once obtained a treasure that the dragon race valued greatly. Both the Black Dragon and White Dragon lineages sent people to trade for it. After much deliberation, the Miao Family gave it to the envoy of the Black Dragon lineage…"

Bai Rong looked a little gleeful, relishing their misfortune. "They had to offend one side or the other, and the White Dragon lineage was thoroughly disgusted. Naturally, Dingjiao wouldn't have a good attitude on his way here. Miao Ye knows this full well and is terrified of giving him any excuse. He's completely stressed out."

Li Zhouwei finally understood. He asked, "What kind of treasure was it? The dragon race is the master of the Eastern Sea's riches. What could possibly make them compete for it?"

"Radiant Profound Origin!"

As soon as Bai Rong said the name, Li Zhouwei understood. "So it was for the sake of dragon heirs."

The Radiant Profound Origin was just an ordinary Purple Mansion Realm spiritual item, nothing special to the dragon race. However, it happened to have the effect of aiding childbirth, which made it incredibly valuable.

The two of them had now arrived before the Azurewater Scaled-Beast. Miao Ye still stood with his head bowed, not daring to move. He might have recognized Li Zhouwei, but the respectful expression on his face didn't waver in the slightest, and his aura remained calm.

'He's a man of deep cunning.'

Li Zhouwei noted him with a glance. The black-armored demon general approached with a smiling face, put away his whip, and said, "My lords, this way please…"

Bai Rong walked swiftly into the hall with him. Behind them, everything instantly dissolved into infinite, swirling waves of azure and blue, churning into a maelstrom. It was clear the Azurewater Scaled-Beast was on the move. Li Zhouwei steadied himself and heard a clear, bright laugh.

"Fellow Daoists!"

Standing in the center of the hall was a youth with white horns. His robes were embroidered with waves and flood dragons, and his light blue eyes looked over with a smile. He took a step forward in his golden boots, and Dingjiao announced in a clear voice, "Dingjiao, White Flood Dragon of the Clear Seas and Serene Pools, Inheritor of the Azure, greets you, fellow Daoist."

This greeting was clearly directed at Bai Rong. The fox flicked his pale green and white sleeves, and his voice, light and melodious, adopted a tone completely different from before as he replied, "Bai Rong, the Plain-Hearted Fox of Moongaze Lake, pays respects to the Crown Prince."

"Excellent…" Dingjiao laughed heartily, appearing to be in high spirits. He invited the two to be seated, then feigned surprise and said, "So, Bai Rong is a Plain-Hearted Fox, with a bloodline so close to the Lord of Mount Dali! I have been neglectful. Had I known your identity, fellow Daoist, I should have come out of the hall to welcome you. The fault is mine."

"Your Highness jests."

Bai Rong, with his slender eyes and handsome features, sat holding his wine cup. His tone was soft and graceful, his smile perfectly composed—a stark contrast

to his usual playful demeanor. He said tactfully, "I was fortunate to receive the grace of the Mountain Lord's blood pool, which tempered my very nature and allowed me to be reborn. I am unworthy of such ceremony."

Dingjiao looked as if he had just realized something. He nodded and clapped his hands lightly. "Then your fortune is profound indeed," he said softly.

The two exchanged a few more cordial words before Dingjiao turned his attention back to Li Zhouwei, his expression growing serious. "Minghuang, I was in the wrong last time for neglecting you. Now that this matter has come to fruition, I am deeply grateful and will not forget it."

What Li Zhouwei wanted was a favor from the dragon race, not their spiritual artifacts. That spiritual ring of the Bright Yang path was certainly powerful, but it wasn't something he could use. He shook his head and said, "Your Highness is too kind. It was all thanks to Senior Bai Rong's assistance. I cannot take the credit."

The three of them chatted for a while. Bai Rong revealed a side of himself completely unlike before, demonstrating great social grace. He told a few eloquent stories, lavishing praise on Dongfang Heyun several times. Dingjiao listened with a smile, and both host and guests were pleased.

The Azurewater Scaled-Beast moved with incredible speed. Time passed as Li Zhouwei listened to the other two converse. Finally, he felt a slight tremor, and a demon general with long whiskers came forward to report, "Reporting to my lords, we have arrived at the Grave Abyss."

Dingjiao rose and began to walk, guiding the two of them as he spoke softly, "Minghuang, you may not be familiar with this place. Let me explain. We are south of the Southern Sea, in a place called the Grave Abyss."

The group flew up from the scaled beast. Before them lay a vast, empty expanse of sand. Stone islands of various sizes were scattered in a radial pattern around a colossal abyss in the center. Gazing into the distance, they couldn't see the other side of the chasm.

The islands on both sides of the abyss were fractured and broken, some as large as cities, others as small as houses, stretching out as far as the eye could see. Seawater flowed into the great chasm through a spiderweb of fine channels, and below was infinite darkness.

Dingjiao gazed into the depths and said quietly, "Before the great celestial shift, this place was a continent as vast as Jiangnan, but sparsely populated. While Jiangnan had a hundred million people back then, this place had no more than ten million."

"During the celestial shift… two Immortal Lords fought here, shattering the entire continent. The spiritual qi vanished, and to this day, no living creatures can survive here. My dragon race calls it the 'Grave Abyss'… it is the counterpart to the 'World's Navel' in the Eastern Sea."

Bai Rong nodded. It seemed to be his first time here as well. He looked around with great interest and said softly, "I've heard that because there is no spiritual qi here, the Great Void does not exist. Even Purple Mansion Realm cultivators must descend and fly normally…"

"Correct." Dingjiao said softly, "This place extends all the way to the Netherworld, where the Underworld is located. It is said that the officials of the Underworld use this as an entrance and exit."

As he spoke, he descended silently. The three of them were quickly swallowed by the infinite darkness. Li Zhouwei watched the seawater cascading down on both sides, frowned, and murmured, "This Grave Abyss is terrifyingly vast. How has the water of the Southern Sea not been drained dry? It's hundreds of times larger than the celestial hole in the Northern Sea. Even if the entire Southern Sea rained down, it wouldn't be enough to fill it…"

"Could it be like the corner of the sea, where the water falls into the depths and immediately returns to the ocean as water veins?"

Dingjiao shook his head and explained, "The seawater doesn't fall into the Grave Abyss from all directions. This area is just one inlet. If you were to fly south for a while, you'd find the ground is higher than the sea level, and no water is falling."

Li Zhouwei nodded in understanding and added a word of caution, "There's no spiritual qi here. We'll be in trouble if we run out of dharma power…"

"Don't worry." Dingjiao took out some white pearls from his sleeve, considered them for a moment, then put them back. Instead, he produced a black, disc-shaped spiritual artifact. It instantly grew larger, forming a platform beneath their feet. He said apologetically, "My personal mount, Revering Radiance, is ill-suited for travel within the abyss."

Bai Rong nodded, then asked with some doubt, "But this tale about this abyss leading to the Netherworld… I've never heard it before. After all, we are not familiar with the affairs of the sea. Could Your Highness elaborate?"

He offered a brief apology for his ignorance. Dingjiao waved his hand dismissively and said in a low voice, "This story dates back to the era of the Qi State. The Northern Qi replaced the Wei. The former Wei Crown Prince, Li Xunquan, raised an army and for a time controlled the Long region, which people then called Long Wei. A certain lord from my family was living in Wei at the time and became close friends with someone there. They got along very well."

"Later, a great drought struck the south. The lord went personally to bring rain. When he returned, he found his friend had been murdered. So he traveled all the way here, descended deep into the abyss, flew all the way into the Netherworld, met with a judge of the Underworld, and brought the person back."

Li Zhouwei was stunned at first, then his heart pounded with excitement. He asked in a heavy voice, "So when a person dies, their soul is truly taken to the Underworld, just like in the legends? And they can be brought back?!"

But Dingjiao hesitated. He said quietly, "When a mortal dies, their soul undoubtedly scatters. But I've heard that everyone in the world is registered on the Underworld's lists. If one practices the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao, the Underworld even knows their cultivation level and techniques. As for capturing souls… that sort of thing shouldn't happen anymore."

"But…" The fierce hope that had surged in Li Zhouwei's heart was instantly extinguished. He lowered his head, a question unspoken.

Dingjiao replied, "I've inquired about this as well. I heard it was because that person was born before the celestial shift and also practiced the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao… so the Underworld arrested him according to their laws. For those born after the celestial shift, unless they fail when attempting to form a Golden Core, the Underworld doesn't get involved."

Seeing Li Zhouwei's distress, Bai Rong changed the subject. He secretly recalled something and asked softly, "What if an immortal cultivator is not on their list?"

"Not on the list?" Dingjiao glanced at him, shook his head, and smiled. "That would mean they practice the Dao of Shamanic Talismans, or the method of nourishing one's nature by consuming qi!"

The white fox lowered his head thoughtfully. Li Zhouwei, however, was only disappointed for a moment before he composed himself and asked in a low voice, "I have heard the name Li Xunquan. There were constant uprisings in the north back then, and many gained significant traction. There were two attempts by the Wei's Li family to restore their kingdom. Later, there was also a Li Xuan… I just don't know what happened to him afterward."

The Li family had gathered a great deal of information over the years and paid special attention to such matters, but it was impossible to find out more in Jiangnan. It was a rare opportunity to hear about it in the Eastern Sea.

Bai Rong glanced at Dingjiao and said softly, "He was killed by the Qi Emperor. His head was hung over the city of Dianyang and wasn't taken down for nine years."

Dingjiao fell silent. The spiritual artifact beneath their feet bobbed gently. Li Zhouwei's breath caught, his expression darkened, and he stared into the endless blackness.

'What is Dingjiao really trying to do…'

Throughout the journey, Li Zhouwei had come to appreciate Dingjiao's status. This Crown Prince of the White Dragon lineage was likely one of the most distinguished figures in the world.

'The Eastern Sea is vast, and the dragon race commands many Purple Mansion Realm demon beasts. If he truly needed something, couldn't the dragons send a great demon of the Purple Mansion Realm to help him?'

'Leaving aside others, Dongfang Heyun alone is strange enough…'

'Bai Rong is a Foundation Establishment fox demon, and his cultivation method isn't specialized in hearing. Perhaps his bloodline or a few special techniques give him keen senses, but could he really compare to a Purple Mansion expert with their divine abilities?'

'Judging from the attitudes of the two demons… this matter was jointly arranged by the fox and dragon races… What in the world is it, and why did they have to bring me along…'

'Bai Rong said Dingjiao wanted to befriend me… is that why he brought me here? Is there some benefit for me in this…'

He pondered this for a while. They sat in silence for several days. Both Dingjiao and Bai Rong had stopped speaking. Dingjiao was completely quiet, while Bai Rong's expression was intensely focused, his ears twitching slightly.

He slowly stood up, listening for a moment. White fur began to sprout from his skin, and with a shake of his body, he transformed into a pure white fox, without a single blemish.

The fox's two ears stood erect. Surprisingly, a third ear was situated between its brows, triangular in shape with the tip pointing upwards. Viewed from the side, it resembled a white horn, fluffy and exquisitely formed.

Having revealed his true form, Bai Rong crouched on the disc as they continued deeper. Dingjiao remained motionless, watching them quietly. The spiritual artifact flew slower and slower, until it finally came to a stop.

Dingjiao said softly, "There is a sound here. Bai Rong, listen closely. The dharma power in my artifact is running low. If you can't hear it here, we will have to go deeper."

Li Zhouwei couldn't hear a thing; he found the silence around them terrifying. Bai Rong paused, then shook his head. "Please, let's fly a little further."

Silently, Dingjiao urged the artifact forward. They flew for a full half-hour through the pitch-black surroundings, devoid of any light, as if trapped in an endless, oppressive void, before stopping again.

Bai Rong twitched his ears and frowned. "It's a man's voice…"

The fox listened for another quarter of an hour, then said in a low voice, "He's saying…"

Bai Rong seemed uncertain, his expression tense. He lay down again to listen more carefully, then looked stunned. He whispered, "The… chains… burning… hot, beg… something…"

Li Zhouwei's heart tightened upon hearing this. Dingjiao frowned, his voice low and deep as he asked, "Did he say anything else?"

Bai Rong listened again for a while. Dharma power circulated through his body, and a purple glow mixed with mist swirled around him. The white fur on his ears turned a deep violet, strand by strand. After a quarter of an hour, he said quietly, "Nothing else. Just that one sentence."

His expression was one of shock. He paused before continuing, "His voice is at times as high as a tiger's roar, heart-rending, mixed with the sound of coughing up blood. At other times, it's as sharp as a mouse's squeak, piercing enough to shatter stone. It's utterly terrifying."

"He is saying…"

"The Dharma chains are scorching hot, and bind too tightly. I beg for some relief."

Dingjiao's eyebrows shot up, his expression a mixture of cold fury and shock. He was silent for a moment, then took a jade bottle from his sleeve, placed it in his palm, and said in a low voice, "Plain-Hearted Fox, keep listening."

Chapter 668: Inquiry

Dingjiao spoke in a low voice. Bai Rong glanced at him, a flicker of hesitation in his eyes. After all, some things were not meant to be heard by just anyone.

"Your Highness," he whispered, "do you have any information? This place is strange. If the one below has too powerful a background, we could break a serious taboo."

'So Bai Rong doesn't know who it is either…'

Of the three, he was the one who had to personally listen. If anything went wrong, Bai Rong would be the first to suffer. Dingjiao naturally understood his concerns and kept his voice low. "Don't worry. An elder once mentioned it. The person below is not a Golden Core cultivator. If a Golden Core master were crying out in pain, how could we possibly still be alive? Uncle Heyun would have appeared to warn us long ago…"

Bai Rong's greatest fear was a Golden Core cultivator. Listening in on the affairs of an ordinary Purple Mansion expert wouldn't pose much of a threat to a Plain-Hearted Fox like him, but once a Golden Core was involved, even the powerful figure backing him might not be able to protect him.

"The fact that Uncle Heyun hasn't shown himself means there is no danger here." Dingjiao softly reassured them both. He put away the jade bottle in his palm, revealing a bright white stone pearl underneath.

The stone pearl was a milky white, inscribed with three faint yellow lines. It was shrouded in a soft glow, devoid of any spectacular radiance. Dingjiao explained,

"This place is so deep that even a Purple Mansion cultivator can't probe its bottom. The further down you go, the thicker the malevolent qi becomes. An ordinary Purple Mansion expert coming here would only hear a single shout. That's why I made a special trip to retrieve this ancient spiritual artifact."

"This once belonged to the Jixian Immortal Dao. It's called the Yinqi's Earthen Word. It's been stored in my residence for a long time; it's rare that I have a use for it."

Hearing of its grand origins, Bai Rong couldn't help but steal a glance, his expression tinged with envy.

"An ancient spiritual artifact of the Earth Virtue path is a true rarity," he said softly. "The Jixian Immortal Dao was supremely powerful. Only a dragon prince like Your Highness would have such a thing in his collection."

Dingjiao seemed slightly embarrassed. He lifted his chin, his twin dragon horns emitting a faint light, almost the only source of illumination in the entire abyss.

"The Earth Virtue path is formidable," he replied, "but this item is too ancient. In that era, cultivators didn't forge artifacts with combat as the priority; mystical function came first. This thing is of little use in a fight."

Bai Rong looked somewhat puzzled, but Dingjiao didn't elaborate. He casually tossed the stone pearl, and it began to spin in mid-air. A murky yellow light immediately emerged from it. Li Zhouwei frowned slightly, but Dingjiao remained silent.

The murky yellow light flowed in a circle, sweeping across the stone wall like a shadow. Wherever it passed, the earth and stone trembled and rustled. Dingjiao's voice was low as he chanted an obscure and unintelligible mantra.

With a crackle, a mouth no bigger than a palm split open on the adjacent stone wall. It had distinct lips and teeth, and a thick, buzzing voice emerged from it.

The voice was hoarse, like the grinding of stones, deep and layered. It sounded ancient and hesitant, but offered no further reaction. Bai Rong watched thoughtfully and chuckled.

"Jixian Immortals, after all."

Dingjiao waited a moment longer before giving up. He passed the stone pearl over with a smile.

"Minghuang, this artifact can hear the speech of the earth and make stones speak on our behalf. But the Jixian Immortals were the leaders of the immortal dao, and this spiritual artifact has too much pride; it won't accept my demon power. You do it."

'How interesting.'

Li Zhouwei finally understood their reactions. He gently took the pearl and infused it with his dharma power. The pearl instantly brightened severalfold, becoming much more animated. The mouth on the stone wall called out eagerly, "Greetings, my lord!"

Li Zhouwei swept his spiritual sense over it and nodded.

"Are you the spirit of this wall?"

The stone wall replied respectfully, "Replying to my lord… it is indeed this humble spirit, awaiting the celestial decree of your lordships."

"Good." Dingjiao nodded in satisfaction and gave his instructions. "Go down and take a look. Report back what you find… and remember, you are not to listen or look. Just speak as commanded. I fear a single glance or sound might shatter what little divine power you have, and I'd have to summon you again."

"Thank you, esteemed immortal."

The minor spirit within the stone wall expressed its thanks, and the mouth immediately slid down the wall. Li Zhouwei offered a word of praise, glancing at the Yinqi's Earthen Word in his hand. He noticed the stone pearl was simple and unadorned, not looking at all like an ancient spiritual artifact.

Meanwhile, Bai Rong's ears twitched. He formed a seal, preparing to cast a spell. On high alert, he began to chant in a low voice, each word like a soft sob, grating and sharp.

Soon, a purple radiance flew from his fine fur, flitting like sparrows and flowing around their ears. Li Zhouwei suddenly felt his hearing clear, and a cacophony of sound emerged, coming from a distance, rising and falling.

"Bound… too tightly, I beg… for some relief!"

Bai Rong's description had not been an exaggeration. The voice was heart-wrenching, a continuous howl of agony, as if the speaker were suffering the ultimate torture, wanting to scream his very heart out.

With everyone at their posts, Dingjiao finally focused his mind and spoke softly, "Who are you?"

All sound by Li Zhouwei's ears ceased abruptly. The mournful cry was finally cut off, replaced by a silence so profound it was unnerving.

A dozen breaths passed before a shriek that could shatter metal and stone erupted, shaking the entire abyss. The man's voice was as sharp as a ghost's wail. "Who are *you*? Where is Yao Chenlin? Where is Yao Chenlin?! I beg… for some relief! I beg… for some relief!"

The force of the cry made Bai Rong grunt. Li Zhouwei felt the Yinqi's Earthen Word in his hand suddenly grow heavy; the stone pearl, which had been steadily drawing his dharma power, abruptly severed its connection. Dingjiao's face went pale.

Pop!

A faint noise sounded by their ears. Li Zhouwei was only supplying the power; the artifact was still under Dingjiao's control. He saw Dingjiao frown and knew without needing to be told: the minor spirit must have been destroyed by the psychic shock.

Without a word, Dingjiao summoned another mouth from the opposite wall, gave it its instructions, and sent it down. His tone was somewhat grim. "There is no Great Void here. Not only does it take a great deal of dharma power to summon a mountain spirit each time, but I also have to instruct it all over again…"

Bai Rong was doing his best to regulate his breathing, his expression complicated. "He might be at the bottom of the abyss, an unknown distance from here, yet the moment Your Highness asked, he was able to instantly send his roar back up with his dharma power! In just a few breaths! That level of strength…"

Dingjiao had clearly thought of this as well, his brow deeply furrowed. Bai Rong pondered for a moment before continuing, "I'm afraid my master couldn't do that. Perhaps only my grand-matriarch could even try…"

When cultivators like Xiao Chuting attained the Purple Mansion Realm, they could instantly transmit their voices over thousands of miles, but that was by using the Great Void. Anyone who achieved divine abilities could do it; it wasn't particularly difficult. But there was no Great Void here. For this person to project his voice all the way up relying on raw dharma power alone was something else entirely.

The group waited for a while before Dingjiao spoke again. "Who might you be, sir?"

After a few breaths, the man's voice indeed sounded by their ears again. This time it was much calmer, his tone hoarse and powerful, yet laced with the sounds of gritted teeth and coughing blood.

"…I am Li Xunquan."

Bai Rong was stunned. Dingjiao looked up. Beside them, Li Zhouwei's eyes widened slightly. The voice struck his heart like a great bell.

'The former Crown Prince of Wei, Li Xunquan!'

The one bound at the bottom of this abyss was the former Crown Prince of Wei, Li Xunquan, whose head had hung over the city of Dianyang for nine years!

Li Zhouwei's eyes flew open, his golden pupils fixed on Bai Rong and Dingjiao. Both demons wore expressions of shock that did not seem feigned. An emotion flashed across his own face, followed by a torrent of questions.

'Is this the real Li Xunquan or an imposter…'

'If Li Xunquan was killed at Dianyang, why is he here… and who did this…'

'What is the dragon race's intention!'

The thoughts flashed through his mind like lightning. Dingjiao glanced at him and said in a low voice, "Li Xunquan? My name is Dongfang Dingjiao. My grandfather is Dongfang You… Who bound you here?"

The voice from below paused, trembling with the effort of enduring excruciating pain. It cried out hoarsely, "Uncle? The pain is unbearable… I beg you, Uncle, loosen them for me!"

Li Zhouwei listened in silence. Li Xunquan had clearly only heard half the sentence and mistaken him for Dongfang You. Dingjiao looked vexed. He asked several more questions, but no matter what he asked, the man only fixated on the loosening of his bonds.

After a full quarter of an hour, Dongfang Dingjiao tried again. "What is it that binds you? How long have you been here?"

Li Xunquan seemed to have reached the limit of his endurance. His voice became a sharp shriek that pierced their ears. "The Fuxi Qilin-Binding Rope… Where is Yao Chenlin?! Loosen this rope for me!"

"Hmph…"

Dongfang Dingjiao grunted, his brow furrowed. The mountain spirit had evidently been destroyed again. An endless wail of agony rose from below. Li Zhouwei remained silent throughout, watching quietly.

The white flood dragon paused, then said softly, "My power is running low. Let's go up for now."

As he finished speaking, the spiritual artifact beneath their feet began to rise. Bai Rong withdrew his divine ability, and all the noise and cries of pain vanished from their ears. Li Zhouwei cast his gaze into the endless depths of the abyss.

Dingjiao seemed somewhat somber. "Minghuang," he said in a low voice, "I had only heard that there was something unusual here, that an elder was imprisoned underground. The clan never spoke of it, so I decided to take a look. I never imagined it would be him…"

Strictly speaking, Dongfang You and Emperor Gong of Wei were friends. Dingjiao's father, the Dragon King, would have to address Emperor Gong as 'uncle', which meant Dingjiao should, at the very least, call Li Xunquan 'uncle' as well. The relationship was only a generation or two removed, making them quite close—he fully qualified as an elder.

Though friendships often fade when people are gone, Dongfang Dingjiao had only brought up the connection to get closer to Li Zhouwei; it wasn't a tangible favor. But Li Xunquan was different… the former crown prince might have even had pleasant conversations with Dongfang You in the past.

Therefore, Dingjiao's mood was now very complicated. Though he had been mentally prepared, seeing this scene still stirred his emotions. The prince had rarely suffered any setbacks in his life, let alone been powerless while an elder was imprisoned deep underground. He said in a muffled voice, "His mind is already gone… He can only react to a few names. He must have been tortured for a very long time."

Bai Rong, having expended the most demon power, was a little listless. He murmured, "It has been fifteen hundred years since the fall of the Wei's Li dynasty. His head hung in Dianyang for nine years. He was probably captured and brought here right after. Fifteen hundred years of agony… no one could withstand that!"

Of the two demons, Bai Rong's words were pure sentiment, whereas Dingjiao felt a genuine, indignant sorrow. The dragon prince said coldly, "Although the

Qi Emperor was cruel and vicious, the Jie clan had at least received Emperor Gong's favor. He only killed my uncle and his partisans, hanging his head in Dianyang. Even privately, he was unwilling or unable to kill my uncle. He would never torture him in a place like this. Besides, the Qi Kingdom was destroyed by the Tuoba family long ago…"

"The one who imprisoned him here must be a major immortal Dao power in the north today, one that was at odds with the Wei's Li family, and one that covets the Bright Yang!"

Bai Rong's heart pounded with fear as he listened. He screamed internally, 'This kid isn't stupid! By being so specific, you've practically spelled out the name of Mount Luoxia! Dingjiao, oh, Dingjiao…'

Bai Rong knew that the relationship between Mount Luoxia and the dragon race, and indeed the entire demon race, was far from good. His own Mount Dali had suffered its share of setbacks at their hands. But Mount Luoxia was protected by a Dao Embryo; it was not a lineage one could speak of so casually!

How could Li Zhouwei not understand? The state of Zhao was now merely a plaything for Buddhist cultivators. The major immortal Dao powers in the north could be counted on one hand; you could guess the name just by thinking about it. Although he filed the information away, he couldn't properly respond. He only asked in a grave tone, "Your Highness, the affairs of Wei, Qi, Liang, and Zhao are rarely recorded in the south and are difficult to discern… What Dao did the Qi Emperor cultivate?"

Li Zhouwei knew quite a bit by now. At his question, Dingjiao sighed.

"The Qi Emperor, Shi Chang, cultivated Dry Qi, which is complementary to Lesser Yang. They have always been intrinsically linked. This Dao can transform Bright Yang into Lesser Yang… which fits the situation perfectly."

Bai Rong, hearing this, feared Dingjiao was about to mention Mount Luoxia again. He quickly interjected, "Isn't that right. The Supreme Yang can be divided into Lesser Yang, which gives birth to Dry Qi, and Dry Qi can in turn transform Bright Yang into Lesser Yang. The Dao of mutual generation lies therein."

Li Zhouwei committed this to memory. Since his own cultivation was of the Bright Yang, he would have to be wary if he ever encountered a practitioner of

Dry Qi in the future. He then saw Dingjiao clasp his hands behind his back and say softly,

"Thank you both. This matter can be considered to have a conclusion. Although it's not entirely satisfactory, I now have a clearer picture."

Dingjiao observed their reactions, knowing his earlier words had been understood. He didn't spell it out further, merely nodding slightly. The spiritual artifact beneath their feet flew faster and faster, transforming into a white shadow as it shot upwards. Dingjiao said softly, "However, the matter within this abyss is a secret, and not a glorious one. I must ask you both to keep this information confidential, for your own sakes as well."

"Of course."

Li Zhouwei and Bai Rong agreed. Dingjiao smiled. "Rest assured, there is no Great Void here, and I chose a special day to come. Cultivators within the seas cannot divine the affairs of my dragon race today. Besides, those lineages are arrogant and usually ignore matters within or outside the seas, let alone try to scry our movements."

The meaning behind his words was now even clearer: he was telling them not to worry. Bai Rong smiled and nodded, while Li Zhouwei began to ponder his words.

'A special day…'

Li Zhouwei paused for a moment, then immediately understood. A quick mental calculation brought a flash of admiration.

'It's the Dragon Monarch's birthday!'

When Li Zhouwei and the others had gone to Thunder Island, they had happened to hear Miao Ye and his men mention the Dragon Monarch's birthday. At the time, Li Zhouwei had asked Bai Rong, who said it was still about half a month away.

'And with all the time we've spent, it's been exactly twelve days. The time we spent at the bottom of the abyss just now was precisely the second day of the second month of the season!'

He glanced at Dingjiao. Bai Rong was also silent. Li Zhouwei understood completely.

'The fox clan of Mount Li also knew this was the most suitable day… That's why Bai Rong was in such a hurry. The travel time of the Azurewater Scaled-Beast was calculated in advance. It seemed like Dingjiao came and went as he pleased, but that couldn't be further from the truth…'

Chapter 669: The Dragon and the Fox

The two demons and one human emerged from the Grave Abyss and descended into the sea. They passed over a scattering of shattered, desolate islands, all of them utterly devoid of life.

Even the Western Mountains at Moongaze Lake, for all their lack of spiritual energy, at least supported the growth of mortal plants. This place, however, was nothing but barren sand and rock, without even common vegetation.

But Li Zhouwei saw more than just the surface. 'This place may be barren,' he thought, 'but it's also free from the influence of the Great Void. An excellent place to evade the prying senses of a Purple Mansion cultivator. A pity it's useless for cultivation.'

The long-bearded demon waited off to the side. Dongfang Dingjiao, in no mood for conversation, simply piloted his spiritual artifact past him. The Azurewater Scaled-Beasts lay quiescent on the seabed, resembling a living mountain range of glittering scales. As Dingjiao's party approached, a black-armored demon who had been waiting for them scurried over to greet them.

"My lords!"

It was clear Dongfang Dingjiao had no interest in speaking with him, and the demon, sensing his master's foul mood, became as meek as a lamb. With a wave of his hand, Dingjiao dismissed him, and the demon hurried off to ready the beasts.

Dingjiao landed before the main hall, flicked his sleeves, and let out a long breath. A smile finally graced his features.

"Please," he said softly.

The trio entered the hall to find someone already standing inside. His sleeves were perfectly neat, and a refined smile touched his lips. Seeing them enter, he bowed.

"Greetings, Your Highness! Greetings, fellow Daoists!"

"Uncle Heyun!" Dingjiao quickly stepped back and offered a respectful bow. The Dragon Prince was all smiles as he said graciously, "Uncle, you are an endlessly busy man. It is a rare honor to have you visit my humble palace!"

Dongfang Heyun returned the bow politely.

"I heard Your Highness was visiting this dangerous place, so I came ahead to wait," he said in a gentle voice. "I was following along just now, but I did not wish to disturb your experience, so I remained hidden."

He stayed half a step behind Dongfang Dingjiao, escorting him to the host's seat. Only after the prince and his honored guests were seated did he take a seat to the side. He adjusted his sleeves with a scholarly air.

"After all," he continued softly, "Li Xunquan is a demon who has lived for a millennium. Even bound by the Fuxi Qilin-Binding Rope, his mind is not clear, and he might still lash out. This abyss holds many dangers. While Your Highness's draconic might is vast, my concern was for your safety and that of your guests."

"Many thanks, Uncle!" Dongfang Dingjiao beamed at his words.

Bai Rong, meanwhile, was observing Dongfang Heyun with quiet astonishment.

'So this is Dongfang Heyun? Aside from his lack of divine abilities, he seems no different from a Purple Mansion cultivator. No wonder Tuoba Chongyuan's soul was scattered by him. This cloud-dragon could probably hold his own against a Purple Mansion master.'

After a moment, a new suspicion arose in his mind.

'Is he truly not at the Purple Mansion Realm? There is only one cloud-dragon in the entire world—who could possibly gauge his true strength? Perhaps he has already reached that realm, and the Dragon Monarch has simply concealed his divine abilities!'

Dingjiao paused for a moment before asking, "Uncle, I am unfamiliar with the Fuxi Qilin-Binding Rope. Could you tell me of it?"

"Oh?" Dongfang Heyun began softly, "The Fuxi Qilin-Binding Rope is an artifact belonging to Yao Chenlin. You young ones wouldn't know of it. Its purpose is to erode the will through the world's most extreme pain."

"Pain is no small matter; it is the greatest enemy of the mind. Under prolonged torment, one cannot stop the tears from flowing. Grudges, love, the desire for the Dao… all are forgotten. Only the overwhelming pain remains, and the sole desperate wish is for a single moment of rest."

"That is the function of the Fuxi Qilin-Binding Rope.

His tone was calm, tinged with an elegance that made his words all the more chilling.

"This artifact delights in hearing pleas for mercy. The more one struggles, the tighter it binds, inflicting limitless, bone-cracking agony. Only by howling for mercy can one find a moment's relief. The moment the cries cease, the pain returns a hundredfold. It is a simple method for breaking the will."

"After a thousand years of this," he concluded, "the only thought left in one's mind is that begging brings rest. For Li Xunquan to be able to respond at all speaks to the incredible strength of his will."

"What a vicious treasure…"

As Dongfang Heyun spoke, Dongfang Dingjiao's brow remained tightly furrowed. His branch of the family had always been the closest to the Wei-Li, and he fell into a deep silence.

Having finished his explanation, Dongfang Heyun took a sip of wine and glanced at Li Zhouwei.

"This must be the White Qilin," he smiled.

"Minghuang greets senior," Li Zhouwei replied.

Dongfang Heyun simply nodded, saying nothing more to him. He then turned to the fox.

"Please send my regards to your master."

After a few more pleasantries, he excused himself. He bowed before the hall and vanished, but not before giving Li Zhouwei one last, meaningful glance.

With his departure, Dingjiao's mood improved considerably. He raised his cup to his two guests, then looked in the direction Dongfang Heyun had disappeared, a flicker of delight in his eyes.

The Dragon Princes of the Eastern Sea had always been a privileged few who rarely gave Foundation Establishment cultivators a second thought. But he, Dongfang Dingjiao, had always been more moderate. He treated cultivators like them, and even Dongfang Heyun, with courtesy and respect.

'My other brothers… they treat Uncle Heyun as a mere subordinate, with a mind to command him for every trivial matter. They must be in a difficult position now!'

Naturally, Dongfang Heyun's attitude toward him was favorable. Had it been any of his other brothers, Heyun might have offered protection, but he certainly wouldn't have appeared personally to share a cup of wine.

'Dongfang Heyun is but one,' he thought, gazing into the distance. 'In the future, there will be Minghuang and Bai Rong…'

He finally turned back to Li Zhouwei, his expression full of pleasure.

"Since Minghuang is unwilling to accept an ancient spiritual artifact, I cannot let my friends leave empty-handed! That would be a failure on my part as a host!"

Dongfang Dingjiao clapped his hands lightly. Two demons entered from outside the hall, each carrying a stone box. They walked forward and presented them respectfully.

"My friends," Dingjiao said earnestly, "these, you cannot refuse. Consider it a small token of my hospitality!"

As the stone box was brought before him, Li Zhouwei was already prepared. 'This is what Bai Rong meant when he said Dingjiao wanted to befriend us…'

Dingjiao might not have known the identity of the person in the abyss, but as the one who extended the invitation, he almost certainly knew the prisoner was a victim of Mount Luoxia. He also knew this person was connected to both the dragon lineage and the Wei-Li.

'Why else would he insist I come? How else could this act serve to build an alliance?'

The greater calculus, he surmised, was part of the game between the dragon lineage and Mount Luoxia. By revealing all this so nakedly, Dingjiao was sending a clear message: Mount Luoxia harbored ill intentions.

'Dongfang Heyun even made a special appearance to tell me just how torturous the Fuxi Qilin-Binding Rope is. If Mount Luoxia treats a former Wei-Li prince like this, what kindness could they possibly hold for my Li family, for me?'

'The dragon lineage was friendly with the Wei-Li generations ago, and now they invite me into the sea as soon as I reach Foundation Establishment. Their stance is clear… But the fox clan of Mount Dali… what is their role in all of this?'

Chapter 670: The Deer's Transformation

'Bai Rong holds no ill will toward me,' Li Zhouwei mused. 'But this involves Mount Dali. The dragon and fox clans had a poor relationship before, and now I'm the one tasked with conveying messages… perhaps this is their attempt to change that.'

He carefully recalled Bai Rong's words, and the situation gradually became clearer.

'The main reason the two clans can even consider reconciliation is the death of their common enemy, Dongfang You. But a strained relationship isn't mended simply because a rival is dead. The fox clan is being proactive, and the dragons are being remarkably gracious. It's likely they are being pressured by an external force…'

'If they share a common enemy, and this new attempt at an alliance pivots on observing Mount Luoxia's secrets… and if I, a Wei-Li descendant with a deep-seated hatred for Mount Luoxia, am meant to be the linchpin… then the answer seems obvious.'

Li Zhouwei maintained a pleasant smile, his golden eyes betraying no hint of his sharp thoughts, but his mind grew ever more lucid.

'It's Mount Luoxia forcing them to turn from enemies to friends. But why act only now? Is it because of something Mount Luoxia has done… or is about to do?'

The Azurewater Scaled-Beast glided smoothly through the water. Melodious music filled the hall, mingling with the sweet fragrance of spiritual fruits and fine wine. Yet Li Zhouwei felt as if he were in the eye of a hurricane. The political

storm was gathering, a tempest of shimmering clouds and radiant light, involving Mount Luoxia, the dragons, the foxes, and countless other powers lurking in the shadows.

'Compared to even the weakest of them, the fox clan, my Li family is no larger than an ant.'

'Most importantly… does Mount Luoxia know? And what is *his* perspective on all this?'

Dingjiao had repeatedly assured him that the day's events would be hidden from any divination, but Li Zhouwei didn't take the words to heart. He treated them as mere pleasantries, and his worries were not the least bit assuaged.

'When I was first invited to the Flood Dragon Palace, how could the Purple Mansion cultivators of Jiangnan not know? My family has sought out the foxes several times—how could the nearby Purple Mansion cultivators not be aware? Even my departure from the lake and boarding the Azurewater Scaled-Beast in the Southern Sea happened in plain sight! None of it was a secret!'

'Why would anyone need divination for this? A simple deduction of the cause and effect would reveal seventy or eighty percent of the truth! What exactly is Dingjiao trying to keep secret? Is it only our entry into the abyss?'

Facing the Dragon Prince, whose smile was so warm and inviting, Li Zhouwei felt no sense of ease. His heart was as still as a tranquil lake.

'This prince's standing is higher than that of an ordinary Purple Mansion cultivator. While he is certainly trying to befriend me… could he have other motives?'

The mists of uncertainty before him offered no real clues. The black-armored demon had already presented the stone box, setting it before him and lifting the lid. A soft light emerged, shimmering within.

Li Zhouwei remained composed as he glanced inside. The box contained a casket of transparent, crystal-clear spirit water. Its color was so faint it was nearly invisible, with only a bright yellow reflection floating on its surface and nothing else.

He swept his spiritual sense over it and felt an overwhelming spiritual energy from the water, but the reflection had no apparent source.

Dongfang Dingjiao chuckled and waved his hand, silencing the music and dancing in the hall.

"Minghuang," he said softly, "this is called Concealed Plunder Gold. It is formed when the sun's essence falls into the deep sea. It cannot be seen with the eyes or detected by the senses. Even placed right before you, unless you have cultivated a divine ability, you wouldn't notice a thing."

"The casket holds Serpent Origin Spirit Water," he explained. "My dragon lineage uses it to wash the horns on our foreheads, while humans often use it to cultivate eye techniques. The Concealed Plunder Gold only casts a reflection in this type of spirit water. We use the water to locate it."

Li Zhouwei had heard of Serpent Origin Spirit Water before. A similar, precious substance called Clear Origin Spirit Water was used within the sea for eye-cultivation techniques. Yet here was an entire casket of it.

'And it's just being used to illuminate the Concealed Plunder Gold. A thin layer on the bottom would have sufficed, yet he used a whole casket. The wealth of the dragons is truly astonishing.'

Dingjiao added that the dragons used it simply to wash their horns, implying it was no rare treasure. He showed no regret in using it so lavishly, focusing instead on the invisible gold.

"This is a Supreme Yang spiritual item with a unique property. It can be placed within the Shengyang, Juque, or Qihai acupoints to assist in cultivating one's dharma light. It is of great benefit to almost all forms of dharma light!"

Hearing this, Li Zhouwei silently circulated the Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light within him. Though his spiritual sense couldn't perceive the object, he could feel his technique stirring with anticipation.

'This is indeed a fine treasure. It must be a rare and special Supreme Yang item, otherwise a man of Dingjiao's temperament would never have brought it out.'

This Dragon Prince had offered an ancient spiritual artifact at their first meeting—how could any ordinary item catch his eye? Even the Serpent Origin Spirit Water was just a tool to reveal this true treasure. With a serious expression, Li Zhouwei nodded.

"I have done little more than make a trip, exerting no real effort. I am unworthy of such a gift, but I will remember this kindness in my heart. Thank you, Your Highness!"

Seeing that he didn't refuse, the frown that had started to form on Dingjiao's brow relaxed. He smiled and nodded, then turned to Bai Rong.

"This Mysterious Jin Purple Fire," he said softly, "was obtained by a Luan-Phoenix senior by chance during her travels in the Western Sea many years ago. A Fire Luan who visited me some years back gifted it to me."

"But after much thought, my dragon lineage commands the races of the water. We have no use for this Mysterious Jin Purple Fire. It is far more valuable to your fox clan than it is to us."

"The elders of our two families have already discussed this, so I won't say more. Bai Rong, please accept it."

Bai Rong was visibly taken aback, as if the value of the Mysterious Jin Purple Fire exceeded his expectations. He accepted with clear delight. Dingjiao, greatly pleased, clapped his hands, and a troupe of women in purple robes hurried into the hall.

"Come."

Dongfang Dingjiao raised his cup. The purple-robed women began to dance, their robes revealing purplish-green shrimp tails that swished back and forth. They were clearly a troupe of shrimp demons, and their dance was quite distinctive.

'He is a dragon, after all,' Li Zhouwei thought. 'Not once on this entire journey has the banquet's entertainment been repeated. There have been shrimp, clams, crabs, and snakes… the dragons truly put effort into these matters.'

Li Zhouwei raised his cup, and the conversation continued amidst the music and dancing. Dingjiao was keen on building a friendship, and Bai Rong and Li Zhouwei were happy to reciprocate. The atmosphere was joyful and harmonious.

Outside the hall, the water rushed past, a blur of turquoise and red. The Azure-water Flood Dragon was speeding towards the Eastern Sea under a sky thick with dark clouds, where bolts of lightning slithered and surged.

Moongaze Lake.

The great hall on Pingya Island was quiet. A few cultivators hurried past as Li Jiangqian strode swiftly down the long flight of stairs. His features had matured in the past two years. Behind him, several figures stumbled to keep up.

"Your Highness!"

The two men were not young, their hair white with age. Judging by their robes, they were tutors. But Li Jiangqian was nimble. He slipped through a group of guards with a swish, leaving the two men far behind.

The tutors could only stop, sighing in exasperation.

Li Jiangqian was growing older and had lost his patience for elementary studies. Skipping lessons was a common occurrence. They knew which direction he was headed—he was surely going to find Li Quewan. Since they were forbidden from entering her inner hall, they could only stop here.

"I used to marvel at His Highness's intelligence… why does he dislike his studies so much now? It is Quewan who is the diligent one, with a benevolent heart…"

"Indeed…"

The two sighed and had no choice but to retreat.

Li Jiangqian, however, ran all the way to a different hall, pushing the heavy doors open with a creak.

Inside, the desk was neat and the books on the shelves were perfectly arranged. As he opened the door, a ray of golden light fell upon the girl before him.

"Quewan!"

Li Shuwan had been formally accepted into the clan at the lake and her name changed to Li Quewan. Her attire was brighter now, her complexion much healthier. Her eyes shone, and a small peach blossom was pinned in her hair. She covered her mouth and giggled.

"Brother Qian, skipping class again… You'll get an earful tomorrow!"

"What of it? They'll just nag a little. As long as they don't report me to the elders, they can't do anything to me."

Li Jiangqian took a bamboo box from his sleeve and placed it on the desk with a clatter. He opened it to reveal several snow-white pastries. Li Quewan thanked him but then furrowed her little brow.

"Brother Qian, the tutors are teaching the great principles of human relations, the separation of immortal and mortal, the unity of the great families, and the governance of the clan branches. You are to be the head of the family one day. How can you not listen?"

Li Jiangqian chuckled, looking at her with a smile. He pulled out a few of his own cultivation manuals and shook his head. "That's just the talk of a lacquerer. Hearing it once is enough."

The *Scripture of Heavenly Radiance and the Waning Sun* and the *Golden Book of Divine Attendance* were Purple Mansion cultivation arts and naturally couldn't be left lying around in the main hall. They had been stored away long ago, and both children had already memorized them. The books they could study here were merely secret manuals on cultivation techniques.

Hearing his words, Li Quewan looked at him, puzzled. As he flipped through a book to a note he had made previously, Li Jiangqian added casually, "All immortal clans and sects are like palaces. What those people teach is just the golden lacquer on the palace walls, used for decoration. Every family has its own principles, so they use their own lacquer. Some are bright, some are dark, but it's all just lacquer."

He raised an eyebrow, looking at the girl opposite him. He hesitated for a moment, then amended his statement. "Perhaps it is important. I'm just tired of hearing it."

But Li Quewan didn't let it go so easily. She thought for a moment and shook her head. "Brother Qian, you are very clever, but I don't think it is just lacquer… and those words aren't just for decoration. Since those words have been spoken, the people of our family have something to rely on."

"Perhaps for you, what color the lacquer is doesn't matter. But the common people can only look up and see the color of the lacquer. To them, it is very important."

Her words made Li Jiangqian pause. He looked at her seriously, his brow furrowed. "But public sentiment is something that can be easily manipulated. A single spell or a divine ability is all it takes. What they think isn't important. It has no meaning."

"Look at the Buddhist cultivators in the north. How bitter and difficult are the lives of their people? How lost are they from birth to death? The lives they lead would be considered the worst of the worst in Jiangnan. And yet, they think only of their next life and worship their masters with all their hearts. What bad reputation could there possibly be?"

Li Quewan was silent for a moment, her eyes quietly glancing at him. "But how they live," she said softly, "is very important."

Li Jiangqian thought for a moment, then realized her point. "You are right… after all, this is the foundation of our family."

The girl pressed her lips together. She knew he was thinking about the Talisman Seeds. She wanted to say more but held her tongue, then smiled to herself.

'It doesn't seem to make a difference. One is judged by their actions, not their thoughts. Brother Qian is brilliant, far beyond me. As long as his heart is in the right place, no one will be able to bully him in the future!'

Li Quewan giggled. The thought of working together with someone like Li Jiangqian made the road ahead seem much smoother. She went back to her reading. Li Jiangqian, however, secretly glanced at her.

'She is exceptionally talented. I must maintain a good relationship with her. No matter what happens, having a genius on my side is for the best!'

Though they had just debated, they seemed to hold each other in higher and warmer regard. Li Jiangqian mused, 'We are both smart and talented. It is difficult for two intelligent people whose interests are naturally aligned to have any real conflict.'

After they had been reading for a short while, someone entered the outer hall and announced, "The Fourth Lord is here."

This referred to Li Zhouluo, the son of Li Chenghuai, who was technically their fourth uncle. Li Jiangqian put his things away and quickly stood up to go out. As he stepped out of the inner hall, he saw Li Zhouluo pacing anxiously.

"Fourth Uncle!"

Li Jiangqian was much more outgoing. Li Quewan, still a bit shy, followed quietly behind him.

Li Zhouluo returned the greeting politely, but his expression was troubled. He sighed softly and shook his head. "Something has happened at the lake. My father was busy all last night, and the elders have all gone to Qingdu for a meeting. He sent me here first thing this morning… I am to wait here. The other cousins will be coming. Elder White Ape is going to take us to Qingdu."

"Oh?" Although young, Li Jiangqian was thoughtful. He simply asked, "What happened?"

Having been by his father's side, Li Zhouluo was more familiar with the clan's affairs. "A mortal deer was found on the eastern shore," he sighed. "It cannot speak, but it acts like a human, dragging several people along, kowtowing and weeping all the way to the foot of the mountain. Its hooves were stained with ink, and it could even write."

Hearing this strange news, Li Quewan's eyes widened.

Li Zhouluo continued in a low voice, "My father studied it all night. None of the Foundation Establishment cultivators in the family could communicate with animals. Fortunately, Elder White Ape is a demon and knew a few methods. After a night of questioning, he learned the truth."

"The deer was once a mortal man who lived on the eastern shore. His father, a gambler, had just passed away. The family was destitute, and his wife was bedridden. He went into the mountains, hoping to hunt a couple of deer to help them get by."

"The hunter went into the mountains and, by a stroke of luck, managed to hunt two deer. He was rushing back, eager to save his wife, when he ran into a monk on the path…"

A look of anger appeared on Li Zhouluo's face. "The monk was furious that he had taken lives. The hunter immediately begged for mercy, but the monk said that he had harmed two lives to save one. And with that, he cast a spell and turned the hunter into a deer, saying he should experience what it feels like to be hunted."

"That's…" Li Quewan looked confused.

Li Jiangqian's expression, however, turned dark. "Where did this bald donkey come from?" he muttered. "He might as well turn all the killers in the world into beasts. Where is Master Kongheng? Is there any news?"

Li Zhouluo's face was etched with anxiety. "That's the problem," he said, shaking his head. "Master Kongheng has already examined the deer. He said the one who cast the spell is extremely powerful. There isn't a single trace of magical energy on the deer. His cultivation is far superior to Master Kongheng's."

Li Jiangqian frowned.

Li Quewan waited until they had finished speaking before asking softly, "Since he was turned into a deer, what about his bedridden wife?"

"She…" Li Zhouluo shook his head. "She was already gravely ill and hadn't eaten for a long time. By the time she was found… she was already gone."

Chapter 671: Fu Xia

In recent years, Qingdu Mountain had seen a flurry of new construction, with pavilions and towers now dotting its landscape. After the main branch of the Li family moved from the summit, the spiritual abodes within the Qingdu Cave Dwellings below were repurposed as a place for the lake's various cultivators to enter seclusion for their breakthroughs. The caverns were quiet, safe, and free from disturbance.

Li Xuanxuan emerged from the main hall on the summit, closely followed by Li Ximing's grandson, Li Zhouming. The young man's aptitude for cultivation was regrettably low; after all this time, he remained stalled at the second stage of Embryonic Breathing. With his grandfather, Li Ximing, in seclusion, the boy could only tag along behind Li Xuanxuan and offer a helping hand where he could.

As the old man reached the front of the hall, he saw a magnificent deer kneeling before it. Its coat was sleek and glossy, but it was prostrated as if frozen in place, tears streaming endlessly from its eyes.

The White Ape watched from the side, its gaze filled with a quiet sorrow. Nearby, the monk Kongheng stood with his palms pressed together, chanting sutras under his breath, his brow deeply furrowed in distress.

Li Xuanxuan had already been briefed on the situation. The old man rarely showed his anger, but now he could not hide his displeasure. "A Buddhist cultivator? If he has a grievance with my family, he should have come to me directly! What is the meaning of taking it out on a mortal!"

Li Chenghuai stood nearby, his voice soft and laced with helplessness. "The story has already spread like wildfire through the towns on the eastern shore. Everyone is terrified. No one dares to enter the mountains anymore. In fact, many have started building shrines, saying that if they believe in the Revered One, they'll be spared from such calamities."

"Preposterous!" Li Xuanxuan sighed.

The White Ape gently stroked the deer's back. After a long silence, it finally spoke. "These zealots are the most stubborn of them all. They delight in toying with the lives of others, dealing out what they call retribution for their own amusement. They cannot comprehend the pain of others until it strikes them personally. Then, in a fit of rage, they forget all compassion, all forgiveness, and raise their blade in the name of defending the Dao."

It was rare for the old ape to speak at such length, and a hush fell over the hall. Kongheng listened, his expression pained. After a moment, he murmured, "Senior… they also teach people to do good, but their methods are too tyrannical… Not everyone of my path is like this…"

The old ape sighed but didn't argue. "The esteemed monk speaks the truth."

Li Xuanxuan's gaze fell upon the prostrated deer. "Master Monk, since you cannot undo this, do you have any trace of the one who did it? Or can you at least identify his lineage? I fear that if we allow him to run rampant on our lake, he will only cause more harm."

Kongheng paused. "I follow an ancient path; I have no skill in divination. From the look of it, he is an old, experienced monk and left no traces… I'm afraid he will be difficult to find."

He seemed more certain about the next part.

"As for his lineage," he said softly, "judging by his actions, he likely belongs to one of the more archaic sects among the seven paths. He neither killed nor laid any curses, so his methods are, in a way, orthodox."

"Oh?" Li Xuanxuan felt a sliver of relief. If the intruder were like Murong Xia of the Yan Buddhists, who cultivated human heads in his stomach, he could have converted half a town with a single breath. The fact that he had only transformed a man into a deer was certainly not the Yan style. "And which paths are considered orthodox?"

Kongheng bowed his head. "To answer the venerable elder, the Path of Precepts and Austerity and the Great Adoration Dharma Realm are both quite righteous, with principles that resonate with my own path. There is one other… the Path of Wrathful World Purification… that is also considered orthodox…"

The words startled Li Xuanxuan. The old man frowned. "The Path of Wrathful World Purification is considered orthodox?"

"Indeed," Kongheng said quietly. "Setting aside the monks from wild, unvetted temples, the renowned monasteries of the Wrathful Path have always upheld extremely strict rules. Though they are dogmatic and unyielding, they are dedicated to vanquishing demons. In that, they are a righteous path…"

Li Xuanxuan was silent for a breath, then shook his head. "Then it must be the Wrathful Path. A grudge with them won't be settled in a hundred years, let alone a thousand!"

"The Wrathful Path…" Kongheng repeated the name, then chanted several lines of scripture, a troubled look on his face. "Venerable elder… the Wrathful Path is not to be trifled with. If it were some rogue monk from a mountain hovel, that would be one thing. But if he is truly of this lineage, then his actions suggest he comes from a major temple…"

His worry was palpable. "It is said that after the fall of the Warthful Subduer of the Four Demon Emperors… the Wrathful Path suffered a devastating blow. Their major temples have sealed their gates and no longer interact with the outside world. Nearly all their monks who were abroad have perished. Let us hope we are not dealing with a Merciful One…" He trailed off, then added, "Even with the Wrathful Subduer gone and the Merciful One's power reduced to a fraction of its former glory, they are still far beyond what an ordinary monk can face."

Li Xuanxuan fell silent. After a quarter of an hour, Chen Yang strode into the hall, cupped his fist in a salute, and announced in a grave voice, "My lords, there is a monk waiting outside the formation!"

A jolt went through Li Xuanxuan. He turned quickly to Li Chenghuai. "Go to Mount Wu at once!" he ordered urgently. "See if Ximing is at a critical point in his seclusion! If not, tell him to come here immediately! I fear we have a serious problem on our hands!"

Li Chenghuai nodded and hurried away. Seeing the old man's panic, Kongheng quickly tried to reassure him. "For this person to approach our gates and ask for entry suggests he may not be an enemy. Please, Senior, rest for a moment. Elder White Ape and I will go and handle this first…"

Li Xuanxuan had no other choice. With Li Ximing in seclusion, the only ones in the Foundation Establishment Realm in the family were the White Ape and

Kongheng. The old ape's strength was not what it once was, leaving Kongheng as their only truly reliable power. He could only nod in agreement.

With Li Xuanxuan's consent, Kongheng walked briskly out of the hall, the White Ape following silently behind him.

"We don't know if this visitor is friend or foe, but he is at least a fellow Buddhist cultivator," Kongheng said softly. "I will go out first to gauge the situation. Senior, please wait within the protection of the array."

The White Ape gave a slight nod.

Once outside the grand formation, Kongheng rose into the air on a gust of wind. As expected, he saw an old monk standing upon the shimmering surface of the lake.

The monk's face was a web of wrinkles, and he held a staff in his hand, his expression as placid as a still well. A deep yellow kasaya was draped over his body, leaving one muscular arm exposed. The arm was powerful and well-defined, gleaming faintly in the sunlight. Circular runes were faintly visible on the kasaya, shimmering like scales under the light. The long staff in his hand was the color of pure white jade.

He stood in silence, but a circle of cultivators had already gathered around him, all of them holding their breath, too afraid to make a sound.

When Kongheng descended onto the lake's surface, the surrounding cultivators let out a collective sigh of relief and scattered. Their leader, An Siwei, approached and said respectfully, "Master Monk… this man used a piece of driftwood from the shore as a boat and paddled all the way here."

Kongheng glanced down and saw that the man was indeed standing on a withered log to stay afloat on the water. His expression was utterly serious as he opened his eyes. His voice was deep and resonant.

"Master, are you of the Northern Revered One's lineage?"

Before Kongheng could even speak, the monk's preemptive question caught him off guard, leaving him feeling slightly awkward. "I do not deserve the title of Master," he replied politely. "This humble monk is Kongheng, from Liaohe Temple."

"Liaohe Temple?" The old monk was clearly not a patient man. His eyes flew open, the scales on his kasaya glittering, and his tone became harsh and critical.

"Your lineage is profound and orthodox, the envy of all. How could you forget the sin of extravagance? We cultivators are meant to measure the world with our own two feet. Why do you imitate other practitioners, flying about from high to high? Is that not indulging in the desire for pleasure?"

This man had turned someone into a deer for no reason, and before Kongheng could even ask why, he was being berated. He was taken aback for a moment, then frowned. "Luxury is a state of mind, not an action. Senior, you overstate things."

The old monk seemed to let the matter drop with a snort. "Fu Xia, of the Northern Demon-Subduing Temple."

'So he really is from the Wrathful Path…' Kongheng's heart sank. This was bad. He could only force himself to bow in return. "May I ask why Senior has come here…?"

Fu Xia's face was cold, as if he was trying to suppress a laugh at the question. "Master Kongheng… are you truly this ignorant, or are you just pretending? We are both followers of the Buddhist Dao; there is no place for such nonsense! Are you, or are you not, a cultivator of the Northern Revered One's path?"

The politeness he had shown earlier vanished, replaced by a cold suspicion of Kongheng's identity. Kongheng, in turn, dropped his own courteous tone. "Senior," he said grimly, "you transformed a man into a deer—a wicked art of animal transformation. Do you consider that a righteous act? I have heard that the Northern Demon-Subduing Temple vanquishes demons, not that it practices such vile arts!"

At this accusation, a bronze light flared in Fu Xia's eyes, and his face took on the sheen of lacquered gold. His voice was low, seething with repressed fury as he ground out the words, "Wicked art of animal transformation? This is the Way of Karmic Retribution! A deer is a living creature of heaven and earth, neither noble nor base, equal to all others. For his own selfish desires, that man killed a deer—it is no different from killing a person! Turning him into a deer was a light punishment, granted only because he was uneducated in the Dao!"

The sleeves of Kongheng's robe billowed without a wind, and a hazy golden light began to form behind him. His voice took on a powerful, resonant tone. "He killed the deer to save his wife! By turning him into a deer, you ensured the death of his wife, who was already impoverished and bedridden… He killed a deer, but you murdered a person!"

The moment Fu Xia heard him emphasize the person over the animal, he knew Kongheng did not respect the doctrine of the equality of all living beings. He erupted in fury. Not only did his face gleam like gold, but bright, intricate patterns now appeared on his skin. "Insolent fool!" he roared. "Let me ask you! He was destitute, and his wife was sick on her deathbed… whose fault was that? Who was to blame? How dare you stand there and spout such nonsense!"

His voice rolled like thunder, sending the nearby cultivators fleeing in terror. Those who were too slow clapped their hands to their ears as blood trickled out, staggering unsteadily. Seeing this, Kongheng formed a hand seal, and the golden light behind him surged.

Clang!

A six-armed Vajra Guardian emerged from the light behind him. Its massive, golden face glowed with red light, its eyes wide with fury. Its six arms held golden chains that spread across the sky like a spider's web, casting down a protective golden curtain over the retreating cultivators.

Kongheng gritted his teeth. "Whose fault could it be! He was poor because his father gambled away the family fortune! His wife was sick because of ill fortune and a cruel fate! How can you blame anyone for that!"

Fu Xia stared as if he had heard the most hilarious joke in the world. A wild laugh burst from the depths of his throat, and his staff began to glow with a dazzling light. "A fine 'ill fortune,' a wonderful 'cruel fate,' " he sneered. "Allow me to enlighten you!"

His staff shot toward the heavens like a white rainbow, striking the net of golden chains with a deafening, metallic crash.

"He lived on the land of your Li family," Fu Xia bellowed, "yet he was forced to live in abject poverty! That is the Li family's crime! All his tragedy was caused by your Li family! And you dare try to shift the blame to me!"

"His wife was killed by your Li family, and so he, in turn, harmed another living creature! I took pity on him, for he too was a victim, and merely transformed him into a deer… I have yet to settle the score with your Li family!"

The accusation stunned Kongheng. For a moment, even the golden chains in the sky seemed to falter. The blazing white light from the staff pressed down, and he let out a muffled grunt, feeling as if Mount Tai itself was crushing him, making it impossible to breathe.

His spiritual energy roiled within him. "Heretical nonsense!" he forced out.

But the monk before him was no longer focused on their battle. His eyes burned with a righteous fire. He pinned Kongheng with the staff in one hand and continued his cold tirade.

"You don't build temples, you don't establish temple-managed fields, you don't teach the Dharma, and you don't guide the people. Instead, you divide the land household by household… letting each person drift according to their individual fate… This guarantees tragedy… You watch impassively as people rise and fall in the mortal world, and you say it is not your sin?"

"If you had followed the Dharma's guidance, brought all land under temple control, and made all people tenants of the temple, their only concerns would be tilling the land and cultivating their spirit! With paradise in their hearts, the greater their suffering, the closer they would feel to the Revered One! How could there be poverty then? How could there be any need to hunt? With monks to watch over them, how could his wife have ever fallen ill?"

The fury in Fu Xia's eyes was almost tangible, erupting from his gaze. With just one hand on his staff, he held Kongheng completely suppressed. Suddenly, he raised his other hand, summoning a blinding golden light.

"My Dharma Idol was crippled by these villains of the Immortal Path, my cultivation nearly destroyed! My strength is a fraction of what it once was, and I have no way to borrow divine power… but to deal with the likes of you… it is more than enough!"

The golden light in his hand shot forward like a venomous snake, boring toward Kongheng. A dire warning flared in Kongheng's mind. His eyes instantly turned a solid gold, unleashing a rain of rainbow-colored light that drifted down upon the lake.

The light was wondrous. Wherever it touched the water, lotuses bloomed, and the sound of sutras filled the air. A five-colored radiance erupted from the lake like a fountain. The light of Fu Xia's white staff dimmed for an instant, and the golden chains seized the opportunity to retract, shielding Kongheng.

"**[The Great Art of Resplendent Light]**…"

As the rainbow light rained down upon him, Fu Xia's expression twisted in fury. "To possess such a profound art," he hissed, "yet you grovel at the feet of followers of the Immortal Path!"

His words echoed across the lake. Kongheng felt a flush of heat in his chest. He gritted his teeth and formed another seal, thickening the golden chains around him, but he didn't dare make a move, fearing the oppressive white light of the staff.

Seeing no reaction, Fu Xia paused. "Those who seek immortality care only for themselves," he said grimly. "How could they ever care for the common people? Wherever cultivators meddle in the mortal world, they build their towering peaks, and schemes and treachery flourish! The common folk become entangled in conflicts of interest, their hearts clouded by dust. It is impossible to find a truly good person among them…"

"Only my Buddhist Dharma teaches that all beings are equal! If all were tenants of the temple, all hearts would be united. They would find joy even in suffering, thinking only of truth, goodness, and beauty. With no officials and no masters, they would be free from the torment of worldly fate!"

"And yet you serve as a guest elder for a family of cultivators, watching all this happen with indifference! Kongheng! You have betrayed the Path of the Northern Revered One…"

Before he could finish, a clap of thunder echoed from above. An intense light gathered in the sky, forming the image of a vast and ancient city wall, forged from celestial light. It descended like a mountain, casting a huge golden reflection on the lake below.

Fu Xia's anger flared anew. His eyes glowed like bronze, and the overwhelming radiance bathed him, turning him into a golden statue. "I am debating the Dao with a peer!" he bellowed. "Who are you to interfere!"

The celestial light filled his vision, growing ever larger. And then a cold voice, sharp as thunder, ripped through the air:

"To hell with you, you bald donkey! Go preach your godsdamned dog of a Dao!"

Chapter 672: The Demon-Subduing Plot

Of all the world's orthodoxies, Li Ximing despised the Northern Buddhists the most.

The stories of his ancestors, Li Xuanling and Li Tongya, had been repeated by his grandfather Li Xuanxuan hundreds of times, and the resentment still festered. Li Xuanfeng had also died besieged by monks, and even Li Xijun had nearly lost his life at their hands.

It had been the same during the northern and southern conflicts. He had only been cultivating for a short time when some Buddhist cultivator would show up at his door, screaming:

"Your family nearly killed mine back then! What now?"

And now, seeing Kongheng immobilized by this old monk's white light, the scene felt hauntingly familiar.

'The Li clan of Wei brought about a golden age for the Bright Yang, only for it to be overthrown by the barbarians of the Northern Path,' Li Ximing recalled. 'It involved Golden Cores and Revered Ones. From that moment on, our fates became intertwined, a law of nature. Wherever the Bright Yang flourishes, a Buddhist master is sure to follow…'

Though he understood the reason for it all, he couldn't suppress the fury welling inside him. He had heard the monk's overbearing words from a distance and knew better than to engage with their bewitching rhetoric. Letting the words go in one ear and out the other, he simply raised his Radiant Origin Pass and smashed it down.

Caught off guard, Fu Xia took the full brunt of the brilliant light. His face darkened for a moment before he raised a single hand to block the massive gate. The searing white bricks turned his copper-toned hand glowing red. The old monk's

eyes narrowed, and he spat, "Just as I thought! The Bright Yang path of rigid hierarchies and social order!"

The instant he spoke, Kongheng was freed. The Six-armed Vajra Guardian behind him opened its wrathful eyes, and a multitude of shimmering golden chains shot out to bind Fu Xia. Only then did Kongheng have a moment to catch his breath.

But as he recovered, Li Ximing's attack slammed into its target. It felt like hitting a cold, unyielding stone. A wave of nausea washed over him, and he almost coughed up blood.

'Tough old monk!'

Fu Xia, despite his casual appearance, had braced himself. A single punch from him sent a tremor through the immortal foundation of Li Ximing's technique. He squinted, studying his attacker for a moment before realizing.

'This is Li Ximing!'

Finally able to speak, Kongheng used his spiritual qi to re-form the scattered chains. The blast of white light had left his voice slightly hoarse, but he maintained his calm composure. "Venerable senior," he began softly, "you say that suffering creates a Revered One. Do the temple serfs, who toil their entire lives, truly become Revered Ones? And which Revered One do they become? They have no affinity for cultivation, no karmic wisdom from past lives. They rely solely on hardship and chanting a name to achieve the Dao, yet tens of thousands perish from hunger and exhaustion. I have never seen the scriptures mention a new Revered One of hardship and mercy, or a new Maha of chanted names!"

His voice, though quiet, carried the deafening force of spiritual law. "This Buddhist paradise you've built in the lands of Yan and Zhao—is it all just a colossal lie?"

An expression of utter disbelief spread across Fu Xia's face. Kongheng's words seemed to root him to the spot, stunning him into immobility.

Seizing the opportunity, Li Ximing's eyes blazed with celestial light. The Radiant Origin Pass materialized in full, its white bricks perfectly laid, its crenellations exquisitely carved. The seventy-two ridges on its corner towers shone like the gates of heaven itself, and the base of the gate was covered in intricate, dazzling patterns.

Fu Xia had been arrogant, using only one hand to block the gate. But the Radiant Origin Pass was renowned for its power to grind down and suppress its targets. Li Ximing's own cultivation was profound, and he had even mastered two secret arts to augment it. Now, pouring every last ounce of his strength into the attack, it was as if a sun had risen over Moongaze Lake.

BOOM!

With a deafening roar, Fu Xia was forced to use both hands to hold back the Pass, and he was completely engulfed in the overwhelming celestial light. The brilliance reflecting off his body pierced the lake below, vaporizing the water into clouds of white steam.

Clang… clang…

The golden chains from Kongheng's technique flew out, wrapping around the monk in dense layers. The Six-armed Vajra Guardian pulled the chains taut, and a shower of sparks erupted from the sphere of white light. Cultivators hovering over the lake dove for cover, frantically searching for protective formations.

The old monk's voice, a furious, thunderous roar, boomed from beneath the gate. "You… You dare to question the fundamental law of my righteous path?! You dare to question our fundamental law!"

Beneath the pass, the monk had transformed into a shining golden statue. His eyes were unnaturally large, the whites like jade and the pupils like copper, striking terror into anyone who met his gaze. His body began to swell, growing larger and larger as he gritted his teeth and pushed back with both arms.

CRACK!

Li Ximing felt his spiritual qi draining away as if being devoured by a whale. The Radiant Origin Pass began to wobble. In all his years of cultivation, he had rarely worried about exhausting his power; his recovery had always outpaced his expenditure. Gritting his teeth, he swallowed two pills and muttered, "Bring it on!"

Kongheng, though engaged in a debate of doctrine, was relentless with his techniques. While Fu Xia was pinned by the gate, he layered chain after golden chain onto the monk, even conjuring more out of thin air to bind him.

But Fu Xia paid the chains no mind. He stared blankly at Kongheng and snarled, "What did your master teach you?! Those people cannot cultivate. They endure

a lifetime of hardship so they may go to Maha's Pure Land… where they can enjoy eternal bliss!"

An incredibly complex expression crossed Kongheng's face, and for a moment, he was at a loss for words. Li Ximing watched, frustrated, and yelled, "If this bliss is so wonderful, why aren't you there enjoying it? Why do you linger in the mortal world? If being a temple serf is such a good thing, why did you start cultivating?"

Fu Xia let out a cold laugh. The celestial light was so bright his face was no longer visible, but his voice boomed, "Did you know that I was a temple serf in my youth?! My ancestors were serfs for generations, and they entered the Pure Land long ago. Back before the domain of the Warthful Subduer of the Four Demon Emperors was shattered… I even went to see them… and now you devils have killed them all!"

He continued, his voice ringing with conviction, "As for why I don't go to that paradise… what would a heretic devil like you know of our aspirations? When a cultivator like me is found to have a spiritual root, it is a calling from the Revered One himself! We cannot go to the Pure Land like common mortals. We are condemned to remain in this world and suffer, precisely to prevent devils and heretics like you from defiling our sacred lands!"

Li Ximing was stunned, unable to tell if the monk was lying or truly believed his own words. He glanced at Kongheng, only to find the young monk with his eyes shut tight, muttering sutras and focusing solely on his technique. He had stopped responding entirely.

'What is this… A renowned practitioner of the ancient Buddhist path can't win a debate against him? Kongheng always tries to see the good in others; he's far too honest…'

Li Ximing didn't know that while Kongheng appeared calm, his mind was in turmoil. If they weren't in the middle of a battle, he would have been drenched in a cold sweat.

Kongheng's lineage was anything but ordinary. Though Liaohe Temple had fallen into decline, it was a place where a Revered One had once cultivated, and its status in the great desert was not low. When his master was still alive, he had dealings not just with the Merciful Ones, but with Mahas themselves.

Kongheng had been to the Pure Land. He had seen its jeweled pools, its lapis lazuli stairs, its lotus canopies, its thousands of birds and beasts, and its tens of thousands of souls living in contentment, able to travel outside when summoned. The experience, in his youth, had shaken him to his core, making him secretly question his own path.

'I've been able to read the hearts of others since I was a child. Those people were all filled with genuine joy… and Fu Xia is utterly devout… This…'

After Liaohe Temple fell, Kongheng traveled south and witnessed a thousand different tragedies across the lands of Yan and Zhao. Only then did he begin to grasp his master's teachings. But Fu Xia's words had stirred up all his old anxieties, leaving a knot of unspeakable conflict in his chest.

'Their methods are just too extreme, too tyrannical… Of the seven paths, if only they all had the same restraints as the Great Adoration Dharma Realm and the Path of Precepts and Austerity…'

The Great Adoration Dharma Realm and the Path of Precepts did not internalize paradise but used a method of conversion through holy light. They would chant sutras and preach, waiting until the common folk had accrued sufficient merit and were filled with yearning before accepting them. For this, they were known as a righteous path.

The other five paths, however, often didn't bother asking. They simply devoured the populace whole, a method that seemed horrifically cruel. It was this that gave Kongheng pause. If not for that, his faith might have already been shaken.

"Kongheng!" Li Ximing's shout snapped the slender-eyed monk back to reality. The golden chains binding Fu Xia were stretched taut, and the Radiant Origin Pass was shaking violently.

While Kongheng was faltering, Li Ximing's mind was racing.

He knew his own strength perfectly well. His prowess in a direct fight was one thing, but the grinding, suppressive power of his Radiant Origin Pass was another. At full power, even a direct disciple of the Three Sects would be in for a world of hurt.

Even if he were fighting Li Qinghong, her best strategy would be to avoid getting trapped beneath the gate in the first place. And here he was, with Kongheng at his side. The young monk's Buddhist arts were anything but simple.

'The two of us, working together, have him pinned down and bound by countless chains. What Foundation Establishment cultivator could possibly withstand this?'

The pass was already pushed to its limit, yet the old monk hadn't budged. Though the celestial light burned his skin red, he endured it, seemingly using the pain as a form of ascetic practice.

Li Ximing's spiritual qi surged as he sent a message to Kongheng's ear, "Master… this monk is incredibly powerful… Can you tell what's going on?"

Kongheng murmured, replying with a secret transmission, "I fear it is what remains of the Merciful One. When the Wrathful Maha fell, this thing lost all its divine abilities, leaving only this Merciful One's Dharma Body…"

"A Merciful One's Dharma Body!"

Li Ximing had considered the possibility, but hearing it confirmed still sent a jolt of shock through him.

No matter how weakened, a Dharma Body was not something a Foundation Establishment cultivator should be able to face. Though its powers were gone, how could it be suppressed by ordinary means? The only reason they hadn't been crushed already was that the monk was likely focused on his own ascetic training; otherwise, he would have thrown off the gate and come at them with his staff long ago.

As they hesitated, Fu Xia exhaled a torrent of golden light. "Kongheng!" his voice boomed. "Wake up! Your spiritual root is unparalleled. Why lead yourself astray? I have allowed you to suppress me without resisting because I wanted more time to persuade you!"

A pillar of golden light shot from his body into the sky. The chains now encased him in a solid golden sphere, but the old monk was unafraid. He formed a lotus seal with his fingers, spat out a cloud of pink mist, and yelled, "Go!"

His deep yellow kasaya suddenly came to life. It fluttered like a scroll caught in a gale, and with two quick turns, the monk vanished from beneath the pass. A violent explosion of golden light bleached all color from their vision.

'It's over!'

Being a Buddhist cultivator himself, Kongheng recovered from the flash far more quickly. His eyes cleared, and the Six-armed Vajra Guardian behind him

surged forward, just in time to block a long staff that was sweeping down from mid-air. The collision created a brilliant flash of light and forced a trickle of blood from Kongheng's lips.

As his vision cleared, he saw a dark-striped tiger pinned beneath the bright, patterned gate.

The tiger was magnificent, with a deep yellow coat and stripes as black as ink. It had white eyebrows and the same copper-colored pupils as Fu Xia. A short, black horn grew from between its brows, pulsing with a mysterious light.

"A horned tiger…" Kongheng's face went pale, his voice laced with a bitter resignation. "Senior, you are a Dharma Protector at the Demon-Subduing Temple in the north. With your orthodoxy in peril, you should be guarding the mountain and teaching the people. Why travel thousands of miles to come here? If something were to happen to you, what would Abbot Fuyan do?"

The blow had temporarily robbed them of their sight and spiritual sense. Fu Xia's staff was already in mid-swing, a strike that would have crippled or killed them. But Kongheng's words stopped him.

"You are indeed deeply connected to my northern Demon-Subduing Temple…" he said, his voice heavy.

Li Ximing's vision finally returned. Fu Xia stood nearby, bare-chested. Though the tiger under the gate wasn't struggling, the arcane light from its horn made Li Ximing's mouth taste like bitter herbs.

'Damn it…'

Fu Xia alone had been difficult enough. Now that he was free and standing nearby with his staff, how could they possibly keep the tiger pinned? The brilliant gate flew up and returned to Li Ximing's hand.

The moment it was released, the horned tiger sprang up and landed at Fu Xia's side. The old monk mounted the beast, his skin coated in a golden sheen, his copper eyes fixed on Kongheng as he held his staff in silence.

The entire lake fell quiet, the air thick with tension. Li Ximing squinted at Fu Xia, a strange feeling rising within him.

Kongheng was an honest monk. He was young and bound by too many precepts to engage in schemes. But Li Ximing had seen his share of conspiracies and had been taught from a young age to be wary. Suspicion began to dawn.

'He's preying on Kongheng's honesty, constantly trying to sway him with words… He must be after something.'

'According to Kongheng, the northern Demon-Subduing Temple is in dire straits. Why would he come all this way? I don't believe for a second that he's just out for a stroll after the Wrathful Maha's death… He has a reason for being here.'

The young man watched Fu Xia warily. The old monk ignored him, his gaze locked on Kongheng. "Kongheng," he said calmly, "since you know our temple's abbot, you must also know that our path is a righteous one. This old monk does not wish to kill, which is why I allowed you to make your moves."

Kongheng finally opened his eyes. "I am aware of the senior's great virtue…"

Fu Xia nodded. "Leave this place," he commanded from atop the tiger. "Join my order and return with me to the temple."

'So that's what this is about?'

Li Ximing lowered his gaze, carefully studying the monk's expression and replaying the events in his mind. Something wasn't right. Kongheng was already showing signs of hesitation, but Li Ximing sent a spiritual transmission.

"Kongheng, this monk talks too much. I suspect there's something wrong with him."

Kongheng didn't see it. As he silently considered how to placate the older monk, he replied, "He wants to convert me to his path. Of course he needs to use many words to persuade me… If I refuse, I fear people will be harmed…"

'No… the Path of Wrath is reviled right now, like rats in the street… Why would he be so arrogant? His actions have been highly suspicious. Did he really just endure the full force of our attacks purely for the sake of ascetic practice?'

Li Ximing felt that Fu Xia was deeply suspicious, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it, his thoughts a frustrating haze.

'If only Xijun were here!' he thought with a pang of resentment. 'This old fox wouldn't stand a chance! He'd see through him in an instant!'

But Li Xijun was gone, and Li Ximing had no one to fall back on. He stared coldly at the monk, his spiritual qi flowing as he sent another secret message.

"Since he's made his intentions clear, he's here for you. He certainly won't harm you. We've only exchanged a few moves with him. Why should we surrender so easily? Let's test him again! It's not too late!"

Chapter 673: Kongheng's Story

Li Ximing's suspicion wasn't just a baseless hunch. At first, not knowing Fu Xia's true power, he had managed to suppress the monk with the Radiant Origin Pass. But now that Fu Xia had escaped and revealed himself to possess the Dharma Body of a Merciful One, the doubts only grew stronger.

'My Radiant Origin Pass is a powerful suppression technique, but every strength has a weakness,' Li Ximing reasoned. 'Since he has the body of a Merciful One, wouldn't it be far simpler for him to just smash my radiant pass with a single punch?'

A blow from a Merciful One was nothing a Foundation Establishment cultivator could withstand. A direct hit on the core of his immortal foundation would, at best, leave him vomiting blood with seventy percent of his strength gone, utterly incapable of fighting. At worst, it would mean instant death.

'He spits venom at me with every word, and my ancestor killed the Four Wrathful Demon Emperor he reveres. How could he possibly harbor any goodwill? His path is one of demon-subduing ferocity.'

'Even if he wouldn't kill me, intimidated by the Purple Mansion cultivators of Jiangnan, he could have just knocked me aside with one punch. That would give him the upper hand in every way. This constant running and evasion… it's not the way of a Merciful One!'

The battle had unfolded in a blur, and few possessed Li Xijun's sharp tactical mind. But with a moment to breathe and think things through, Li Ximing's suspicion hardened into certainty.

When he voiced his thoughts, Kongheng nodded in agreement.

"Very well. I will test him again."

Kongheng pressed his palms together before his chest, chanting an endless stream of incantations. A five-colored brilliance bloomed from his hands as

a vibrant, rainbow-hued rain began to fall from the sky once more. Lotuses blossomed across the lake's surface, filling the air with a rich fragrance.

"Still struggling futilely!" Fu Xia scoffed at the sight, though a flicker of delight shone in his eyes. He allowed the tiger-pelt robe to drape back over his shoulders, letting the colorful rain cascade over him. It shimmered across his gilded skin, creating ripples of multi-hued light.

'Another orthodox restraining technique,' Fu Xia thought. 'His background is truly extraordinary!'

The binding force was immense, but Fu Xia neither dodged nor resisted. He hailed from a great and renowned sect himself; just as his own incantations had little effect on Kongheng, Kongheng's arts were equally limited against him.

Besides, he possessed the Dharma Body of a Merciful One.

Seeing Fu Xia stand firm under the shimmering rain, Kongheng's expression remained solemn and dignified. Golden chains swirled around him as the Six-Armed Vajra Guardian behind him released its grip, bringing all six arms together before its chest to cradle him. The five-colored light in his hands never dimmed.

A resplendent glow covered the lake, but Li Ximing ignored Kongheng, his gaze locked on Fu Xia. The old monk stood unshaken amidst the downpour. Concentrating the radiant light in his hands, Li Ximing's mind raced.

'The old monk has barely used any techniques! He's just relying on this Dharma Body.'

Seeing Fu Xia remain motionless, he formed a hand seal and shouted, "Five Waters Imperial Heaven!"

At his command, the great formation of Mount Qingdu roared to life. A dense gray fog surged across the water's surface, obscuring the sky. From within, countless water serpents leaped forth—nimble, cunning creatures wielding weapons condensed from lake water. They charged the monk with reckless abandon.

This was the Five Waters Imperial Heaven Formation of Mount Qingdu.

The activation of the Foundation Establishment-level formation was an impressive sight, but Fu Xia didn't grant it so much as a second glance. "The tricks of an insect," he sneered.

And so it was. The roiling gray mist had no effect, and the water serpents within were exposed by the radiant light of his body. Before they could even get close, they were blown into clouds of white steam by the shimmering phantoms emanating from his gilded skin.

The formation was Liu Changdie's masterpiece, but its core aspects, 'Morning Mist' and 'Serpent Flow,' were designed to handle Qi Refinement cultivators. Against the Dharma Body of a Merciful One, they were utterly useless. Undeterred, Li Ximing watched with a cold expression, his hand seal abruptly changing.

"Non-Buoyancy!"

He touched two fingers together. As the seal formed, a white radiance spread out from beneath his feet. Kongheng and Li Ximing were unaffected, but Fu Xia paused for a fraction of a second, his eyes narrowing.

"Now!"

In that same instant, the radiant pass materialized once more—white bricks stacked high, bright corner towers, and a celestial gate that blazed with blinding light. It slammed down from the sky with a deafening crash, its brilliance forcing the surrounding cultivators to shield their faces with their sleeves.

"Master Kongheng!"

Li Ximing hadn't missed Fu Xia's momentary hesitation. He pushed the Radiant Origin Pass to its absolute limit, radiant light flaring in his eyes as he shook a small flag from his sleeve.

The flag was no bigger than his palm, a fiery crimson-yellow cloth embroidered with shimmering gold thread. It depicted a lifelike crimson sparrow, wreathed in five overlapping rings of red light, its beak open as if breathing fire.

It was a Dongli Sect artifact—the Yang-Li Crimson Sparrow Banner!

Unleashed for the first time, five palm-sized rings of red light shot from the banner. They surrounded the ornate base of the Radiant Origin Pass and pulsed in unison, spewing five different kinds of flames.

"By the heavenly pattern, let the Yang-Li execution flames descend!"

The five flames—brown-yellow, pale-yellow, goose-yellow, bright red, and vermillion—pressed down with overwhelming force. A pillar of fire shot into the sky, instantly forming clouds of red and yellow above the lake.

The clouds blazed with crimson light, drawing in the surrounding spiritual energy. Kongheng, still maintaining his restraining spell, had the Six-Armed Vajra Guardian behind him reach out. This time, however, it did not release its golden chains.

'That is a Dongli Sect artifact, and those are Radiant Fire flames. If my chains enter that inferno, they will eventually be melted down!'

His mind worked quickly. All six of the guardian's arms descended at once, pressing down on the radiant gate.

BOOM!

The flames raged. Through them, Li Ximing could see the color draining from Fu Xia's face. A cold sneer touched the young man's lips. "Just as I thought!" he bit out. "I knew something was wrong with you!"

From the moment Fu Xia had appeared before Mount Qingdu, he hadn't used a single spell. Even his escape with the Horned Tiger had relied on an artifact. He clearly possessed the strength to defeat them both with two punches, yet he dragged out the fight, avoiding any real action.

Though Li Ximing was no expert in Buddhist techniques, he had pursued the Dao of the Purple Mansion for years and was well-versed in the theory of spells and cultivation arts. His suspicions had been raised early on.

The most precious and unique aspect of his Five Waters Imperial Heaven Formation was the 'Non-Buoyancy' technique. It was crafted from a rareMansion Water material obtained by Yang Xiao'er and was incredibly valuable.

"And its value lies precisely in this," Li Ximing realized. "It excels at draining an opponent's dharma power and disrupting their flight!"

'The problem is his dharma power!'

Connecting this with Fu Xia's previous actions, the answer struck him in a flash.

"His cultivation has fallen back to the level of a Master Monk! Though he possesses the empty shell of a Merciful One's body, its divine power is lost! This

kind of collective Buddhist cultivation, without any personal foundation—it must have severely impacted his own dharma power. With no divine abilities and a body that's incredibly difficult to command, he's just a paper tiger!"

Such beings were not unheard of. He recalled how Li Xuanfeng, in order to channel the power of Geng Metal, had been forced to burn both of his immortal foundations as fuel. How could Fu Xia be any better off?

As Li Ximing explained, Kongheng immediately understood.

"I underestimated the impact of the Four Wrathful Demon Emperor's fall!"

"And this is a Dharma Body that Fu Xia cultivated himself! Having fallen from the rank of a Merciful One, he has the experience and a deep understanding of the Dao. If not for that, he would probably be completely immobile!"

Kongheng was not foolish, merely bound by precepts that forbade him from judging others with a suspicious heart. But with the truth laid bare, it was like a sudden awakening.

"When he arrived on that piece of driftwood, was it purely an act of asceticism? I think not! The body of a Merciful One is immensely heavy. He was afraid his dharma power was insufficient to sustain flight. By riding the wood, he had a physical anchor, allowing him to conserve what little power he had!"

Yet even now, with his pure heart, Kongheng was unwilling to believe Fu Xia had been deceiving him from the start, chalking it up to his journey being "not solely for asceticism."

With this new understanding, they both realized Fu Xia's evasions and his robe-turned-tiger were largely bluffs. A wave of relief washed over them.

BOOM!

Fu Xia strained with all his might, struggling to rise. A violent tremor shook the radiant pass, making it sway precariously. Li Ximing showed no mercy. Now that he had his opponent's weakness in hand, he pushed one part of the Five Waters Imperial Heaven Formation to its limit while pulling a small vial from his robes.

"Profound Pattern Vial!"

A torrent of radiant light erupted from the vial, layering itself over the Radiant Origin Pass. If the 'Sun Return' disc wasn't a defensive artifact, Li Ximing would have thrown that on top as well.

'A pity the Chongming Profound Insight Screen is with Zhouwei, or I'd be even more certain of victory.'

Now pressed down as if by a mountain, the Radiant Origin Pass began to stabilize. The five Radiant Fire flames burned fiercely. As Li Ximing's own dharma power plummeted, Fu Xia's struggles grew weaker. He knew his secret—the lack of power to command his Dharma Body—was out.

The old monk sighed and shook his head.

"When it comes to schemes, this old monk is no match for you followers of the Purple Mansion Golden Core Demonic Dao. I had hoped to keep it hidden, but I am not accustomed to deception. You saw right through me."

Li Ximing paid the old monk no mind. He swallowed a pill and focused his entire being, converting all his dharma power into radiant light and pouring it into the radiant gate.

Fu Xia, enduring the raging Radiant Fire, tried his old trick again. He formed a lotus mudra with his fingers, puffed out his cheeks, and spat a mouthful of pink mist.

But Kongheng had been watching him. He would not let him escape again. With a sharp cry, he exhaled several rays of golden light that shot like comets toward the base of the gate. His hands tightened, and the five-colored light in the sky vanished as he made a grasping motion.

With two sharp *clinks*, a pair of golden rays met the pink mist before it could spread. Like a gale scattering clouds, they completely neutralized it.

Fu Xia's hands were still in a seal, his expression unchanged, but he stopped chanting.

If the Four Wrathful Demon Emperor had not fallen, he wouldn't even need his divine abilities. In terms of spellcasting alone, a hundred Konghengs would be no match for a single of his incantations. But now, Fu Xia had to admit he was powerless.

With the death of the Four Wrathful Demon Emperor, the Wrathful Path had suffered a devastating blow. While smaller, less orthodox temples still

had their own independent techniques, a major temple like his, whose most powerful arts were all connected to the Maha, found their wellspring had run dry.

It wasn't that Fu Xia couldn't cast a single spell, or that he couldn't smash the radiant pass with one punch. But his dharma power was already strained. If he used it so recklessly, he might not have enough left to return to the north with Kongheng…

'Besides, the Abbot predicted that I cannot kill this Li Ximing… it would be best not to even injure him!'

The situation seemed dire, but the old monk was unconcerned. He simply sat down cross-legged in the middle of the raging Radiant Fire, formed a seal over his dantian, and said nothing more.

'Why should I even try to cast a spell to get out?'

He sat quietly within the radiant pass, allowing the five-colored Radiant Fire to scorch him and the radiant light to refine him. He withdrew all his magical radiance, becoming like a golden statue sitting motionless in the fire.

Seeing this, Li Ximing paused, instantly understanding.

'You cunning old monk!'

They had seen through Fu Xia's bluff, knowing he lacked the dharma power to break the gate. They had confidently suppressed him.

But Fu Xia had turned their plan against them, calmly taking a seat.

The reason was simple. He had the body of a Merciful One. The Radiant Fire and the radiant light, no matter how powerful or divine, were less than a nuisance to his true form. He didn't need to break the suppression; he only needed to endure it.

Li Ximing's dharma power, however, was not infinite. The longer this went on, the more of his energy would be wasted, and eventually, he would be exhausted.

Silence fell over the lake. Li Ximing's brow furrowed. He gradually reduced the power of the Yang-Li Crimson Sparrow Banner, stopping only when the radiant pass began to tremble slightly, maintaining a minimal level of suppression.

"Master," Li Ximing said in a low voice, "is there a solution?"

Kongheng saw the stalemate clearly. He sighed softly. "At least now I can speak with him as an equal. Allow me to try and persuade him."

He walked across the lake's surface, passing through the billowing steam and the intense glare of Radiant Fire and radiant light, until he stood before the Radiant Origin Pass.

Li Ximing was horrified. "Master, be careful!" he called out urgently. "The Radiant Fire and the radiant light have no eyes! Your body is precious; you cannot be in the same place as that man!"

The space beneath the Radiant Origin Pass was terrifyingly dangerous. Fu Xia was not afraid because of his Dharma Body, but an ordinary Foundation Establishment cultivator wouldn't last three seconds in there.

Kongheng looked back at him from a distance and smiled gently. "Do not worry, Ximing," he replied with a bow. "This is my tribulation. I have traveled thousands of miles south precisely to face it."

Li Ximing stared, dumbfounded, as Kongheng stepped into the flames. Enduring the scorching heat of the Radiant Fire and the dazzling radiant light, he made his way under the Radiant Origin Pass.

Fu Xia sat with his eyes closed, deep in meditation, not saying a word.

"Venerable senior," Kongheng said softly, "you did not tell the whole truth earlier."

Fu Xia knew he was referring to the driftwood. Sensing the hint of accusation, he answered gruffly, "I am a Dharma Protector, not a fool. Why would I tell you everything?"

"I understand." Kongheng sat down cross-legged before him, his voice gentle. "All seven paths have their selfish desires. In this age, one cannot survive without them. Kongheng has long known this. Even when the Mahas met with my master, they too had their own motives."

This statement, bordering on slander against the Mahas, made Fu Xia's eyes fly open in anger.

A faint smile touched Kongheng's face.

"When the Mahas visited my master back then, the sky over the Liaohe River was filled with five-colored light that night. I stood behind my master as the

Mahas tried to entice me with celestial flowers falling like rain, with wondrous words and profound teachings of the golden lotus. They spoke of primeval chaos until the unfeeling stones shed tears, of delving into boundless heavenly realms to behold the ultimate essence of all things. But they did not succeed with me."

"But my five senior brothers, who came before me, were all lured away."

Kongheng's words touched upon hidden matters and mentioned the Mahas, causing the colorful clouds in the sky to churn and the golden lotuses on the lake to bloom in profusion. This finally made Fu Xia treat him with solemnity. "So what?" he asked in a low voice.

"Abbot Fuyan," Kongheng said calmly, a smile still on his face, "is my third senior brother, Kongyan."

Chapter 674: The Majestic Jeweled Visage

That sentence struck Fu Xia like a bolt of heavenly thunder. A flood of memories washed over him, and many of his earlier doubts began to clear. His voice was grave.

"Then why," he demanded, "are you so stubborn and unenlightened?"

"Unenlightened?"

Kongheng shook his head with a smile. "The next day, when I returned to the temple, I had forgotten every word the Mahas had spoken. I opened the scriptures to read, but as I looked upon them, the texts blurred before my eyes. The characters themselves leaped from the pages, one after another, and fled toward the lands of Zhao and Yan."

"I turned to look and saw the entire courtyard filled with a dense swarm of characters, like refugees from a famine, running hand-in-hand. A sea of words flowed down the mountain and vanished over the endless horizon."

"That night, every classic and scripture in Liaohe Temple turned to blank paper."

His words echoed slowly in the air. Li Ximing's face finally showed a glimmer of understanding. Kongheng gave a self-deprecating laugh.

"And that is why I am the worst at doctrinal debate."

Fu Xia was finally silent, sitting quietly. Kongheng continued in his warm voice.

"I was only eighteen that year. I had just finished reading the texts on cultivation techniques, interesting anecdotes, and secret histories. I was preparing to start on the scriptures, but from that day forward, there were no books left for me to read."

"Venerable senior, cultivators of all seven paths yearn for the ancient ways of Buddhism, for the chance to ascend to the position of a Revered One. They hope to find the true scriptures through me, but I can give you nothing. I have never read these things. My cultivation, to this day, has relied solely on my own heart for enlightenment."

A look of dawning comprehension crossed Fu Xia's face. He finally understood why Kongheng so often remained silent in the face of his refutations. His voice dropped. "The ancient scriptures are not suited for the modern path anyway."

"Correct," Kongheng said gently.

"I have read the core texts of all seven paths. The Way of Great Desire is boundless; one must first gain then lose in order to seek solemnity. The Way of Wrath manifests phenomena; it pacifies evil to create good, molding a Majestic Jeweled Visage'1. The Way of Adoring the Dharma seeks a realm; it establishes a Buddhist land in the mortal world to deliver all sentient beings."

"The Way of Precepts is one of bitter cold; it recognizes the sea of suffering and thus provides a ferry to cross it. The Way of Goodness and Joy clarifies the heart; it uses joy, anger, and folly to seek something from nothing. The Path of Compassion is held within; it nurtures all beings, and in turn, all beings nurture me. The Way of Emptiness is one of focus; it seeks liberation from the ego for the sake of rebirth..."

Kongheng spoke softly.

"All of you use a Pure Land to gather people."

"Venerable senior, it is not that I don't understand the fundamental principles. I too have entered a Pure Land. Whether the joy of the common people within is real or not, we can set that aside for now."

"But your esteemed path uses the suffering of the mortal world and the joy of the Pure Land to edify the people, to make them forget the material world in pursuit of a state of solemn, tranquil emptiness. But have they truly reached it? Has a single great divine power ever emerged from a Maha's Pure Land? In the end, is the Pure Land a Maha's personal divine property, or is it true liberation, untethered by suffering and joy?"

For the first time, Kongheng's expression turned utterly serious. There was no anger, no admonishment, only deep contemplation and concern. His fair face, bathed in the five-colored light, seemed infinitely bright.

"It is neither… Venerable senior, it is neither."

Fu Xia stared at him in disbelief. For the first time, a thoughtful expression appeared on the old monk's face. The moment it did, his imposing aura faltered. "There are those who have achieved greatness in the Pure Land," he said coldly, "cultivators like Du'en and Liubai… You…"

Kongheng shook his head. "Have you ever seen them?" he asked softly.

Fu Xia's eyes lit up as he seized on the question. "Just because I have not seen them, does that mean they do not exist?"

"You have seen one," Kongheng replied softly, giving him no ground. Seeing Fu Xia's stunned expression, he pointed gently at the sky and smiled.

"Liubai is right up there."

Forgetting their conflict entirely, Fu Xia slowly raised a trembling head. High above the Radiant Origin Pass, the Six-Armed Vajra Guardian stood, its visage a mask of solemnity, its six arms pressing down firmly on the gate.

"You… How is that possible! Do not try to deceive me with such demonic words!"

Kongheng slowly shook his head, his voice very soft.

"This *is* the Majestic Jeweled Visage. This *is* the state of purity. This *is* the one from the Pure Land who has forgotten both self and the world. When I was eighteen, he came to me from the manifestation of Wrath to aid me. To this day, he has not uttered a single word."

Fu Xia did not know how to respond, lost in a daze of confusion.

"I know what my senior brother wants," Kongheng continued gently. "With the fall of the Four Wrathful Demon Emperor, the lineage of the Way of Wrath is in decline. He wants me to give rise to anger in my heart, to dedicate myself to the manifestation of Wrath, so that I might become a Maha and re-establish the tradition."

"Is that not so?"

After a moment of silence, Fu Xia answered, "It is."

Kongheng's expression was gentle, the light on his face growing ever brighter. He spoke in a kind and reasonable tone.

"And that is the problem. You believe the manifestation of Wrath is a good thing, so you want me to become it, and thus you have come to take me."

"You believe all living things suffer, so you must deliver them all. You must create a Pure Land of ultimate bliss. First, you let all beings endure the depths of suffering, and then you place them all within it, so that you may be revered and thanked."

He asked, "You condescendingly wish to deliver all sentient beings, but have any of them ever asked to be delivered by you?"

"Why would they not?!" Fu Xia's face changed. "The world is so full of suffering, and the Pure Land so full of joy! Take any hundred commoners from the lands of Yan and Zhao, and every single one of them would yearn to enter the Pure Land!"

"That is because their present world is too bitter," Kongheng said softly. "They seek only pleasure. As for the boundless peace, boundless purity, and boundless stability of the Majestic Jeweled Visage—that is not what the people seek. They suffer the seven passions, but they also enjoy the seven passions. A boundless Majestic Jeweled Visage is a boundless image of death. Only when the suffering becomes so great that they wish for death, so great that they no longer even want joy, only then are they willing to enter the Pure Land."

"You believe that everyone wants to enter the Pure Land, but the reality is that everyone is tortured until they have no choice but to want it."

"Nonsense!" Fu Xia retorted. "Who would not want the Majestic Jeweled Visage? Those who do not are simply not at a high enough spiritual state!"

Kongheng stood up. His voice remained soft and gentle.

"The Majestic Jeweled Visage is a state of boundless, ultimate tranquility. Every image is the same. It reacts to every situation in the exact same way. It is the same person. If ten thousand people cultivate it, it is really just one person occupying ten thousand bodies. Venerable senior Fu Xia, that is not how one cultivates a Revered One."

"In the name of cultivating a Revered One, you use a vast land of joy to delude millions, hoping to use the puppets of the Majestic Jeweled Visage to possess all of their souls! Meanwhile, you yourselves retain your seven passions and six desires, sitting high above, laughing at the world and calling it ignorant!"

"And there are those even more foolish, who in the end use the Majestic Jeweled Visage to possess themselves! Millions become one boundless, tranquil, pure, and stable image of death!"

Fu Xia stared at him, his voice hoarse. "Is that what the ancient scriptures say?"

Kongheng looked at him quietly, his voice warm.

"That is what I say."

As Kongheng's voice fell, the searing Radiant Fire began to climb his body. Li Ximing's urgent calls echoed again and again. Suddenly, Fu Xia's expression changed, all traces of conflict vanishing. He gazed at Kongheng, and his old face was filled with sincerity. Clear tears streamed from his eyes.

"If that is the case, then why does Kongheng not become a Maha?"

"Since all seven paths are wrong, Kongheng should ascend to the rank of Maha, establish a true Pure Land of his own, and teach the world the path to infinite liberation! He can turn this filthy world on its head and create the First and Truest Pure Land!"

"My Lord, return to the Northern Demon-Subduing Temple! We are willing to serve as your vanguards!"

Chapter 675: Three Treasures

As Fu Xia spoke, the air blazed with a golden radiance. Clouds like peacock feathers danced across the sky as pools of shimmering gold erupted and a rain of colored light fell. To the north, a Pure Land materialized, veiled in mist. Through the haze, a colossal golden gate could be seen, beside which slumbered a single-horned tiger as massive as a mountain, its coat a canvas of black patterns. Ranks of golden guardians stood upon the clouds, a host so vast it seemed endless. Countless figures, thousands upon thousands, raised their heads in prayer and prostration, their faces filled with fervent hope.

For the first time, the Six-armed Vajra Guardian, Liubai, who had been relentlessly aiding the Radiant Origin Pass in suppression, hesitated. As the cry of a peacock echoed from the northern sky, its ever-wrathful, ever-tranquil head lifted. Its golden lips parted, and the melodious sound of chanting filled the air.

Boom!

The cultivators on the lake bowed their heads and shielded their eyes, daring not to look.

The vision was a potent stimulant to Fu Xia's spirit. He threw his head back, all thoughts of his dwindling spiritual qi and the searing Radiant Fire forgotten. The entire Radiant Origin Pass groaned and shifted with his movement, seeming on the verge of collapse.

'They can be saved… Good… Excellent…'

The old monk was overcome with ecstatic joy, tears streaming down his face. He turned a pleading gaze upon Kongheng, his voice a desperate cry.

"My lord, the Buddhist Pure Land has manifested! Please, for the sake of our Way, become the vessel for the Wrathful Pure Land! Return to the north to subdue the demons, enthrone yourself amidst a heavenly rain of mandara flowers, and for countless eons, attain the immeasurable power of the Maha!"

As if in response, a resonant bell tolled from within the golden haze to the north, sounding nine times.

Dong… Dong…

Kongheng gazed into the distance, the reflection of the Pure Land mirrored in his pupils.

He understood. If he just nodded, if he allowed even a flicker of the will to purify the world to arise within him, the seat of the Maha in the Pure Land would answer his call. He would become a practitioner like Murong Xia, attaining the ground of non-regression.

Once that state was achieved, he would be eternal. Unless someone could invade the Pure Land itself and extinguish the last spark of his true spirit, he could reincarnate for a hundred lifetimes with his mind and memories intact, forever enjoying the station of a *Maha*.

He would have no need to cultivate further in this life, for he would have already perfected the cultivation of a Master Monk. As an ancient cultivator, Kongheng's next step was not to become a Merciful One, but a *Maha*. He would only need to journey north and reclaim his seat to become one of the most powerful beings in the realm, with the Dharma Aspect Realm itself within his grasp.

Yet, he simply watched in silence.

His own spiritual lineage ended here; all that remained was the pursuit of enlightenment. It had been ages since an ancient cultivator had become a *Maha*. If he missed this chance—a chance so rare that a Pure Land was personally extending an invitation to an outsider from a dying tradition—it would never come again.

"Venerable elder," Kongheng said calmly, "the manifestation of Wrath is not my path."

Fu Xia was a Merciful One. His tears turned to crystal in the Radiant Fire, only to be shattered by the Celestial Light, casting a chaotic dance of light and shadow across the old monk's stunned face.

Kongheng looked at him serenely. The slender monk, with his naturally white teeth and red lips, was now suffused with a boundless radiance.

"My form is not the form of all living beings," he declared. "I will not establish an infinite Pure Land. I will not create terrifying images. I will not build temples for incense, nor will I accept the worship of monks. All such things are but a source of negative karma."

"Cultivators must not be made to believe in me. The common people must not be made to worship me. My path is one of liberation, not of gathering souls into a Pure Land."

Fu Xia looked as if he'd been struck by lightning. The will went out of him, and he slumped, deflated. As his focus wavered, the light radiating from his Merciful One's body dimmed. His back bent, the pressure upon him growing ever stronger.

The old monk remained motionless, staring at the sky as the scorching Radiant Fire licked at his body. He began to mutter sutras under his breath, watching as the golden radiance faded, bit by bit, until the giant tiger vanished back into the mist. All was lost.

The wrathful glare left Fu Xia's face, replaced by an expression of desolate sorrow. "I was sharp-tongued and aggressive," the old monk whispered. "I pressured you, berated you, and rebuked you with fierce, zealous doctrine, yet I could not stir a hint of anger in you. Had you felt even a moment of indignation, the Wrathful Pure Land would surely have descended upon you."

"So I tried to overwhelm you with power, to intimidate you with the radiant majesty of a Merciful One. Had you felt a sliver of fear, you wouldn't have even needed to nod or follow me. The Pure Land would have become yours."

"Since you felt neither anger nor fear, I resorted to tears of grief. I tried to move you with sorrow, begging you to spread the doctrine to the world and sit enthroned as the teacher of all Buddhists. Had your heart swayed for even an instant, the Pure Land would have chosen you."

Kongheng's face remained radiant. The Radiant Fire around him gradually subsided as a crystal light flew from Fu Xia's body. The old monk propped up the Radiant Pass with one hand. With his spiritual qi now flowing freely, his eyes filled with a crystalline light, and he stepped out of the flames.

The true power of a Merciful One was now in motion. Fu Xia could have shattered the Radiant Origin Pass without lifting a finger. The endless Radiant Fire

now served only as his fuel, its flames making his body shimmer with even more vibrant colors.

"But you were unmoved," Fu Xia said softly.

A hush fell over the lake, the onlookers staring in terror at the Merciful One. Only Kongheng's voice was warm.

"The great *Maha*s have tried all this before."

Kongheng smiled at him. The old monk removed his deep yellow kasaya, folded it neatly, and placed it in his palm. With his other hand, he laid a pure white staff on top of it.

After arranging the two items, he set them floating in the air before him. He pressed his palms together in a gesture of respect.

"Since this old monk came to this demonic land, I never intended to return. I have three treasures to gift you, Master Monk."

"The first is the Mysterious Tiger-Stripe Kasaya. It was transformed from the Horned Tiger and possesses profound abilities. It can take the form of a fierce tiger under your command, capable of devouring all things and invincible against ordinary cultivators."

"The second is the White Jade Demon-Subduing Staff. It is a treasured artifact that has vanquished countless demons. Its killing aura is so immense that the spirits of the slain would not dare to cry out for vengeance. A single strike can shatter mountains and part rivers."

Kongheng frowned, the five-colored light on his face shifting. "These belong to the Northern Demon-Subduing lineage. I cannot accept them."

But the old monk was stubbornly ignoring him. He held his clasped hands to his chest, his bare torso shimmering. He first kowtowed to the north, then closed his eyes and announced in a solemn voice, "The third is the Sarira of the Dharma Protector of the Northern Demon-Subduing Temple."

These words finally broke Kongheng's composure. He took a step forward, opening his mouth to intervene, but no matter how fast he was, he could not outpace a Merciful One.

The moment Fu Xia finished speaking, a pillar of crystalline light erupted, soaring to the heavens. Countless lotus blossoms bloomed across the lake's surface,

and a deluge of pink petals mixed with multicolored light rained down, bathing the world in a magnificent, boundless glow.

In an instant, Kongheng was engulfed. Fu Xia had been a Merciful One for many years. The moment he chose to pass on, the sound of sutras echoed through the world, the fiery prison shattered, and the ground was awash in gold and crimson.

Ommmmm…

But the Pure Land that should have come to receive him was gone. All the light and color converged, coalescing upon a single, crystal-colored sarira.

For all its splendor, for all its heaven-piercing brilliance, the vision lasted but a moment. Before it could fully bloom, it was drawn into the sarira like a great whale inhaling the sea, leaving not a trace behind.

The colors of the world receded, leaving only a single sarira hovering before Kongheng.

The lake grew even quieter.

The relic, about the size of a fingertip, floated in midair. It was pure white and crystalline, circled by rings of colored light that created various illusions. The lotuses on either side released waves of sweet fragrance.

Kongheng gazed at the sarira before him, then closed his hand around it and stored it away. The crimson and black light of dusk draped over him, and the light on the lake seemed unnaturally dim.

Fu Xia's death was like that of the twelve Master Monks shot down over the great river by Li Xuanfeng. Aside from the sarira, there was only a brief shower of petals and crystal, and the blooming of a few lotuses.

And the Pure Land that had manifested for him offered no response to his death. There was no glimmer of gold, no tolling of a bell. The horizon held only the hazy crimson of a dying sun.

It wasn't until Li Ximing flew over that a sliver of celestial light fell upon Kongheng. The slender monk seemed to awaken from a dream. The five-colored radiance flowing over his face receded, and the infinite light within him dimmed.

He returned to his usual gentle and courteous demeanor, though his expression was somber. "I have caused you trouble, Ximing," he said softly.

"How could you say such a thing!"

The Radiant Origin Pass had been a convergence of heavenly light, obscuring the view of the surrounding cultivators. Only Li Ximing, who had been watching from the side, had seen everything clearly. His expression was complicated, his heart filled with emotion. "Master Monk," he asked quietly, "are you well?"

"I am fine," Kongheng replied earnestly. He held the kasaya and staff in his hands. "However," he said gently, "my karmic connection with your clan has now come to an end."

Li Ximing had expected this. He closed his eyes and clenched his jaw. Kongheng bowed to him, his voice filled with guilt.

"I should have left when Xijun met his fate. But I felt responsible and wanted to watch over you a little longer. I never imagined I would nearly bring disaster upon your clan. The fault is mine. Now I must go. I must travel the world to validate my path."

"Venerable Kongheng…"

Before Li Ximing could say more, Kongheng's smile stopped the words in his throat. He lowered his voice. "Master Monk, please see my grandfather before you depart. It won't be too late… You have been with my family for so many years… The elders hold you in the highest esteem… Zhouwei is still away… He won't get to see you…"

Kongheng nodded gently. Li Ximing's rambling voice was surprisingly similar to Li Xuanxuan's, blurring the monk's vision.

As he descended toward Mount Qingdu, he glanced back at the northern sky where Fu Xia had kowtowed before his death. The sarira in his hand grew hotter.

The brilliant golden haze had long since vanished. The soaring peacocks were gone. Everything the old monk had held more precious than his own life—the golden pools, the faithful followers—had disappeared as if carried away by the wind.

The lake was dim. The crystal light had scattered into the water, leaving only a gloomy sky and a half-dead sun sinking behind the clouds.

The Eastern Sea.

The night was deep. A palace of black, arcane stone stood upon a reef. It was not large, its dark walls blending seamlessly with the rock, and it faced north.

Waves crashed against the steps leading to the entrance. A pair of exquisite, azure boots stepped onto the stone. Their owner had a wild mane of crimson hair and wore golden clothes that shimmered like scales. His jade-green eyes stared into the distance.

Behind him stood a youth, impeccably dressed, at his side. The man in gold spoke in a low voice.

"Heyun, that was the domain of the Wrathful Four Demon Emperor…"

Dongfang Heyun raised an eyebrow and also looked toward the distant north, where peacocks danced and golden pools erupted as the Pure Land manifested. He bowed. "Great King, Buddhist cultivators achieve their Way through the power of the collective. The station of a *Maha* is an evolution of a Master Monk fruit. It is not something a mere immortal can fake."

"Now that the *Maha*'s seat has sensed a call and sought to manifest a vessel in the mortal world, it means the being behind the Way of Wrath must be truly dead. No matter how many tricks he had up his sleeve, not even faking his own death could have accomplished this."

If Li Xizhi had been present, he would have recognized the golden-robed man as Dongfang Changmu, the Dragon King of the Admirable Sea, a son of the Dragon Monarch himself, a being of incredible nobility.

The Purple Mansion demon dragon nodded in agreement.

Dongfang Heyun continued, "He was caught by the Golden Bridge Lock and killed by True Monarch Shangyuan. His chances of survival were minuscule. Whether the Wrathful Four Demon Emperor is dead is almost a secondary concern. The Six Phases wanted to test the state of the Master Monk being behind the Way of Wrath."

"Judging by the current situation, it refused the meal placed right before its mouth and even let that ancient Buddhist Pure Land escape. It seems that Master Monk being is in a truly weakened state."

"Not necessarily," Dongfang Changmu said softly.

"Neither Mount Luoxia nor the Underworld reacted, and Jiangnan showed little interest. They probably already knew the Master Monk wouldn't respond. The real cause of this incident is that the ancient cultivator's power was growing, and someone did not want him to remain in Jiangnan."

"The followers of the Way of Wrath merely sensed an opportunity and came buzzing like flies to blood, making another futile attempt to awaken their master and summon a *Maha*."

Dongfang Heyun bowed, his tone admiring. "The Great King's insight is profound."

Dongfang Changmu said quietly, "After all… times have changed. Buddhist cultivators have their own place in the world now, and many are wary of them. How could they simply allow an ancient Buddhist to cultivate in Jiangnan? What if he achieved sudden enlightenment overnight and a Pure Land enveloped all of Jiangbei? Would that not mean another war?"

Dongfang Changmu chuckled. "In the past, the Immortal Dao was complacent, allowing Buddhists to seek the path in various sects. The result was that the Dry Qi fruit was secretly attained by Su Xikong, robbing the Dao of one of the Twelve Qis. The faces of several great immortals changed that day… A lesson learned the hard way."

"Indeed…" Dongfang Heyun replied respectfully.

"What is the fox tribe's response?" Dongfang Changmu asked.

Dongfang Heyun cupped his hands. "Mount Dali has sent the Plain-Hearted Fox. He has already made contact with His Highness Dingjiao. There are no issues."

"Oh, the White Dragon lineage!" A playful smile touched Dongfang Changmu's lips. He paced before the dark hall, a faint rumble of thunder echoing from the clouds above. The great Purple Mansion demon shook his head slightly. "As it should be. After all, Zipei gave that thing to the Dragon King of the Beihai Sea…"

Dongfang Changmu waited. A moment later, a streak of light cut through the sky, materializing into a woman with narrow eyes. She glanced around and said grimly, "Changmu, it's time to move."

Dongfang Changmu laughed and waved his hand. The Great Void before him split open, revealing a vast, violet expanse that stretched to the ends of existence.

The void here crackled with countless bolts of lightning that threatened to merge into a sea. Dongfang Changmu activated a divine art to shield himself from the electricity as he looked down at a pale purple Grotto-Heaven in the distance.

"Is everyone here?" he asked.

"Of course," the dragoness replied. "We dragons do not act with the same convoluted methods as humans, with their subtle manipulations and grand strategies. Whatever those thunder cultivators were planning, we simply sent a few Purple Mansion Demon Kings to round them up."

She added casually, "It took less than fifteen minutes. They've all been captured and thrown into the Grotto-Heaven."

Chapter 676: Departure

By the time Kongheng descended on the wind back to Mount Qingdu, the sky had completely darkened. Li Xuanxuan was waiting in the main hall, the old man's spirit still unsettled, not yet recovered from the terrifying vision he had witnessed.

When Kongheng and Li Ximing landed safely, Li Xuanxuan hurried to greet them. Seeing them both unharmed brought a flicker of joy to his face, but as he looked from one to the other—at Li Ximing's wistful expression and Kongheng's complicated one—his relief faded.

"What is…?"

"Venerable Elder."

Kongheng placed his palms together and bowed respectfully.

"This humble monk is about to depart," he said in his gentle voice. "I will travel through the prefectures, leave Jiangnan, and journey to other lands."

"What!" Li Xuanxuan was stunned. "Have we offended you in some way, Master Monk?" he asked urgently. "We've been together for decades…"

The old man's thoughts raced.

"That monk, Fu Xia, was spouting nonsense. He was almost certainly targeting our family! You mustn't take it to heart, Kongheng."

As Li Xuanxuan spoke, Kongheng simply held his hands together in a bow.

"Venerable Elder, you have a fortunate countenance," he said softly. "The first half of your life was fraught with hardship, but few trials remain ahead. It is best to worry less."

Li Xuanxuan had no reply to that and could only nod.

"I have long considered Zhouwei's situation," Kongheng continued. "I originally thought we would have to trouble someone to purchase a Supreme Yin spiritual item from overseas, as they are exceedingly rare. Fortunately, I heard your clan has acquired a Supreme Yin Dharma artifact, which will serve perfectly."

He retrieved a manuscript from his sleeve and handed it to Li Ximing. The pages were filled with meticulously handwritten characters, as small and neat as flies' heads, clearly penned by the monk himself.

"Follow the methods in this book," Kongheng instructed. "It will protect the mother and suppress the child's spiritual nature, preventing it from being overwhelmed by the Bright Yang."

Li Ximing was deeply moved and accepted the manuscript.

"However," Kongheng added apologetically, "since I cannot perform the ritual myself, it will be difficult to grasp the precise balance of power. Too much Supreme Yin can cause its own problems. You must all be exceedingly careful and proceed with caution."

"We will!" Li Ximing promised.

The monk bid farewell to Li Xuanxuan and made his way out, following the stone steps down to the halfway point of the mountain. The deer was lying numbly by the path, watching them quietly.

Kongheng paused. "He should not have done this to you," he sighed.

With that, he took out the White Jade Demon-Subduing Staff.

In the moonlight, the treasured artifact had shrunk to the length of a forearm and the thickness of a finger. It gleamed brightly, its intricate patterns faintly visible on the surface.

"Now I have no choice but to make a trip to the north," Kongheng lamented. "These items must be returned to the Northern Demon-Subduing Temple. The staff and the Mysterious Tiger-Stripe Kasaya are precious, and the sarira must be enshrined in a pagoda."

Li Ximing had expected as much. 'That old monk was cunning after all,' he thought with a bitter heart. 'He used every trick in the book, even sacrificing his own life, to force Kongheng to travel north. An ancient cultivator like Kongheng is a significant figure. He might survive the journey, but it's doubtful his lineage will remain intact.'

The artifact was truly formidable. Merely holding it out caused waves of five-colored light to ripple across its surface. Li Ximing took a closer look, mentally calculating its power. 'This is definitely not for the Foundation Establishment Realm. It's at least equivalent to a Purple Mansion spiritual artifact. Three such items… they truly spared no expense.'

Kongheng lightly tapped the deer's head with the staff. "Your crime did not merit this. You should be freed."

The deer let out a whimper and thrashed on the ground. Its fur fell away like leaves in the wind, revealing a bloody, human form that rolled out from the mess.

The man's face was smeared with deer blood. He looked dazed as he bowed. "Thank you, Master Monk."

Kongheng draped a robe over him. "The dead cannot be brought back to life," he said softly. "You must learn to accept your grief."

The man lowered his head, his expression lost. "I have known only hardship since I was a child," he mumbled. "Always hungry, always cold. I grew into a man with nothing to my name. My wife traveled a thousand miles to marry me, and we shared everything. Now she has been wrongly killed… I have nothing left to live for."

Kongheng looked down at him. His mind-reading ability told him the man's will to live was gone. He turned his head away.

'If I had accepted the Pure Land's call and embraced that karmic destiny, not only would this man have become a deer-bodied Arhat, but his wife might have been reborn in the Buddhist lands.'

Fortunately, the man was from Jiangnan, not from the lands where Buddhism held sway. If he had known more about the doctrine, he might have blamed Kongheng. As it was, having been both harmed and saved by the monk, he was merely confused.

Kongheng sighed gently. "Why not follow me north?" he offered. "You can seek answers from the Northern Demon-Subduing Temple as well."

The man paused, a flicker of resentment in his eyes, but he nodded. His black hair fell out in clumps. He put on the offered robes and silently fell in line behind Kongheng.

Li Ximing watched this unfold with a nod of his own. He escorted them to the lakeshore. The night was deep, and the bank was silent and deserted, the only sound the soft crunch of their feet on the sand.

"You have come far enough, Ximing," Kongheng said, pressing his palms together and urging him to return.

Li Ximing stopped and looked at him for a long moment, a sudden realization dawning on him. 'With Kongheng's departure, of those from my generation, I am the only one left.'

"Master Monk," he said softly, "if you ever pass by Moongaze Lake again, please stop and rest. It would be my honor to host you. But perhaps by then, I will have failed and perished. Things will have changed, and this land may no longer bear the name Li."

A faint smile touched Li Ximing's lips, and his usual, slightly anxious demeanor shifted. "When that time comes," he said with an air of self-possession, "do not perform last rites for me. Let me be utterly gone."

"I would have no face to meet my ancestors, my father, or my elders."

Kongheng placed his hands together in prayer and sighed, but said nothing more. With a final farewell, he departed. Li Ximing watched as the two figures walked away under the moonlight, eventually disappearing into the northern woods, before finally riding the wind back up the mountain.

His progress in the Jewel Steps realm was agonizingly slow. This brief emergence from his seclusion had caused little stir, as he had made scant progress—no more than ten or twenty percent of the way through his studies.

'I fear even ten years may not be enough,' he thought, his heart heavy as he landed back on his peak.

The Eastern Sea

On the back of the Azurewater Scaled-Beast, among the cluster of palaces, lay a wide-open plaza. A high, azure platform stood at one end, set with three jade tables. Dingjiao sat at the head.

Below, two massive water beasts were locked in a vicious battle. One was a water elephant with thick, snow-white scales and long, sharp tusks. The other was a long-tailed, single-horned serpent, the horn on its brow glowing with a brilliant light.

The horn's pale blue radiance cast a hazy mist before it. The water elephant thrashed and rolled, blood gushing from its eyes like springs, flowing down its scales and transforming into pearls as they hit the ground.

"Minghuang!"

Dingjiao's majestic voice pulled Li Zhouwei's attention back. The Dragon Prince was leaning against a seat of jade and coral, its armrests carved into the shape of two pristine white hook-serpent heads.

"What do you think of this profound light?"

Li Zhouwei set down his jade cup.

"This Converging Water Profound Light is a fourth-grade art," he noted, "but it excels in illusion and lacks killing power. Its myriad transformations can easily dazzle an opponent, but they cannot inflict lethal harm. In a one-on-one fight, it would struggle against a foe skilled in defense."

Dingjiao nodded in agreement. Below, the two beasts fought to the death, but the Dragon Prince watched with a detached air, his pale blue eyes unfocused as he sipped his wine, his mind clearly elsewhere.

Li Zhouwei had been in the palace for some time. The Azurewater Scaled-Beast had already completed a full tour of the Vermillion Sea. Dingjiao, having tired of music and dance, had ordered the water beasts to fight for their entertainment.

Li Zhouwei had learned from a nearby demon attendant that the beasts were a Jewel-Scaled Ferry-Beast and an Azure-Necked Flood Dragon—neither was an ordinary creature. Either one could dominate a stretch of water on its own.

His own Wushao, meanwhile, wouldn't even have a chance to take the stage in the Eastern Sea. Only beasts like Lingu Lanying's White-Scaled Hook-Serpent or the Whole Pill Water Ape from the Converging Water Sea would have such an opportunity.

'But before a True Dragon,' Li Zhouwei reflected, 'they are nothing more than playthings.'

He watched for a moment longer. As the Converging Water Profound Light gradually weakened, the Jewel-Scaled Ferry-Beast began to counterattack. Though he found the sight of such creatures fighting intriguing, his mind was preoccupied.

'I wonder what has happened at the lake. Why have they kept me here for so long?'

His business in the Southern Sea had been concluded long ago, and he should have left. Yet Dingjiao and Bai Rong had insisted on taking him on a tour of the sea. The journey had been uneventful; it was clear they simply wanted to delay his return.

Though worried, Li Zhouwei could do nothing about it and had resigned himself to the situation. Just as he was lost in thought, a demon in silver armor with a gold mask and silver fangs hurried up the palace corridor. He carried two short halberds on his back and was clearly no ordinary soldier.

The demon approached Dingjiao's high seat and seemed to whisper something using a secret technique. Dongfang Dingjiao's hand, holding the jade cup, froze in mid-air, though his expression remained unchanged.

A moment later, the demon general bowed and departed. Dingjiao resumed his casual posture. Across from him, Bai Rong was clearly growing weary of the spectacle. He finally stood up with a smile.

"This has been a most pleasant conversation, but I cannot be away from my mountain for too long. I mustn't impose on Your Highness any further."

Dingjiao rose, exchanged a few pleasantries, and escorted them out of the hall. As they passed through the corridor, the two demon generals were still locked in a life-or-death struggle, their blood spattering and turning to pearls in mid-air, rolling to Dingjiao's feet unnoticed.

After seeing them off, Dingjiao returned to the platform alone, the smile vanishing from his face.

The armored demon had obviously brought bad news. Dingjiao's deep composure had allowed him to remain perfectly at ease in front of his guests, but the moment they were gone, his expression turned grim.

The Dragon Prince's white horns began to glow faintly. He stood in silence, leaning on the azure railing, staring down at the two generals—demons who stood above tens of thousands of their kind—as they tore each other apart.

Though the esteemed guests had left, Dingjiao had not spoken, so the two creatures dared not slacken their efforts. They fought until their scales were shattered and their horns broken, the ground littered with dripping blood and rolling pearls.

Still, Dingjiao said nothing. He narrowed his pale blue eyes, and a suffocating tension filled the hall. It was obvious to anyone that the White Dragon Prince was in a foul mood. The guards on either side began to tremble, not daring to look up.

After a full quarter of an hour, a demon general with bulging gills and black armor could bear it no longer. He knelt down, trembling with fear, and said respectfully,

"Your Highness, the Dragon Monarch's birthday has just passed. It would be… inauspicious for high-ranking demons to die in a duel."

This general, Ranwu, had served Dingjiao for many years and was no ordinary subordinate. At this moment, with the prince's anger palpable, he was the only one in the hall who dared to speak.

Dingjiao didn't answer. With a dark face, he turned and strode back into the hall, the doors slamming shut behind him with a boom.

The demon general felt as if a death sentence had been lifted. Terrified, he silently waved his hands frantically. The two combatants below immediately ceased their fight, kowtowed several times toward the main hall, and scrambled away.

Outside, a wave of relief washed over the attendants. Inside, the hall was empty, silent, and gloomy, lit only by the faint glow of lamps.

Dingjiao walked all the way to his high seat, then with a sudden sweep of his sleeve, sent a cascade of jade pots and cups crashing to the floor with a series of sharp, clear clinks.

His face abruptly elongated, revealing rows of sharp, white fangs. Snowy-white dragon whiskers sprouted from his neck, and the color of his eyes deepened intensely. The tables and chairs in the hall began to tremble and rattle.

"Mount. Luo. Xia!"

He ground out the name, his voice like thunder, yet it was trapped within the hall, echoing off the walls and making everything vibrate.

Once they were clear of the sea's surface, where the Azurewater Scaled-Beast waited in the shallows, Bai Rong's reason for leaving became clear. He produced his two-wheeled chariot, flopped onto it with a groan, and sighed.

"Gods, that was exhausting!"

All the elegance and composure he had displayed were thrown to the winds. He reverted to his lazy, slovenly self, his feet dangling over the side of the cart as he whined and refused to even steer the artifact.

After so long under the sea, Li Zhouwei found the fresh scent of the sea breeze incredibly refreshing. With Bai Rong on strike, he had no choice but to pilot the chariot westward, back toward the mainland.

Bai Rong lay there for some time, only stirring when they reached the salt lake. "Careful, slow down," he mumbled, before adding with a laugh, "Life as a dragon is just that boring. They can't wander around human territory, and no matter how much trouble the sea demons get into, it's never as interesting as what humans come up with. That dueling spectacle… humans were bored of that back in the Zhou Dynasty! I was about to die of boredom."

Li Zhouwei grunted in acknowledgment, offered a few words of praise for Dingjiao, and then asked softly, "A lot must have happened at my family's lake while we were gone. Do you have any news, senior?"

He was worried about his family and had been rushing back, but Bai Rong had advised him to slow down, which suggested the problem wasn't critical. Now was his chance to get answers from the fox.

Bai Rong paused for a moment. "Nothing much," he said with a smile. "A Merciful One from the Way of Wrath saw an opportunity and came sniffing around to drive away your family's monk. If you had been at the lake, the other cultivators would have been delighted to get a measure of your true power."

The fox didn't bother with pretense. He gazed at the distant sea view, his tone calm.

"You have to understand, Bright Yang isn't just a power that allowed Buddhist cultivators to topple an immortal dynasty. There was also a Bright Yang Buddhist figure, the Undefeated King of Brightness!"

"If that monk had truly accepted the Way of Wrath and its karmic path, with you present at the lake, it would have been a perfect reenactment of the old tale. They would have dragged you, a White Qilin, into their Pure Land to become the new Undefeated King of Brightness and packed you off to the north!"

"Oh?" Li Zhouwei pictured Kongheng's face in his mind.

Bai Rong shook his head and chuckled.

"But even a Maha couldn't persuade him, let alone a mere Merciful One. I told you it was a minor problem. There was no need for us to get involved, and besides, it was a good precaution to take."

Li Zhouwei thanked him softly.

"So, Buddhist cultivators can also cultivate Bright Yang…" he mused.

"Bright Yang is a Fruition Attainment. It doesn't distinguish between immortal, Buddhist, demon, or devil!"

Bai Rong said, shifting to a more comfortable position.

"The Undefeated King of Brightness was a creation of Buddhist methods to begin with. After Su Xikong seized the Brilliant Qi, the Buddhist lands gained their glorious light, and their cultivators gained treasured artifacts. Just imagine how wonderful it would be for them if they could also get their hands on Bright Yang…"

Chapter 677: Two Qis

"'Bright Yang'..."

Li Zhouwei considered the past. The fall of the Wei and Li dynasties had been orchestrated by Buddhist cultivators, so it was only natural that the northern Buddhists would have designs on the Fruition Attainment.

"So it would seem," he ventured, "that with the death of the Undefeated King of Brightness, the Buddhists lost their bid for the 'Bright Yang' Fruition Attainment."

"Correct."

Bai Rong's mouth snapped shut. It was a long moment before he uttered the single word. Li Zhouwei took the hint and asked no more, sitting quietly on the Dharma artifact as it flew on.

'Dingjiao...'

The Dragon Prince had certainly treated him well, but a deep-seated suspicion lingered in Li Zhouwei's heart, a doubt he never dared to show, given the Dragon Clan's immense power.

'The Azure Pond Sect and Mount Luoxia are no saints, but is the Dragon Clan any better? The matter of the thunder-swallowing scheme is still unresolved, and for thousands of years, the dragons have rarely played a noble role...'

The Dragon Clan's plot to devour the thunder had been in motion for years. Li Qinghong's fate in the sea was still unknown, and there was no way Dongfang Dingjiao was ignorant of it. Yet the Dragon Prince had acted as if nothing was amiss, laughing and conversing with him, treating him with immense warmth.

Throughout his stay in the palace, Li Zhouwei had maintained a calm facade, offering smiles where appropriate. It was all the face he could give Dingjiao.

Firstly, the Dragon Prince's station was noble. Secondly, by befriending him, he hoped he might create even a sliver of a chance for Li Qinghong's survival.

'And in the worst-case scenario, if the matter with the Dragon Clan is already beyond saving and our elders are doomed, I absolutely cannot let the dragons think our family harbors a grudge. Saying nothing, acting as if I don't care at all, is the best course of action.'

If he were to bring up Li Qinghong to Dingjiao, it would lay his concerns bare. The consequences of a refusal from the Dragon Prince were not something the Li family could endure. And so, Li Zhouwei had acted as if he had no worries in the world. Only now, away from the dragon palace, did he allow himself to think on it.

'Dingjiao's casual attitude means one of two things: either the thunder cultivators involved in the scheme will at most lose their cultivation and not their lives, or he sees me purely as a White Qilin, an entirely different species from the Li family members I consider kin.'

Despite Dingjiao's repeated courtesy, Li Zhouwei found it impossible to truly connect with him, let alone reveal his inner thoughts. All their interactions had been polite formalities. 'The true nature of my family's relationship with the Dragon Clan, the real reason for Dingjiao's friendliness… the answers will likely only surface after the thunder-swallowing affair concludes.'

'Unfortunately, Bai Rong and Dingjiao delayed me for too long. I can no longer go to the Southern Sea. I'll have to wait for the next opportunity…'

Li Zhouwei spent some time cultivating cross-legged on the artifact before they finally reached Moongaze Lake. The moment they arrived, Bai Rong sprang to life.

"Next time something like this comes up, you can count me out, even if it kills me," the fox sighed. "It was both boring and exhausting…"

He was a homebody who preferred to stay holed up on his mountain peak and was already eager to return. He flatly refused Li Zhouwei's invitation to stay and fled on his artifact as if escaping a plague.

Li Zhouwei, meanwhile, rode the wind down to the island. As he made his way to the main hall, he found a youth in pleated robes waiting outside. The boy's body radiated a golden spiritual qi as sharp as a sword. Seeing Li Zhouwei, he quickly stepped back and bowed.

"Third Brother!"

"Zhouluo, you're here."

Li Zhouwei had only met this fourth brother of his a few times, but Li Zhouluo bowed with profound respect. "It has been a long time, Third Brother. You labor so hard for the family, traveling far and wide. We other brothers are not as capable and can only help with small matters at home. The thought fills me with shame."

Li Zhouwei gave him a surprised look and nodded. "You're too kind, Fourth Brother. We all simply have our roles to fulfill. Since you have reached Qi Refinement, you are a pillar of the family. You must not belittle yourself."

"I will take your words to heart."

Li Zhouluo smiled. His innate talent was second only to Li Zhouwei's among the Zhou generation. As a descendant of Li Xizhi's line, his aptitude was naturally high. Though he lacked a Talisman Seed, he had reached Qi Refinement at eighteen, only slightly slower than Li Xijun had been.

His golden aura flowed like stalks of wheat, splitting into six streams that circled his body with long, fiery tails, as nimble as sparrows. It highlighted the brightness in his eyes, giving him the sharp, spirited air of youth.

He was cultivating the *Gleaming Gold Spirit-Searching Art*, a rather impressive ancient technique. The Li family had recently acquired the Gleaming Gold Feather Liquid when they broke a great restrictive formation, making it possible to practice the art. As the first to do so, Li Zhouluo was naturally full of vigor.

Li Zhouwei had a good impression of him. He nodded and smiled. "I have reviewed the *Gleaming Gold Spirit-Searching Art*. I believe it has the potential of a fourth-grade technique, no worse than any other. Cultivate it well."

This unexpected praise brought a thrilled look to Li Zhouluo's face. He followed Li Zhouwei into the hall.

"Where are First Brother and Second Brother?" Li Zhouwei asked casually, referring to Li Zhoufang and Li Zhouyang. They were older than him, so he had seen more of them over the years and knew them better.

Li Zhouluo smiled. "They are both in seclusion beneath Mount Qingdu. They are expected to reach Qi Refinement within the next two years."

"Excellent!" Li Zhouwei praised, partly for his two brothers' progress and partly in approval of Li Zhouluo's open and generous attitude. His voice softened considerably. "My father has been in seclusion for a long time, and Aunt Minggong and Uncle Chenghuai are also at the point of breaking through to Foundation Establishment. The sooner you all reach Qi Refinement, the sooner you can take up the family's burdens."

Li Zhouwei knew his own standing. Few uncles could speak to him so casually, let alone his brothers. He clapped Li Zhouluo on the shoulder. "Both Kongheng and I have left the Eastern Sea, leaving Zongquan Island unguarded. Once your two older brothers emerge from their seclusion, the three of you should discuss who will lead a party to the Eastern Sea to stand guard."

"As the family head commands," Li Zhouluo said respectfully.

Li Zhouwei smiled and dismissed him, his previously heavy mood lifting considerably. He walked up the steps to the rear hall, where Li Xuanxuan, having heard the news, was hurrying to meet him, his face filled with hope.

"Minghuang, what did the Dragon Prince have to say?"

Li Zhouwei first invited him to sit down in the hall. He hesitated for a breath before speaking softly. "It is still uncertain if there is a chance for a turn of events. At the very least… His Highness Dingjiao gifted me a treasure in thanks."

He took out the Concealed Plunder Gold and recounted his journey, omitting and altering details as necessary. The old man shook his head as he listened, and in turn, told Li Zhouwei about the incident with Fu Xia.

Finally, Li Xuanxuan dropped the subject. He took two jade slips from his robes and placed them in Li Zhouwei's hands. "Minghuang," he said gravely, "we must begin preparing the spiritual qis for the two children."

Li Zhouwei accepted the slips, his spiritual sense sweeping over them.

"Bright Radiance's Blazing Essence: One must find a place where the earth's veins of Radiant Fire converge. Then, using four types of Radiant Fire—Profound Yang, Contemplating Fire, Celestial Yang, and Surging Li—one must refine baleful fire, extracting the essence of the four Radiant Fires. This essence must then be exposed to celestial light for six months to produce a single wisp. Ten wisps make one portion."

"Supreme Instrument Whole Mercury: One must find a place where the properties of things change and transform. Using a treasure from a Whole Pill cultivator as a nexus, yin and yang spiritual items for balance, and five-element treasures for regulation, one can produce a single wisp every one hundred and eighty-one days. Ten wisps make one portion…"

This was the gist of the two slips; the rest of the details were operational techniques and tricks. The texts were far longer than typical qi-gathering manuals. Li Zhouwei had already read them.

"Both of these are troublesome," Li Xuanxuan said in a low voice. "The complex methods are a secondary concern. The main problems are finding the spiritual fires and a place where the properties of things change… Do you have any ideas, Minghuang?"

Li Zhouwei pondered for a moment. "Grand-uncle Ximing has a Radiant Fire flag," he asked. "It contains five types of Radiant Fire. Do you know which ones they are?"

Li Xuanxuan had already considered this. He took out the crimson-yellow flag. "I've already asked him. It has five types of Radiant Fire, but only Contemplating Fire and Surging Li match our needs. The other three are different. We are still missing two."

"He also gave me the location of a place in the Eastern Sea with Radiant Fire earth veins, perfect for gathering qi."

Li Zhouwei thought for a moment and immediately had a plan. "Elder, do you remember the Intercalary Sun Art? The only spiritual fire in the family belongs to Grand-uncle Ximing, his Long-March Pheasant Flame. That fire was converted from Profound Yang Radiant Fire."

At his words, the old man nodded. "So, if we reverse the art to convert it back to Profound Yang, we'll have one of the two we need. We'll just be missing Celestial Yang. Where can we find that?"

"There's no need to look elsewhere." Li Zhouwei shook his head. "Elder, you probably haven't read the Intercalary Sun Art in detail. Celestial Yang is also part of the conversion process. We can first use Profound Yang for the refinement, then use the Contemplating Fire and Surging Li from the flag. While that's happening, someone else can convert the Profound Yang into Celestial

Yang. They can then return and continue the process. There is no need to search for it."

"Good." Li Xuanxuan nodded in sudden understanding.

"Aunt Minggong cultivates fire arts," Li Zhouwei continued. "She will have to make the trip. Have her take An Siwei and a few others to the Eastern Sea. From what I see, the location Grand-uncle gave is near the Suzhù Reefs, so it should be relatively safe."

Li Xuanxuan, however, doted on the younger generation. "Minggong and Siwei are always burdened with tasks. It seems a bit unfair…"

"The arrangements will be handled properly," Li Zhouwei said soothingly. "We can use this as an opportunity. When they return, we will give them Essence Gathering Pills and have them break through."

"Excellent!" Hearing this, Li Xuanxuan relaxed considerably.

Li Zhouwei was always decisive in handling clan affairs. He was already thinking about the Supreme Instrument Whole Mercury. "A place where the properties of things change and transform… I've never heard of such a thing, but I know a place that fits the description perfectly."

Li Xuanxuan had been agonizing over these problems for some time. He raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"Chengshui Marsh!" Li Zhouwei declared. "That place was the site of a great battle. It was once suppressed by the Xinyou Pristine Marsh Seal, turning it into a sea of Pristine water. Then, it was transformed into converging water by the combined efforts of several Purple Mansion cultivators. I can think of no place that better fits the description of a place where the properties of things change!"

"As for the Whole Pill treasure… the family possesses a drop of mercury of a rather high grade. It belongs to a Whole Pill cultivator, so others cannot use it, which is why it has been kept in storage. Now is the perfect time to use it."

Hearing how easily he had arranged everything, Li Xuanxuan readily agreed.

"However," Li Zhouwei added, "Chengshui Marsh is dangerous. It would be best to have a Foundation Establishment cultivator overseeing the operation. We will have to ask Elder White Ape and Li Wen to make the trip."

"You arrange it as you see fit!" With the spiritual qis for the children now secured, Li Xuanxuan was greatly relieved and departed in high spirits.

The hall fell silent. Li Zhouwei waited for a moment before taking out the jade slip recording the Intercalary Sun Art. He stroked the patterns on its surface, his eyes narrowed in thought.

'What a powerful technique… what a convenient technique…'

He knew this had come from Tu Longjian. He even suspected that the Intercalary Sun Art was one of the most crucial core legacies of the Dongli Sect. The thought was chilling.

'This thing… why isn't a single secret art locked? How could it not be locked! To be read so freely by anyone!'

No one in the world would be foolish enough not to place security restrictions on their cultivation arts. Their own family's *Great River and Grand Tomb Scripture* had been sitting inaccessible for nearly a hundred years for that very reason. How could a great power like the Dongli Sect leave such a critical legacy completely unguarded?

'And the Whole Pill treasure… Chengshui Marsh just happens to exist… and we just happen to have a drop of mercury. Even if the mercury wasn't suitable, there's still that Purple Mansion spiritual item stored with Hengzhu.'

Li Zhouwei pushed the thoughts aside. He casually approved the scrolls on his desk, setting down his vermilion brush before allowing himself a moment of contemplation.

'Now even Kongheng has been forced away. If more trouble comes, it will be difficult to handle…'

Elder White Ape was about to head north to gather qi. The family once had many Foundation Establishment cultivators, but now their ranks felt empty. After a moment, he summoned Chen Yang.

Chen Yang, now at the fifth level of Qi Refinement, entered and cupped his fist in a salute.

"Zongquan Island has been empty for too long," Li Zhouwei said in a low voice. "First, have Guest Elder An make a trip to the Eastern Sea. If Uncle Cheng is out of seclusion, have him return at once."

He paused, then added, "If there is any other news, write back immediately."

Chen Yang bowed and departed. Li Zhouwei sat in silence for a quarter of an hour, then abruptly waved his hand. The great doors of the hall boomed shut, sealing him off from any outside disturbances or prying eyes.

While the sun was high, he took out the stone box containing the Bright Yang object, the Concealed Plunder Gold.

'Once this object leaves the deep sea, it must not be exposed to moonlight. A single glimpse of the moon will instantly transform it into Balanced Qi.'

A pale gray spiritual water swirled inside the box, reflecting a tiny point of bright yellow light. His spiritual sense, however, could detect nothing. Li Zhouwei simply channeled his spiritual qi and raised the box before him.

He felt a faint heat on his brow, and the bright yellow reflection in the box vanished in an instant.

A point of bright light appeared within his Shengyang Acupoint. His spiritual sense felt as hot as fire. Li Zhouwei steadied his mind and began to circulate the art for Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light. The point of light immediately shot downward like a falling comet, trailing a searing tail of flame through the twelve-storied tower of his throat and plunging into his Juque Palace.

Li Zhouwei kept his eyes closed for a long time as light and shadow flickered around him. Finally, he exhaled a breath of celestial light that filled the hall with a brilliant golden glow. He opened his eyes, the gold within them slowly fading.

"A fine treasure."

The flow of Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light, which had previously circulated sluggishly in his Juque Palace before slowly rising to his Shengyang Acupoint, was now several times thicker and moved with incredible speed. With just a thought, it could erupt from between his brows in a matter of breaths.

'Never mind how much its power has increased, this speed of circulation finally makes it usable in actual combat…'

He had not been practicing Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light for long. A normal cultivator at their peak could mobilize it in a few breaths. By the time he perfected this Dharma light, he might be able to unleash it in a single breath.

The Concealed Plunder Gold was far more useful than he had imagined. Li Zhouwei was in a good mood, but he wasn't satisfied yet. He left the hall, took to the air, and flew to Mount Qingdu, where he retrieved two jade slips from the ancestral shrine.

Both techniques were appendices from the *Scripture of Heavenly Radiance and the Waning Sun*.

One was a sixth-grade Radiant Fire profound light: Great Parting's White Brilliance! The other was a fifth-grade Solar Radiant Fire art: the Sun's Resonant Parting Art!

'My family's Bright Yang lineage is closely related to Radiant Fire. Cultivating Great Parting's White Brilliance should be as suitable for me as it is for a cultivator of fire virtue.'

'As for the Sun's Resonant Parting Art… although it is not a Dharma light, it is a Solar Radiant Fire art. Since the Concealed Plunder Gold is a solar Bright Yang object, it might even provide an enhancement!'

Author's Note: *A bit of tidying up in these two chapters, then it's time for a time skip.*

Chapter 678: Ambush (Part 1)

The Eastern Sea.

Night rippled across the water, but Green Pine Island remained brightly lit. The forests on the Azure Pond Sect's immortal peak had been thinned, replaced by a grove of iron pillars. Streaks of dark red blood, remnants of some unknown beast, trickled down the metal, slowly turning to smoke.

A middle-aged man with a sinister air emerged from the forest of pillars, the treasures hanging from his waist jingling with every step. Upon seeing him, a group of cultivators hurried to offer fawning greetings.

"Greetings, Lord Fei!"

This was Fei Luoya, once a disciple of Mount Wu. He had visited the Li family several times in the past, begging for a path to escape his circumstances, only to be captured by Li Xuanfeng and sent to serve the Ning family. Decades had passed since then.

Fei Luoya's reddish eyes flickered over them, but he offered no reply. A few guest elders scurried to his side, attending to his every need with obsequious praise.

Fei Luoya was ruthless and cunning. He had spent years clawing his way up the ranks through any means necessary. Hailing from Mount Wu, he was well-versed in the treacherous shamanic arts, which proved highly effective in the Southern Borderlands and fueled his steady ascent.

A few years ago, he had finally caught the eye of the Ning family's main lineage and earned the trust of Ning Hejing, rising to his current station. No matter how much these Azure Pond guest elders might despise him in private, they had to address him as "Lord" to his face.

Fei Luoya untied a jade pearl from his waist and swept it around him, creating a barrier to prevent eavesdropping. Only then did he speak in a low voice.

"Have you scanned the area with your Dharma artifacts? Is there any movement from the Earth Abyss?"

"None, my lord," one of the men replied, stepping forward. He presented a palm-sized, turquoise mirror with both hands. "Li Xizhi has not been seen for years. It is likely he has already perished."

"Not even the Flowing Light Mirror can detect him."

Fei Luoya pocketed the ancient Dharma artifact. Years ago, he had been nothing but a poor member of the Eastern Yue. Now, he casually used treasures that chimed and clattered as he walked.

'He's from the Eastern Yue, through and through,' the guest elder thought, his face a mask of smiles while his mind churned with disdain. 'He'll never lose that tacky habit of hanging every trinket he owns on his body…'

Fei Luoya glanced at him but said nothing. With a flick of his sleeve, he dismissed the crowd and turned back into the iron forest.

Within a pocket of absolute darkness, Ning Hejing sat clad in soft red armor. Opposite him, a portly monk sat with his hands pressed together, a faint smile on his face. A small, sealed letter lay on the stone table between them.

Ning Hejing's expression was grim. He watched Fei Luoya approach before picking up the letter again.

"A message from the sect."

The letter was creased from being opened and refolded dozens of times. "Chi Fubo's people have already left the sect," Ning Hejing said gravely.

The violent energies within the Earth Abyss had gradually subsided. Li Xizhi was not yet dead, which meant his emergence was only a matter of time. Ning Hejing considered this for a moment, then asked, "Master Monk Liaokong, what news from Chi Zhihu?"

The monk, Liaokong, had a fortunate and guileless appearance. He smiled amiably. "Chi Zhihu plans to make his move against Li Xizhi above the Sea of Reefs. The grand formation is already in place. The moment Li Xizhi passes through, the formation will be activated to ensure his demise."

"Good…" Ning Hejing's voice was calm and low. "With you as his backup, Chi Zhihu will have no trouble killing him. And once he does, Si Yuanli will no longer be able to feign ignorance!"

Ning Hejing spoke as if the two were his most trusted confidants, making no effort to hide his intentions. "I must thank you, Master Monk. This plan could not have succeeded without your aid."

He had chosen to promote Fei Luoya because the man was resourceful and, more importantly, held a grudge against the Li family for seizing his territory, which made him relatively trustworthy. But the one he truly valued was the monk before him.

'The enemy of my enemy is my friend.'

Setting aside the long-standing conflicts between the Li family and the Buddhist cultivators, the eighteen monks Li Xuanfeng had slain on the river were reason enough. Ning Hejing had seen with his own eyes how deeply Liaokong was committed to the Li family's destruction and how much effort he had poured into this scheme.

"Daoist Master Suiguan is, after all, a Chi. With Chi Buzi away, it seems Daoist Master Yuanxiu truly has no interest in the position of sect master. The Si family, however, will not be so easily bullied. The moment Li Xizhi dies, Si Yuanli will be forced to retaliate."

Liaokong sought to eliminate an enemy of his faith, while Ning Hejing wanted to spark a war between Chi Fubo and the Si family. Their goals aligned perfectly. Liaokong had immediately set about approaching Chi Zhihu. That old brute was hot-tempered and had been desperately seeking allies to deal with Li Xizhi; the monk's arrival was a godsend.

Ning Hejing reviewed the plan in his mind and found no flaws. "That snake demon is nothing special," he muttered. "It's a miracle he even survived the Earth Abyss. But even if his luck holds, what can one man and one demon do? Chi Zhihu has three allies, plus you, Master Monk, all concealed by a grand formation. There is no escape!"

"Once Chi Zhihu has killed Li Xizhi, you will immediately reincarnate back in the north, and our hands will be clean…"

Fei Luoya listened, then frowned. "But… my lord, the Earth Abyss has many exits. What if Li Xizhi returns to Green Pine Island to recuperate instead of heading for the Sea of Reefs? Wouldn't the trap be for nothing?"

Ning Hejing laughed. "That is where you are mistaken."

The fat monk beside him gave Fei Luoya a meaningful look and shook his head. "Benefactor… this is the result of a divination I performed a few days ago. I needed one of his personal belongings, but unfortunately, Changtian Peak was inaccessible."

"Fortunately, Li Xizhi once resided on Qingsui Peak. Using an item obtained from Peak Master Yuan, I was able to divine that Li Xizhi has already reached the Sea of Reefs."

"In fact, he arrived there some time ago and is healing in secret. I will be taking my leave of you two shortly to head there myself."

Ning Hejing smiled at Fei Luoya. "I only just learned of this myself and hadn't had a chance to tell you."

Fei Luoya feigned a sudden understanding, showering them with praises for their brilliance. The two men laughed heartily, but a chill crept through the Eastern Yue man's heart.

'He doesn't trust me.'

Fei Luoya didn't believe for a second that Ning Hejing had "only just learned" this. All his efforts—sending him to scan the various branches of the Earth Abyss with Dharma artifacts, ordering him to search everywhere—had been nothing but a diversion. He had been deceived along with everyone else.

The man stood silently, his expression serene, but a storm of thoughts raged within him.

The Sea of Reefs.

Located on the edge of the Converging Heaven Sea, the water here was shallow and dotted with countless stone reefs. Li Xizhi emerged from a tunnel at the bottom of the sea, having just arrived.

He had hidden in the Earth Abyss for a long time but remained in good condition. Li Wushao, however, was listless and had yet to recover. The old demon, now in human form, was so pale and weak he could barely move. He remained behind to recuperate in a temporary cave residence carved near the exit.

The Dawn Rayfish, Li Qiyun, had fared better. The orange feathers on his cheeks were much brighter now. He had already reverted to his true form to carry Li Xizhi north. Man and fish became a streak of rosy light, moving at astonishing speed.

Li Xizhi consulted a map in his hand. "The nearest market is just ahead," he said softly. "I've been down there for years, and my supply of pills is completely depleted. We'll buy some more so Wushao can properly heal…"

He seemed utterly without a care, yet his eyes constantly swept over the reefs below, as if searching for something. After flying for a short while, the water beneath them began to boil. Several pillars of white light shot into the sky, coalescing into a shimmering white barrier.

"Li Xizhi!"

A thunderous shout echoed across the sea. Li Xizhi brought the Dawn Rayfish to a halt and looked up. Several figures had appeared above the water. The leader, a Foundation Establishment cultivator with a coarse face and a triumphant expression, was none other than Chi Zhihu.

Behind him stood three guest elders: two middle-aged men in red robes at the mid-Foundation Establishment Realm, and an elderly man in white robes at the late-Foundation Establishment Realm. They all looked familiar; they were Chi Zhihu's trusted retainers, and Li Xizhi recognized every one of them.

'Guest Elder Zhao, a Bright Yang cultivator; Xia Yun, who cultivates Virile Fire; and Wu Weibai, the Eastern Yue man stationed overseas…'

Li Xizhi's gaze swept over them without a trace of fear. He smiled warmly. "Is there anyone else? You might as well all come out at once."

"You!"

Chi Zhihu had long harbored a deep dislike for Li Xizhi. Seeing the young man's fearless expression as he rode a magnificent Dawn Rayfish, his triumph quickly soured into vigilance. He remained silent.

He scanned the Dawn Rayfish with his spiritual sense and found it was only at the mid-Foundation Establishment Realm. Relief washed over him. Without giving Li Xizhi a chance to speak, his expression hardened. "Attack!"

In an instant, three beams of Dharma light shot toward Li Xizhi. One was as brilliant as the sun and blindingly fast. Another was searingly hot, attempting to envelop him in flames. The last was a cool, pristine light that snaked through the air, watching him like a venomous serpent.

These three were not merely guest elders of the Azure Pond Sect; they were Chi Zhihu's most trusted followers. The Dharma lights they unleashed were dazzling and far from ordinary. Chi Zhihu himself stood ready, his hands forming a series of seals as potent spiritual energy pulsed around him.

"Impressive," Li Xizhi praised with a nod. He gave the Dawn Rayfish a gentle pat, and the creature vanished from beneath his feet. A cauldron-shaped rosy light appeared in his hands as he gave his sleeve a light flick.

"Calamity Dispelling Heart Cauldron!"

The Dharma light that shone like the sun had barely reached him when it was sucked into his palm as if by a great whale, disappearing completely. With another flick of his sleeve, Li Xizhi released the stored energy as a brilliant glow that collided with the searing red light, shattering it into a shower of sparks.

The initial probe was over. Li Xizhi's form dissolved into several streaks of rosy light, leaving the last Dharma light to dart about aimlessly like a headless fly.

"What a technique…" Wu Weibai, the sole late-Foundation Establishment cultivator among the four, murmured in admiration. His Dharma sword flew from his hand, only to collide with something moving at incredible speed. It wobbled and fell back into his grasp.

Two streaks of rosy light reappeared from the opposite direction. Li Xizhi's shadow flickered in the air as he sheathed his sword, then vanished once more.

'His movement technique has reached a profound level!'

The four attackers froze. The elder, Wu Weibai, had seen Lingu Xia in action years ago and knew just how troublesome these elusive light cultivators could be. "Your Highness!" he said gravely.

Chi Zhihu, though reluctant, drew a mirror from his sleeve. He hadn't expected to need it so soon, and being forced to use it after a single exchange was a blow to his pride.

Hum!

The mirror was clearly no ordinary artifact. The moment it appeared, a moving speck of rosy light became visible within the grand formation. A ray of sunlight shot out from the mirror, chasing after the speck.

Tss!

While the mirror's detection ability was formidable, its offensive power was lacking. The ray of sunlight struck the rosy light and vanished without a trace. In return, a brilliant glow shot back toward them—another victim of Calamity Dispelling Heart Cauldron.

The four had studied Li Xizhi's *Dawn Dew Gathering Technique* before the ambush and were familiar with its techniques. They recognized Calamity Dispelling Heart Cauldron at once.

'Calamity Dispelling Heart Cauldron is not an easy art to master… He must have spent a great deal of effort on it.'

Chi Zhihu's eyebrows twitched. He deflected the returned attack with a quick reaction, and a bead of white light pulsed in his hand. "No more delays! Finish this quickly!" he commanded coldly.

He was confident that his preparations were more than sufficient. Four cultivators should have been enough to suppress Li Xizhi, and he still had the monk hiding in the shadows. His only fear was that reinforcements might arrive. "Stop being so timid!" he roared.

Clang!

The bead of white light shot from his hand and struck something in mid-air. Unable to dodge, Li Xizhi materialized from the rosy light, his expression finally turning serious. He brought his hands together in a seal.

"Scatter."

A burst of rosy light erupted from his hands, momentarily pushing the bead of white light back. He drew a fan to block an incoming Dharma sword, already preparing his next art.

"Rainbow Phantom Split"

A multicolored light bloomed, splitting into more than a dozen copies of Li Xizhi. The sky filled with rosy light, momentarily stunning the four attackers. They immediately activated their ocular arts, but they couldn't see through the illusion. Their Dharma lights and swords wavered, their targets lost. Even the bead of white light hesitated.

Bang!

In that brief moment of confusion, a loud crash echoed in their ears. A dazzling streak of rosy light flashed past and slammed into Guest Elder Zhao, who was still forming his hand seals.

"Pah!"

He had no time to react. He coughed up a mouthful of blood, his protective Dharma artifact unable to shield him in time, and plunged headfirst into the sea.

"What!"

The rosy light solidified into a youth clad in colorful clothes, with feathers adorning his face. He smiled as he dove into the water after Guest Elder Zhao. Chi Zhihu cursed under his breath and whipped out a talisman.

"Protect me!" he yelled. His spiritual qi surged into the talisman. He glanced back and saw his other two retainers still busy trying to dispel the clones. He cursed them again, but several streaks of rosy light were already converging before him. An orange-yellow speck of light pulsed twice, so bright it made his eyes ache.

'Not good…'

He felt his hand suddenly go light; the talisman had vanished. His eyes watered from the pain. When he could finally see again, he was horrified to find that every one of the dozen Li Xizhi clones was now holding an identical talisman.

The next moment, all the clones dissolved into motes of orange light and disappeared, leaving only the rosy glow that drifted aimlessly through the formation.

The very first art Li Xizhi had ever mastered was Floating Light Gathering. It was not only his specialty but also the signature technique of a light cultivator.

After years of refinement with talismanic qi, his mastery of it had reached a divine level.

"You!"

His two remaining retainers quickly moved to shield him. Wu Weibai sighed and sent a message with his spiritual qi.

'Your Highness, this man's Floating Light Gathering is terrifying. If you intend to use a talisman, you must inform us beforehand.'

Although Chi Zhihu had warned them to be ready, the fault was not theirs. Knowing the enemy possessed such a technique, he should have retreated behind them before drawing the talisman, not shouted for protection after it was already in his hand.

Wu Weibai's words were diplomatic, but Chi Zhihu, unaware of his own lack of combat experience, inwardly blamed his men. A knot of frustration tightened in his chest, mingled with a growing fear of Li Xizhi's profound skill.

'I never heard he was so talented with his arts! He hid his abilities well!'

Author's Note: *I know many of you aren't fond of the Azure Pond Sect plotline, so I've been putting it off. But it's a necessary part of the story. I'll try to wrap it up as concisely as possible in the next few chapters before the time skip. With the New Year holiday, everyone is busy, so it will be difficult to release extra chapters. Thank you for your understanding.*

Chapter 679: Ambush (Part 2)

'A fine talisman.'

The talisman in Chi Zhihu's hand felt extraordinary. It was crafted from a bluish-white paper and inscribed with golden lacquer, but its grade, symbols, and activation incantation were all a mystery. It was useless to him.

Li Xizhi didn't spare it a second glance. His fingers formed a new seal. He tapped two fingers with his thumb, then shifted his grip to point first toward Mount Luoxia in the west, then to Mount Duan in the east. Three specks of light—emerald, brown, and black-gold—ignited at his fingertips.

His three opponents weren't about to stand by and watch him cast a spell. Chi Zhihu immediately raised his hand, a gleaming white, needle-like Dharma artifact materializing in his palm. Spiritual qi surged into it, but he hesitated, unsure which of the dozen clones to target.

Wu Weibai watched, speechless and utterly exasperated.

'All those years I told you to study the properties of magical arts, but you just slept through the lessons, obsessed only with raw power… Now you're paying the price!'

Normally, the type of artifact used for detection should have been able to see through Li Xizhi's illusions. But of all the treasures Chi Zhihu could have brought, he had chosen the Qingmu Mirror, an artifact of Bright Yang profound light.

Many arts could create illusory clones, but when one tried to use an artifact of profound light to see through a technique based on Heavenly Glow, they canceled each other out. The user would see nothing.

'If he had brought the Flowing Light Mirror or the Grand Feather Sword, we wouldn't be wasting our time on these phantoms!'

While Wu Weibai fumed, Chi Zhihu, though appearing calm, was cursing his luck. The mirror floating above his head shimmered, but he knew its limitations. He wasn't so incompetent as to overlook such a detail, even at the mid-Foundation Establishment Realm.

'Ning Hejing borrowed the Flowing Light Mirror, and the Lingu family took the Grand Feather Sword to the Southern Sea to slay demons… The Qingmu Mirror was better than nothing!'

Wu Weibai's eyes darted about as his hands moved. Being older, he had a wider array of arts at his disposal. While mentally cursing his master, he was already forming a seal. He raised his sword to his lips and chanted:

"Boundless fire, breathe forth the bright apricot… By my command!"

A torrent of apricot-yellow flame erupted from his mouth, swelling into a massive, incandescent sphere in the air. In an instant, it burst like a shattered silver vase, unleashing a countless number of Virile Fire sparks.

The fiery tide washed over the dozen Li Xizhi clones, each of them poised mid-incantation, treading on rosy light. Xia Yun, overjoyed, swiped his own weapon through a nearby clone, dispelling it. "A brilliant technique, Senior!" he shouted.

But then, each Li Xizhi clone formed a seal with one hand and cupped the other. Simultaneously, they all swiped their sleeves, conjuring a wall of iridescent light that met the tide of apricot flame and held it back.

"What?"

The sight made Wu Weibai's face pale. He had fought Lingu Xia before and had even personally shattered her light clones. Since when could a light clone cast a spell?

Before he could react, Chi Zhihu rashly unleashed the art he had been preparing, striking a random clone. Xia Yun was still maneuvering his artifact, chasing down other phantoms, when Wu Weibai roared, "Defend yourselves!"

Li Xizhi had completed his incantation. Ninety percent of the phantoms in the formation had been dispelled, leaving only his true body and two clones, positioned in a triangle. The rosy light around them pulsed softly.

"Rainbow Pierce!"

The three specks of light—emerald, brown, and black-gold—leapt into the air. They streaked across the sky and descended upon Chi Zhihu, whose face lit up with triumph. "Excellent!" he cried.

A jade stone on the man's necklace shattered with a crack. A halo of brilliant yellow light erupted from his body, coalescing in mid-air into a three-tailed, feathered beast. It let out a silent roar, and the incoming lights froze, held in place.

Seeing this, all three attackers were ecstatic.

Li Xizhi's light art had seemed terrifyingly powerful. Wu Weibai was composed enough, having already deployed his own artifact and talismans, but Xia Yun had been scared witless.

He knew that of the three of them, he was the weakest link. By the logic of 'better to sever one finger than injure all ten,' he should have been the first target. The unknown power of the light art had filled him with dread.

But Li Xizhi had chosen Chi Zhihu. As a direct descendant of the Chi family, he was protected by powerful treasures. The rosy light had been instantly neutralized. Chi Zhihu was elated, Wu Weibai was suspicious, but Xia Yun was the most jubilant of all. He raised his Dharma sword and laughed.

"What kind of pathetic trick was that!"

He thrust his sword through a nearby light clone, only to hear Wu Weibai's horrified cry.

"Look out!"

The old man shot forward, sword raised, but was blocked by a fan that glowed with a faint blue light. From behind the shimmering cover of the three-colored lights, a speck of gold emerged. Li Xizhi himself materialized right in front of Chi Zhihu, hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

"This is bad!"

Though they had witnessed his mastery of magical arts, none of them had forgotten that the Li family was a clan of sword cultivators. Furthermore, throughout the entire exchange, Wu Weibai's swordsmanship had been a complete joke in front of Li Xizhi, easily parried. It was a clear testament to the young man's skill with a blade.

The Dharma sword at the Peak Lord of Changtian's waist was no mere ornament.

'He's too close!'

The sight of his opponent appearing before him sent a chill down Chi Zhihu's spine. His hair stood on end. He frantically reversed his incantation, forcing the fiery spell he had been gathering to dissipate unevenly within his meridians, and slammed his spiritual sense into his necklace.

"Return!"

As Chi Zhihu desperately recalled the three-tailed beast, Wu Weibai saw his master's peril. Biting the tip of his tongue, he spat out a mouthful of essence blood and roared, "Halt!"

The old cultivator's experience showed. The shout was like a crack of thunder, focused into a single line of force that slammed into Li Xizhi, making him pause for a fraction of a second. It was the opening Chi Zhihu needed. His shock turned to relief, then to joy.

'A perfect chance!'

Wu Weibai had bought him a crucial moment at the cost of injuring himself. The three-tailed beast that had been suppressing the three-colored lights vanished from its spot and reappeared before Chi Zhihu. It lunged with a silent, spectral roar, spewing a mist of golden light that struck Li Xizhi squarely in the face.

'He's been hit by the Gleaming Gold Feather-Beast's pounce! Victory is ours!'

Chi Zhihu knew the power of his own treasure. The jade was an heirloom discovered in a grotto-heaven by an ancestor, and it contained the spirit of the long-extinct Gleaming Gold Feather-Beast. A single breath of its mist was enough to kill an ordinary Foundation Establishment cultivator. Even someone as skilled as Li Xizhi would not escape unscathed.

'What a stroke of luck…'

He had inadvertently dealt Li Xizhi a massive blow. But before a smile could form on his lips, it was replaced by sheer astonishment.

The Li Xizhi before him dissolved like snow under the morning sun, vanishing without a trace.

"A clone?"

Wu Weibai's pupils dilated. A single thought consumed his mind.

'The Qingmu Mirror…!'

And indeed, reflected in the old man's eyes was the golden flash of the Gold in Cloud technique. A fair, strong hand materialized from nothing, shimmered into existence, and slapped a swath of rosy light onto the crystalline white mirror Chi Zhihu had left hovering in the air.

"Floating Light Gathering!"

Chi Zhihu's entire focus had been on the three-tailed beast; he was completely unprepared. He felt a sudden emptiness in his chest, then a sharp pang as his spiritual sense took a heavy blow. His connection to the precious mirror weakened.

'His arts… can be used like *that*?!'

With the Qingmu Mirror now in Li Xizhi's grasp, the clear light that had filled the area vanished. Li Xizhi held the artifact as if it were a struggling sparrow, his grip alternating between light and firm. With his other hand, he unleashed a rosy glow he had already prepared, smashing it onto the mirror's surface.

Clang…

The arc of rosy light dissipated into mist. Li Xizhi took a step back and vanished from sight. Before Chi Zhihu could even react, a piteous scream tore through the air.

"Aaaargh!!"

When Chi Zhihu had recalled the Gleaming Gold Feather-Beast, the three-colored lights had been freed. They had immediately changed course and struck Xia Yun.

Xia Yun had only been promoted because of his good relationship with Ning Hejing, and he had opportunistically thrown his lot in with Chi Zhihu. He had some skill, but he never expected Chi Zhihu to retract the feather-beast, leaving him exposed to the attack.

He had amassed a small fortune over the past two years, and several layers of white light flared from protective artifacts on his body. They absorbed some of the impact, and a Foundation Establishment-grade talisman he'd deployed

earlier nullified more of the force. But the attack was too sudden; he had no time to prepare further.

Chi Zhihu looked over to see a fist-sized hole blown straight through Xia Yun's head. He could almost see the ocean through the gap. The man stumbled back in a panic, pulling out healing salves and spirit meats to try and patch the wound.

'Zhao is still tangled with that Dawn Rayfish underwater…'

Chi Zhihu could feel the constant ripples of spiritual qi from below. The fight had dragged on, and his will to continue was gone.

'This man's skill with arts is profound… What is Liaokong doing? Why hasn't he acted yet? Does he want to wait until Xia Yun is dead?'

With the Qingmu Mirror stolen, Li Xizhi had once again vanished into the ambient rosy light. Chi Zhihu hastily raised a turtle-shell shield in front of him just as he heard Wu Weibai exclaim with delight, "Huh?"

Chi Zhihu looked up sharply. The figure that had dissolved into golden light had reappeared, stumbling out of the air. A thought dawned on him, and he grinned.

"The Qingmu Mirror is an ancient artifact. It can't be stolen so easily!"

'Gold in Cloud was interrupted…'

Li Xizhi had the mirror in hand. If he could have transformed back into light, his opponents would have been helpless. Unfortunately, the Qingmu Mirror was a high-quality ancient artifact from the Azure Pond Sect. It struggled relentlessly, breaking his movement technique.

As he materialized, Wu Weibai seized the opportunity and charged, his Dharma sword lunging like a venomous, gold-and-silver-ringed serpent. Its patterned blade shimmered, a truly sinister-looking weapon. "Activate the artifact!" the old man yelled.

Taking the cue, Chi Zhihu abandoned the spell he was forming. He closed his eyes and poured all his effort into activating the Qingmu Mirror. The struggling force in Li Xizhi's hand multiplied several times over, forcing him to divert his attention to suppress it.

Li Xizhi's gaze swept across his opponents, his assessment clear.

'Chi Zhihu has many treasures but little combat experience. Xia Yun is just here to make up the numbers. Only this Wu Weibai is a seasoned fighter… His arts aren't refined, but his cultivation is deep.'

As Wu Weibai closed in, Li Xizhi formed a seal with one hand while his spiritual sense reached out, following the connection to his companion.

"Qiyun!"

Clang!

The serpent-like sword was upon him.

The Qingmu Mirror was still stuck to Li Xizhi's hand, so Wu Weibai wasn't worried about him retrieving his own sword. The old man's eyes were fixed on the composed youth, who calmly held the mirror in one hand while the other rested on his sword hilt.

Clang!

An arc of sword energy shot toward the heavens. Wu Weibai's serpent sword was struck, its tail end flying up. Three more agile arcs of moon-white sword energy flew out.

Li Xizhi's execution of the two stances of the Law of Celestial Moon lacked Li Xijun's sharp, ethereal grace, but it was undeniably fluid. Wu Weibai didn't understand sword forms; his weapon was more of a spellcasting implement than a proper blade. He scrambled to defend himself.

Boom!

The sea below exploded. A column of snow-white water erupted into the sky, and a streak of rosy light shot out of it. The Dawn Rayfish, Li Qiyun, streaked past Li Xizhi, and in that instant, the Qingmu Mirror passed from one's hand to the other.

Freed from the burden, Li Xizhi immediately activated Gold in Cloud, his form once again splitting into dozens of streaks of rosy light that danced and circled within the grand formation.

'He got away…'

The moment Li Qiyun had the mirror, Guest Elder Zhao shot out of the water, his face a mask of fury. He was met by another brilliant blast of rosy light and was hammered back into the sea.

Having lost the Qingmu Mirror, Wu Weibai and Chi Zhihu grew even more cautious amidst the swirling light. Chi Zhihu's expression was grim. Wu Weibai sighed.

"Your Highness… that spirit beast appears to be a Foundation Establishment Dawn Rayfish. It has little combat power, but it's incredibly difficult to deal with. Zhao Fu is completely tied up; he won't be getting free."

The situation was clear. The three of them were powerless against the master and his companion. If Liaokong didn't intervene soon, they would be lucky to escape with their lives.

"How can his mastery of arts be so profound?!"

Chi Zhihu understood the old guest elder's implication perfectly, but he couldn't fathom what madness had seized Liaokong. The monk was still hiding somewhere, refusing to show himself.

As they hesitated, two more streaks of rosy light shot toward them. They both raised their weapons and batted them aside, only to find they were mere illusions.

Thump!

A dull thud sounded nearby. Xia Yun's spiritual presence weakened, and a burst of hazy flame erupted from his body, dispersing some of the rosy light. A deep sense of dread filled Wu Weibai. "Your Highness!" he cried out.

Chi Zhihu was at his wit's end. He possessed powerful artifacts and devastating techniques, yet it felt like punching cotton. He couldn't even find his enemy's shadow. His anger and fear had reached their peak.

'Do I have to let him go? Was this all for nothing?!'

He stared at the sword energy lashing out from the rosy mist and roared, "Liaokong!"

The sound rolled like thunder, making Li Xizhi wary. The rosy lights pulled back slightly. But after several seconds, there was no response. Chi Zhihu, grinding his teeth, shouted again, "Liaokong!"

Only a dull echo answered him from within the grand formation. Wu Weibai's face changed, his expression turning ugly. "Your Highness, retract the formation and leave at once!" he urged.

Chi Zhihu also sensed something was wrong. Fear crept onto his face as he hastily formed a seal, his spiritual sense connecting to the formation disk in his sleeve.

The brilliant yellow formation in the sky remained perfectly still, an unshakable cage.

Wu Weibai almost coughed up blood. He felt faint. Chi Zhihu tried several more incantations, but the grand formation was as steady as a mountain, not budging an inch. The color drained from his face as well.

A rush of hot blood surged to Wu Weibai's head. He was terrified. The old man trembled, forgetting all decorum. "You couldn't borrow the Flowing Light Mirror and the Grand Feather Sword… could you!" he croaked.

Chi Zhihu looked at him, dazed, as if waking from a dream.

Wu Weibai raised his head in despair. Within the swirling rosy light, the three specks of color—emerald, brown, and black-gold—were gathering once more. Dozens of phantoms flickered with iridescent light, like a pack of starving wolves, poised and ready to devour them.

Chapter 680: Abandoned Pawns in the Formation

The waves of the Sea of Reefs churned as a great ship materialized in the sky. At its bow stood a young man in black robes, his hands tucked into his sleeves. In the center of the deck was an old man with white hair and sharp, high-arched eyebrows that gave him a ferocious look. He was draped in gold and jade, his body shimmering with the light of powerful artifacts—the very image of a direct descendant of the Chi family.

Six Guest Elders stood in two rows on either side of him. All were clad in resplendent spirit armor, their hands gripping weapons that vied for brilliance—axes, blades, spears, and staves. None of them were below the mid-Foundation Establishment Realm.

'Such a grand display,' Li Yuanqin thought. 'All this for Li Xizhi.'

The old man in the center, Chi Buhua, was advanced in years. Surrounded by the other cultivators, he wore a look of impatience, his eyes constantly scanning the sea below. Finally, his deep voice rumbled, "Why aren't they here yet?"

"Rest assured, Senior," Li Yuanqin said with a casual laugh. "There's more than enough time. The monk Ning Hejing sent is formidable, but Li Xizhi cultivates the Dao of Heavenly Glow. He won't be defeated so easily."

Chi Buhua glanced at the black-robed young man, a hint of satisfaction finally showing on his face. "We misunderstood you before," he nodded. "You have played an invaluable role in this."

Given Chi Buhua's high status, Li Yuanqin simply offered a polite acknowledgment.

Chi Zhihu was reckless, impulsive, and arrogant, often ruining carefully laid plans. While Chi Fubo outwardly respected him as an elder, he secretly held him in contempt. Chi Buhua, however, was Chi Fubo's most capable agent—not

only was he cautious and steady, but his cultivation was among the highest in the Chi family, giving him a deep understanding of the situation.

The old man raised an eyebrow and said leisurely, "The Lingu family is tied up with the demon scourge in the Southern Sea, and Si Tongyi was kept on Green Pine Island by Ning Hejing. We have the entire Si family under surveillance. Li Xizhi has well and truly been abandoned."

Chi Fubo was a capable man. Ever since Si Yuanli had entered seclusion, he had kept all the major families under watch. Daring to send Chi Buhua here meant he was ninety percent certain of success, with numerous contingencies in place to keep the Si and Lingu families from interfering.

Even so, Chi Fubo had dispatched six Peak Lords and the profoundly powerful late-stage Foundation Establishment cultivator, Chi Buhua. The grand formation Chi Zhihu was using also concealed a hidden, devastating power. Even if, by some miracle, Lingu Lanying and Si Tongyi were present, the formation was strong enough to suppress all three of them.

"Zhihu knows nothing of the true plan. By acting as the bait, he earned the Si family's trust. At this point, unless Daoist Master Yuanxiu himself appears, there is no turning back."

Chi Buhua's only fear was that the monk and Chi Zhihu would kill Li Xizhi prematurely, which would be a disgrace. 'The Li family still has many friends among the Purple Mansion cultivators. Killing Li Xizhi would force us to sacrifice many of our own to appease their anger. It's best to capture him alive and force Si Yuanli to back down.'

By now, Chi Buhua was no longer worried that Daoist Master Yuanxiu would actually intervene. 'The Daoist Master must have tacitly approved of this. This is a move against the Li family, a test of some kind. Otherwise, things would never have reached such a passive state for him. Even if he did show up to save Li Xizhi, he would lose immense face. And in the absolute worst-case scenario, if Li Xizhi is saved… we just go home. Is the Daoist Master really going to kill us for it?'

All signs pointed to one conclusion. Ning Hejing's plot was clumsy, and Chi Fubo had only acted because he could turn it to his own advantage. Otherwise, why would he have bothered?

While the old man mulled this over, Li Yuanqin stood by respectfully, his mind a world away.

'Chi Fubo truly wants Chi Zhihu dead.'

Chi Buhua knew only half the story. His esteemed junior was no gentle soul. Chi Fubo had secretly tampered with the formation, making it a one-way trap—easy to enter, impossible to leave. He had also conveniently arranged for the Grand Feather Sword and the Flowing Light Mirror to be sent away.

As for the monk, Liaokong, Chi Fubo was certain he would not act in their best interest.

'Liaokong wants to harm the Li family, which means he needs Li Xizhi to kill Chi Zhihu. Even if Li Xizhi is unwilling, Liaokong will *help* him do it. Only with that crime can he effectively frame Wei Danying and the Li family. Ning Hejing is far too naive.'

With all these factors in play, Chi Fubo was banking on his uncle dying at Li Xizhi's hands.

'If they only fought for a while, no matter how we twisted the story, the worst we could do is have Li Xizhi imprisoned. But if it comes to a matter of life and death, if Chi Zhihu dies at Li Xizhi's hands, then Li Xizhi will have no way to defend himself. That would be enough to demand his life, and that is what will forge him into a sharp blade to pierce the Si family.'

Of all the players in the Chi family, Chi Fubo's thinking was the most ruthless and profound. Though he had never met the monk Liaokong, his grasp of the situation had allowed him to form a tacit alliance of interests.

Li Yuanqin's thoughts churned, but he remained silent, his arms crossed.

'The Si family was willing to throw the Li family away... What is their true goal?'

His thoughts grew grim. Through the shimmering blue water, he could almost see Si Yuanli's simple, honest face.

'Does the Si family really just want to defeat the Chi family and divide the Azure Pond Sect with the Li and Lingu? I'm afraid not.'

A sudden realization struck him. 'How many Foundation Establishment cultivators does the Si family even have?'

Only two of any note. And how many years did Daoist Master Yuanxiu have left?

'And the Li and Lingu families? How many do they have? Never mind Li Xizhi, the Peak Lord of Changtian Peak. Li Ximing is a late-stage Foundation Establishment cultivator and a genius alchemist. And Li Zhouwei is the Child of Bright Yang, a talent unseen in a century.'

The young man's expression darkened. 'More importantly, the Li family has been forging connections with Purple Mansion cultivators everywhere. Li Xuanfeng and Li Qinghong instigated Si Yuanli to move against the Chi family. Does Si Yuanli truly not see their selfish motives? Is Daoist Master Yuanxiu really unaware that he's being used as a weapon?'

'And the Lingu family? Lingu Lanying might not be a genius, but is she weak? They collude with the Xiukui Sword Gate, nurturing bandits in the Southern Sea to make themselves indispensable. They use the grievances of the Jiangnan cultivators to pressure Si Yuanli. Are they not a threat to be feared?'

'Is that the kind of Azure Pond Sect that Si Yuanli wants to rule?'

In Li Yuanqin's mind, the seat of power in the Azure Pond Sect was a throne of thorns. The sharpest belonged to the Li, the most venomous to the Lingu. The Si family had few members, and Daoist Master Yuanxiu was running out of time. If Si Yuanli took that seat, who would usurp him after the Daoist Master's death? The Li? The Lingu?

His perspective suddenly expanded. Si Yuanli's simple, almost slow-witted face became transparent, and behind it stood the stern, unsmiling figure of the Purple Mansion Daoist Master.

'Chi Fubo, Chi Xunxiao… they are all just scissors, just axes. They wouldn't dare touch the trunk of the Si family, so they are being used to chop away at the poisonous thorns of the Li and Lingu.'

'Once the Li family is weakened and the Lingu family loses its hold on the Southern Sea, the other cultivators will tremble in fear. Then, Si Yuanli, unable to bear it any longer, will emerge from seclusion like a savior, crying out against the Chi family's cruelty to the Peak Lords and their persecution of the great families. He will take their place.'

'Then he can generously restore the two families and console the peaks, and there will be no more threats. By the time the Li and Lingu realize what has happened, even if they harbor suspicions, what could they possibly do?'

His face remained impassive, but his mind was reeling.

'Yes! So that's how it is!'

With that single thought, all of the Si family's bizarre actions suddenly made perfect sense. But his moment of clarity brought no relief, only a bone-deep, bottomless chill.

The thought vanished as quickly as it came. The young man shivered and drew his black robes tighter, an unconscious gesture that made him touch his throat. Chi Buhua was watching him and immediately asked, "What is it?"

'What is it? I'm checking if my head is still attached, of course.'

Li Yuanqin cursed inwardly, half-expecting a talisman to fly out and lop off his head at any moment. Outwardly, he simply smiled and said warmly, "Thank you for your concern, Elder. I just feel a bit of a chill here."

"A chill…" Chi Buhua laughed, the realization dawning on him. "Ah, yes. The Dragon King of the Sea of Reefs cultivates a dao of cold energy. He has turned his undersea domain into a grotto-heaven of ice. It does make the area colder. If you were to fly a little further, you'd even see icebergs."

He turned to the men at his sides with a warm smile. "Look at me, I'd forgotten that Yuanqin is still a Qi Refinement cultivator. We Foundation Establishment cultivators naturally wouldn't feel a thing. My apologies."

Chi Zhihu was in the grand formation, luring Li Xizhi into a trap. They needed to frame Li Xizhi for his murder, and Li Yuanqin's testimony would be essential. Chi Buhua was mindful of this. 'This Li Yuanqin is Li Xizhi's clan uncle, after all. He's an important piece. Although we don't need to fear him recanting his story, it's best to keep him on our side.'

Li Yuanqin deflected with pleasantries. A few moments later, a talisman in Chi Buhua's hand suddenly lit up, pointing north.

"Found him!"

Overjoyed, Chi Buhua steered the spirit ship in that direction. The sky ahead was empty, but the old man activated an ocular art, his hands forming a seal and pressing against his eyes.

A massive, bright yellow formation became visible, blanketing the sea. "Right ahead!" Chi Buhua declared, his voice filled with delight.

Li Yuanqin watched, his heart sinking. 'This old fossil has lived a long time and accumulated far too much power. Not only does he have a powerful ocular art, but he even knows a special technique to enhance it…'

Such specialized arts were rarely used. That he had mastered one spoke volumes of his profound skill. Though Li Yuanqin's cultivation was low, his insight was not. A single glance was enough to make his stomach tighten. 'It seems Chi Zhihu isn't dead yet. This old man is powerful enough on his own, and he has six other Foundation Establishment cultivators with him. With Liaokong's interference and the power of the formation… things could still go wrong.'

His face remained a placid mask, but anxiety gnawed at him. As the others prepared to leave the ship and enter the formation, Li Yuanqin racked his brain and said in a low voice, "Senior, a moment!"

At such a sensitive time, before Chi Buhua could even speak, a nearby Chi family Guest Elder shot him a sharp, narrowed glare. These men were proud and had only tolerated Li Yuanqin's presence out of respect for Chi Buhua. They weren't about to let him command seven Foundation Establishment cultivators. He opened his mouth to rebuke him, but the old man stopped him.

"What is it, Yuanqin?" Chi Buhua asked, his tone surprisingly patient. Li Yuanqin was useful, and his sharp mind often produced unexpected results. Besides, in his view, delaying their entry was pointless. 'Even if Li Yuanqin has ulterior motives and wants to save his clan nephew, he should have entered the formation sooner. Delaying now will only seal his nephew's fate.'

His tolerance grew. Li Yuanqin adopted a hesitant expression. "Senior, firstly, I am concerned that members of the other two families are still in the area. And secondly… I worry that since Li Xuanfeng visited the Great Ning Palace, Li Xizhi might have a Purple Mansion-grade talisman."

"A Purple Mansion talisman?" Chi Buhua paused. "What of it?"

"I fear he might use the talisman to escape the formation. If we all rush in, he could slip away. With his speed, we would be left helpless." He chose his words

carefully. "Capturing him should be effortless for us. Perhaps it would be better to leave one person outside, just in case he uses a Purple Mansion talisman to break through the formation."

Chi Buhua frowned. Such escape talismans were exceedingly rare, capable of traversing the Great Void to pass through formations. The Azure Pond Sect had only a few, all in Daoist Master Yuanxiu's possession, with one held by the Sect Master, Chi Zhiyun, and another that had belonged to the deceased Chi Zhiyan.

'Li Xizhi has such a treasure? He's making a mountain out of a molehill.' The old man grew suspicious and stared at him intently.

Li Yuanqin waited a beat, seeing he had successfully planted the seed of doubt, before adding hesitantly, "Elder… the truth is, this formation can be entered but not exited. I fear if we all go in… we might be walking into a trap!"

A half-hidden truth is always more alluring. As soon as he heard this, the old man froze, his mind reeling. Chi Buhua was old and experienced; it took him only a moment of thought to grasp the implication. "He wants to use Zhihu's life…" he gasped.

He cut himself off, his face hardening. He drew a sharp breath, lifted his chin, and closed his eyes. The weathered bark of his face wrinkled deeply. "Then… we will wait a little longer," he sighed.

He waited. The grand formation fell silent, with only occasional flickers of light, a clear sign that the cultivator inside had dealt with his opponents.

"Alright…" Chi Buhua grit his teeth and exhaled, his face cold as he issued his orders. "You six will stand guard outside. If anything goes wrong once I'm inside, I will crush this jade pendant. Three of you will enter. The remaining three will act based on the pendants of the first three."

"Yes, sir," the six replied in unison.

A flicker of motion crossed Chi Buhua's old face. He glanced at Li Yuanqin, who stood by respectfully, and a new suspicion entered his grim expression. 'In that case, is it possible this boy is colluding with Li Xizhi, trying to buy him some time?'

'And where is Liaokong? If Zhihu has been dealt with, the monk should be inside, contending with Li Xizhi…'

He stared at the boy, a cruel glint in his eyes. 'This is a perfect chance to test him.'

Chi Buhua suddenly laughed. "As for you, Yuanqin," he shook his head, "why don't you come inside with me? You are Li Xizhi's clan uncle. You can persuade him to surrender without a fight. It will save us all the trouble of coming and going."

Li Yuanqin understood and nodded, clasping his fist. "As you command."

"Good." Chi Buhua roared with laughter, using his spiritual qi to pull the boy to his side. Seeing the youth's calm expression, he felt he had the situation perfectly under control.

'Since Li Xizhi is a member of the Li family, how can he disobey his clan uncle's command? Even if he pretends not to listen, he will have to divert his attention to protect Li Yuanqin. He cannot bear the infamy of killing his own uncle. This gives us another weakness to exploit!'

'And even if he is stone-hearted and they are not colluding, I can simply call in three Guest Elders. One to guard Li Yuanqin, while the other two and I capture Li Xizhi. It will be effortless. And that's not even counting his mortal enemy, Liaokong! Even Li Qinghong would be powerless here, let alone this boy.'

Chapter 681: Liaokong

Pristine Water dripped within the grand formation, which shimmered with clear light and pulses of rosy mist.

When Chi Buhua entered, the space was empty save for a single golden pagoda standing unshakable amidst the swirling light.

'That must be Liaokong.'

Chi Buhua needed only a single glance to know that Chi Zhihu, Wu Weibai, and the others were all dead. Suppressing a wave of grief, he immediately activated his ocular art, his hands framing his eyes to peer through the haze.

His technique was profound, and it allowed him to make out a shadowy figure within the rosy light. He could also see the monk inside the pagoda, whose booming voice echoed out.

"Senior! This man is treacherous! I cannot hold him! Attack now!"

Chi Buhua formed a seal, his hands glowing with the light of Pristine Water. He looked up just as Li Xizhi's figure shot toward him. The old man had barely blocked the obscuring mist when he saw, in his peripheral vision, a three-colored light screaming toward him, aimed directly at Li Yuanqin.

"You—"

This was entirely unexpected. He faintly heard the young man's voice, refined yet ice-cold. "First, I will eliminate this unfilial whelp for Lord Xuanfeng!"

"Son of a bitch."

Hearing the curse, Chi Buhua hesitated for a fraction of a second, caught between saving the boy and letting him die. He hadn't anticipated the terrifying speed of the three-colored rainbow. In an instant, it was before Li Yuanqin, aimed straight at his face.

BOOM!

A flash of white light flared from Li Yuanqin's body, holding for a moment before shattering like an eggshell. The golden pagoda, arriving just in time, finally caught up to the rosy light, suppressing it with a deafening, grating screech.

"That man from the Azure Pond Sect! What plague-ridden mother would bring a Qi Refinement cultivator in here!"

Liaokong clearly had no idea why Chi Buhua had brought Li Yuanqin inside, but seeing Li Xizhi try to kill him immediately told him the boy's identity was not simple. Adhering to the principle of opposing his enemy's every move, Liaokong intercepted the light, planting the pagoda firmly in front of the two men as he descended behind it.

Chi Buhua's eyelids twitched. Li Yuanqin was covered in a cold sweat, and seeing that the young man's fear was genuine, the old man finally spoke. "Monk," he said coldly, "help me capture him, and I will let you leave."

The Buddhist cultivators had nearly annihilated the Azure Pond Sect's main lineage at the border mountains. How could Chi Buhua feel anything but hatred? Yet he was an old man, and deep down, he still felt a sliver of grief for what had befallen the main branch. Besides, he had brought an entire retinue; victory was already assured. If Liaokong weren't a sworn enemy of the Li family—and thus a useful source of trouble for them—and if monks weren't so prone to causing unexpected complications, he might have been tempted to kill him as well.

Liaokong instantly detected the hostility in his tone. The portly monk's expression shifted, but he swallowed his anger. "Who in the world is this Qi Refinement cultivator?" he grumbled. "He's getting in the way!"

"He is Li Xizhi's blood relative," Chi Buhua answered.

Liaokong's eyes lit up. "Excellent!" he exclaimed. "A fine move, Senior. I have just the way to deal with him!"

Chi Buhua had no real need for the monk's help, but he feared Li Xizhi might fight to the death. Having a Buddhist cultivator's methods on hand could be useful. "Make it quick," he ordered.

Liaokong immediately channeled his power into the golden pagoda, which erupted in a brilliant glow. He then produced a golden pearl from his sleeve and swallowed it. A surge of spiritual qi flooded his body and he poured it all into the pagoda, which blazed like a golden sun, its light rippling like water.

'He has some skill.'

Chi Buhua felt a wave of heat wash over his face. As Liaokong focused on his technique, the three-colored rainbow slipped out from under the pagoda. The old man drew a green vase from his sleeve, infused it with the spiritual qi of Pristine Water, and tossed it into the air.

The vase flipped upside down, the flood dragon motif upon it glowing brightly. It spat out a beam of green light that drove back the swirling mist, then began to suck in spiritual qi, successfully pinning Li Xizhi's Rainbow Pierce technique in place.

Li Xizhi's second spell was already streaking through the mist. Chi Buhua locked onto it with his spiritual sense, but a flicker of movement caught his eye. The black-robed young man at his side was smiling.

"Hm?"

The old man reacted like a striking viper. The wrinkles on his face bunched together as his head snapped around at an unnatural angle. His aged eyes stabbed into Li Yuanqin. "Yuanqin? What are you doing?"

Concealed beneath his robes, Li Yuanqin's hand held a jade talisman, already glowing with infused power. "Elder," he said in a soft, gentle voice, "you gave me the formation talisman. It can seal the entrance and exit."

"Oh?"

A muscle twitched in Chi Buhua's old face as a realization struck him like lightning. 'Fubo was afraid I would save Zhihu. Afraid I would see his betrayal and fear that one day I, too, would be abandoned. So he gave the talisman to *him*.'

'I was never supposed to know. He had the talisman but didn't use it, instead revealing it to me to keep the other six outside.'

The next moment, the grand formation in the sky locked shut. Eight distinct runes lit up in the corners, sealing it from both within and without.

The old man's face turned grim. 'So what? How long can this formation hold back six cultivators? While I and Liaokong deal with Li Xizhi… how do you expect to survive?'

His mind seethed with suspicion. Without another word, he raised a hand, and a vicious wind swept toward Li Yuanqin. He would kill him with a single palm strike and take back the talisman.

But a golden light flared. The pagoda that had been hovering in the sky suddenly blazed with multicolored light and came crashing down. Caught completely off guard, Chi Buhua's face finally twisted into a mask of horrified disbelief. "How is this possible?!"

The golden pagoda slammed into his green vase with a sickening crunch, sending it tumbling. The misty green light dissipated, and the suppressed rosy light shot out like a slippery fish, diving back into the mist.

At the same instant, a sword light that had been lying in wait erupted from the fog. A chill ran down Chi Buhua's neck, and a cold dread washed over his back. It had to be the second three-colored rainbow he had sensed earlier.

'How…'

Of all the people who might betray him, Liaokong was the last one he would have suspected. He would have sooner believed one of the six men outside was a spy for the Si family. He had never once considered the monk.

"The Way of Emptiness had eighteen of its disciples killed by Li Xuanfeng! His sect and the Wei-Li family are mortal enemies for generations to come! He stood to gain so much by harming them… How could he possibly help Li Xizhi?!"

"Are you insane?!"

The roar died in Chi Buhua's throat. Not only was the pagoda hurtling toward him, but the monk himself was charging forward, fists flying. But the true killing threats were the sword energy and rosy light right in front of him.

A jade stone on his body shattered, and the three-tailed feathered beast materialized once more, spewing a yellow mist that halted the sword energy. He focused all his spiritual qi into two fingers and thrust them at the rosy light behind him.

Pfft.

The menacing glow of light vanished with a muffled sound, transforming into a Dawn Rayfish that dove into the sea below. Chi Buhua never imagined such a demonic beast was present. He was unable to retract his technique in time. The

two beams of three-colored light were already at his back. Swallowing blood, he had no choice but to retract his attack to defend himself.

"Floating Light Gathering!"

But at that critical moment, the old man's spiritual sense jolted. Li Xizhi, timing it perfectly, had struck the green vase with a spell, severing Chi Buhua's connection to it.

It was more than just losing an artifact. The mental backlash caused him to stumble for half a step, and the screaming golden pagoda slammed squarely into him.

"Puh…"

Chi Buhua's cultivation was deep. The robes he wore managed to block the pagoda, but the force still made him spit blood. His technique was interrupted, and before he could react, the rosy light struck his arms, shattering them into a spray of Pristine Water.

The situation had reversed in an instant.

Li Xizhi had studied Chi Buhua beforehand. He knew the old man was vastly experienced, a master of powerful arts, and a direct descendant of the Chi family. His protective treasures were unknown, and the grade of his techniques was certainly far higher than his own.

Thus, his two attacks had a single purpose: to destroy the old man's arms and rob him of his ability to cast spells. With that accomplished, Liaokong's pagoda came crashing down, pinning his body.

Li Yuanqin, meanwhile, couldn't care less who lived or died. He had already scrambled away, head in his hands, and was now huddled at the far end of the formation. The aftershocks of a battle between Foundation Establishment cultivators were more than enough to kill him; even the fine spray of Pristine Water that rained down on him was agonizing. He pulled out five or six talismans, but a rainbow-colored light flashed, and he was pulled into the air.

Before him stood Li Xizhi, handsome and elegant, with gentle brows and gray eyes. Rosy light flowed around his feathered robes, giving him an extraordinary air. One of his hands was clamped tightly around the green vase, which struggled fruitlessly to escape his grasp. With his other hand, he controlled the two

beams of light. He looked at Li Yuanqin with an affectionate expression and said softly, "Little Uncle."

Li Yuanqin, looking somewhat disheveled, glanced at him and mumbled, "Greetings… Peak Lord of Changtian."

On Green Pine Island, Ning Hejing sat silently in his hall. Before him stood a middle-aged man in rattan armor, arms crossed. Two gourds at his waist trembled slightly, as if something were struggling inside.

This man had broken through the grand formation and fought his way up the immortal peak. The Guest Elders had either been too terrified to stop him or were subdued in a few moves. Ning Hejing hadn't even had time to flee before being cornered.

Fei Luoya stood respectfully at the man's side, a jade talisman in his hand glowing faintly—the source of the grand formation's control.

Ning Hejing had long known he was no good; he had promoted the man specifically to leak information to Li Yuanqin. He showed no surprise now. He slowly closed his eyes and sighed. "Senior Lingu…"

The man before him was none other than Lingu Rao, who had accompanied Li Xuanfeng into the Great Ning Palace all those years ago.

"Scorpion Child" Lingu Rao had once been a name spoken in the same breath as Tang Shedu and Li Xuanfeng. Though he kept a low profile and was not widely famous, in the current Azure Pond Sect, he was a figure far beyond the reach of most. He had defeated and injured Ning Hejing in just over a dozen exchanges. The Foundation Establishment spirit scorpions from his gourds had already poisoned him. Now, he was just sitting on his throne, waiting to die.

"The Lingu family… colluded with the Lin clan… who saved your life. No wonder."

Lingu Rao didn't move. Knowing he couldn't escape, Ning Hejing felt black blood trickle from his lips. "With Chi Buhua and the others gone from the sect, Si Yuanli must have made his move inside as well," he said in a low voice. "Sacrificing Li Xizhi… good… very good."

"Good?" Lingu Rao chuckled softly. "From start to finish, Liaokong belonged to Li Yuanqin. Fei Luoya? You deliberately leaked information, thinking he was the messenger? No. It was always Liaokong. Fei Luoya was only here to prevent your escape."

"Impossible!" Ning Hejing scoffed. "He's a Li! What monk from the Seven Ways would side with them? To willingly become prey for his peers to extend their lifespans? A Purple Mansion cultivator must have intervened!"

"No Purple Mansion cultivator intervened in this matter," Lingu Rao said, his voice quiet. The Eastern Yue man's features were plain, but his gaze was sharp as a blade. "As for why… it was because of an inheritance Li Xuanfeng left behind: the Wrathful Dao lineage of the Qinling Temple and a Buddhist treasure."

Ning Hejing let out a ragged breath, no longer caring about such things. The smiling face of Chi Xunxiao appeared in his mind. "What of the Sect Master?" he asked weakly.

Lingu Rao seemed to just then remember the Qi Refinement Sect Master. "That does not concern you," he answered, shaking his head.

The stern, domineering mask on Ning Hejing's face finally crumbled. He lowered his head, his voice taking on a pleading tone he had never used before. "The Sect Master is benevolent, kind, and a friend to all the peaks. He has never harmed anyone. Daoist Master Buzi is still away… I beg you, Elder, for the Daoist Master's sake… spare his life."

"That does not concern you," Lingu Rao repeated.

Ning Hejing froze like a statue, slumping into his seat. He watched impassively as Fei Luoya approached him step by step. Lingu Rao turned and walked out of the hall, gazing at the brilliant rising sun in the distance.

The golden-red light illuminated his face. From the hall behind him came a heart-wrenching roar. "Chi Fubo! Chi Fubo! You fool, to trust tigers and wolves! You fool!"

Ning Hejing's voice was thick with strangled hatred, yet it still carried the tyrannical, domineering viciousness that had defined him. It echoed from the hall, through the open doors, and across the peak, lingering for a long, long time.

Lingu Rao paid it no mind, his gaze fixed on the horizon.

'Si Yuanli…'

Lingu Rao hadn't actually coordinated his attack with the Si family, but by making his move, he had forced Si Yuanli's hand. 'After all, Si Yuanli was waiting for me to act.'

As long as the Si family remained inactive, the Li and Lingu families were in increasing danger. Moongaze Lake was too remote for the Chi family's reach, so they could only target Li Xizhi. The Lingu family, however, was right on their doorstep, their power in the commandery and on the sea being stripped away piece by piece. Their situation was far more dire.

Si Yuanli was content to watch the Chi family weaken his two allies. He was waiting, letting the dull blade slowly cut away at their flesh, until they could endure it no longer.

And so today, with Li Xizhi, Li Yuanqin, and Liaokong having dealt with two major Chi family figures, Lingu Rao saw his chance and struck. Otherwise, who knew how long Si Yuanli would have waited.

'Now, our two families are the ones who struck first, making us deeply complicit. If Suiguan or Daoist Master Buzi hold a grudge in the future, the Si family won't be the sole target.'

'Whether we act or not, Si Yuanli holds all the cards.'

Lingu Rao knew this well. The longer they waited, the more their families would lose. Better to grant Si Yuanli his victory sooner rather than later. 'You have a Purple Mansion cultivator backing you, so you can sit back and watch the show, making us dance to your tune. But in thirty years… we shall see.'

He dismissed the thought and walked out with a faint smile. The morning sun bathed the sky in gold. The middle-aged man's expression brightened, his eyes showing a sense of liberated ease. He chuckled softly.

"As long as the Xiukui stands, my family will be an evergreen tree."

Chapter 682: Seclusion

On Mount Wu, a white mist of spiritual qi drifted through the air, flowing along the intricate patterns carved into the jade structures. At the highest point, atop a jade pillar where all the energies converged, the celestial light was brilliant.

Li Ximing sat cross-legged upon it, his pale white Daoist robes with their golden trim fluttering gently. His cultivation had reached its peak.

'The Jewel Steps technique was difficult,' he thought, 'but as I delved deeper, I found I could constantly cross-reference it with my memories of the Huai River Map, that ancient Purple Mansion spiritual artifact. It made things much easier.'

After many years of cultivation, aided by several flashes of insight from that long-ago opportunity, his progress had not been slow. Now, as the morning light shone and the pure qi was at its clearest, he had finally mastered the secret art.

'Jewel Steps is a secret art that tempers the will and strengthens the spiritual sense. By using the Radiant Origin Pass as a focal point, I can project its light over the entire mountain. Wherever the light touches, a cultivator's dharma power will be clarified, protecting them from the peril of inner demons.'

The manifestation of the Jewel Steps technique appeared upon his immortal foundation. He knew that if he were to unleash the Radiant Origin Pass now, illusory, treasure-like steps would materialize by the two corner towers and the central gate. He kept the power contained.

'This is troublesome... I don't know how much the other sects know about the Radiant Splendor immortal foundation. These Jewel Steps are clearly unique. If any records from the old Wei-Li family still exist, they might be able to tell I've cultivated this technique.'

With a quiet sigh, he concluded, 'It's probably best if I avoid any more fights.'

He exhaled slowly and raised his gaze to a jade water clock on a nearby pillar. In the basin below, fifty-four perfectly round jade beads were piled together.

'I estimated it would take ten years to master, but it only took about half that time.'

That, at least, was a good thing. Li Ximing looked away and retrieved a light purple jade slip. With a turn of his hand, he began to read about the next secret art: the Great Fissure.

This technique was related to ocular arts. The text was far more extensive, and nothing about it felt familiar. As he scanned it, his heart sank.

'This is several times more difficult than Jewel Steps… and that's not even accounting for the mutual repulsion between the different secret arts. The time it will take is almost impossible to calculate!'

Furthermore, he suspected the Huai River Map had been a Purple Mansion spiritual artifact corresponding to both the Radiant Origin Pass and another technique, which was why it had been so beneficial for his Jewel Steps practice. The Great Fissure was clearly unrelated, so that advantage was gone.

'I'll have to cultivate this one honestly, step by step. It will take at least twenty or thirty years! And if I run into any parts I can't comprehend, who knows how long it will be delayed!'

Having made his assessment, Li Ximing put the jade slip away. He rose from the jade pillar, light gathering around him, and flew out through the formation. The morning sun was bright as he soared toward the center of the island. The cultivators before the main hall all bowed their heads in greeting.

He strode into the hall but did not see Li Zhouwei. Instead, a young man in black robes and silver armor stood in the center of the room. Six slender, elegant, silver-white ancient tokens hung from his waist.

The man was not particularly tall, but the armor made his shoulders seem broad. His features were sharp and clear, his eyes like polished lacquer, exceptionally captivating. A faint purple mark was imprinted on his brow as he stood bathed in the brilliant morning light.

'He looks so familiar!'

Li Ximing paused. Though the young man was only at the initial stage of the Foundation Establishment Realm, his bearing was anything but ordinary. The

young man looked up, his eyes filled with joy. He had recognized Li Ximing at once.

"Chenghui pays his respects to Uncle!" he said with a bow.

"Chenghui! Good…"

Li Ximing's eyes were fixed on the six tokens at the man's waist. He had guessed his identity, and now it was confirmed. Overjoyed, he nodded repeatedly, took two steps forward, and pulled him by the hand to sit down.

"Excellent, excellent," he praised. "With you breaking through to Foundation Establishment, the Radiant Lure generation has a worthy successor! You're only in your early fifties, aren't you? Opportunity is a hard thing to predict. I once thought few among you would be able to reach this realm, but you managed it with the tide of the world, without even needing an Essence Gathering Pill!"

This was the first time Li Chenghui had spoken so informally with this elder. He perched on the edge of his chair and answered respectfully, "Uncle, Brother Huai has also entered seclusion on the island, and First Brother Chengliao should be emerging soon. I was merely reckless and seized an early opportunity."

But Li Ximing shook his head.

Though Li Chenghui was among the most talented of his generation, he had received few resources throughout his cultivation. When the spiritual tides of the Eastern Sea rose, he had gone to the islands to train. But he had been caught up in one turmoil after another, at times even losing contact with the family, let alone using any of their resources.

When it was finally time for his breakthrough, he hadn't even been given one of the family's Essence Gathering Pills. Although Li Chenghui was of the direct line, his resources had been less than those of An Siwei and the others. It was almost as if he had been exiled. Li Ximing wasn't in charge of the family, but he had heard Li Xuanxuan lament it dozens of times, so he was well aware of the situation.

"You have been wronged all these years!"

"Uncle, you speak too seriously."

The words made Li Chenghui anxious. The light in the young man's eyes dimmed as he said gravely, "My brothers went to war, and eight out of ten perished. I, meanwhile, sat peacefully in the sect's spiritual font, focusing

solely on cultivation. How could I dare feel any resentment? To receive the Six Thunder Profound Punishment Talisman right after my breakthrough… I feel it is far too great an honor."

Li Ximing's heart relaxed. After a few more words with him, he looked into the young man's eyes and found them unusually dark, with a strange, captivating quality. "Have you cultivated an ocular art?" he asked.

Li Chenghui nodded quickly. "Uncle has a discerning eye. I spent decades overseas and came upon a small opportunity, mastering a technique called the Yin-Bright Profound Eyes. I have already sent the manual home."

Li Ximing nodded, satisfied. Li Chenghui then added, a little awkwardly, "This ocular art requires a spirit liquid called Scaled Wood Profound Liquid to master. It's usually only found in the Admirable Sea. When I found my opportunity, I used that portion myself and had none left for the family…"

Li Ximing gave him a surprised look. "What is there to apologize for? It was your opportunity; of course you should be the one to use it."

Apart from Li Zhouwei, no one in the Chengming or Zhouxing generations had received a Talisman Seed, and their performances had been mostly unremarkable. He hadn't expected Li Chenghui to have changed so much. Highly pleased, he encouraged him, "Lord Tongya was in his thirties before his true talents began to show. Continue to work hard."

He ignored Li Chenghui's modest deflections and asked, "Where is Zhouwei?"

Li Chenghui replied softly, "Uncle, the family has found a spirit jade vein in the Helin Mountains. The patriarch had it surveyed, and the reserves are sufficient to build the White Jade Grand Court required for the 'Courtly Red Dust Qi' technique from the *Aged Courtly Path Sutra*."

"However," he continued, "since jade has become more common, a demon of the True Jade lineage has occupied the mountain and is commanding a host of lesser demons. The patriarch had to go deal with it."

Li Ximing frowned. "Just tell him to be careful not to fall into a trap."

"Don't worry, Uncle!" Li Chenghui replied reassuringly. "It's not far, and with the matter at the Azure Pond Sect settled, the way is quite safe."

Hearing this, Li Ximing's brow furrowed. "What happened at the Azure Pond Sect? Did Si Yuanli make his move?"

Li Chenghui smiled. "He did. Years ago, Chi Buhua was killed in the Sea of Reefs by Third Uncle, who is now Peak Master Changtian, 'Heavenly Pavilion Heavenly Glow.' His Excellency escaped with ease on a Dawn Rayfish, and the six pursuers couldn't even catch his shadow."

"Then, 'Scorpion Child' Lingu Rao attacked Green Pine Island. Fei Luoya opened the grand formation, and Ning Hejing was killed. 'Azure Flash Sword' Si Yuanli then appeared in the main hall, captured Chi Fubo and his faction who had controlled the sect and mistreated the other families, and rescued the Sect Master…"

He paused, then explained, "The Sect Master is now in seclusion for his breakthrough. Si Yuanli is managing the sect in his stead."

"Oh…"

The amount of information was staggering. It took Li Ximing more than a dozen breaths to process it all. "Then what about Uncle?" he finally asked.

Li Chenghui understood who he meant. "His Excellency endured great humiliation, feigning compliance with the Ning family and Chi Fubo. He was handsomely rewarded by Si Yuanli and is now also in seclusion to break through to the Foundation Establishment Realm."

"Good!"

Li Ximing finally felt a sense of relief. After a few moments, he smiled. "Brother Zhi has become truly formidable!"

"Indeed!" Li Chenghui said in a low voice. "I hear His Excellency's magical arts are incredibly profound, even surpassing those of Lingu Xia back in her day. He's called the number one spellcaster in the Azure Pond Sect and is now in charge of the Heaven-Probing Pavilion, making him one of the most powerful figures there!"

"Furthermore, I've heard that he always carries a longsword but has never drawn it, fighting only with his arts. A rumor says his swordsmanship far surpasses his spellcasting. If someone could force him to draw his sword, they would witness the true grace of a family of sword immortals as his blade split the sky."

As Li Chenghui spoke, a look of shared pride and joy lit up his face, his eyes shining with a smile.

"Is that so!"

Li Ximing was half-incredulous. He thought to himself, 'I always used to hear him say that Xijun's sword Dao was superior. I never imagined that his swordsmanship and his magical arts would advance in tandem to such a degree! He has already far surpassed me!'

He chose to believe it for the moment and smiled. "Good! With Third Brother's great prestige, he will be able to support the family should anything happen in the future."

Li Chenghui agreed. Just then, a set of footsteps approached the hall. Li Xuanxuan entered hurriedly from outside. The old man was dressed in a light blue robe, his white beard flowing. An old talisman brush, which he had used for nearly a century, hung at his waist, his gaze full of concern.

"Ming'er."

"Grandfather!"

Li Ximing stood to greet him. He saw two more people behind him, a boy and a girl, both just over ten years old. The boy had a slightly pointed chin and a warm smile. The girl was very polite, bowing her head and offering greetings.

Though Li Ximing was often in seclusion, he recognized Li Jiangqian and Li Quewan. He smiled at them, then asked his grandfather in a low voice, "Is there any change in Aunt's fate jade?"

"None."

Li Xuanxuan checked it day after day; he might as well have been living in the ancestral hall. "She has been gone for years," he said, his voice hoarse. "Though the jade's luster has waxed and waned, there are no signs of cracking. It is currently warm and bright. It seems she is in no danger."

"Good…"

In truth, both grandson and grandfather knew that with her by the Dragon Monarch's side, the fate jade was most likely useless. But it offered a sliver of comfort, something to hold on to.

Li Ximing sat quietly, listening as they recounted the events of the past few years. The sun eventually set, and the celestial light in the hall grew dim. Magical lamps flickered to life, illuminating the space with a bright glow.

When they had finished, Li Ximing let out a soft laugh. He took the old man's hand and said gently, "Grandfather, my cultivation has reached a bottleneck, and the family is prosperous and thriving. I will enter seclusion to break through to the Purple Mansion Realm."

Li Xuanxuan froze. He looked at the young man in Daoist robes before him. The old man lowered his eyes, and for a moment, he was speechless. He finally said in a low voice, "You all may leave."

Li Chenghui's expression turned solemn as he led the two children away.

Li Xuanxuan had lost his father at birth and had buried two elders. After Li Xuanfeng's death, he had watched his peers pass away one by one. And as the Yuanqing generation faded, Li Ximing was the only one of the Xiyue generation left in the family.

He was at a loss for words. A heavy silence fell over the hall.

"When I was young, I was foolish and caused Grandfather, Father, and my uncles much worry," Li Ximing began softly. "When my father was on his deathbed, I did not see him even once. That was the height of unfilial piety… For all these sins, the fault lies with my own cowardice."

"In terms of selfless devotion, I am not as good as First Brother. In courage and bearing, I am not as good as Third Brother. In intelligence and wit, I am not as good as Jun'er. Even in facing danger with calm and self-respect, I am not as good as Yuexiang."

His expression held no hesitation, no self-pity, only a quiet statement of fact. "If any one of them had been in my position, there would not have been so much sorrow. It would have been best to let me be an alchemist, rising with the sun to absorb qi and sleeping in the mountains at dusk."

"But I was the one who took that breath all those years ago."

"Why must you say such things!" Li Xuanxuan whispered.

Li Ximing gave a faint smile. "Grandfather, do you remember when I went to the Xiao family and was led astray by wine and women, causing Father great disappointment?"

Li Xuanxuan could only nod silently. His grandson's raw confession had thrown him into disarray. He couldn't help but suspect that this attempt at a breakthrough was a form of suicide, but the words were caught in his throat.

Li Ximing, however, sipped his tea as if recounting some amusing anecdote after a meal. "That woman was actually a proper lady," he said quietly. "Every time I went to see her, my heart would burn with passion. But every time I went to loosen my belt, I would freeze. A coldness would rise from the soles of my feet, and I would be seized by a fear I couldn't control. I would arrive full of excitement and leave in utter defeat."

"But I kept going back to her, and every time, I was paralyzed by fear. In the end, I stopped even trying to undo my belt. I would just touch her for a bit and then leave. She grew impatient and plied me with spirit wine. When I awoke, I found the situation irreparable."

"That was why, when Jun'er asked me what happened, I said I didn't know."

"Later, after I broke through to Foundation Establishment, my old memories became clear. The events of that day replayed in my mind. In my terror, even while drunk, I had clutched my belt so tightly that I refused to let go. She tried, but she couldn't pry my hands away."

"The spirit cloth was tough. She couldn't cut it with scissors, so she had to stage the scene by taking off her own clothes. Whether it was her own idea or someone else's direction… since nothing happened, no one cared to investigate."

Now a peak Foundation Establishment cultivator, he spoke of this without a trace of fear. "Grandfather," he said softly, "I never got the chance to explain it to him."

Li Xuanxuan was stunned into silence. He stared blankly at his grandson. "Why didn't you tell me…" he finally managed.

"It wouldn't have mattered anymore." Li Ximing turned his head to the side. "I am a man of ambition but no courage. I have been a coward for most of my life. But not anymore. Ximing has nothing left to lose. Our family has never had anyone perish while attempting to reach the Purple Mansion Realm. Today, let it begin with me."

The young man rose from his seat. Li Xuanxuan, his expression a storm of emotions, was led by him to the front of the hall, still unable to process what he had heard. The old man's voice trembled as he spoke.

"Ximing… Ping'er… he never blamed you."

Li Ximing paused at the words but did not reply. He reached the entrance of the hall and performed a grand, formal rite to his grandfather. After three full bows and nine kowtows, he said with utmost respect, “Grandfather, please take good care of your health.”

He straightened up and transformed into a ray of brilliant light, not daring to look at the old man again as he flew toward Mount Wu.

Li Xuanxuan was left collapsed on the steps, his white beard trembling. He took several deep, shuddering breaths before he could calm himself.

Chapter 683: Divine Power

"Divine power is the fruit of a vast Dao foundation. It is born from the immortal foundation, channeled from the Qihai, through the Shengyang acupoint, and past the infinite illusions of the Twelve-Storied Pagoda. When the Juque, Qihai, and Shengyang are all illuminated, the Shengyang 'mansion' ascends into the Great Void, severing the mortal coil and dispelling the world of forms."

Li Ximing sat cross-legged on the jade pillar, having centered his mind for six days. Several jade slips were arrayed before him. The Li family's collection of Daoist arts was not extensive, but most had been granted by the Immortal Mirror and were exceptionally profound, offering much to study and reference.

'The *Radiant Essence Scripture* describes the Purple Mansion as: "Fire rising in the heart, Yang and Ming manifesting inside and out."'

'The *Scripture of Heavenly Radiance and the Waning Sun* says: "Concealing the heart-fire, the sun sets in the southern brightness, ruling the world from a southern throne."'

'The *Golden Book of Divine Attendance* is more succinct, using only four words: "The ultimate transformation of things."'

These were all texts from the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao. As Li Ximing prepared to make his own attempt at the Purple Mansion Realm, he had paid close attention to such information, even seeking out Kongheng to ask about it when he was still around.

Kongheng had described it from a Buddhist perspective: "When one's wishes are fulfilled, they achieve infinite light, instantly realize Maha, obtain divine power, and enter the realm of liberation. Wherever their transformations take them, they go with ease, and wherever they reside, they are constantly guarded."

Though each school had its own interpretation, the method for breaking through to the Purple Mansion Realm was largely the same: forge the immortal

foundation, propel it to the Shengyang acupoint, ascend the Twelve-Storied Pagoda, and pass through the boundless illusions.

It sounded simple, but the very first step—propelling the immortal foundation toward Shengyang—was enough to halt ninety percent of all cultivators.

Each Purple Mansion cultivation art had its own method, but once the immortal foundation left the Qihai acupoint and began its ascent, a cultivator's entire power would surge. There was no turning back. Failure to break through meant instant death, with no chance of survival.

On its way up, the foundation had to first illuminate the Juque acupoint before entering Shengyang. If a cultivator's dharma power was insufficient, their immortal foundation of too low a grade, or their mastery of the Dao lacking, their energy would be consumed too quickly. They would burn out before even reaching Shengyang, and their life would be extinguished.

Years ago, Li Encheng and the others had rashly attempted their breakthrough after only a few years of seclusion. They had failed, their deaths marked only by a celestial phenomenon, having fallen at the very first hurdle.

'Those who perish at that stage have their cultivation scattered long before. The resulting celestial phenomenon, though vast, is as fleeting as smoke and leaves no precious spiritual treasures behind.'

If a cultivator successfully reached the Shengyang acupoint, they then had to manifest their divine power. The higher the grade of their immortal foundation, the more secret arts they had mastered, and the deeper their understanding of their own Dao, the easier this process would be. It was not a long stage, typically taking about six years.

This was the point where rogue cultivators and members of smaller clans were most likely to fail. Lacking the high-grade foundations, secret arts, and profound comprehension of their peers, they often met a swift end.

Finally, if one could manifest their divine power within Shengyang, they had to use that power to push the Shengyang 'mansion' into the Great Void. In the Immortal Dao, this was known as "severing the mortal coil and dispelling the world of forms." For Buddhist cultivators, it was "pushing Shengyang into the Pure Land to achieve the state of non-regression."

To enter the Great Void, one first had to pass through a state of primordial oblivion, a complete loss of self. One could be trapped there, adrift and unaware, for

days or decades. Because the mortal coil was already severed, they would feel nothing, remaining stagnant until their lifespan ran out. The vast differences in time taken to break through to the Purple Mansion Realm stemmed from this stage.

Ning Wan and Yang Tianya were likely trapped at this point. While Ning Wan's situation was uncertain, rumors suggested Yang Tianya was nearing the end of his lifespan in this state, with no hope of escape.

By this point, a cultivator had achieved half the characteristics of the Purple Mansion Realm. If they were to perish now, the celestial phenomenon could blanket an entire region with a shower of spiritual treasures or trigger a natural disaster spanning several prefectures.

When the Yuan family's ancestor, Yuan Licheng, had failed his breakthrough, his death was widely lamented. The ensuing rain had covered several prefectures. Even with the Azure Pond Sect's intervention to prolong the phenomenon, the power of the event itself was undeniable.

Only after breaking through this state of oblivion could one face the infinite illusions. With their divine power in hand, the illusions would pass in an instant. Failure meant the complete dispersal of one's cultivation. Success meant they had truly arrived, and could emerge from seclusion as a Purple Mansion cultivator.

'That's how it is now. In ancient times, a cultivator also had to face the Three Calamities. After surviving those, members of the Thunder Palace would be waiting. One to drive the thunder, another to summon the clouds, they would call down Profound Thunder to punish past misdeeds. Even if you lived an honest life, you were bound to have hurt someone, and you would be made to suffer for it.'

He was fortunate that such tribulations were no longer a part of the process. Given his limited combat prowess, Li Ximing wasn't sure he would have survived.

Having sorted through the crucial steps, he put away the jade slips and retrieved a cinnabar brush from his storage pouch. Infusing it with his dharma power as ink, he watched as it began to glow.

'With the Radiant Violet Pill my master gave me, I shouldn't fail at the first stage,' he thought. 'If I do die, there should be a wealth of spiritual items.'

After a long moment of contemplation, he estimated what the aftermath of his death might look like. He casually set up a formation around the jade pillar, then stood beside it and began to write with a flourish.

"The walls of Great Desert City are crumbling, and gathering spiritual qi is difficult. Should I perish, a convergence of celestial light and swirling sands will fill this place with Radiant Origin. I have bound it with this formation for the benefit of future generations."

"Li family disciple, Ximing."

He put the brush away and flew to the top of the pillar. With two fingers, he lightly drew a circle on its surface.

Though the jade was of high quality, it wasn't particularly durable. The simple motion carved a shallow groove into the stone. Li Ximing blew away the dust and retrieved a small, golden-red ring from his sleeve.

The ring was about the thickness of his little finger, made of a material that was neither gold nor silver, and it glowed with a faint red light. He carefully placed it into the groove he had just carved.

It was the Sun-Gazing Ring.

He didn't know its material or grade, but it was an ancient artifact of Bright Yang, and he had taken it out specifically for his seclusion. Perhaps it would bring him good luck.

He let out a self-deprecating laugh and took out a black jade box. Placing it on the pillar, he opened it to reveal a white stone the size of a fingernail, glowing with a bright, ethereal light that seemed to shift like smoke and mist.

'The Radiant Sky Stone!'

This spiritual item was used for condensing one's divine power. He dared not look at it for too long. He then took out the Radiant Violet Pill, which bore five golden patterns, and placed it next to the box.

He swallowed a calming pill and settled onto a cushion at the base of the pillar. He let the surrounding light and shadow shift around him as he regulated his breath for three months. When he finally opened his eyes again, they were filled with nothing but tranquility.

Hum.

A pristine white jade bottle on the pillar's top leaped up and tilted, releasing a perfectly round pill.

Li Ximing enveloped the pill in his dharma power to prevent its medicinal properties from dissipating. But the Radiant Violet Pill was refined from multiple precious herbs. The moment it appeared, it shone with a dazzling brilliance, like a miniature sun rising, bathing the entirety of Mount Wu in light.

He swallowed the pill and felt a searing current rush into his Qihai.

His Qihai was already a roiling sea of bright dharma power, a world of gold and white. Amidst the surging white qi stood the Radiant Origin Pass, a majestic gate of white brick with exquisitely carved battlements. The seventy-two ridges on its corner towers shone brightly, like a gateway to the heavens, its base covered in dazzling patterns of light.

As the sun-like Purple Brightness Pill descended into his Qihai, a rain of Bright Yang power fell, instantly flooding the entire space and submerging everything in golden light.

BOOM!

Fortunately, the Radiant Origin Pass, an immortal foundation designed for suppression, reacted at once. As if provoked, the great gate leaped up from the sea of qi and pressed down on the miniature sun, containing its power and keeping the pill intact.

'Good.'

This saved him the effort of having to suppress it himself. With his Qihai now like a flash flood, Bright Yang power surged into his limbs and meridians. Ignoring the painful swelling in his body, he exhaled a torrent of celestial light and formed a seal with his hands.

"Ascend, immortal foundation!"

He activated the arts and incantations from his Purple Mansion cultivation method. The Radiant Origin Pass trembled in his Qihai, the Jewel Steps technique upon it shining ever brighter. Filled with a sense of great creation and joy, the immortal foundation transformed into a streak of golden light and shot upward, leaving the Qihai behind.

For an ordinary cultivator, the immortal foundation leaving the Qihai was a sign of impending death. Even with the cultivation art's incantations to stabilize it, his Qihai felt like it was deflating, its dharma power pouring out through the opening to propel the Radiant Origin Pass, rapidly thinning.

But as the Radiant Origin Pass moved, the suppressed Purple Brightness Pill flared back to life. A fresh rain of bright light fell, and his Qihai was once again brimming with vitality.

'Thank heavens for this precious pill!'

The Purple Brightness Pill was refined from two Bright Yang treasures and nearly a hundred other spiritual herbs of the same affinity. It was this immense power that kept his Qihai full. Without it, Li Ximing would already be drenched in sweat, burning his own life essence to push his immortal foundation upward.

With the pill's help, all he had to do was guide the foundation steadily on its course.

He calmed his mind, focusing his entire consciousness on the immortal foundation, oblivious to the changing light and darkness of the outside world. He didn't know how much time had passed when he finally saw a light before him, his immortal foundation having entered a vast, hazy space.

'The Juque Palace!'

The three keys to the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao were, from top to bottom, Shengyang, Juque, and Qihai. After the six spiritual wheels merged, the Juque became indistinct. From Qi Refinement to Foundation Establishment, the only one a cultivator could perceive was the Qihai.

BOOM!

The Bright Yang power from the Purple Brightness Pill found a new outlet, pouring into this vast space. The dharma power in his Qihai was rapidly drained, nearly half of it converging in the Juque Palace.

As the Radiant Origin Pass flew in, the haze before Li Ximing was illuminated by celestial light, revealing a landscape of pure white. The ground of the Juque Palace was covered in something like a blanket of snow, at the center of which stood a high platform.

And floating above that platform was a bright, perfectly round object.

'The Talisman Seed?!'

He had never imagined he would find it in his Juque Palace. He instinctively looked down at his Qihai.

The Purple Brightness Pill there had been mostly consumed, leaving only a thin layer of dharma power. At the bottom of his Qihai, the round, brilliant Talisman Seed lay quietly.

'There's one in the Qihai too? Are they the same?'

This was not the time for deep investigation. Without a moment to spare, he rested briefly before commanding the Radiant Origin Pass to leave the Juque Palace and continue its ascent.

Now, without the aid of the Purple Brightness Pill, he was raising the immortal foundation on his own. It felt like carrying a heavy bronze cauldron. Cold sweat immediately beaded on his brow, and a chill ran down his spine.

Even so, he was far better off than most. His starting point had been the Juque, not the Qihai. A cultivator like Chi Zhiyun would likely have another one or two pills similar to the Radiant Violet Pill to consume, pushing them all the way to Shengyang in one go.

It wasn't that he didn't have other pills, but if he lost focus for even a moment, the immortal foundation would begin to fall. The energy from an ordinary pill wouldn't even compensate for the loss from that momentary lapse. He estimated he would need something at the level of a treasure herb.

'My family doesn't lack treasure herbs… but no one has ever broken through to the Purple Mansion Realm before. No one knows the details of what's required.'

Beads of cold sweat dripped from his face. This part of the journey was far more grueling than the first. The path was treacherous, the Twelve-Storied Pagoda like twelve steps that he had to climb while carrying the immense weight. The pressure was so intense that blood began to seep from his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth.

After what felt like an eternity, his vision went black. Then, finally, a faint light appeared ahead, revealing a small mansion floating on a sea.

The water was a clear, green, dotted with lotus blossoms. Twelve white bridges spanned the shores, and a white light shone in the sky. Looking closer, he saw that the sun illuminating this realm was the Talisman Seed.

'So there's one in the Shengyang Mansion too! That makes sense… the three mansions are a vital secret of cultivation. How could one be favored over the others?'

Before he could take a closer look, the Radiant Origin Pass plunged into the mansion, causing the sea to churn violently and overturn several lotus flowers. A wave of dizziness washed over him, and he couldn't stop himself from spitting out a mouthful of blood.

"Pah!"

He quickly swallowed the rest of the blood. He knew he was badly injured, but his heart was filled with elation.

'I finally made it!'

Thanks to the Radiant Violet Pill, he had only suffered a heavy injury, far from the point of utter exhaustion. He focused his mind, gathered his remaining dharma power, and formed a new seal with his hands, setting the Radiant Origin Pass within the Shengyang Mansion.

The light from his foundation warmed his mind, and his spiritual sense felt wonderfully comfortable. His body, however, was in stark contrast—as weak as a mortal's, as if it might collapse at any second.

He dared not delay. While the Radiant Origin Pass was stable and required little effort to maintain, he forced his eyelids open.

His vision was dim, and he could see nothing clearly. He used his spiritual sense to guide his hand, using his last bit of power to open the jade box. The thumb-sized white stone flew out and gently attached itself to the center of his brow.

The Radiant Sky Stone immediately came to life. It squirmed like an insect, its surface covered in tiny, fine scales. It burrowed into his forehead, breaking the skin and entering his Shengyang Mansion.

The Radiant Origin Pass was still suspended in mid-air when the Radiant Sky Stone flew in. The Pass immediately descended, its seventy-two corner ridges glowing brightly, bathing the space in dazzling light.

"...Sensing the seventy-two profound attributes of Bright Yang, today I seek the inner from the outer, seek life from nature. May the thousand divine officials all come to my aid. May the divine light shine within, bringing clarity and spiritual grace. May the five decays and five calamities be melted away by this..."

He chanted the incantation, and the Radiant Origin Pass in the sky began to tremble violently.

"May old age, sickness, and death no longer touch me. May my nature and life be eternal, and may my vow be everlasting!"

The Radiant Origin Pass shook more and more fiercely. A vast torrent of white qi flowed down like water. Two golden, hollowed-out lanterns on its corner towers lit up, and a radiant staircase appeared, each step igniting in sequence.

The Radiant Sky Stone evaporated like white steam, its essence pouring into the immortal foundation. Li Ximing's mind was filled with an endless, brilliant light as he cycled through one set of incantations and hand seals after another.

After an unknown amount of time, he vaguely saw a white qilin leaping through the world and heard the cry of a white cicada. The celestial gate shattered, its white bricks crumbling like broken tiles. From its center, a rainbow-colored light emerged, flowing and dancing in the air.

A wave of exhaustion washed over Li Ximing's mind. The primordial oblivion enveloped his consciousness, a hazy state between waking and sleeping. His vision turned to gray.

Everything in the Shengyang Mansion froze. The sea no longer rippled, the lotuses stopped blooming, and the rainbow light solidified in place. All movement ceased.

But the sun in the sky paused for a moment, then cast down a beam of light as cool and clear as water.

Chapter 684: The Sky Brightens

The cool light flowed down, illuminating the dust-covered Shengyang Mansion once more. The primordial oblivion, like snow in the blazing sun, vanished completely. The sea began to ripple again, and the lotus flowers bloomed anew.

Li Ximing felt a crisp, refreshing sensation circulate through the Shengyang Mansion. It was like drinking melted snow, and the haze in his mind cleared completely.

'The Talisman Seed dispelled the oblivion!'

A surge of joy rose in his heart. His spiritual sense extended beyond the Shengyang Mansion, peering into an endless, empty darkness. Below, celestial light shone brilliantly. A cool energy settled under his tongue, and a sweet liquid trickled down his throat. The trial of oblivion was over.

By now, his spiritual sense had detached from his body along with the Shengyang Mansion. The "mouth" he perceived was, in fact, the mansion itself; his spiritual sense, lacking a familiar frame of reference, was simply interpreting it through his inherent senses.

The coolness in his "mouth" was his nascent divine power. Seeing that the Talisman Seed had carried him all the way to the final trial, Li Ximing's joy subsided. He dared not be careless and kept his "mouth" firmly shut.

'There are still the infinite illusions!'

Just then, something materialized from the void before him. Banners fluttered, and a golden host marched out of the darkness. The air filled with the clamor of whinnying horses and sharp commands as an army manifested.

The soldiers were all clad in golden armor, each with a distinct face, holding spears and halberds. They were shockingly lifelike. The man at their head wore a phoenix-wing helmet and a mask that concealed his features. He rode a tall

steed, holding the reins as he trod upon the air. With a golden spear in hand, he advanced and pressed its tip to Li Ximing's throat.

"Halt!"

In an instant, he was surrounded by the golden-armored soldiers. They drew their swords and nocked their bows, their weapons all trained on him. Li Ximing glanced down at himself. He was dressed in simple robes, his hands empty, nothing more than a mortal man.

"Who are you!"

The scenery in the distance grew clearer, revealing that he was in a mountain valley. The general pressed the spear against his throat and barked, "Why are you here?"

Li Ximing knew his divine power was held within his mouth and refused to speak. The general's expression shifted from suspicion to anger, and the guards on either side began to press him, their thousand voices roaring like thunder.

Such a display was hardly enough to frighten Li Ximing. He remained silent. Enraged, the general wheeled his horse around and departed, his guards vanishing with him like the wind.

Li Ximing had just begun to relax when a black-striped tiger leaped from an unseen corner and sank its teeth into his calf. There was a sickening crunch as its fangs tore through flesh and muscle, exposing white bone and sinew. Blood sprayed everywhere.

The pain was excruciating. He raised a hand to drive it away, but a massive snake with a purple head shot out from behind him. Its pupils were pale yellow, its scales slick and smooth. It ripped open his chest with a single bite and made off with a piece of his flesh.

He reached to cover the wound, only to touch his own bare ribs. A viper with a triangular, flat head lunged, burrowing into his stomach and yanking out his intestines, spilling the warm, steaming coil all over the ground.

All manner of venomous creatures and wild beasts swarmed from the shadows, fighting over his body. Through a haze of agony, Li Ximing kept his mouth shut. He gradually lost track of where he was, knowing only that he could not open his mouth, for his divine power was held within.

Soon, the beasts scattered. A torrential rain began to fall, accompanied by lightning and thunder. The general returned with his men, this time dragging a great bronze cauldron, heated until it glowed red and filled with boiling oil.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

Li Ximing still refused to answer. Then, he saw a group of people being dragged forward from the distance. At their head was a white-haired, stooped figure—his grandfather, Li Xuanxuan.

Two armored soldiers brought out a board, black and stained with blood. They struck the old man fifty times, then turned to ask Li Ximing again. When he didn't answer, they each took out a blood-flecked rasp and began to file down his grandfather's fingers.

The old man's shrieks shook the heavens, but Li Ximing remained silent. When all five fingers had been ground down, the general lifted his grandfather and held him over the cauldron of oil.

"Tell me your name, and he will be spared," the general said coldly.

The old man's blood dripped into the cauldron, and sizzling bubbles burst, scalding his skin. His grandfather pleaded in a hoarse voice, but Li Ximing did not respond. He closed his eyes, refusing to watch. The general finally let go and ordered his men, "This sorcerer's art is nearly complete. We cannot let him live."

Two soldiers stepped forward. One thrust a spear into his chest with a dull, wet thud. The other swung a saber. A cold sensation touched his neck, and his vision exploded into a shower of stars. Li Ximing nearly lost his resolve.

He drifted in a daze for a moment before his vision cleared to a gloomy scene. Heavy iron chains were wrapped around his arms and neck, shackling him at the waist. They were so heavy he couldn't lift his head. Two icy gazes fell upon his face.

Two figures stood beside him. One held a warrant covered in tiny, ant-like script. He could vaguely make out titles like "Ninth Netherworld Ghost Emissary" and "Tenth Generation Merciful King." Since Li Ximing wouldn't speak, the two soul-takers didn't question him, simply leading him on the path to the Netherworld.

Li Ximing saw a landscape of collapsed city walls and iron plaques scattered everywhere. Two small ghosts were using long ladles to pour molten bronze,

glowing a fiery red. Without a word, they threw him into a pit and used their ladles to push him under the surface, expertly dousing him with the liquid metal.

The molten bronze seared through his chest and stomach, the pain so intense it almost wiped out his consciousness. A mortal would have screamed instinctively, a reaction beyond conscious control. But as a spiritual body, he was just barely able to maintain his silence.

After one round of pouring, the ghosts fished him out. One of them spoke. "It's rare to see a ghost so good for torturing. There probably aren't many ghosts left in the mortal realm."

"Isn't that the truth," the other replied. "The Lord Magistrate is in seclusion, and the posts of 'High Shaman' and 'Xiukui' have been vacant for ages. When people die, they just die. What ghosts are there to speak of?"

The two of them flipped him over and subjected him to a litany of tortures: being pounded with iron rods, boiled in pits, and forced through mountains of blades and forests of swords. Partway through, a soul-taker brought over a white-haired old man. One of the ghosts called out, "Sir, which fellow Daoist have you brought?"

The soul-taker stood beside the old man and answered, "This is fellow Daoist Chi Wei."

Li Ximing almost cried out. He looked up and saw the old man standing next to the soul-taker, dressed in the robes of the Azure Pond Sect, looking down on him with a superior air.

The little ghost glanced at him and sneered, "Do you have a grievance? The Great King is watching from above. He is the Tenth Generation Merciful King. If you just open your mouth, we'll cast this man down for you."

Li Ximing struggled but lowered his head in silence, not even letting out a groan. His mind was mired in a stupor. The little ghost gnashed its teeth and began to file at him with a blade, its actions growing ever more vicious. After he had endured it all, a voice from above declared, "This one is insidious and cunning. Send him to the Blue Sea to be reborn as a woman."

Li Ximing was led away, his mind numb, to be reincarnated. Finally, his vision brightened. By now, he had forgotten he was holding his divine power in his

mouth; all that remained was the single, overriding thought that he must not speak.

He looked around. He had been born into a wealthy family, but was plagued by a hundred illnesses. He refused to eat or take medicine, yet somehow, his life was never in danger. But without medicine, the illnesses wracked him with constant, unbearable pain. He gritted his teeth and made no sound. His family simply treated him as a mute girl, one who was exceptionally beautiful.

They noticed she never ate. In the early days, they tried to force her mouth open, but her lips were sealed as if cast from iron, impossible to pry apart. Yet despite never eating, she grew day by day. Her parents began to fear her in secret.

Bedridden and unable to speak, her beauty was a curse. Visiting relatives, unaware of the truth, would often tease her with words and secretly take liberties. She grew to the age of sixteen in unspeakable misery.

Finally, a man from her village with the surname Lu came to ask for her hand. Her family hastily married her off. Fortunately, Mister Lu cherished her. They lived lovingly for several years, and her health gradually improved. They had a son and a daughter. But no matter how much her husband begged, she would never speak.

One day, while she was weaving at home, Mister Lu burst through the door, his face flushed and reeking of alcohol. He snatched their young son from his cradle and stared at her with cold eyes.

"You haven't eaten in three years! What kind of demon are you?" he roared. "This child may wear human skin, but who knows if he is human? An immortal master on the road told me that you sleep with me only to devour my official fortune!"

He was a large man, and in his rage, he grabbed the child by the feet and lifted him high above his head. Li Ximing was too slow to stop him.

"Speak!" Lu bellowed.

When she still didn't open her mouth, he threw the child with all his might. The boy's body hit a stone and shattered on impact, his brains splattering everywhere.

Li Ximing felt a rush of blood surge into his head. The coolness in his mouth churned, and a weak sound escaped his throat. As if struck by lightning, he managed a choked gasp. "Puh…"

His face went deathly pale. He finally spat out a mouthful of blood, along with half of his tongue. It mixed with the blood on the ground, everything blending into a deep, dark red that flickered before his eyes.

He looked up. Lu's enraged face, reflected in his eyes, began to grow more and more distant. He felt himself rising, floating away, swiftly leaving the infinite illusions behind.

The cool energy rushed straight to his mind. Everything before him faded rapidly, dissolving back into endless darkness. His memories returned, and he felt as light as air.

In his Juque Palace, the ice melted in an instant, and a powerful flame erupted, roaring through the acupoint. Li Ximing felt as if he were rising from boundless darkness toward infinite light. He saw visions of gardenias blooming and heard the ringing of camel bells. His world became brilliantly bright.

BOOM!

He felt himself fly up from where he stood, entering a place of infinite truth. The darkness was absolute, yet the stars in the sky seemed to shift, sometimes near, sometimes far. Countless figures seemed to be seated in meditation throughout the Great Void.

He flew to the very apex of the Great Void, where it seemed to be shrouded in mist and filled with countless remnants. The spiritual energy grew thinner, and the Great Void itself became narrow and fractured, turning a dull gray. The sight pained his eyes, and he plunged back down.

Below him was a boundless desert, and upon it stood a great pass. The celestial gate was majestic, the seventy-two ridges on its corner towers distinct, its white base covered in dazzling patterns of light.

His consciousness fell into it, plummeting with the celestial gate into the deepest depths. Finally, he fell from the vast Great Void and back into his physical body in the mortal world.

Li Ximing's eyes snapped open.

Before him was a dim, murky darkness. Sparse grasses and trees swayed in front of him. A drop of cold water from some melted snow trickled down and fell with a soft *plink*.

In front of him lay a golden table. The black jade box on top had been shattered by a surge of dharma power, its fragments scattered across the ground. As for the jade bottle that held the Radiant Violet Pill, it was nowhere to be seen.

The mountaintop was a complete wreck, as if it had been ravaged by demons a hundred times over. Jade pillars had collapsed. The tallest one lay right beside him, the words he had carved on it now faded and barely visible beneath a curtain of vines.

The formation lines on the ground that gathered spiritual qi were in disarray. The plants, nourished by the celestial light, had grown wild, nearly covering the entire summit. Small, golden specks of sand and a white-gold mist drifted through the air.

It was the darkest hour before the dawn. The stars were bright in the moonlit sky, and the pale moonlight flowed over the ground, making the white-gold mist glow faintly, creating a strange and beautiful scene.

Rustle…

Li Ximing stood up, and a shower of dead leaves fell from his clothes.

The celestial light was gone from the young man's pupils, and no bright aura surrounded him. Even his golden-white Daoist robes seemed ordinary. He looked younger, his skin fairer.

He seemed little changed from before, except for a new, tiny, white-gold dot at the center of his brow. It was neither painted nor tattooed, but shone with a brilliance like a point of celestial light, illuminating everything around it.

Li Ximing stood motionless for a long time. Behind his head, halos of rainbow light began to expand, one after another. The golden-white light of his Bright Yang divine power emerged from his sides, draping over him like a cloak and rising more than nine feet into the air.

He finally moved his lips and exhaled a breath of celestial light.

Before the breath could touch the ground, a purple flame ignited from thin air. It moved like a lithe flood dragon, soaring and weaving through the air. The flame was purple on the outside and gold on the inmost, its heat intense. Golden dust

from the celestial light scattered around the dazzling flame, glittering as it was carried by the heat, spreading everywhere.

The purple flame spread across the ground, and in the space of a breath, it had set the whole of Mount Wu alight. As the fire spread, gardenia trees sprang from the earth, their canopies wide. In the midst of the roiling flames, pure white gardenia blossoms drifted down, blanketing the ground in snow.

The vast river of purple flames surged toward the heavens, its outer edges purple, its core gold, burning so brightly it seemed to bring the dawn ahead of time.

And then, the true, brilliant dawn began to rise swiftly in the east. Amidst the mountain of purple fire, Li Ximing stood beneath a gardenia tree, draped in the light of Bright Yang, as white petals swirled around his feet.

The first ray of morning sunlight passed through the formation and fell upon his pupils.

In the next instant, that ray of light was trapped within his eyes. They turned a pale gold, light flowing within them. His old ocular art, the Great Fissure Golden Pupils, had instantly reached its zenith.

His eyes, glowing in the firelight, slowly lifted. He looked toward the distant south. The clouds in the sky above him parted, scattering down a brilliant white radiance.

"The sky has brightened."

Moongaze Lake.

A light snow was falling. The moonlight was clear and bright, reflected in the cold surface of the lake. A late-night breeze sent ripples across the water. Streaks of light from flying cultivators crisscrossed the sky, giving the place an ethereal, immortal air.

It was the Zi hour, and most of the lamps around Moongaze Lake had been extinguished. But the many cultivators on patrol and guard duty were still awake, flying back and forth over the lake like colorful ribbons.

On the lush slopes of Mount Qingdu, in a talisman pavilion crafted from elegant, rustic redwood, an old man washed his inkstone. He carried the fresh ink inside, spread a sheet of talisman paper on his desk, and lifted his brush, pausing for a moment.

The old man was always busy. Though it was late, well into the Zi hour, he had not stopped working, painting one talisman after another. He watched as the cinnabar-red marks appeared on the yellow paper, then let out a breath, having finished another one.

Li Xuanxuan put it aside, then noticed that the room seemed unusually bright. He casually extinguished a few magical lamps, but then realized something was wrong.

"Where is that light coming from…"

He looked up and saw more than a dozen cultivators standing scattered across the lake, some near, some far, all staring eastward in a daze. They were bathed in a golden light, their shadows stretching long across the water.

The old man's gaze shifted, and he finally saw it: a brilliant, golden dawn rising in the east.

The golden radiance was reflected in his tired, clouded eyes. The talisman brush in his hand fell with a clatter onto the desk, rolling twice and smearing ink all over the paper, ruining it completely.

But Li Xuanxuan seemed not to hear. He braced a hand against the windowsill, his old face aglow with the light of the dawn. Tears welled in his eyes. He forced them shut, his breathing growing heavy.

On the twenty-second day of the winter month, at the Zi hour, the moonlight over Moongaze Lake retreated. The sky had brightened.

Chapter 685: An Underworld Registration

The Azure Pond Sect.

Green peaks pierced the sky, wreathed in clouds and mist. The grand hall shone with the light of magical arts, its vermillion gates and high eaves marking it as a place of power. Corridors wound through the complex, and the fragrant smoke of incense curled through the air, painting a picture of a true immortal sect.

A streak of clear light shot across the sky, halting before the stairs. It resolved into a man wearing an ornate crown. He took the steps two at a time, crossed the immortal threshold, and hurried into the hall where a middle-aged man sat at the head seat, brush in hand, focused on a painting.

The crowned man's expression was anxious, but the middle-aged man pre-empted him, pulling him over to look at the work. The painting depicted a tall, stately peach tree, around which three flood-dragon serpents were coiled, each baring its claws and fangs.

The serpent on the right was fat and bloated, but the poisonous stinger on its tail gleamed wickedly. The one on the left was small, thin, and weak, but its eyes were dotted with gold lacquer and its form was wreathed in vermillion clouds. The one in the center was powerful and majestic, yet it carried an air of old age.

The middle-aged man smiled. "Fellow Daoist Tantai, what do you think of this painting?"

The crowned man, Tantai Jin, had no choice but to pause and study the artwork. After a moment, he replied in a placid tone, "Sect Master, your skill is sublime… excellent. But the space beneath the tree is empty. Adding a deep pond would give it more depth."

"Hahahaha!" Si Yuanli roared with laughter and clapped him on the shoulder. "Brother, what a fine eye you have."

Tantai Jin bowed in return, then lowered his voice. "My spirit falcon has returned from the north. At the Zi hour, the sky over Moongaze Lake brightened. Purple flames soared from Mount Wu, and rainbow clouds billowed—a true Bright Yang phenomenon. The effects will likely spread to envelop the entire lake."

"Hah!" Si Yuanli's head snapped up, his gaze sharp. He shook his head and sighed. "Alas! Li Ximing has perished!"

Tantai Jin frowned. "According to my earlier deductions," he said softly, "he would have entered seclusion twelve to fourteen years ago. For him to reach the Purple Mansion Realm now… the timing is indeed a bit too short."

"Too short is an understatement!" Si Yuanli shook his head. "Pushing an Immortal Foundation into the Shengyang Acupoint takes a decade. Even with the pill from the Xiao family and all the treasures he prepared himself, it would take five years at the minimum! The Li family lacks the deep foundations of an ancient house, and Li Ximing is no Tu Longjian."

"Manifesting a divine power is even more perilous—that requires another six years. I never discussed the Dao with him, so I have no idea how deep his understanding of Bright Yang is. Let's be generous and assume he consumed the Radiant Sky Stone and, by some great stroke of luck, passed that trial."

"But after that comes the trial of oblivion, which can easily last more than a decade!" he sighed, grinding fresh cyan ink for his brush. "For a phenomenon to appear now can only mean one thing—he has died!"

Seeing him turn back to the paper to paint the pond, Tantai Jin pressed, "But the phenomenon is vast and extraordinary."

"Because he consumed the Radiant Sky Stone!" Si Yuanli said, still shaking his head. "That is a Purple Mansion-grade treasure. How could the resulting phenomenon not be vast? The stone corresponds directly to the Radiant Origin Pass. Even you, Tantai Jin, might not have such favorable conditions. He is a Wei Li, he cultivated Bright Yang, and he consumed a Purple Mansion treasure. Such a grand spectacle is only natural upon his death."

Tantai Jin frowned. "Is there no chance he succeeded?"

Si Yuanli paused to think. "It was a possibility. He is a Wei Li, after all. Perhaps his family possessed some secret art that gave him an advantage with Bright Yang, which is why he dared to use the stone… but do you think our superiors wouldn't have anticipated that?"

"As long as he used it, we didn't have to worry. The trial of oblivion would trap him for decades. What would it matter if he eventually succeeded? By then, Li Zhouwei would have long been dealt with. It would have been good if he had managed to become a Bright Yang Purple Mansion cultivator—being in the north, he would have been a perfect shield against the Buddhist cultivators… A pity… he has perished."

"Besides," Si Yuanli added, "I heard he was a soft man. Even if he passed the divine power trial, how could he possibly endure the infinite illusions? It was all for naught."

Tantai Jin was finally silenced. He waited quietly as Si Yuanli finished the painting and handed it to him.

Tantai Jin unrolled it. A small pond now lay beneath the peach tree. The serpent on the left was now half-submerged, its body obscured by the pond's edge, making it appear even smaller and weaker than before.

Leaving the main peak, Si Yuanli flew on a cloud to another summit. A solitary pavilion stood there, seemingly suspended in the mist. Countless jade talismans hung from its eaves, swaying and chiming in the breeze.

"Fellow Daoist Xizhi!"

Si Yuanli stepped into the pavilion and found Li Xizhi engrossed in a jade slip. He had aged into a middle-aged man, still carrying an air of refined nobility, though his years as the pavilion master had clearly lent him a more scholarly grace.

"Greetings, Sect Master!" Li Xizhi rose at once to welcome him.

Si Yuanli, not daring to be arrogant, quickly steadied him, a deep apprehension in his heart. 'So many years have passed. I wonder how powerful his arts have become!'

In the entire Azure Pond Sect, the only person Si Yuanli truly feared was the man before him.

In his eyes, Li Xizhi's cunning was unfathomable. He was clearly a prodigy in the Dao of arts, yet since joining the sect as a teenager, he had never once displayed his talent. He had probably even fooled Yuan Tuan!

'He didn't even reveal his true power when Tuoba Chongyuan was hunting him, when his life was on the line!'

It wasn't until the battle at the Sea of Reefs that Si Yuanli learned that this man was the true genius of the Li family's 'Xi' generation. His talent for magical arts even surpassed that of Yu Muxian, who had once been hailed as a prodigy!

'If his wife weren't a member of the Yang family… I would have certainly arranged a marriage alliance to bind him to my cause… Ah well, the current arrangement is not so bad.'

His thoughts were heavy, but his face was a mask of concern. "Xizhi," he said in a low voice, "there has been trouble at Moongaze Lake!"

Li Xizhi's expression shifted, his brow furrowing. Si Yuanli recounted the events, his words completely different from those he had shared with Tantai Jin. He spoke of Li Ximing with tact and subtlety, approaching the subject from all angles.

Li Xizhi himself knew a fair amount about the trials of the Purple Mansion Realm. As he listened to Si Yuanli's account, his heart went hollow. He slowly closed his eyes and exhaled. "Sect Master," he said softly, "you mean to say… my brother… has likely failed his breakthrough and perished."

Si Yuanli nodded hesitantly. "Not necessarily… perhaps he succeeded…"

Li Xizhi knew it was mere politeness. He stood in silence for several breaths before saying respectfully, "Thank you for informing me, Sect Master. I must ask you to excuse me."

Si Yuanli nodded in understanding and departed on the wind. Li Xizhi saw him off, then, holding himself together by sheer will, stumbled back into the pavilion. He closed his eyes, and tears began to fall. They glistened on the man's face as five words escaped his lips.

'Ming'er… had it so hard…'

Li Xizhi's eyes narrowed. He forced the tears back with his spiritual qi as he pulled out a letter from his desk and began to write, his heart growing colder by the second.

'Since Ming'er has failed and perished, Grandfather must be heartbroken… Of the Xi generation, only I remain. Everyone is scheming against my family's heir. Even if I have to risk my life and my cultivation, I must protect Zhouwei…'

As dawn broke, the purple flames on Mount Wu surged toward the heavens. Clumps of white gardenias rolled along the fiery currents at the summit, and pale golden sand swirled in the air.

Mount Wu, once composed of basalt with reddish-brown soil, had been utterly transformed. The earth had turned a lacquer black, and the stones had cracked, all of them taking on the hue of Radiant Sky Stone. The entire mountain had become a domain of Bright Yang. The grand formation that once protected it had shifted, its power greatly diminished.

Amidst the rolling spiritual sand and blooming gardenias, Li Ximing reacquainted himself with his body. His Cinnabar Sea was filled with sky glows, and his Juque Palace was a space of pure, clear light. The snow from before had long since melted, the celestial light within it transmuting into Bright Yang Purple Flames that now flowed freely through the acupoint.

'Fire soars in the heart, with Yang and Ming as its exterior and interior. Thus is the Radiant Splendor divine power achieved. Its radiance extends over nine feet, emitting purple flames as rainbow clouds rise and fade…'

Li Ximing had not understood the scripture before, but now it was perfectly clear. 'Fire soars in the heart' naturally referred to the Juque Palace. The Bright Yang Purple Flames accumulated there, ready to be unleashed with a single thought.

'Golden armor and golden robes descend from the sky. The sun glows red in the east, and Malevolent Earth erupts in the south. Then one roams the Great Void to temper the golden lotus…'

The morning sun was brilliant, but there were no signs of golden-clad soldiers. Perhaps it was because his divine power had not yet manifested externally. He paused, then swept his spiritual sense over the southern face of Mount Wu.

There, the Bright Yang Purple Flames burned with particular intensity, shattering the Radiant Sky-colored stone. Jets of reddish-black Malevolent Earth Qi

gushed from the ground, only to be suppressed by the purple flames and confined to a small patch of land.

'This must be "the sun glows red in the east, and Malevolent Earth Qi erupts in the south"! My ascension has greatly benefited this mountain, turning it into a Bright Yang treasured land. This malevolent qi is extraordinary. It can be used for alchemy and smithing, and perhaps I can even extract some form of Bright Yang qi from it.'

He sat for a few moments, and then the Great Void seemed to hum. Two figures materialized beside him.

Li Ximing lifted his head slightly, his eyes once more a pale gold. The point of celestial light at his brow pulsed, and the grey aura cloaking the two figures dissolved, revealing their true forms.

One was short and squat, with two horns sprouting from his forehead. He wore a simple grey cloth draped around his neck. His face was hideous; his eyes were set so far to the sides that only half of each was visible from the front. His teeth were long and thin, his pupils a dark, murky green. In his hand, he clutched a grey brush as long as a pestle.

The other was a head taller, his body draped in strings of copper coins. His face was unnaturally long and wide, stretching all the way down to his chest. His nose bisected his face, and his eyes were a startling pink. He was struggling to hold a massive book.

The horned one stepped forward and gave a casual bow. His voice was shrill and reedy.

"Greetings, Fellow Daoist! I am Wang Long, an envoy from the Underworld Bureau of the Netherworld. Good news… good news! You have achieved a divine power, and I have come on behalf of my colleagues to offer congratulations! Congratulations, congratulations! May you transcend life and death, perfect your divine power, master the five arts, avoid the great calamity, attain fruition early, and achieve truth hereafter…!"

He rattled off a string of four-character blessings in his piercing voice. When he finally finished, the long-faced man beside him added, "Congratulations, congratulations!"

Wang Long then bowed to introduce his partner. "This is my companion, Zhang Gui."

"So you are esteemed envoys from the Underworld Bureau!"

'No wonder they arrived so quickly,' Li Ximing thought, returning their salute.

Wang Long's shrill voice cut in. "Is this the 'Radiant Origin Pass'?"

Zhang Gui, his long face impassive, glanced at Li Ximing for a moment. "Correct," he replied. "The style is ancient. It's the 'Heavenly Audience Gate' of the Wei Li. Fellow Daoist's version is not the orthodox one. It's likely a simplified variant practiced by a collateral imperial branch that guarded the northern border. It is called 'Radiant Origin Pass'."

"Good, good, good," Wang Long chirped. He immediately turned to Li Ximing. "Your surname and given name?"

Having just endured the trial of infinite illusions, the request for his name made him hesitate. The words caught in his throat for a second before he answered calmly, "I am Li Ximing of the Li Clan. 'Xi' as in the heavenly dawn, 'Ming' as in the sun and moon."

The moment he finished speaking, the brush in Wang Long's hand flashed, and ink welled at its tip. The horned man nudged his long-faced, book-carrying companion. "Have you found it yet!"

Zhang Gui remained as slow as ever, his hand tracing lines across the page as he searched. He made no sound. Wang Long was clearly impatient. He ignored his partner and began muttering to Li Ximing.

"Honestly… a few True Monarch-level figures, why must they fight? They punched a hole in the sky, and several True Monarchs went to watch in person, stirring up trouble in heaven and on earth."

"Fellow Daoist, on my way here, I heard a piece of flesh fell from the sky in the State of Wu. It was as large as a city and rotted the surrounding lands. I wonder who was so displeased… sigh…"

He grumbled on, a worried expression on his half-ghostly face. "And I don't know if Fellow Daoist Si will be able to break through to the Golden Core Realm. If not… we won't be able to collect this century's quota of Metallic Essence!"

Li Ximing gave a noncommittal grunt. Unsure of the customs of these Underworld officials, he held his tongue. Wang Long's impatience grew with every passing second. He spun around, his reedy voice sharp with irritation as he snapped at the long-faced Zhang Gui.

"Old friend, what time is it! You're dragging your feet! When those old geezers find out, they'll accuse us of neglecting the affairs of the departed, and you'll be the one to suffer!"

Zhang Gui looked from side to side, then slammed the massive book shut. He knitted his barely-there brows, making his face even more grotesque. "I can't find him," he answered slowly.

Wang Long froze. He grabbed the book's cover, shoved with both hands, and with a grunt of effort, sent the great tome tumbling to the ground. It immediately fell apart into several smaller volumes, scattering everywhere.

"How could you make a mistake like this?" he shrieked. "Did you copy all this for nothing?"

The two Underworld envoys seemed to be in a tremendous hurry. They scrambled about, frantically searching through the scattered books. Li Ximing glanced down. The volumes were of various colors, and his spiritual sense passed right through them as if they weren't there.

'Dharma power probably can't lift these books, and I doubt any arts would affect them… I wonder if I could pick one up with my divine power.'

The two were hunched over, grabbing volumes and flipping rapidly through the pages. The air filled with the rustling sound.

Rustle, rustle…

Li Ximing took the opportunity to look down at the volume by his feet. It had a purple-and-gold cover bound with several white cords, making it the most distinguished of the lot. In the swirling purple flames, it was flipping its own pages, coming to rest at the very last one. An inscription ran down the side of the page:

"Registry of Purple Mansion Divine Powers Observed by the Five-Directional Emissaries of Jiao and Yang Provinces—Compiled by the Record-Keeping Ghost, Zhang Gui."

At the very top of the page, a line of golden text was inscribed in ancient intaglio script, which Li Ximing recognized at once.

"On the third day of the second month in the 697th year of the Yin-time Earth Virtue Cycle, the cultivator, Daoist Master Guanxuan, Yang Tianya, of the

Guli tribe of Yangzhou, currently in the territory of the Azure Pond Mountain, achieved a divine power."

Directly beneath that golden line was another:

"On the twenty-third day of the eleventh month in the 698th year of the Yin-time Earth Virtue Cycle, the cultivator, Daoist Master Houfu, Lin Wei, of the Wuzhong tribe of Jiaozhou, currently in the territory of Linhai Commandery, achieved a divine power."

Li Ximing's heart jolted.

He knew both men on the page. Yang Tianya was one, of course, and Daoist Master Houfu was none other than the current head of the Great Xiukui Monastery! The year he broke through was the same year Li Ximing's clan had been embroiled in the chaos of the Xu Xiao rebellion!

'Yang Tianya achieved a divine power!'

'He did it even before Daoist Master Houfu!'

Chapter 686: An Elder's Counsel

Li Ximing had only caught a glimpse before Wang Long was already bustling to gather the books. Zhang Gui strode over and silently picked up the scattered volumes. Once they had restacked the heavy tomes, Zhang Gui finally spoke in a low voice.

"He really isn't here…"

The two envoys exchanged a look, a silent understanding passing between them. Wang Long flipped open a purple-and-gold booklet from the bottom of the stack. Zhang Gui's brush moved, writing for a moment on the page as a violet-gold light flowed from the tip.

"…Jing Province, Moongaze Marsh, now known as Moongaze Lake…" Zhang Gui murmured. He paused, then asked quietly, "Ximing, you haven't spent many years cultivating in other lands, have you? This is a serious matter. You mustn't hide anything from me."

Li Ximing figured that his name should have been in their records all along. Since they couldn't find it, they were likely adding it unofficially now. He had nothing to hide. "That's correct," he said plainly.

Zhang Gui wrote two more characters. "Your Daoist Master name?"

After a moment of thought, Li Ximing replied, "Zhaojing."

As Zhang Gui bent over his work, Li Ximing rested a hand on his storage pouch. After a quick search, he produced two jade boxes from his sleeve. "Thank you for taking the trouble to come all this way," he said softly. "A small gift, to show my gratitude."

"You're too kind, Fellow Daoist."

Zhang Gui didn't stop writing, but he lifted his head to offer a word of thanks before returning to his task. Wang Long, however, eagerly accepted the boxes with a slight nod.

"It's merely our duty," Wang Long chirped. "You are too courteous."

Li Ximing noted their practiced ease; this was clearly a customary exchange. The jade boxes couldn't block spiritual sense, and inside were a Drystone Brightfruit that Lu Ken had given him years ago and a vial of Malevolent Earth Coldspring. One treasure was of the Earth Virtue and the other was infused with malevolent qi, both having some connection to the Underworld. They were the best items he could find in his storage pouch on such short notice.

'No one ever mentioned that the Underworld sends envoys to register new divine powers,' he thought. 'Fortunately, judging by Wang Long's reaction, these two items are acceptable. I haven't offended them.'

Just as the thought crossed his mind, Zhang Gui finished writing. He put away the massive, pestle-like brush and clasped his hands in a salute. "The registration is complete. We've disturbed you, Fellow Daoist. With your divine power achieved, five hundred years of freedom await. When your lifespan nears its end and you seek to attain fruition, I will come again. We can speak more then."

Wang Long hoisted the books, and together, the two tore open the Great Void, disappearing into a boundless blackness as they returned to the Underworld.

Li Ximing waited a moment, sweeping the area with the celestial light from his brow to confirm he was alone. A swirl of uncertainty filled his mind. 'Yang Tianya has connections in the Underworld. He kept his own breakthrough a secret, which means he's plotting something. By letting me see these two envoys, it seems he's making a gesture of goodwill.'

'On the other hand… my name wasn't in the registry, and those two added it themselves. Was that on the orders of the person backing Yang Tianya? Someone with his standing is likely trying to help me.'

In light of this, the two treasures he had offered seemed trivial. Li Ximing set his doubts aside for the moment and considered his next steps. 'Now that I've reached the Purple Mansion Realm, I'm expected to announce it to all the major families and sects. I doubt I can keep it a secret…'

'But for cultivators like me, who reached the Purple Mansion Realm through the combined strength of their entire clan, the situation is different. I'm not a lone wolf like Tu Longjian, who relies only on himself. Nor do I have the backing of a

sect with other Purple Mansion cultivators. Announcing my status will involve more than just words.'

He mulled it over before reaching a decision. 'First, I'll visit Seniors Changxi, Chuting, and Tu Longjian to express my gratitude. Then, I'll make the official announcement to the other sects. This shows respect, and… it will give me a chance to learn about any unspoken rules or pitfalls.'

With his course set, Li Ximing suppressed his aura and plunged into the Great Void, making his way toward the Xiao family's domain.

This was his first time traversing the Great Void. His divine power shielded his body, masking his radiance as he flew in silence. He looked around at a world of utter blackness that undulated and warped, constantly shifting up and down.

The Great Void was a reflection of the spiritual qi of the world. It wasn't flat, but a landscape of peaks and valleys. Where spiritual qi was dense, the Great Void formed a high mountain. Where it was thin for a thousand miles, crossing that distance in the Great Void was but a single step.

The moment he achieved his divine power and looked into the Great Void, he understood.

Purple Mansion cultivators could travel thousands of miles in an instant by following the barren, low-qi paths in the Great Void, crossing vast distances with each step. If an entire region was saturated with spiritual qi, it was actually faster to exit the Great Void and fly using one's divine power. Of course, if a place had no spiritual qi at all, it simply wouldn't exist in the Great Void, making it impossible to reach.

Li Ximing journeyed for a short while, following several of these shortcuts. In less than a minute, he had arrived in the region of Mount Xianyou. Here, the void was no longer pitch black. Rings of azure light rippled through the space like waves on water.

He halted his divine power, his pupils glowing with a faint golden light as he activated his ocular art. 'So this is a formation… The Xiao family now has a Purple Mansion-grade formation severing the Great Void. Displaying it so openly is a show of force, a far cry from the days when Chi Buzi could sneak through their defenses to threaten Xiao Guitu…'

His own clan had received similar treatment back then, though Chi Buzi had been careless enough to glimpse the Immortal Mirror and gained nothing for

his efforts. A flicker of desire sparked in Li Ximing's heart as he secretly calculated the cost. 'If I get the chance, I must ask Senior Chuting about this. A formation like this would make the family infinitely safer.'

He had barely stopped when a ray of white light shot out from the formation and landed before him. A hazy figure materialized, and an old, authoritative voice emanated from within.

"Which Fellow Daoist has come to visit? Please, enter the formation and we shall speak."

Li Ximing, not wishing to reveal his identity, had kept his divine power suppressed. He gave a slight nod and followed the white light into the formation. His vision instantly brightened.

A cold mist swirled around towering peaks. Two cliffs faced each other, dotted with gnarled pines and cypresses. Below, the water of a frigid pond was clear as crystal. A small boat rested silently on its surface, where the faint figure of an old man could be seen fishing.

Snow was falling, crunching softly underfoot. Li Ximing stood on the bank, bowed deeply, and said in a soft voice, "Junior Zhaojing, Li Ximing, pays his respects to the Daoist Master!"

There was a soft *creak*. The white jade fishing rod dipped as something below took the bait, only to grow wary and dart away with a flick of its tail. Ripples spread across the water, making the thin ice tinkle.

The old man calmly set down his fishing rod. "So it is Daoist Master Zhaojing," he said. "I thought it was Chengyan. Forgive my lack of courtesy. Please, come aboard."

Li Ximing took a single step, his form blurring in a flash of bright light before reappearing on the boat. Xiao Chuting set out a small table with two jade cups and placed a verdant jade pot upon it.

As Li Ximing took a seat, Xiao Chuting put that pot away and took out another, pouring a cup for him. "Try this," he said with a smile.

Li Ximing took a sip.

The tea had a light flavor, and its spiritual energy was only mediocre—hardly fitting for someone of Xiao Chuting's stature. As Li Ximing felt a flicker of confusion, the old man spoke.

"Years ago, when Li Tongya came to Crowncloud Peak, I served him this same Clearlight Fruit Leaf Tea. He thought it a great treasure and dared not drink much."

"Today," Xiao Chuting continued, "this tea is a common beverage even for your clan."

Li Ximing understood his meaning and replied respectfully, "Senior, my entire clan remembers your immense kindness and would never dare to forget it. Having been fortunate enough to succeed in my breakthrough, I came to find you first. I thought you were still in the Northern Sea, so this is a pleasant surprise."

"Good. The matter in the Northern Sea was settled long ago." Xiao Chuting praised him with a nod and a smile. "I appreciate the sentiment. However, you should have first visited Si Boxiu. The man is a stickler for rules and values his reputation. If you don't show him proper respect, that old traditionalist may not say anything, but he will certainly hold it against you."

Li Ximing had planned to visit Tu Longjian second and Changxi third, leaving Si Boxiu for last. Hearing this, his heart tightened. "Thank you for the guidance, Senior!"

Xiao Chuting's voice was warm. "You were able to overcome the trials of the Purple Mansion Realm so quickly, which speaks to your strong character. But Si Boxiu's lifespan is nearing its end. He is at his most sensitive. You should have stabilized your relationship with him first. If you visit an outsider like me before him, what do you think he will assume?"

"Fortunately, you haven't yet announced your breakthrough, so it doesn't officially count. You also came here with your divine power suppressed, so Si Boxiu is likely still debating whether you succeeded or not. He has the Dongli Sect's Secret Records, but you consumed the Radiant Sky Stone. Since he never cultivated Bright Yang himself, he has no way to accurately gauge your situation."

Li Ximing nodded thoughtfully. "The Dongli Sect's Secret Records?" he asked.

"Indeed." Xiao Chuting took a sip of tea. "When the Dongli Sect's grotto-heaven was carved up by the three major sects, their secret arts were divided as well. The records detail the various phenomena associated with the Bright Yang paths. Si Boxiu recognized your foundation and cultivation method back when you were still in the Foundation Establishment Realm."

Hearing this, Li Ximing's heart sank. His image of the stern and venerable Si Boxiu was now colored with new complexity. After thanking him again, Xiao Chuting continued.

"You won't be able to hide your breakthrough for long. It's only a matter of time before you're discovered. You should announce it to the various powers soon and have your clan elevated to an Immortal Clan."

"Once word of your divine power spreads, everyone will come to offer their congratulations. You will hold a divine power convocation, and then you must pay return visits. The first three Daoist Masters you visit are especially important. Be mindful of this."

Li Ximing committed every word to memory, nodding with a solemn expression.

"Tu Longjian has gone to the Southern Sea," Xiao Chuting went on. "There's no rush to see him. He's keeping to himself these days, trying to stay out of worldly affairs. If you visit him too hastily, you might disrupt his plans. There's no need to reserve one of your first three official visits for him; a private visit will suffice."

"You can visit Changxi. However, he has even less time left than Si Boxiu. The Profound Peak Gate has only one Purple Mansion cultivator, and its decline is imminent. In a few years, they might not even be able to protect their own sect."

He paused here, seeming to observe Li Ximing's reaction. "Consider it carefully," he said softly. "If your friendship isn't deep, it might be better to distance yourself now. You shouldn't be rushing to see him; he should be the one rushing to see you."

Enlightenment dawned on Li Ximing. He knew nothing of the intricate politics of the Purple Mansion Realm. Xiao Chuting, however, was a master of it. Without an elder's guidance, he would have made countless blunders. 'Without knowing these subtleties, I would have been easily manipulated.'

He straightened his posture and gave a formal bow. "Zhaojing thanks the Daoist Master for his guidance!"

Xiao Chuting chuckled, a hint of warmth in his eyes. "Seeing you like this, my junior's wish has finally been fulfilled! He suffered his whole life, treating people

with sincerity only to be deceived time and again. To have a disciple like you… his bitterness has finally turned to sweetness!"

Li Ximing remembered Xiao Yuansi's Radiant Violet Pill and nodded gently.

"Go," Xiao Chuting said softly. "Settle your family's affairs, then announce your achievement. Yuansi and I will attend."

The old man's gaze fixed on Li Ximing. He saw a flicker in the young man's eyes at the words "settle your family's affairs." The youth immediately nodded, bid a quiet farewell, and vanished into the Great Void.

Alone, Xiao Chuting put away the jade cups, lost in thought. 'He knew to come see me first, which shows he is unaware of that great figure behind him…'

He picked up his jade rod and began to fish once more in the frigid pond. As the snow fell around him, Xiao Chuting stared silently at the water, deep in contemplation.

By the time Li Ximing left, the purple flames on Mount Wu had begun to fade. The already fragile grand formation shuddered, and a young man descended on a bolt of lightning, holding a command token. Clad in armor and wreathed in crackling light, with eyes as dark as lacquer, it was Li Chenghui.

Behind him followed a middle-aged man in a white robe with a spear on his back. He was at the early stage of the Foundation Establishment Realm and wore a cautious expression. They landed within the formation together, the searing purple flames stinging their faces.

"Clan Uncle Siwei," Li Chenghui said after a quick scan of the area. "The purple flames here are too intense. It would be unwise for the Old Master to enter. Please, stand guard outside and look after him. I will search for my uncle's whereabouts."

The man in white was none other than An Siwei. More than a decade had passed, and he had successfully reached the Foundation Establishment Realm, though his demeanor was as reserved as ever. He nodded and retreated, riding the wind away from the mountain.

Li Chenghui headed for the summit alone. The jade pillars had collapsed, and the ground was a web of cracks. Gardenia trees had sprouted everywhere, their white blossoms tumbling in the wind and rolling to a stop at his boots.

He searched the entire area but found no trace of Li Ximing, not even a scrap of his robes. All that remained underground were two piles of melted jade powder.

Shielding himself from the purple flames with lightning, Li Chenghui moved closer to inspect the site. 'The Patriarch once instructed me that if a phenomenon occurred and he disappeared from the mountain, I was to keep his success or failure a secret, regardless of the outcome… He is not here now, so it falls to me.'

'In recent years… the covert harassment and plots from the Three Sects of Xiaoshi Mountain, the Golden Tang Gate, and the demonic cultivators of Jiangbei have grown ever more brazen. This celestial phenomenon is sure to attract attention. There will be no peace for us. I must plan carefully.'

He picked a gardenia blossom, placed it in a jade box, and immediately withdrew. Outside the formation, Li Xuanxuan was waiting, his face etched with anxiety. When he saw Li Chenghui, he hurried forward.

"How is it?" he asked in a low voice.

Li Chenghui paused before answering softly, "The purple flames are too fierce. I couldn't see clearly and was forced to retreat."

Li Xuanxuan had never truly believed Li Ximing could reach the Purple Mansion Realm, but he had clung to a sliver of hope. Now, that hope seemed to fade. He bowed his head, his voice old and weary.

"What do Minggong and Elder White Ape say?"

"My sister sent a message," Li Chenghui replied respectfully. "The demonic cultivators near Coldcloud Peak were startled by the celestial phenomenon and have scattered. We should be safe for a few days. But the Patriarch is still in the Eastern Sea dealing with demons, so we must remain vigilant. The sects from Xiaoshi Mountain are not ordinary rogue cultivators; they will likely send someone to the lake."

"Good." Seeing that Li Chenghui had a plan, Li Xuanxuan quickly departed.

Li Chenghui looked up at the sky. "The rainbow clouds have already covered more than half of Moongaze Lake. It's impossible the Three Sects and Seven Gates don't know. The sect must have news by now as well. All we can do is wait for word."

Chapter 687: Proclamation of the Purple Mansion

The moment Li Chenghui descended from Mount Wu, he was met by a cultivator in black armor. The man was thin-cheeked with gray eyes and a sword at his waist. His expression was grim, his jaw tight, his gaze heavy.

"Cousin!" the cultivator called out.

Li Chenghui nodded. "Chen Yang, what's happened?"

Chen Yang, now in the late stage of the Qi Refining Realm, was shrouded in a swirling gray aura. He cultivated the *Pestle Ice and Sea Expansion Art*, a water-element technique the Li family had acquired years ago. Its grade was unknown, but it was a clear step above the family's foundational arts.

The black-armored cultivator lowered his voice. "A group of people arrived from the river. They're from the Floating Cloud Cave, one of the three sects on Mount Xiaoshi. They claim they're here to offer congratulations."

"Congratulations?" Li Chenghui scoffed. "The Three Sects of Mount Xiaoshi have been eyeing our shores for years, encroaching on our territory inch by inch, colluding with demonic cultivators on the northern bank… Congratulations? More like a harbinger of ill will."

Chen Yang's grim expression confirmed his suspicions. His recent exchange with the envoys had clearly not been pleasant. "My lord, the man leading them is arrogant, yet he's merely a guest elder in the early Foundation Establishment Realm. They mean to provoke us, to probe our family's true situation."

Chen Yang was a shrewd man, not one to be trifled with. He had seen through their ploy instantly. "They refuse to enter the island, instead making a show of force in the air above the lake. The Old Master has already gone to confront them. Please, my lord, hurry."

Hearing that Li Xuanxuan had been intercepted, Li Chenghui's expression finally changed. A strange, ancient light flickered in his lacquer-dark eyes, and a purple glow welled within them. "Let's go!"

A muffled clap of thunder echoed from beneath his feet as his form blurred into a streak of purple light, streaking toward the island's edge.

From a great distance, he could hear a sharp voice, amplified by spiritual qi. "Old man, still managing the household at your age!"

Li Chenghui's eyes shot toward the sound. He saw An Siwei standing firm, his long spear already in hand, locked in a tense standoff with a young-looking Daoist. Behind An Siwei stood Li Xuanxuan, his brow furrowed with unease.

Rage flared in Li Chenghui's heart. He arrived like a bolt of lightning, landing amidst the clamoring cultivators. The six command tokens of his artifact spun into the air, their pressure forcing the onlookers back a step. He slammed the butt of his spear into the ground with a deafening boom.

"You…"

The young man's face shifted. He waved a hand, dispelling the force of the impact, his displeasure evident. "Oh… so it's Fellow Daoist Cheng!"

Though the man appeared young and his voice was strong, his aura reeked of decline. Li Chenghui saw at a glance that this was just a facade. In truth, this was some old fossil who had only managed a lucky breakthrough to the Foundation Establishment Realm after a century of cultivation, thanks to the recent surge of spiritual qi in the state of Yue.

"Greetings, Fellow Daoist," Li Chenghui said coldly.

'The Floating Cloud Cave is not without powerful cultivators,' he thought. 'This man is nothing but a pawn sent to test the waters.'

The Three Sects of Mount Xiaoshi were a relatively new power from across the river. They all hailed from the same mountain and acted as one. With the Golden Tang Gate backing them, they were a force to be reckoned with. They were a typical northern power, unbound by the orthodoxies and immortal laws of the Three Sects and Seven Gates. Their ranks were a chaotic mix of immortal, demonic, and Buddhist cultivators, and they had been a constant source of friction for the Li family over the last decade.

He didn't recognize the man, but the man clearly recognized him. Li Chenghui had stood guard on the northern bank for several years. His lightning arts, combined with the Six Thunder Profound Punishment Talisman, had once routed several demonic cultivators so thoroughly that the Three Sects were shaken and had to send a Buddhist cultivator to deal with him.

"Fellow Daoist Cheng… your cultivation has improved again! I am Zaixingzi. It is a pleasure to meet you!"

Perhaps realizing he was no match for Li Chenghui, and on foreign soil, Zaixingzi adopted a cordial tone, though his smile didn't reach his eyes. "I was merely asking after the old senior. I meant no harm."

Li Chenghui was not fooled by the thinly veiled mockery. "State your business," he said flatly.

Zaixingzi chuckled. "Our sect master saw the rainbow clouds gathering over Moongaze Lake and the sky brightening at midnight. We presumed that Senior Ximing has broken through to the Purple Mansion Realm, so we came to offer our congratulations! Where might the senior be?"

Li Chenghui stared at him, his voice like ice. "My elder's affairs are none of your concern. Be on your way."

Zaixingzi frowned. "Fellow Daoist, you are hardly welcoming. I came to offer congratulations… yet I am not permitted to see him? And I've seen no official announcement to the great families…"

He let out a short, muffled laugh, answering his own question. "I believe a failed breakthrough also produces quite the phenomenon… could it be that your esteemed elder…"

The Three Sects and the Li family were enemies. Zaixingzi made no move to enter the island's grand formation, simply hovering outside it. His voice, amplified by his power, boomed across the lake.

Li Chenghui's brow slowly furrowed.

Everyone in the clan knew about the phenomenon, and all the major families suspected it was Li Ximing, though they were unsure of the specifics as the clan had remained silent. Now, with Zaixingzi's public speculation, anyone with a lick of sense would guess the truth. An Siwei and the others stiffened.

Zaixingzi sneered. "To fail after only a decade… your elder was certainly hasty! Fellow Daoist Cheng, you yourself know that breaking through to the Purple Mansion Realm is not a matter of a mere dozen years!"

Li Chenghui held his token, his expression unmoving.

With the family in a precarious situation, Zaixingzi's bold and timely arrival told Li Chenghui everything he needed to know. His face darkened.

'The Floating Cloud Cave has shallow roots. They couldn't possibly have understood the celestial phenomenon, let alone been so certain as to come asking questions. They have deep ties to the Golden Tang Gate… this has Situ Mo's fingerprints all over it.'

Zaixingzi's words were too pointed, his knowledge too specific for it to have originated from his own sect. It had to be Situ Mo pulling the strings from behind the scenes. Li Chenghui had been a target of that man's insidious plots before and knew the depths of his cunning. He could only sigh inwardly.

He spoke clearly. "The purple flames on our Mount Wu have yet to subside. Our elder has not yet emerged from seclusion. If Fellow Daoist Zaixingzi continues to cause trouble here, do not blame my lightning for being merciless!"

Li Chenghui cut him off before he could spout any more nonsense, the token in his hand already glowing with purple light. Zaixingzi just chuckled.

'I already know Li Zhouwei went out to hunt demons!' he thought. 'What's the point in pretending? Where else would he dare go besides the Eastern Sea… and without that White Qilin, does your Li family truly dare to start a fight?'

After a final laugh, Zaixingzi feigned alarm. "Fellow Daoist, please don't be angry! I was merely concerned. So, your esteemed elder truly has broken through and is now recuperating in seclusion… My sect master had me prepare a gift. You wouldn't turn me away, would you?"

As he spoke, his gaze swept past Li Chenghui and locked onto Chen Yang behind him. He saw the man's eyes were incredibly sharp and hostile, like a poisoned blade used for flensing bone.

Zaixingzi was taken aback that a mere Qi Refining cultivator would dare to look at him with such venom. He paused, momentarily forgetting his next move as he took note of the man. 'Such a venomous gaze. I wonder which Li family junior that is. I'll have to find a chance to kill him sooner rather than later.'

Li Chenghui heard the blatant sarcasm in Zaixingzi's words, and a chill crept into his heart. 'It seems the other sects are quite certain that Clan Uncle Ximing has failed… They came prepared. I can fend them off this time… but what about the next?'

In truth, the Li family knew a breakthrough was unlikely given the short time frame. Their hopes were slim, but as long as Li Ximing's life jade in the ancestral hall remained lit, a sliver of hope endured. Yet more than a decade had passed, and the jade slip had not been nourished by its owner's spiritual sense in all that time, making its status unreliable.

'Even with the patriarch's careful planning, who could have predicted this celestial phenomenon…'

The thought flashed through Li Chenghui's mind. Zaixingzi had already presented a jade box, holding it out respectfully with both hands while his cold eyes watched Li Chenghui's reaction.

Every eye was fixed on the box. Li Chenghui swallowed his anger, his expression returning to a calm mask as he prepared to accept it.

'I have to deal with this for now.'

He had just reached out his hand when another, luminous and fair, shot past him. It deftly plucked the jade box from Zaixingzi's grasp, turned it over in its palm, and held it up to the light for inspection.

'Huh?'

Not only Li Chenghui, but Zaixingzi too was stunned into silence. A hush fell over the entire lake as everyone stared, dumbfounded, at the figure in the sky.

A man in a white and gold Daoist robe had appeared between them without warning. His features were not exceptionally handsome, but they were well-formed and proper. His pale golden eyes were fixed on the jade box, and at the center of his brow, a point of celestial light shone with blinding brilliance.

This was Zaixingzi's first visit to the Li family; he had never seen this person before. The celestial light from the man's brow was so bright he could barely keep his eyes open. A thought struck him, and he sneered inwardly. 'Li Zhouwei? So you didn't leave after all… So what?'

Before he could speak, an excited voice cried out beside him. "Clan Uncle!"

'Clan Uncle? That's the wrong generation!'

Zaixingzi was thoroughly confused now. He stared at the man's face, only to see him look up from the box, his calm, golden eyes meeting his own.

"I have achieved divine power, and this is the gift your sect brings me? A trinket for a Qi Refining cultivator?"

Zaixingzi's mind went blank. He vaguely heard the old man behind Li Chenghui let out a choked sob that turned into a laugh. He saw the wild joy explode across Li Chenghui's face.

'What?'

'Li… Xi… Ming?! A Daoist Master?!'

Silence reigned over Moongaze Lake, broken only by the old man's triumphant laughter. Zaixingzi's mind was a maelstrom of chaos. He saw a blinding celestial light that drilled into his pupils and shot straight into his brain.

The skin on Zaixingzi's face peeled back as if caught in a gale, revealing the wrinkled, ancient visage beneath. The sheer terror in his eyes vanished as his pupils began to tremble violently. Both eyeballs leaped from their sockets, transforming into two large, brown cicadas that buzzed away into the air.

The sight of the eyeless old man was utterly horrific. His arms shattered like porcelain, exploding into a shower of fragments. The sun in the sky seemed to become a terrifying weapon, causing his entire body to go limp. His flesh, as if boiled to mush, slid from his bones in great sheets. His heart leaped from his chest like an untamed stallion, dragging his scorpion-shaped stomach and a long train of intestines with it.

Then, in an instant, the illusion vanished. Zaixingzi was whole again, restored to his original appearance. His lips trembled twice, and then he exploded into a cloud of flying stones.

Li Ximing turned his face away.

Zaixingzi had cultivated the Earth Virtue, and the stones that rained down from the sky were Radiant Sky Stones, falling like a pure white snow as Li Ximing stood silently in their midst, sending ripples across the lake.

The cultivators who had come with Zaixingzi went weak at the knees. Some fainted from fright, tumbling into the water with a splash. Li family cultivators

scrambled to fish them out, jolting them awake with bursts of spiritual qi and forcing their heads up to continue watching the spectacle in the sky.

The purple flames on Mount Wu flared, growing thicker and more intense. A brilliant column of celestial light shot into the heavens, connecting with the rainbow clouds and transforming them into a dazzling, blinding expanse. The whole of Moongaze Lake was saturated with celestial light, its surface a perfect mirror reflecting the sky, until heaven and earth were a single sheet of brilliant white.

Li Ximing did not speak, but a vast, resonant voice emanated from him, spreading through the Great Void and reaching every corner of the state of Yue.

"I, Zhaojing, Li Ximing of the Moongaze Li clan, have this day achieved the Bright Yang divine power! I hereby proclaim my clan an Immortal Clan of the Purple Mansion Realm. In three months, a celebratory rite will be held. All fellow Daoists are welcome to attend!"

The voice was clear and resonant, carried for thousands of miles by his divine power. As Li Ximing hovered over the lake, specks of glittering gold began to emerge from the rainbow clouds.

Hummm…

A magnificent, bright white celestial gate, covered in intricate patterns, materialized from the clouds. Majestic dragon banners and phoenix-drawn chariots of every color streamed through it, accompanied by fluttering canopies and streamers. Golden-armored and golden-robed celestial soldiers, each bearing a weapon, filled the sky.

Celestial music and profound hymns swelled in the air as the gate descended from the heavens. Almost every cultivator present lost their ability to fly, dropping to the ground to stare up in awe.

'The Bright Yang divine power: Heavenly Audience Gate!'

Only now did Li Ximing understand what an art-based divine power truly was. His own body contained only purple flame and celestial light; his entire power was manifested in the magnificent spectacle of the Heavenly Audience Gate. The Wei Li clan had been an imperial lineage, and the sheer pomp of this divine power was enough to inspire awe and fear in any who beheld it.

He stood silently amidst the celestial light and music. In the Great Void, figures who had been watching now began to reveal themselves one by one. Li Ximing nodded to them with a smile, listening as their voices rang out.

A celestial mountain wreathed in profound black qi was the first to appear. A powerful voice boomed, "Congratulations, young friend, on your breakthrough! On behalf of the Profound Peak Gate, Changxi wishes you great success with your divine power, and may you forge your Golden Core within a century!"

Li Ximing looked up and saw a middle-aged man with a jade pendant on his chest standing on the mountain. In the blink of an eye, the man's appearance shifted to that of a white-haired elder, a strange and wondrous sight.

"Senior, you are too kind!"

He returned the greeting, then turned to the south, where a simple cloud had appeared. A stern-faced old man stood within it, his gaze filled with surprise and a complex mix of other emotions. "I am Si Boxiu of the Azure Pond Sect. On behalf of my sect, I congratulate you on reaching the Purple Mansion Realm. As a gift, I offer you the great lake. May you master the five arts and attain Fruition!"

Chapter 688: Congratulations from the Great Clans

Standing firm in the clouds, Si Boxiu finished his congratulations. Li Ximing immediately clasped his hands in a formal salute.

"Our family has cultivated for a century under the shelter of the great sects," he said softly. "Your own clan has offered much assistance, and for that we are grateful. My elder brother still serves within the sect. I hope that you will continue to look after him in the future, Senior."

The complex emotions in Si Boxiu's eyes remained, but his expression softened considerably. Li Ximing's breakthrough to the Purple Mansion Realm was an undeniable fact. What more could be said? He could only sigh.

"During the turmoil of the Chi clan's reign, you were treated harshly," he said in a conciliatory tone. "For that, I offer my apologies."

Li Ximing gave a noncommittal reply, his tone still deferential.

"You are too kind, Senior. I am not worthy of such words."

As their exchange concluded, a crimson rune of radiant light pierced through the Great Void, materializing in the sky. The light pulsed, coalescing into shimmering motes that formed the figure of a man with thick eyebrows. He wore a wide-sleeved robe with a crossed collar, the edges embroidered with dense patterns of radiant runes. His features were open and honest, his eyes large. He clasped his fists together loosely and announced in a resonant voice.

"Hengli of the Hengzhu Immortal Dao, on behalf of my tradition, I offer you congratulations. May you find affinity with the five arts, may the golden lotus bloom with ease, may you transcend upon grasping the purple, and may your Intercalary Sun Art achieve perfection."

This was Daoist Master Hengli of the Hengzhu Dao, one of the most renowned artifact refiners in Jiangnan. His personal appearance was a clear sign of the Hengzhu Dao's sincerity. Li Ximing had long heard of his reputation and did not take the gesture lightly. "I have long heard of your esteemed name, Senior," he replied, returning the salute. "You truly live up to your reputation."

Hengli let out a low chuckle and nodded. "The Nine-Colored Profound Mercury you entrusted to us has been kept safe. Now that you have reached the Purple Mansion Realm, I have already dispatched someone to deliver it. They are on their way."

Li Ximing understood that he was referring to the Purple Mansion spiritual item obtained from Wang Fu and responded graciously. Just then, a streak of golden light appeared to the west, revealing a powerfully built man with broad shoulders. He shot a cold glare at Hengli before turning to Li Ximing.

"I am Tianque of the Golden Feather Sect. I come on behalf of my sect to congratulate Daoist Master Zhaojing. May your divine powers be honed through a hundred refinements, may your righteous arts never falter, may your light illuminate the cosmos, and may you attain your true nature!"

These two Daoist Masters were both skilled in combat, and it was well known they did not get along. Li Ximing quickly interjected, saying softly, "The Golden Feather Sect and my ancestors were on good terms. Your presence brings light to my humble home."

After Daoist Master Tianque nodded, a tall, slender man in shamanistic robes appeared in the clouds. His expression was placid, his gaze distant. He gave a casual salute. "Houfu of the Great Xiukui Monastry, here to offer congratulations."

Though the Great Xiukui Monastry was considered a righteous path, its traditions were strange and esoteric, and its members rarely socialized. Houfu's appearance was a gesture of respect for the Li family's upstanding conduct. The moment Li Ximing acknowledged him, Houfu dissolved into a puff of black smoke and vanished.

Immediately after, a middle-aged man with a sword on his back offered his own salute, his tone relatively mild. "I am Cheng Jiuwen, representing the Sword Gate. If you have the opportunity, you are welcome to visit us."

The Sword Gate and the Xiukui Monastry were famously aloof. The middle-aged man seemed to hold the current proceedings in disdain. As soon as Li Ximing returned his salute, he vanished back into the Great Void.

Once the man from the Sword Gate had departed, a Daoist-robed man with a kind and gentle face and willow-leaf eyes appeared with a smile. "I am Changxiao, here to congratulate Daoist Master Zhaojing!"

Li Ximing raised an eyebrow. The man's face held no trace of hostility, only a warm, beaming smile. But Li Ximing knew better than to trust him. Not only was this man notoriously difficult to deal with, but the Radiant Sky Stone essential for Li Ximing's breakthrough had been obtained from the Changxiao Sect.

'Back then, it was a game played by many cultivators,' he thought, his mind racing. 'The Changxiao Sect paid a price, but with their key members confined to the sect, Changxiao used the Radiant Sky Stone as bait to outmaneuver the Hengzhu Dao and keep Tu Longjian from taking a side… Our family just got lucky. But who knows what this old fox is really thinking?'

Though wary, he maintained a polite facade and responded cordially. Changxiao's voice was deep and resonant. "Daoist Master Zimu of the Purple Smoke Gate is in seclusion, and the other master is of your generation. She is out searching for the reincarnation of Zipei and could not attend. Please do not take offense."

He spoke as if he were on intimate terms with the Purple Smoke Gate, which gave Li Ximing pause. He offered a polite reply, and after a moment, the few remaining figures who had not shown themselves in the Great Void—including Xiao Chuting—saluted from their concealment and disappeared.

Si Boxiu was the last to leave. He had remained behind, his eyes fixed on the celestial gate in the sky. With his hands clasped behind his back, he seemed to have finally sorted through his thoughts. He gave Li Ximing a slight smile before finally departing.

The celestial light behind Li Ximing receded back into the space between his brows. The rainbow clouds in the sky faded, and the glittering celestial gate dissolved into nothingness. He descended to the surface of the lake, where over a million pairs of eyes watched him.

"We pay our respects to the Daoist Master!"

Li Chenghui was the first to step forward, so overcome with excitement and joy that his eyes were red. He bowed deeply. An Siwei and the others lowered their heads, not daring to meet his gaze, as they held the attendants who had arrived with Zaixingzi.

Li Ximing gestured for Li Chenghui to rise. He brought two fingers together and held them an inch from his lips. His pale golden eyes flashed as he blew out gently.

Hooo…

A rain of bright light fell from the sky, finally suppressing the purple flames that had been burning ceaselessly on Mount Wu. The flames twisted like living things, burrowing down through the earth veins and into the mountain's core. The Malevolent Earth spring was filled with the purple fire, and now it emanated a faint purple baleful energy, occasionally spitting out a lick of violet flame. It had clearly undergone a new transformation.

Having quelled the flames, Li Ximing smiled. "I was uncertain of the situation when I broke through and didn't want others to know. I feared that if I told you, a powerful cultivator might overhear, so I went to see Daoist Master Chuting first and have only just returned."

"It wasn't exactly luring a snake from its hole, but we did manage to catch one or two."

Li Chenghui bowed respectfully, the elation in his heart still so strong it left him feeling dizzy. 'Our family has a Purple Mansion cultivator? We're a Purple Mansion Immortal Clan?!'

Everyone stared at Li Ximing, their excitement palpable. His gaze fell upon the cultivators from the Three Sects of Mount Xiaoshi. They were pale with terror, having fainted several times already. They didn't dare look at him, fearing his gaze alone could kill them.

The jade box still hovered in the air. Li Ximing gave a cold smile. "Chenghui, take a look at the gift from the Three Sects."

Li Chenghui understood immediately. He gently opened the box. Inside lay a round, white object that looked eerily like an eyeball, radiating a chilling aura.

His voice was not loud, but it was hard and cold. "The Floating Cloud Cave of the Three Sects of Mount Xiaoshi presents a Lesser Yin spiritual item: the Falcon Yin Pearl."

The men collapsed again, held up only by the spiritual qi of their Foundation Establishment captors. Across the lake, every gaze fell on them like a sword. 'A Bright Yang cultivator breaks through, forges a divine power, and becomes a Daoist Master, and you dare to present a Lesser Yin spiritual item as a congratulatory gift? The meaning could not be more obvious. Zaixingzi got what he deserved!' An Siwei's anger had yet to fade, and he silently cheered.

Li Ximing smiled faintly. "Chenghui," he said calmly, "return their gift and let them go."

He turned his face toward the men, who were so frightened they could only stare at the ground, their souls nearly leaving their bodies. They could feel the celestial light from Li Ximing's brow shining down on them, hot as a blazing sun, and sweat poured from their bodies like rain.

"Within three days, the Floating Cloud Cave—or the Three Sects—will give me, Zhaojing, an explanation."

An Siwei released them. The Qi Refining cultivators, never imagining they would be allowed to live, began to kowtow and wail. A glare from Chen Yang sent them scrambling to their feet, and they flew off toward their sect on shaky gusts of wind.

"The Daoist Master is truly benevolent," Li Chenghui said, staring coldly at their retreating figures. "They got off easy."

He was right. Li Ximing's actions were incredibly magnanimous. As a Purple Mansion Daoist Master who had been so gravely insulted by Foundation Establishment cultivators, he could have struck them down without consequence. Even if Zaixingzi had been from one of the three great immortal sects of Yue, he would not have been spared unless he was a direct disciple, and another Daoist Master would still have had to come and apologize.

Li Ximing could have torn through the Great Void, appeared in the skies above the Three Sects, and rained down celestial light and endless purple flames, razing the entire Floating Cloud Cave to the ground, and it would have been considered perfectly reasonable. At most, some might have called him callous.

But Li Ximing was unfamiliar with the Three Sects and acted with caution. He had only just broken through and had yet to fully master his divine powers. Fearing a hidden trap, he chose not to act too ruthlessly. He let them go, forcing the Floating Cloud Cave to come to him and atone.

As he landed, Li Chenghui immediately reported in a low voice, "Daoist Master, the Golden Tang Gate is behind the Three Sects of Mount Xiaoshi… It's a bit tricky."

Li Ximing understood his nephew's meaning. The Golden Tang Gate was already struggling to save itself. For a century, it had been plagued by internal strife, and the surrounding sects were not to be underestimated. Ever since the fall of the mid-stage Purple Mansion cultivator from the Situ family, their sole remaining Purple Mansion, Situ Huo, could only wander the Southern Sea, not daring to return to the mainland. Rumor had it he was severely wounded by Yuan Su a few years ago, and his current condition was unknown.

"Situ Huo's refusal to return is the only thing keeping the Golden Tang Gate alive, allowing it to cling to its existence in Jiangbei. It was only in recent years, with Situ Mo's rise to power and the surge of spiritual qi in the region, that they have started to recover…"

"The spiritual qi of Jiangbei," Li Chenghui continued, "was paid for with the lives of cultivators from both the north and south…"

As he was speaking, a flash of pale red light streaked across the northern sky. A wave of fire rolled across the lake before revealing the figure of a bright and beautiful woman.

"Minggong!"

It was Li Minggong. She wore a red dress and carried a sword, her face a mixture of disbelief and overwhelming joy. She landed before them, hurriedly bowing.

"Junior… pays respects to the Daoist Master!" As she spoke, her eyes welled up with tears. She choked back a sob before continuing, "Congratulations on forging your divine power, Seventh Uncle! I… I have passed my own trial of life and death and forged the Immortal Foundation: the Pheasant Li March!"

The Pheasant Li March allowed one to command the true fire of the pheasant, refining the five organs internally and all metals externally. One could hold the pheasant's parting flame in one's mouth to spit fire and baleful energy, and

even take the form of a bird to ride the flames. The family's fourth-grade *Long-March Pheasant Flame Art* had always been an excellent true fire tradition. That Li Minggong was the first to forge a true fire foundation was somewhat unexpected. Li Ximing was pleased.

"Excellent!" he said warmly.

Among the Foundation Establishment cultivators, Li Minggong was one of the closest to him, being Li Xuanxuan's direct great-granddaughter. Li Ximing smiled and helped her up. "True fire is excellent for artifact refining. You should study it well. He Jiu's lifespan is nearing its end, and we still have no one to watch over the family's artifact refining peak, Mount Jiumen."

He raised an eyebrow. "Where are Chengliao and Chenghuai?"

Li Minggong clasped her fist. "Reporting to the Daoist Master," she said softly, "Elder Brother… he failed his breakthrough a few years ago…"

"Oh…"

Li Ximing paused, a look of regret on his face. Li Minggong and Li Chengliao had similar levels of talent, but Li Chengliao had possessed the best temperament. He had thought he would surely succeed, yet the one who entered seclusion first had been the one to fall.

'Thinking back, managing the family took too much of his time… He always had to look after his brothers and sisters, and he spent too little effort on his own cultivation. Though his cultivation base was solid, how could it compare to his siblings, who tempered themselves a thousand times over in their daily practice?'

Li Ximing was silent for a moment. Five or six years had passed, and the family had mostly recovered. He sighed inwardly, not wishing to dwell on the painful memory. "And Chenghuai?"

Li Chenghuai was the most talented of the Chengming generation. A breakthrough to the Foundation Establishment Realm should have been well within his grasp, but cultivation depended heavily on opportunity and even luck. It was impossible to be certain.

Li Minggong stood beside him. "He is still attempting his breakthrough."

As they spoke, they landed on the island. Over a hundred thousand people looked up at the figure bathed in brilliant light. Li Ximing made a quick calculation with his fingers and frowned. "He's late."

Li Chenghui spoke respectfully. "According to Twenty-ninth Brother's cultivation speed, he should have entered seclusion long ago. However, Clan Uncle Xizhi went to great expense within the sect to acquire a fourth-grade technique of a compatible element for him, the *Art of Concealed Profundity*. It's said to be quite miraculous. He had Chenghuai convert his cultivation base before attempting the breakthrough, which caused a delay of five or six years."

Li Ximing's face broke into a broad smile. "Good! A fourth-grade technique makes all the difference."

Listening to Li Chenghui's explanation, he walked toward the center of the island under a bright sun and a sky full of auspicious clouds.

Li Xuanxuan approached, his face streaked with tears of joy. The old man's lips trembled, and his hands shook as he reached out. He stared at his grandson for a long time before finally managing to speak two words.

"Ming'er!"

Li Ximing's heart had been filled with a boundless sense of peace and relief, but those two words struck him with an indescribable poignancy. He closed his eyes. He stood motionless for several breaths before finally managing a choked reply.

"Grandfather! I have not failed you!"

In the endless illusions of his tribulation, he had been devoured by beasts, walked on mountains of blades and through seas of fire, had his chest torn open and his guts ripped out—he had endured it all without a single sound. Yet now, this simple greeting nearly brought him to tears.

He turned his head slightly. "Chenghui, in three months, the Three Sects and Seven Gates and all the great clans will send representatives. Go and make the preparations."

Li Chenghui and Li Minggong understood at once. They took two steps back and quietly closed the doors, leaving the grand hall empty save for the grandfather and grandson.

Li Xuanxuan's cloudy eyes were filled with tears. He stood frozen, staring at the radiant celestial light on Li Ximing's brow. After what felt like an eternity, he closed his eyes, squeezing out two more tear tracks.

The old man smiled. "If I were to die now, I could face my second and third uncles… Ximing, you have brought us glory! If Yuanping and Yuanjiao could know of this in the netherworld, they would be overcome with joy…"

Chapter 689: Reactions from All Sides

Li Ximing answered quietly. Li Xuanxuan immediately wiped away his tears and smiled.

"This is a joyous occasion; there should be no tears. Tell me, what of your divine power?"

With a gentle wave of his sleeve, Li Ximing released a stream of celestial light that flowed from his cuff. It traced the contours of the hall's decorations, plating the entire chamber in a luminous sheen and sealing it off from the outside world.

"It is the Bright Yang Art's divine power: Heavenly Audience Gate," Li Ximing explained softly. "The Azure Pond Sect possesses the *Secret Records of Dongli*, which they obtained from the Dongli Sect's grotto-heaven. They long ago deduced that I cultivate the *Golden Hall Radiant Origin Art* and were aware of the mysteries of our family's Radiant Origin Pass. At the time, they paid it little mind."

"What they didn't know," he continued, "is that while I used the *Golden Hall Radiant Origin Art* for my Foundation Establishment, I later converted my cultivation to the fifth-grade *Radiant Essence Scripture*, which shares the same spiritual affinity. It was with this scripture that I reached the Purple Mansion Realm. Hence, the divine power is called Heavenly Audience Gate."

Li Xuanxuan looked slightly puzzled. He frowned in thought before asking, "Does this mean that the divine power one forges from the Radiant Origin Pass can differ? That cultivators with different grades of Immortal Foundations will awaken different divine powers upon reaching the Purple Mansion Realm?"

Li Ximing paused for a moment. "The differences are not so great," he said. "Excluding a few rare exceptions, only techniques of the fifth grade or higher can typically produce a divine power. Whether it is called Radiant Origin Pass or

Heavenly Audience Gate, they are both manifestations of the same Bright Yang Art. Their areas of expertise merely differ slightly."

"As for sixth or seventh-grade techniques, perhaps their divine powers are even stronger. I have never seen them."

The celestial light between his brows flickered as he spoke, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Upon forging this divine power, I realized that it is more closely tied to my personal Dao than to the technique I practice. It is as though I am beginning to transcend the constraints of the technique itself. Perhaps this is the difference between nature and fate. The Purple Mansion Realm touches upon fate, and it seems one is no longer bound by the limits of a cultivation art."

He paused again, choosing his next words with care. "Connecting with the Great Void gave me a faint premonition. It seems the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao is limited by its techniques. Reaching the peak of the Purple Mansion Realm and breaking through to the Golden Core is the absolute limit. Once you forge a Golden Core nature and attain Fruition, you no longer need a technique at all. Your cultivation relies entirely on your own understanding."

He lifted his teacup and took a small sip. "Perhaps the ancient methods of qi cultivation have arts that can be studied beyond the Golden Core, but the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao ends with the Golden Core. Once you attain Fruition and become a True Monarch, a single thought can alter the world. What technique could possibly guide such a being?"

Li Xuanxuan nodded. After a quick calculation, he said in a low voice, "I have heard that the *Answers to the Beggar Beneath the Mulberry Tree*, a text bestowed by an immortal, is the only known seventh-grade. Fifth and sixth-grade scriptures must be the pinnacle of the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao."

Li Ximing nodded in agreement. He touched a finger to the space between his brows, then gestured outside. The rainbow clouds in the sky instantly dissipated. "Chenghuai cultivates the *Art of Concealed Profundity*. This radiant display is not good for him. It's best to put it away for now."

"How has the family fared these past ten years? And what of the world?"

Li Xuanxuan sighed and shook his head, a clear sign that the decade had not been easy. But now that the family had a Purple Mansion cultivator, those past struggles seemed insignificant. "Most of the changes have been in Jiangbei," he

said with a measure of relief. "Daoist Master Changyun's Revering Radiance Gate has seized a large territory and stabilized the situation. Two other Purple Mansion cultivators from overseas have also settled there, and now sects and families of all sizes are sprouting up everywhere."

"Jiangbei is a nexus of spiritual qi, which has also invigorated the wild temples in the untamed lands across the river. The spiritual energy there grows stronger by the day."

Those untamed lands were on the same terrestrial meridian, situated between Moongaze Lake and the Profound Peak Gate. In the past, the spiritual qi there was sparse, home to little more than desolate temples. Now, with the meridian flourishing, new sects and families were rising.

"As for our family," he continued, "we've faced more and more probing from various factions, all directed at Zhouwei. They've been using the Golden Tang Gate and the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion as their pawns to test our relationship with the dragonkin, growing bolder with each attempt."

"The visit from the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion today was the culmination of that. Had you not broken through, we would have faced considerable trouble."

"Where is Zhouwei?" Li Ximing asked.

"He feigned a trip to the Eastern Sea to hunt demons, but he's actually positioned across the river," Li Xuanxuan explained. "He anticipated that the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion were planning a major assault across the river to the north bank and was preparing to counter it in secret. Your breakthrough disrupted everything, and the situation has completely changed."

"Not only did the Three Sects not cross the river, but they sent people to offer congratulations and provocations. I don't know what they were planning."

Li Ximing nodded. "Whatever their plan was, it no longer matters. Within three months, all the major sects will send representatives with gifts. We must focus on making the proper arrangements."

He hesitated for a long moment before finally asking, "Is there… any news of my aunt?"

Li Xuanxuan's breath caught in his throat. "It's… hard to say," he said softly. "Qinghong has been away for too long. Five years ago, the jade talisman lost

its spiritual nourishment and went dim. It can no longer show her fortune or peril."

A calm resolve settled in Li Ximing's heart. "Once things have stabilized," he said, reassuring his grandfather, "I will discuss it with Zhouwei. We will assess the situation and decide whether to pay a visit to the dragonkin and ask them about this."

Li Xuanxuan nodded repeatedly. Just then, a sound came from outside the hall. With a thought from Li Ximing, the heavy doors swung open on their own.

Two figures entered. The young woman wore a light red, cloud-patterned satin dress with a silver necklace. A talisman brush hung from her waist, and the cuffs of her sleeves partially concealed a few sheets of talisman paper. She wore no makeup, her skin fair and her eyes bright with spirit. She smiled, her eyes curving into crescents, and bowed respectfully.

"Junior Li Que'wan pays her respects to the Daoist Master!"

The young man beside her was dressed in a pleated robe of purple and white, its crossed collar and cuffs embroidered with patterns of Radiant Fire. A white jade pendant with a golden tassel hung from his waist. His gaze was bright, and he carried himself with a bold and refreshing air.

"Li Jiangqian greets the Daoist Master!"

Li Ximing looked up and gestured for them to approach. Li Que'wan, a sixth-level Qi Refining cultivator, seemed a bit shy. Li Jiangqian, who was already at the seventh level, was quicker to speak.

"Ancestor has broken through to the Daoist Master realm! The whole family is celebrating. Seeing the looks on those fools' faces was so satisfying."

Li Ximing chuckled. "You two are advancing too quickly," he advised. "There's no need to rush your cultivation. Spend more time practicing your arts."

"This junior understands."

After bowing, Li Jiangqian smiled. "Before, we didn't know Ancestor would emerge from seclusion so soon. The family was short on Foundation Establishment cultivators, so I discussed it with Wan-mei. I would push for a breakthrough first to help the family, and she could take her time.

"But now, it seems that's no longer necessary!"

Li Jiangqian's words pleased Li Ximing, who nodded in approval. "Your father," he asked with a curious smile, "how many children does he have now?"

"In the last decade, he has given me four more younger brothers," Li Jiangqian replied respectfully. "The little ones haven't been assigned duties in the clan yet, but they are all showing great promise."

Li Ximing sipped his tea and chatted with them a while longer. Soon, An Siwei descended on the wind before the hall. "Reporting to the Daoist Master," he said respectfully, "the envoys from the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion have arrived from across the river."

Li Ximing had been sitting for less than a day, but the Three Sects had acted with impressive speed. "How did they deal with Floating Cloud Cave?" he asked casually.

An Siwei bowed. "The Floating Cloud Cave is in utter chaos. Everyone scattered like birds and beasts. The sect elders and guest elders stormed the main pavilion to divide the treasures. The Cave Master, fearing punishment, took his own life. His body was torn apart by the crowd and vanished in a flash of light, leaving only his head behind."

"In the midst of the chaos, the other two sects of Xiaoshi Mountain stormed the Floating Cloud Cave. Under the pretext of purging traitors from the Daoist path, they rounded up and imprisoned the remaining cultivators. They took the heads of all involved and brought them here. Zaixingzi's entire faction has been trampled to dust… not even bones could be found. They gathered all their spiritual items and sent them over as well."

"The cultivators from the other two sects have already escorted the men from Floating Cloud Cave to the north bank, bringing the heads and spiritual items with them."

Li Xuanxuan was left speechless by the account. Li Ximing sipped his tea without a word. Only Li Jiangqian, standing to the side, rubbed the jade pendant in his hand and sneered.

"Such a swift response. In the end, only Zaixingzi's faction and a late-stage Foundation Establishment Cave Master are dead. They've certainly adopted a humble posture… rushing to offer their faces to be slapped on the very day our Daoist Master breaks through, not even daring to wait a single night."

He paused, calculating. "Judging by the timing, the chaos on Xiaoshi Mountain must have begun the moment the Daoist Master revealed himself. Otherwise, it would have taken half a day just for the news to reach them, let alone for them to arrive before nightfall."

"Someone must be pulling the strings from behind."

Li Ximing was well aware that it wasn't just the Golden Tang Gate behind the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion. Even the Golden Tang Gate was only targeting his family because there was something in it for them. "Bring the items forward," he said softly.

An Siwei withdrew and returned a moment later with a row of jade boxes. He opened the largest and most ornate one, revealing the head of an old man, his face a mask of regret, his hair and beard standing on end.

Celestial light shifted from between Li Ximing's brows, and the spell concealing the head's true appearance dissipated. It returned to its state at the moment of death. The features were the same, but where was the regret? There was only astonishment and rage.

He lowered his head and sipped his tea. An Siwei confirmed, "This is indeed the man."

With a gentle wave of his sleeve, blood began to seep from the sealed head. "Que'wan," he said, "check his bloodline."

Li Que'wan understood immediately. She placed one hand on the wrist of the other, formed a sign with two fingers, and lifted a drop of blood with her spiritual qi. As she chanted an incantation, a silvery mercurial light shimmered within the blood. "A fish with a red tail," she murmured. "Its house is destroyed. Its son, a beast that devours its parents. Distant kin."

She drew a talisman and pressed it to her wrist, dispelling the silvery light. "He had few children, and his parents, both rogue cultivators, died long ago. His eldest son despised him and has just slain his parents, only to be killed by another."

The shamanistic talisman art she used was quite accurate. Li Ximing nodded. "It seems the chaos was real. There is indeed a Purple Mansion cultivator keeping an eye on Xiaoshi Mountain."

Whether Li Que'wan's divination was precise or not, it was certain that a Purple Mansion cultivator was directing events from behind the scenes. Li Ximing dismissed the two juniors and turned to An Siwei. "Have them leave the reparations. The guest elders may all return. The two Cave Masters, however, will come up to see me. I wish to have a long chat with them."

Azure Pond Sect, Main Hall.

Tantai Jin, dressed in fine robes, waited before the hall. A moment later, a guard invited him in. He took a few steps, crossing the threshold and ascending the misty white steps into the grand chamber.

Si Yuanli was practicing calligraphy, seemingly in a good mood. Tantai Jin walked up to him, clasped his hands in a salute, and smiled.

"Sect Master!"

"Brother Tantai, you've arrived!" Si Yuanli laughed heartily and produced a small letter from his sleeve, handing it to him with an air of self-satisfaction.

Tantai Jin took it and read it closely, his face immediately lighting up with pleasure. The note contained only a few short lines:

On the twenty-second, Daoist Master Buzi appeared on Lufang Island in the Southern Sea. He was traveling at great speed using a divine power, seemingly in pursuit of a demon. He appeared for only a few breaths to conduct a magical search before vanishing.

"Chi Buzi has shown himself!" Tantai Jin knew exactly what Si Yuanli meant.

More than a decade had passed since the turmoil in the Azure Pond Sect, and Chi Buzi had shown no reaction, concerning himself only with his own affairs. The message was clear: he couldn't care less. If he had possessed even the slightest concern, he wouldn't have needed to return to the sect; even a single word would have prevented the tragedy of the past.

Tantai Jin's smile faded, and he lowered his gaze. In a voice barely above a whisper, he asked, "Daoist Master… could it be that he holds a grudge against a certain someone?"

A man of Si Yuanli's caliber understood immediately. A flicker of fear crossed his heart as his expression grew hesitant. He knew exactly who Tantai Jin was referring to.

'Lushui!'

"Who can say?" Si Yuanli's face remained dark and uncertain. "Perhaps he holds a grudge against Chi Wei. The man is resolute in his pursuit of the Dao and is a master of deception. When Chi Wei was alive, you couldn't see his true nature at all. The moment Chi Wei died, he was like a different person."

He kept his next thought to himself.

'Even if he does hold a grudge against Lushui, so what? Ning Tiaoxiao's resentment was so deep he gave up cultivating his divine power, but what did it accomplish? He only hated himself to death.'

Chi Buzi was a clever man. Si Yuanli didn't believe he would make such a mistake. At most, he simply wanted to leave the Azure Pond Sect behind.

'My only worry is what will happen after the old ancestor passes…'

Si Boxiu was a master of talisman arts and possessed several excellent legacies, but time was running out. Si Yuanli was waiting for a Moon Radiance Glazed Fruit to enter seclusion himself.

He stared at the painting on his desk for a moment, then lifted his brush to inscribe it.

Suddenly, Tantai Jin cocked his head as if listening. Si Yuanli paused, his own ears twitching. A vast, resonant voice was passing through the Great Void, echoing through the hall.

"I, Zhaojing, Li Ximing of the Moongaze Li clan, have this day achieved the Bright Yang divine power! I hereby proclaim my clan an Immortal Clan of the Purple Mansion Realm. In three months, a celebratory rite will be held. All fellow Daoists are welcome to attend!"

"Zhaojing, Li Ximing of the Moongaze Li clan…"

Si Yuanli's hand froze mid-stroke. The half-written character stopped abruptly, leaving a large blot of ink on the painting that spread like a stain, utterly ruining the masterpiece.

Crack.

The expensive white-bristle jade brush in his hand shattered. Fine jade powder trickled through his fingers, dusting the painting below. It settled over the face of the old flood dragon at the center of the work, obscuring its eyes in shadow.

"How is this possible…"

Si Yuanli's composure, cultivated over years, instantly broke. His brow furrowed, his eyes glazed over with shock as he met Tantai Jin's equally incredulous gaze.

'A Purple Mansion cultivator in just over a decade?! Li Ximing?'

Tantai Jin looked up, his shock quickly morphing into a grim expression of regret. "I fear we've fallen into a trap," he said in a low voice. "Not just you and I, Sect Master, but likely more than ninety percent of the Purple Mansion cultivators in Jiangnan… We all underestimated him."

Si Yuanli's mental fortitude was extraordinary. He took a slow breath, then waved his hand decisively.

"Say no more! Go and visit Li Xizhi at once!"

Chapter 690: Martial Brothers

Si Yuanli strode down from the main seat. With a flicker of his spiritual qi, the painting he had been working on ignited, the fine paper curling into a ball of crimson flame on the jade desk before collapsing into a pile of black ash. Tantai Jin dared not look, following closely behind him.

"Xiao Chuting?" he asked, his voice low and urgent.

"He must have had a hand in this!" Si Yuanli replied under his breath. Though his face was a mask of calm, the wide, hurried strides betrayed the turmoil within. "At first, I thought Xiao Yuansi acted alone, taking advantage of the old man's absence in the Northern Sea and a push from other factions to force the pill refinement… but now, it's clear. Xiao Chuting even used his own descendant as a pawn! The 'Man on Creek' of Pit Water… he truly lives up to his name."

"For the past century, since reaching the Purple Mansion Realm, Xiao Chuting has been infallible, maneuvering between the Azure Pond and Golden Feather Sects until he became one of the most formidable figures of his generation… I never should have assumed he had miscalculated!"

Tantai Jin murmured, "Could it be… that Li Ximing is the most cunning of the four 'Xi' siblings? That he's been playing the fool all this time?"

Si Yuanli considered this for a moment. He gathered the hem of his robes and rose into the air on a gust of wind. "Unlikely," he said, shaking his head. "There are no secrets from those with fate-seeing divine powers. Besides, the heavens wouldn't be so generous. Li Xizhi and Li Xijun were already exceptional talents, and I hear Li Xicheng was also a man who gives his all. How could there be yet another in Li Ximing?"

"Xiao Chuting was certainly involved in the planning, but there's something else strange about this. Either there's a problem with Li Ximing's celestial phenomenon, or there's a problem with the man himself. When the Daoist Master returns, I will ask for his guidance."

He flew with Tantai Jin toward the Heaven-Probing Pavilion. As the immortal structure slowly came into view, Si Yuanli composed himself, a brilliant smile spreading across his face.

'Fortunately, I've always been careful to maintain appearances,' he thought. 'My attitude now won't seem out of place. If I hadn't laid the groundwork, rushing over like this would appear far too eager and opportunistic.'

"I, Zhaojing, Li Ximing of the Moongaze Li clan, have this day achieved the Bright Yang divine power…"

The resonant voice pierced through the Great Void, brushing against the Azure Pond Sect's Heavenly Origin Dao Spiritual Formation. The array, sensing only sound and no hostile power, merely shimmered once before letting the announcement pass.

The voice swept through the entire Azure Pond mountain range, echoing and lingering until it reached the pavilion perched high above the clouds.

Clink… clank…

The jade talismans hanging in the pavilion chimed, stirred by the sound waves. On the top floor, a middle-aged man in feathered robes looked up, staring blankly at the clouds.

Behind him stood a man in black, his face grim. Shadowy, serpent-like tails writhed beneath his robes. He, too, was frozen in place, his expression one of utter disbelief.

"Ximing?"

Li Xizhi listened to the announcement repeat several times. His eyebrows shot up, a shocked, almost dreamlike smile gracing his lips. He paced the floor of the pavilion, the world so quiet he could hear the crisp, clear chimes of the jade talismans.

"Ximing… Daoist Master Zhaojing, Li Ximing?!"

He murmured the name, a flush rising to his cheeks. It all felt so unreal. "I was still scheming how to protect Zhouwei," he chuckled, "and my brother has already reached the Purple Mansion Realm…"

Li Wushao, standing beside him, looked even more incredulous.

'Damn it all… am I now the spirit beast of a Purple Mansion Immortal Clan?'

A wave of exhilaration washed over Li Xizhi. He laughed, a rare loss of composure, his steps light as he pushed open the pavilion window. In the distance, several streaks of light were speeding toward them.

As the voice spread across the better part of Yue State, Li Xizhi felt a mysterious warmth rise in his sea of qi. The tri-colored talismanic energy of his Rainbow Pierce Skyway technique grew brighter, shining with a newfound brilliance.

"My Rainbow Pierce Skyway has advanced to the next level!"

Li Xizhi paused, then understood immediately. The power of Rainbow Pierce Skyway was tied to his status. With the news of his brother's breakthrough, his own standing as one of the three 'Xi' of the Li clan had soared. The change was palpable!

"It seems I've benefited as well!"

He smiled as he watched the approaching lights. A sharp knock came at the pavilion door, and a youth hurried in. He wore an exquisite jade crown and silver-white robes, a magnificent red brocade cloak draped over his shoulders. He bowed with a jubilant air.

"Congratulations, Master! A joyous occasion! Daoist Master Zhaojing has forged his divine power!"

After a flurry of congratulations, he finally turned to Li Wushao with a smile. "Greetings, Guardian!"

Li Wushao had been cultivating alongside Li Xizhi, while the more powerful Li Qiyun had been dispatched to guard the spirit jade mine in the Helin Mountains.

Li Wushao returned the greeting. Behind the first youth stood another, a head taller and powerfully built, a bow slung across his back. His expression was serious, but his eyes shone with joy.

Li Xizhi, who always prized composure, couldn't help but laugh aloud at such wonderful news. His face was alight with excitement as he stroked his beard. "Duan'er, quickly, open the side gates of the Heaven-Probing Pavilion. You

stand at the main gate to receive our guests. Have Junwei wait at the secondary gate."

He quickly regained his poise, though his eyes still danced with amusement. "The Sect Master is coming. See that you don't neglect him."

The youth in red and white was his eldest disciple, Quan Yuduan, a relative of the late Quan Yi. The powerfully built young man behind him was his second disciple, Zhao Junwei.

After Tuoba Chongyuan killed Quan Yi, only his elderly mother was left. Li Xizhi had cared for her until she passed away a few years prior. Unwilling to see the Quan line fade, the old woman had written several letters to relatives outside the sect. To honor her wishes, Li Xizhi found Quan Yuduan among some distant kin who had been reduced to country squires and brought him into the sect.

A year later, while inspecting the family's spirit jade vein in the Helin Mountains, Li Xizhi took Zhao Junwei, the son of a local hunter, as his second disciple. More than a decade had passed since then.

"As you command, Master!" Quan Yuduan replied, turning to leave with a spring in his step. The boy was ecstatic, and even Zhao Junwei, who had only been cultivating for ten years, understood the significance of the Purple Mansion Realm. The two of them were clearly overjoyed, and laughter filled the pavilion.

Li Xizhi smiled softly.

In his earlier, more precarious years, he hadn't dared to grow too close to the major families. Thus, both his disciples came from humble backgrounds. Quan Yuduan could at least be considered the son of a wealthy family whose ancestors had been cultivators, and he possessed decent talent. Zhao Junwei, however, was a true commoner with mediocre aptitude. Fortunately, both were diligent, and Zhao Junwei's character was particularly outstanding.

'Si Yuanli is here…'

He gently tapped the jade window, watching the two familiar streaks of light arrive. He turned and walked out of the pavilion just in time to see Si Yuanli approaching with a look of utter delight.

"A truly joyous occasion!" Si Yuanli boomed. "Daoist Master Zhaojing's success is an inspiration to us all! For your esteemed family to become an Immortal Clan is the greatest news this century has seen!"

Li Xizhi responded politely, his gaze drifting past Si Yuanli to the smiling man behind him.

'Tantai Jin!'

He was no stranger to the man, who had joined the sect a decade ago. Rumor had it he was the prized disciple of an overseas Purple Mansion cultivator, one who had been aided by Daoist Master Yuanxiu, Si Boxiu, in the past. With Si Boxiu's lifespan dwindling, this was clearly one of the arrangements he had made for the future.

After exchanging pleasantries, Si Yuanli smiled. "I've sent someone to the Southern Borderlands to summon Yuanqin. He will be overjoyed to hear of your family's great fortune!"

'Yuanqin…'

Li Xizhi hadn't seen Li Yuanqin much in recent years. After his Foundation Establishment, he had taken the Ning family to guard the Southern Borderlands. Perhaps because of his sensitive position, he rarely contacted Li Xizhi.

Just then, another figure approached the pavilion. He wore vine armor, a gourd tied to his waist, and carried a commanding presence. It was Lingu Rao, the "Scorpion Child," who had once been as famous as Li Xuanfeng.

The middle-aged man clasped his hands and smiled. "Congratulations, Pavilion Master!"

The three families were still, overtly and covertly, on friendly terms. Si Yuanli also greeted Lingu Rao as a senior. The atmosphere was warm and lively, with smiles on every face.

After offering their congratulations, the visitors from the other families departed. For the rest of the day, a steady stream of guests arrived at the pavilion. Li Xizhi greeted them all, and it wasn't until sunset that he finally had a moment to himself.

"Yuduan," he said softly, "have they all been seen off?"

Quan Yuduan bowed. "There is one person still downstairs, Master. He's been pacing back and forth for a long time, too afraid to come up."

"Oh?" Li Xizhi knew exactly who it was. "And who might that be?"

"The Qingsui Peak Master!" Quan Yuduan replied with a cold smile.

He was no pampered fool. Life as a country squire was full of its own petty squabbles, and his childhood had not been without hardship. How could he not know about the feud between his master and the Qingsui Peak Master, Yuan Chengzhao?

While Yuan Chengzhao had been stewing below, Quan Yuduan had greeted the other guests with a warm smile but had not spared him a single glance. If not for Yuan Chengzhao's status as a Foundation Establishment cultivator, he wouldn't have even shown him that much courtesy.

Li Xizhi shook his head. "He is your martial uncle, after all. Go and invite him up."

Quan Yuduan complied and went downstairs. A moment later, the deep, polite voice of his second disciple, Zhao Junwei, could be heard.

"Martial Uncle… please!"

Quan Yuduan, who wore his heart on his sleeve, clearly had no desire to bow to Yuan Chengzhao and had passed the task to the more diplomatic Zhao Junwei. Li Xizhi heard his junior martial brother's sigh, then the sound of him straightening his robes before the door creaked open.

"Chengzhao pays his respects to Senior Brother!"

Yuan Chengzhao didn't dare to look at him, dropping to his knees.

Li Xizhi stood bathed in the golden light of the setting sun, hesitating.

Yuan Chengzhao had always feared him. Their own master, Yuan Tuan, was perpetually absent, so Li Xizhi had always filled the role of the stern elder. To Yuan Chengzhao, he was less a senior brother and more a master.

But human nature is a tangled thing. Despite his fear, Yuan Chengzhao had repeatedly bowed to the Chi clan and placed obstacles in Li Xizhi's path. When Chi Buhua had tracked him down, he had used one of Li Xizhi's old personal items—an item that Li Xizhi was certain had come from his junior brother.

The irony was that after the Chi clan fell and the Si family began their purge, his terrified junior brother's first act was not to come to him, but to run to Si Yuanli. He had knelt, clutched Si Yuanli's leg, and begged him not to reveal that Chi Buhua had gotten the item from him, fearing Li Xizhi's wrath.

'To be so utterly lost! Why would Si Yuanli ever hide such a thing for me? He'd be delighted to see us at each other's throats!'

Li Xizhi's gaze was filled with disappointment. He had watched this boy grow up on the mountain and truly felt a mentor's affection for him. He knew Yuan Chengzhao was weak, but he never imagined he could be so utterly clueless.

Kneeling on the floor, the Foundation Establishment cultivator was already drenched in a cold sweat.

"It has been many years," Li Xizhi said softly. "It seems your misfortune has become your fortune."

Yuan Chengzhao knew exactly what he meant, and the hair on his neck stood on end. In recent years, Si Yuanli had not been stingy with his gifts. Yuan Chengzhao's own talent wasn't poor, but he had relied on the Si family's resources to reach Foundation Establishment. Si Yuanli, all smiles on the surface, had never missed an opportunity to prop up a member of the Yuan family who held a grudge against Li Xizhi.

"Senior Brother… I was wrong," he pleaded, his voice choked with grief. "I was forced… Both Chi Zhiyun and Chi Zhiyan, and later Chi Fubo and Chi Buhua… and now the Sect Master… I couldn't afford to offend any of them! Chi Buhua was at the peak of Foundation Establishment, and I was just a lowly Qi Refining cultivator. When he asked for the item, how… how could I refuse!"

He began to weep, his head striking the floor with dull thuds. Li Xizhi looked away, gazing at the distant sunset.

"You set foot on a path of no return long ago," he said quietly. "The moment you coveted power and accepted the position of Qingsui Peak Master, you became the Chi clan's pawn. You were a piece meant to counterbalance me, and no matter who held power, they would never let that piece go."

"If, on that day, you had been able to quiet your heart and refuse the temptation of power, if you had taken a mission to leave the sect and distance yourself from the Azure Pond… would you be in this position today?"

Yuan Chengzhao could only sob and knock his head against the floor. "You're right, Senior Brother! You're right! I was blinded…"

"You need not say such things," Li Xizhi said. "In truth, no one could have predicted today. I should have died in the Eastern Sea long ago, and your Yuan family would have rightfully reclaimed this immortal peak. A perfect ending."

"But the world is full of surprises. If not for Daoist Master Zhaojing's breakthrough, you would still be reaping benefits from every side."

Yuan Chengzhao choked on his sobs, unable to speak.

Li Xizhi lowered his gaze, a trace of sorrow in his heart, but his face remained calm. "There is no need for tears. Go back to where you came from. For our master's sake, all that has passed is forgiven. Do not seek me out again."

He raised his teacup. "Junwei, see our guest out!" he called.

Yuan Chengzhao was aghast. Zhao Junwei stepped forward, but his Qi Refining cultivation was not enough to move the kneeling man.

"I acted foolishly and harmed you, Senior Brother," Yuan Chengzhao cried. "I have no face to return. I will remember your years of guidance for the rest of my life…"

"Be well, Senior Brother… I must protect my clan in this life and cannot serve you. Your kindness… I will repay it in the next…"

He struggled to his feet, his face streaked with tears. "I still wish we could ride the winds together as we once did, soaring across the prefectures, chasing the Dawn Rayfish, and listening to your teachings…"

"But now… that is no longer possible…"

He bowed and backed out of the room. Li Xizhi remained silent. Zhao Junwei escorted him all the way out.

Quan Yuduan, however, simply pursed his lips. He walked briskly to Li Xizhi's side and bowed. "Master, on this joyous occasion, should we make plans to return to the lake?"

Li Xizhi's voice was gentle. "We should. The Azure Pond Sect will also be sending a delegation to offer congratulations. We will travel with them."

Chapter 691: The Background of the Three Sects

A golden light shimmered across the surface of Moongaze Lake. Inside the main hall on the island, two Daoists stood in uneasy silence. An entire row of jade boxes sat on a nearby table, completely ignored. To the side, a young woman in a red dress sipped her tea, her eyes crinkling into a smile.

"Miss Minggong…"

One of the Daoists, a man built like a small mountain with black tattoos etched across his face and a tiger-striped robe, stood with his head bowed respectfully. Despite being a late-stage Foundation Establishment cultivator, his voice was meek.

"Miss… is there any word from the Daoist Master?"

This man was Daoist Wenhu, the master of Dense Cloud Cave, one of the three sects of the Secret Diffusion region. He had established his foundation in the Southern Sea. Just a day ago, his forces were constantly harassing the shores guarded by Li Minggong, and getting an audience with him would have been an impossible dream. Now, the tables had turned completely.

Seeing his subservience, Li Minggong didn't put on any airs. "Please wait for the report from my clan's cultivators," she said softly.

The other Daoist was weaker, only at the middle stage of the Foundation Establishment Realm. He had an unremarkable face and an average build, and he kept his spiritual aura tightly suppressed, not daring to let any of it leak out. This was Pingwang Zi, the master of Brahma Cloud Cave and the only true immortal cultivator among the three cave masters. Perhaps because Brahma Cloud Cave was the weakest of the three, it had always been the quietest.

Although he was an immortal cultivator, the way he kept his aura locked down suggested he was no stranger to using arts fueled by blood and qi. Now, he was too afraid to even speak.

The two men exchanged a look, then grabbed the jade boxes and tried to press them into Li Minggong's hands. Daoist Wenhu, despite his brutish appearance, spoke with surprising finesse. "Miss Minggong," he said with a fawning smile, "we had hoped our friend An Siwei might put in a good word for us, but he is a man of uncompromising integrity and scorns such humble offerings… Perhaps you might take a look…"

Li Minggong had just fought the men from Dense Cloud Cave a few days ago; she had no intention of accepting his gifts. "Take them back," she said politely. "I have no influence with the Patriarch. You'll have to give them to An Siwei."

The three sects of Secret Diffusion had once been on equal footing with the Li clan, but they were powerless before a Purple Mansion cultivator. Floating Cloud Cave had already been destroyed, and the two remaining cave masters felt as if they were sitting on pins and needles. Finally, they saw An Siwei descending from the clouds.

They scrambled to greet him, showering him with every flattering word they could think of, but An Siwei ignored them completely. They could only look pleadingly at Li Minggong. The woman in red glanced at the table. Taking the hint, the two men quickly mixed their gifts in with the pile of confiscated spiritual items.

An Siwei had personally witnessed the arrogance of the three sects before Li Ximing emerged from his seclusion. Though his anger had subsided, he was still far from cordial. "Masters," he said in a low, formal tone, "if you please."

Steeling themselves, the two men followed him into the air. The sky was beginning to darken. As Daoist Wenhu walked with his head bowed through the long corridors of the palace, his heart grew heavy.

'I wonder what kind of divine power this Daoist Master has cultivated. Is it a life divine ability? If it is, this will be very difficult to handle…'

Whatever dismissiveness he had once felt toward Li Ximing had vanished. In the presence of a true Daoist Master, even thinking a disrespectful thought was dangerous. The best course of action was to not think at all. He quickly suppressed the notion.

After a short walk, he entered the main hall. A cultivator in a white and gold robe stood at the head of the room, his profile turned toward them. A blinding Heavenly Radiance seemed to pulse from between his brows, but otherwise, his features were not particularly remarkable.

"This humble cultivator, Wenhu, pays his respects to the Daoist Master! Congratulations on achieving your great divine power!"

"This humble cultivator, Pingwang, pays his respects! Congratulations, Daoist Master!"

The two men bowed low in unison. They felt a sudden heat on the crowns of their heads and knew the Daoist Master's gaze had fallen upon them.

Li Ximing gave them a brief glance. The Heavenly Radiance between his brows had already seen through them. Daoist Wenhu's foundation was of the Xiukui lineage, a type known as Hurricane Ghost Yin. Pingwang Zi's immortal foundation, however, was peculiar; he had never seen it before, though it might belong to the Ancient Merging Dao Lineage.

'Wenhu has some strength, but his Hurricane Ghost Yin is countered by my own arts. I could have suppressed him even before I reached the Purple Mansion Realm. As for Pingwang Zi, his foundation doesn't seem suited for combat. He's not worth mentioning.'

The two of them together couldn't even defeat his brother, Li Xizhi. It was no wonder they had spent the last decade dithering, resorting to a slow war of attrition.

The two masters didn't dare look up. Li Ximing sipped his tea and spoke softly, "State your origins."

Although the three sects of Secret Diffusion had colluded with the Golden Tang Gate, Li Ximing knew other Purple Mansion cultivators had to be pulling the strings from behind the scenes. The Golden Tang Gate was just the pawn on the board.

Now came the moment where they had to reveal their backers to save their lives. Daoist Wenhu didn't dare hesitate. The hulking man was the first to cup his hands.

"My given name is Shi Wenya," he said respectfully. "I was originally a cultivator from Mount Xiaoshi. I later received guidance from Lord Chidu of the White Ye

Immortal Sect and traveled to the Southern Sea to cultivate. There, I established my foundation and slowly made a name for myself. I heard from Lord Chidu that Jiangbei was a stable region with fertile spiritual lands, so I came here to settle down."

He kept his head bowed, having revealed everything down to his real name. The White Ye Immortal Sect he mentioned was one of the two new Purple Mansion sects established in Jiangbei a decade ago. Li Ximing rested a hand on the table and nodded.

"So, White Ye Immortal Sect. My family has no grievances with your esteemed Dao. Now that things have come to this, did Chidu have any message for me?"

"Yes, yes, he did," Wenhu said quickly. "The master said that he will come personally to offer his apologies to you in three months."

Li Ximing's expression remained neutral. It was clear that this Chidu from the White Ye Immortal Sect lacked sincerity. But as a rogue cultivator from the Eastern Sea who had mastered three divine powers, he certainly had the capital to be arrogant.

He turned his gaze to Pingwang Zi, who immediately forced a placating smile. "Daoist Master, as you can clearly see, Brahma Cloud Cave rarely involved itself in the affairs concerning your esteemed clan. At most, we were coerced by the other two sects under the pretense of unity. Only then did Brahma Cloud Cave have no choice but to send men…"

Li Ximing had already heard from An Siwei that Brahma Cloud Cave was indeed less active, but ninety percent of the reason was their own lack of strength and manpower. "I asked for your origin," he said softly.

The simple sentence sent a cold sweat beading on Pingwang Zi's nose. He didn't dare blink. "My… my given name is Wang Jun," he stammered. "I am a cultivator from Brahma Cloud Cave on Mount Xiaoshi. In my early years, I was fortunate enough to receive the patronage of Lord Zhong Qian, which allowed me to reach the Foundation Establishment Realm. I followed him to Jiangbei."

"Later, under his instruction, I returned to Mount Xiaoshi to revive the Brahma Cloud Cave lineage and operate in Jiangbei under the Three Sects Agreement…"

Li Ximing's expression softened slightly. "So you are from the Revering Radiance Immortal Gate," he said quietly. "Sect Master Zhong Qian has had some dealings with my family."

He set down his teacup. "And what of Floating Cloud Cave?"

Pingwang Zi eagerly chimed in. "Floating Cloud Cave's territory is the southernmost, and they were always the ones stirring up trouble. Their backer was indeed the Golden Tang Gate. You can rest assured of that, Daoist Master."

Li Ximing fell silent, pondering the situation.

The picture was now clear. The Revering Radiance Immortal Gate had been founded by Daoist Master Changyun and a group of demonic cultivators. They were the weakest of the major powers in the region and had some connection to his own clan. It was only natural that Brahma Cloud Cave, with its limited resources, would be reluctant to stir up conflict.

The Golden Tang Gate, however, still had some power. They had colluded with Floating Cloud Cave, which bordered the Li clan's territory, and had repeatedly caused trouble. As for Dense Cloud Cave's backer, the White Ye Immortal Sect, they were clearly no friends to the Li clan either. In fact, they might pose an even greater threat.

Seeing Li Ximing's silence, Daoist Wenhu chimed in obsequiously, "Daoist Master, most of the cultivators from Floating Cloud Cave have been captured by your men! They are all weeping with remorse, swearing they would die to prove their loyalty to you… Please, investigate the matter yourself!"

Chapter 692: The White Qilin's Gift

Li Ximing knew that the cultivators of Floating Cloud Cave were terrified and desperate to serve him. His clan had a sterling reputation, after all. He was reminded of Fei Luoya from Mount Wu, who had lingered by the lake for decades, hoping for a chance to serve a Purple Mansion cultivator. It was the same principle at play now.

But just because they wanted to pledge fealty didn't mean Li Ximing was inclined to accept. Taking in cultivators of unknown origin without a Life Divine Ability to see through them was asking for trouble; it would almost certainly lead to disaster down the line.

He didn't want the men, but the land they occupied in Jiangbei was prime territory. "What is the status of Floating Cloud Cave's territory?" he asked.

Pingwang Zi hurriedly replied, "It has all been seized and secured, awaiting your command, Daoist Master."

Li Ximing sipped his tea in silence.

In truth, he had heard of Mount Xiaoshi long ago. The Li clan had secret records mentioning it, records that predated the establishment of the three sects. During the great war in Jiangbei, a master monk of the Way of Emptiness had arrived on the wind and landed on Mount Xiaoshi, causing the various Dao lineages there to scatter in terror. One of them, a Daoist Fuyuan, had fled all the way to the lake.

The Daoist had been grievously injured by the master monk and died shortly after. But in his dying pleas, he had revealed a great deal of information, which Li Xuanxuan had later recounted to Li Ximing in detail.

A cultivator from Floating Cloud Cave on Mount Xiaoshi had once come to the lake's shore and been slain by Lord Xiangping, who wielded a powerful mirror. From the man's body, they had recovered a jade pendant. That very pendant was

a component needed to repair the Immortal Mirror—a piece of the same quality as the one Yu Muxian had once possessed.

It was because of this component that Li Ximing was so fixated on the name Mount Xiaoshi, and it was why he had personally summoned the two cave masters for questioning.

'What a coincidence,' he thought, 'that the White Ye Immortal Sect, the Revering Radiance Gate, and the Golden Tang Gate all chose cultivators from Mount Xiaoshi as their proxies in Jiangbei. Surely that isn't by chance.'

Li Ximing was already deeply suspicious of Mount Xiaoshi. The fact that all three Secret Diffusion sects hailed from its Dao lineages only confirmed his belief that something was amiss.

'Finding the other components would be ideal, but even a clue would be a start. Besides, several Purple Mansion cultivators are playing this game in Jiangbei with pieces from Mount Xiaoshi. There must be something valuable at stake.'

'And even if none of that were true, Floating Cloud Cave is located right across the river from the northern shore of Moongaze Lake. It's practically on my doorstep. I cannot allow another power to remain there.'

He took a sip of tea, waved his hand, and said, "Very well. We'll leave this matter for now."

The two men departed as if they had received a royal pardon. Li Ximing hesitated for a moment in the hall, then drew a jade slip from his sleeve. In a small corner, the words *Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light* were carved.

He rubbed the jade slip for a moment, his brow slowly furrowing.

'Zhouwei is still in Jiangbei… I hope nothing's happened to him. This isn't the time to be studying cultivation arts. I need to make a trip to Jiangbei first.'

Meanwhile, the two Daoists left the hall and flew out of Moongaze Lake toward their own territories, both feeling as if they had been given a new lease on life. Pingwang Zi was relieved, but Daoist Wenhu felt as if a mountain had been lifted from his shoulders, and he was overcome with emotion.

Although both were pawns of Purple Mansion powers, they had run afoul of Li Ximing. If he had killed them, it would have been justified. Their backers might have been displeased and lost face, but they couldn't have raised any real objections.

Pingwang Zi spoke softly, his voice laced with meaning, "Whether this is a big deal or a small one is entirely up to the Daoist Master's whim. He said he's leaving the matter for *now*… but he didn't say he's dropping it forever. You'd best be careful from now on, elder brother."

Pingwang Zi could say this because the Revering Radiance Gate behind him had some prior dealings with the Li clan. The same couldn't be said for the White Ye Immortal Sect. It was hard to say what their Daoist Master thought, and Daoist Wenhu's path forward looked treacherous.

Daoist Wenhu clearly understood this. The joy vanished from his face, replaced by a look of confusion. He replied in a low voice, "I can't afford to offend either side. It's like walking a tightrope. I'm caught in the middle, and it's not something I can control."

Pingwang Zi, thoroughly enjoying the drama, found Wenhu's predicament amusing. He cut to the heart of the matter. "Are you tired of living? A bird seeks a forest, a man seeks a master. You don't have the luxury of playing both sides."

Daoist Wenhu was speechless. If he had to compare them, the master of the White Ye Immortal Sect was far more difficult to deal with. Li Ximing, on the other hand, had just reached the Purple Mansion Realm and seemed to conduct himself with more righteousness. He didn't yet view Foundation Establishment cultivators as mere blades of grass. Wenhu sighed with a hint of resignation.

"Sigh… Just you wait. Only when you've truly offended someone of their stature will you understand what it's like."

He saw they were approaching his territory and fell silent, letting out another sigh, which greatly pleased Pingwang Zi.

In Jiangbei.

Night had fallen over the territory of Floating Cloud Cave. A shadow flitted through the mountain forest. Shrouded by overlapping layers of cloud-like gauze, an old man with a goatee flew close to the ground, glancing around cautiously.

"Li Ximing… a Purple Mansion cultivator… It's preposterous!"

A look of disbelief was still etched on his face. But the facts were the facts: the master of Floating Cloud Cave was dead. The man, Situ Ku, had relied on a magical artifact to sneak away, and he didn't dare take a single unnecessary step.

Floating Cloud Cave had close ties with the Golden Tang Gate. Its master, Fudou, had been backed by them, and Situ Ku was naturally stationed there as the Golden Tang Gate's representative. Now, his face was a mask of bitterness.

'At least I never showed my face…'

Situ Ku knew that Wenhu and Pingwang Zi wouldn't want to offend the Golden Tang Gate, so they wouldn't go out of their way to hunt him down. Their best course of action was to pretend they hadn't seen him, which was how he had managed to escape.

'A pity… I doubt I'll get such a lucrative assignment again.'

Situ Ku traveled for a while before emerging from the woods. Before his eyes could even focus, his spiritual sense flared. He detected a young man in white and gold armor sitting beneath a pine tree on a distant mountaintop.

From a distance, the young man sat cross-legged with his eyes closed. A great halberd with a bright gold, crescent-shaped blade was planted in the ground beside him. His hands rested on his knees in a meditative seal, perfectly still.

Situ Ku froze. The young man's eyes snapped open. Golden pupils pierced the darkness, locking onto Situ Ku. The uniquely shaped halberd beside him began to vibrate softly.

"Senior Situ, I have been waiting for you."

A chill shot through Situ Ku's heart, and his mind reeled.

'Li Zhouwei! Wasn't he supposed to be in the Eastern Sea fighting demons?!'

The next moment, the great halberd swept toward him. Before its brilliant light even reached him, Situ Ku broke out in a cold sweat. Terrified, he activated several talismans on his chest, conjuring a tortoise shell shield in front of him and spitting a mouthful of blood essence onto it.

Pfft!

BOOM.

But Li Zhouwei's halberd slammed into the ground in front of him, sending stone chips flying. The tortoise shell missed its mark. Situ Ku saw that Li Zhouwei was now forming a seal, a wisp of Radiant Fire dancing in his hand.

'Sun's Resonant Radiance Art!'

The only sixth-grade art in the Li clan's possession was the Great Radiance of White Brilliance, but it required a Purple Mansion-level spiritual fire to cultivate, which the clan lacked. Therefore, Li Zhouwei had cultivated the fifth-grade Sun's Resonant Radiance Art instead. The art was powerful and, more importantly, versatile. A fifth-grade art was considered a trump card even for the direct lineage of the Azure Pond Sect. Li Zhouwei had cultivated it for over a decade and had relied on it to escape dangerous situations many times.

In an instant, a brilliant white light rose before him, rippling like water before shifting to an apricot hue. The tortoise shell was knocked aside and trapped, struggling within the raging flames.

Bang!

Li Zhouwei's hand pressed against the protective barrier of light from the talismans. The entire barrier immediately burst into Radiant Fire. The scorching flames seared Situ Ku's vision. He broke out in another cold sweat, having just finished forming a seal for his own art.

BOOM!

Situ Ku knew exactly who he was facing. When Li Zhouwei had just reached the Foundation Establishment Realm, protected by his treasure armor, even Daoist Fudou himself had only managed to injure him before he escaped. Situ Ku's cultivation level was similar to this Li clan's White Qilin, but he was inferior in every way—arts, techniques, and artifacts. What was the point of fighting?

He made a split-second decision. The black, mist-like gauze artifact exploded, shattering with a deafening roar. A thick gray light erupted as the power of the Xiukui lineage surged, forming a massive mountain of shadow that came crashing down.

Situ Ku knew he only had one chance to escape. He poured out all his spiritual qi, mixed with his own blood essence, igniting a powerful flame beneath his feet that launched him into the sky like a bird, speeding away.

Li Zhouwei remained silent. He swung his inverted halberd, and from the crescent blade, streams of illusory Bright Yang light shot out, slowing the descent of the shadow mountain. Then, a small banner flew from his sleeve.

The Yang-Li Crimson Sparrow Banner.

"By the Heavenly Form, I invoke the Yang-Li flame of judgment!"

Five colors of Radiant Fire—ochre, pale yellow, goose yellow, bright red, and vermilion—leapt up to hold back the black mountain. The halberd thrust forward again, like a pillar supporting the heavens, propping up the massive shadow.

But this power came from a self-destructed artifact. Situ Ku had already fled a full li. A chase would invite unforeseen complications. Li Zhouwei narrowed his eyes, calculated the distance, and chanted coldly, "Light illuminates the eight directions! All kings bow before me! Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light… Manifest!"

A point of bright light emerged from between his eyebrows. The entire forest flashed brilliantly, illuminating everything before plunging back into darkness. In the distance, caught in the heavenly light, Situ Ku fell from the sky like a bird with a broken wing.

The old man, focused solely on fleeing, had offered no resistance. His lower body had been pierced through. The searing heavenly light pulsed in his wound, then rippled outward, transforming into two soldiers in silver scale armor. The faceless soldiers each took one of his arms and flew back with him.

In no more than ten moves, the nearly dead Situ Ku was dragged before him. The mountain-sized black light had been burned down to the size of a writing desk.

Of course, the old man's single-minded focus on escape played a part, as did the power of Li Zhouwei's arts and artifacts. Still, it was a testament to his strength, which now rivaled that of Tuoba Chongyuan in his prime.

After staunching Situ Ku's bleeding, Li Zhouwei sensed something and his eyes narrowed sharply.

'A Purple Mansion cultivator?'

The Great Void rippled before him, revealing a man in a white and gold Daoist robe. He was beaming, his voice filled with pleasant surprise.

"My dear White Qilin is truly formidable!"

Seeing it was Li Ximing, Li Zhouwei let out a breath of relief. He clasped his fist in salute and laughed heartily. "Greetings, Daoist Master! Since you have made your breakthrough, I couldn't possibly return empty-handed. So… I've captured a man from the Golden Tang Gate as a congratulatory gift."

"Oh?"

Li Ximing gave him a look full of praise. Only then did he realize the man on the ground was from the Situ family. Li Zhouwei's eyes flickered as he said in a low voice, "This is Situ Ku, also an elder of Floating Cloud Cave. Wenhu and Pingwang Zi let him escape. I was half a day late, so I've been waiting for him."

Li Ximing understood immediately. His gaze on the captive grew intense. This wasn't just a guest elder; he was valuable leverage. He smiled. "A fine… a fine gift indeed!"

He flicked his finger, and a beam of bright light shot out to bind Situ Ku. Then he took Li Zhouwei's hand, looking him over, and sighed with feeling. "I've reached the Purple Mansion Realm, and you are safe and sound. Nothing is more important than this."

Li Minggong and the others hadn't gone into detail, but Li Ximing knew how difficult the past decade had been for Li Zhouwei, navigating the four territories. He had likely needed a great deal of help, and now he was forced to fake a trip to the Eastern Sea just to return in secret.

Li Zhouwei just smiled. Li Ximing glanced at the sky, then pulled him into the Great Void, and they vanished. A dozen breaths later, the sky rapidly brightened.

An Siwei escorted the two cave masters into the hall and returned quickly to find a young man wandering around. Li Minggong stood to the side. The spiritual items that had been on the table were gone.

An Siwei bowed his head and clasped his hands respectfully. "Second Young Master!"

"Lord An…"

The young man had a clean-cut appearance and was dressed smartly. He was otherwise unremarkable, save for the golden eyes that met An Siwei's gaze. He smiled as he responded. This was Li Jianglong, Li Zhouwei's third son.

The four brothers born after Li Jianglong were not named according to the traditions of the Li clan's Second Branch. No one dared to ask why, and no one mentioned it. Li Jianglong was now eighteen or nineteen, but his cultivation was not as advanced as his older brother's; he was still only at the Qi Refining stage.

He blinked slightly and smiled. "I heard from Lord An what happened. With such wonderful news, when will Father return?"

"It should be very soon," Li Minggong replied.

Li Jianglong shook his head and said, "That Daoist Wenhu really doesn't know how to give a gift. He's probably never been so aggrieved. The item was a medicinal herb that looked like it had been stored for a long time. It was mixed in with the other confiscated spiritual items and sent to the clan's treasury."

An Siwei nodded. "I understand."

Li Minggong watched Li Jianglong with a smile. The young man bid them both farewell, saying he was going to the edge of the island to welcome his father, and left quickly, full of joy. Li Minggong chuckled.

"He means well. Uncle An rejected Wenhu's gift, but then I kept it here. Now that it's gone, he was afraid you would think I secretly accepted a bribe, so he made a point of clarifying."

An Siwei understood, of course, and his expression was one of approval. He said in a deep voice, "The Second Young Master is magnanimous and astute. He is a blessing to our clan."

'It's not just Jianglong,' Li Minggong thought, then said aloud, "Jianglong and Jiangxia are older and are already showing great promise. Jiangliang is a few years younger, and I've met him as well. They each have their own unique qualities…"

"All of the Radiant Splendor generation are talented," she continued. "If they had been born in my Chengming generation, the conflict between north and south would surely have gone much better. That would have been a great thing."

A bitter expression crossed her face, and she lowered her eyes gracefully, careful not to be impolite in front of her elder. An Siwei was getting on in years and didn't dare discuss such topics with her. He just clasped his hands and said, "I'll go and prepare the reception for the other Purple Mansion cultivators. I asked the clan elders, and they said holding it on the island is inappropriate. The current plan is to hold it in the Helin Mountains, where the terrain is most open and the spiritual qi is most balanced."

Li Minggong was familiar with the clan's affairs and understood immediately. She nodded. "This is a good opportunity to renovate the old Helin Mountains. And since the matter with Mount Xiaoshi and the Secret Diffusion sects is settled, I don't need to go back. I can stay and help with the festivities."

An Siwei nodded. They went outside together. The Helin Mountains by the lake were already being decorated with countless golden floating murals. Cultivators flew to and fro, and the air was filled with joyous celebration.

Chapter 693: The Immortal Palace Within the Mirror

The world inside the Immortal Mirror was in flux.

Clouds drifted up and down, a great sun hung high in the sky, and wisps of grey qi scattered as the vibrant lights of divine abilities began to manifest one by one.

When Li Ximing broke through to the Purple Mansion Realm, the Talisman Seed immediately sent feedback into the mirror. A life-giving, spiritual ambrosia rained down, breathing vitality into the realm. The entire world seemed to awaken, bursting into a symphony of brilliant color.

Lu Jiangxian materialized in the sky. Beneath his feet lay a sprawling complex of gleaming white immortal palaces and pavilions, surrounded by shimmering lakes and ethereal mists. A few stone spirits could be seen darting between the halls, painting a picture of a true celestial domain.

'The Purple Mansion Realm… he's finally achieved it.'

Li Ximing's breakthrough had taken over a decade. The process of pushing his foundation into the Shengyang Acupoint had gone smoothly, and he had navigated the trial of endless oblivion with the help of the Talisman Seed. The remaining steps, however, had been fraught with peril. In Lu Jiangxian's view, luck had played no small part in his success.

Li Ximing's Dao Heart had never been weak, and it had been tempered further by years of cultivation and countless trials. Thus, throughout the process of forging his divine ability, the greatest threat had not been the endless illusions, but the single, instantaneous moment of its conception.

Even with the *Radiant Essence Scripture*, the nine secret arts of which he had mastered three, and the aid of the Radiant Sky Stone, Li Ximing's chances of success had been no more than fifty percent.

He himself hadn't realized it, but that fleeting moment when he successfully forged "Heavenly Audience Gate" had been far more dangerous than he could ever imagine.

'Still, his success is a great boon… And Li Zhouwei, being in the spotlight, drew most of the danger away from him…'

Li Ximing's breakthrough was a profound nourishment to the Immortal Mirror itself. While Lu Jiangxian could simulate various divine abilities using his Bright Radiant Yang Imperial Union Essence, it was no match for the feedback from the Talisman Seed. The moment Li Ximing succeeded, the entire mirror world was infused with the power of a divine ability.

The bright white immortal palaces, which the stone spirits had spent a century building under Lu Jiangxian's direction, already filled the original area. Now, with a deep rumble, the ground expanded. The dark clouds on the horizon rapidly receded, and the world grew several times larger, revealing vast new lands.

Lu Jiangxian descended past the central, circular palace complex to the newly formed territory. Unlike the rolling landscapes of before, the ground here was as smooth as a mirror, a perfectly flat, unbroken plain stretching as far as the eye could see.

He pondered for a moment, and with a single thought, the world obeyed. Billowing white mists, like smoke and fog, surged from the distant horizon and swept inward, blanketing the ground completely. The entire palace complex now appeared to be floating atop a sea of clouds, shrouded in an aura of infinite mystery.

'Much better.'

Reappearing high in the sky, he formed a seal. A celestial gate materialized from thin air and descended upon the distant clouds. It was constructed of white bricks, with two corner towers adorned with seventy-two brightly decorated ridges, carved with dragons and phoenixes, and hung with flags and banners—a truly magnificent sight.

'Bright Yang: Heavenly Audience Gate!'

He formed another seal. The sun in the sky, a manifestation of his Bright Radiant Yang Imperial Union Essence, began to shimmer with iridescent light,

showering the world with countless falling stars. These stars drifted about before transforming into various Golden-Armored Heavenly Soldiers.

Most were clad in smooth armor and carried simple spirit spears, but among them were generals wielding long halberds and wearing phoenix-plumed helms, as well as massive, cloth-armored strongmen. They descended into the palace, each finding their post.

"Lord Liu…"

"Ah, General Lin!"

In an instant, the silent palace came alive with a bustling clamor—the clang of armor, the murmur of conversations, and the sound of hearty laughter and greetings. The entire celestial court seemed to be a living, breathing, and smoothly functioning entity.

And yet, it was all born from a single thought.

With a gentle wave of his hand, all the figures in the world dissolved like smoke, leaving only the empty immortal palaces and pavilions behind. Lu Jiangxian chose a hall at random and descended into it.

'Beyond the changes within the mirror, the Supreme Yin Profound Light has now surpassed the Purple Mansion level. I wonder how it compares to the Golden Core Realm… The gap between the two is immense. At best, it could probably only injure a True Monarch.'

'The range of my spiritual sense, however, hasn't changed much.'

Lu Jiangxian sat down at a table, his mind racing with thoughts.

'First, Yang Tianya is not dead. In fact, he broke through to the Purple Mansion Realm long ago.'

This was a rather troublesome development. Yang Tianya served the Underworld, and he had personally seen Li Mutian. Cultivators gained a photographic memory after reaching Foundation Establishment, let alone the Purple Mansion Realm. Yang Tianya must have known that Li Mutian was a mere mortal.

'Yet, according to the information from Li Xizhi, Yang Tianya always referred to Li Mutian as a Foundation Establishment cultivator. That was clearly intentional.'

'At the very least, it means the Underworld bears the Li clan some goodwill. Whatever their hidden motives, they are willing to provide cover on the surface.'

But Lu Jiangxian's discoveries went far deeper. The two emissaries from the Underworld, Wang Long and Zhang Gui—Li Ximing had noticed nothing strange, but within Lu Jiangxian's spiritual sense, their nature was perfectly clear.

'Those two… they're not cultivators, nor are they demons. They seem to be souls that have been influenced by Metallic Essence, then sculpted into their current form by some powerful expert…'

Lu Jiangxian had long been puzzled by something. This world had a complete system of immortals and demons, yet it completely lacked ghosts. There were plenty of ghost stories and legends, and even a power like the Underworld, which was clearly designed to manage such beings, but in a hundred years, he had not seen a single ghost.

'Combined with what Dingjiao said, this must be a consequence of the celestial shift. The rules changed, affecting even True Monarchs and Immortals, to the point where the world can no longer even form ghosts.'

Understanding dawned in Lu Jiangxian's mind.

'But the Fruition Attainment of the Underworld is likely tied to ghosts. If that's the case… does it also mean that the Underworld, the power that presides over ghosts and spirits, has been weakened to an extreme degree since the shift?'

The only time the Li family had encountered anything resembling a ghost was when a disciple from Mount Wu had summoned them with shamanic arts. And even then, those green-faced, tusked creatures were more like puppets of shamanic arts than true spirits.

Lu Jiangxian had studied this phenomenon carefully. When mortals in this world died, their bodies immediately became empty shells. There was no process of a soul dissipating; nothing was left behind but lingering resentment and baleful energy, which could be used to refine treasures.

If one had cultivation and reached Embryonic Breathing, their death would appear normal to the untrained eye, but Lu Jiangxian could perceive their soul leaving the body and scattering into nothingness.

But here was the strange part: once a cultivator of the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao reached the Qi Refining or Foundation Establishment realms, their soul would be extinguished instantly upon death, leaving no trace. Only after forging a divine ability and pushing their Shengyang Acupoint into the Great Void could their soul truly persist after death.

None of these ephemeral states were as stable as the Underworld's emissaries. Lu Jiangxian was astonished by what he saw.

'This method uses Metallic Essence as a vessel for the soul. If I could master it, I could let beings like Dangjiang out of the mirror!'

He made a mental note of it.

'The Li family may have more contact with the Yang family in the future. I'll have to wait and see.'

Lost in thought, Lu Jiangxian clapped his hands lightly, and the bustling sounds of the celestial court once again filled the world. He gazed down at the puppet show he had created, an idea stirring in his mind.

'The mirror world has truly changed. There is so much more I can do now… And with such a fine place at my disposal… I can't just let Dangjiang sit around in my pocket. Such a good laborer should be put to use.'

Riding a streak of light, he instantly appeared in a palace beside the main hall. Feeling a slight headache, he considered his options.

'What was the title I made up for Dangjiang back then… Since I gave him a title related to the Supreme Yin, this palace must reflect that.'

With a thought, the hall instantly transformed. The power of the Supreme Yin surged forth, and patterns of moon laurels and golden cassia blossoms appeared everywhere. The lunar sigil of the Supreme Yin was carved before and behind the hall, and several jade lamps as large as tables began to glow with the light of the full moon.

A cold snow began to fall, piling up in pristine white drifts. Small statues of toads and jade rabbits appeared throughout the hall, making it feel like a true moon palace. Lu Jiangxian surveyed his work, then summoned a plaque above the entrance.

The Saintly Palace of the Supreme Yin's Luminous and Primordial Purity

The silver-white characters, though similar in color to the jade-white plaque, were utterly captivating. He looked from side to side, feeling something was still missing. With a flick of his finger, a ray of Supreme Yin moonlight landed on the floor.

White gravel flew from the corners of the room, merging with the moonlight to form a man in silver armor. Lu Jiangxian adjusted the face several times before settling on one that resembled Li Xijun, giving him the dignified air of an immortal general.

With a thought, the silver-armored man immediately bowed deeply.

"The Supreme Yin's Luminous Immortal General, Zhengao, pays his respects to the Palace Lord!"

Lu Jiangxian looked him over from every angle and nodded in satisfaction. The man was, of course, just another one of his puppets, but he would be more than enough to fool Dangjiang.

Returning to the main throne, Lu Jiangxian's robes shifted and changed. He flicked his finger again, and a pale, turquoise light landed on the floor, coalescing into the form of a young boy.

The boy wore archaic robes, his sleeves embroidered with wave patterns. His eyes were a pale turquoise, and his face was round, making him look no older than a teenager. He appeared somewhat dazed, looking around until he spotted Lu Jiangxian on the throne above. He immediately fell to his knees in a panic.

"Dangjiang pays his respects to the Palace Lord."

For Dangjiang, it had been the blink of an eye. One moment he was in Anhuai Heaven, the next he was here. He had no idea how much time had passed, but looking at the magnificent decorations, he knew this was an immortal palace without a doubt. A sense of relief washed over him.

'That fool Chi Buzi, so shallow and ignorant… going on about how the immortal palaces were shattered… All nonsense. He acts so certain in private, but if he saw the Palace Lord, he'd be kneeling faster than anyone!'

Even as he calmed himself, a current of anxiety ran through him. According to what the Palace Lord had said before, he had escaped from the palace by accident. But Dangjiang's mind was a blur; he had no memory of it. This was a crime in itself, how could he not be afraid?

Seated on his throne, Lu Jiangxian was still considering what tasks he could assign this fellow. He spoke casually, "This is not a place you should be. Since you escaped by accident, you will wait in the palace for now."

Dangjiang let out a sigh of relief. Before he could utter a word of thanks, Lu Jiangxian vanished. Dumbfounded, Dangjiang meekly backed out of the hall. The moment he stepped outside, he saw a man in silver armor standing there.

The man was handsome, with sharply defined cheeks and silver pupils. He stood holding a long spear, looking down at him. Dangjiang hurriedly bowed.

"Greetings, Immortal General! This humble official is Dangjiang, attendant of the River Stream Manor! Might I ask the Immortal General's…"

The silver-armored man simply said, "I am but a minor general of this palace. It is not worth mentioning… Please."

Dangjiang quickly agreed. As he walked through the palace, he glanced up for a moment and his eyes fell upon the words *The Saintly Palace of the Supreme Yin's Luminous and Primordial Purity*. He felt a sharp sting, as if pierced by a needle, and quickly looked away, his heart filled with emotion.

'I, your old man, have now been to an immortal palace… When I go back to preside over my river manor in the lower realm, I'll have endless stories to tell… Chi Buzi? Just a minor cultivator! How could he possibly compare to me?'

Although Dangjiang had many memories, Lu Jiangxian had deliberately made them vague to leave room for future changes. His only clear memories were from his years with Chi Buzi, so he couldn't help but compare himself to the cultivator in private.

He was soon led to a corner of the vast and complex residence. Along the way, he saw many people coming and going. Several immortal generals and officials all bowed their heads in greeting to the silver-armored man. Dangjiang was a perceptive sort and immediately understood that the man before him was no ordinary figure.

'That makes sense. Anyone who can wait outside the Palace Lord's main hall is no common immortal general…'

His expression became even more respectful. He was led to a small side room, but he didn't find it strange at all.

'I'm just a minor river official from the mortal world. What status could I possibly have in the heavens? It's only because the Palace Lord brought me here personally that I'm even allowed to stay in this palace.'

The silver-armored man led him into the room. His stern gaze fell upon Dangjiang as he spoke in a deep voice, "Friend Dangjiang, you may stay here for the time being. However, there are a few rules I must explain to you."

Dangjiang nodded repeatedly. The silver-armored man continued, "The immortal prohibitions are currently active throughout the celestial palace. No one is permitted to enter or leave any of the palaces or manors. If you become terribly bored, you may wander around this palace, but do not speak to too many people, and certainly do not step outside the main gate."

Lu Jiangxian was simply too lazy to create other immortal palaces and just wanted to keep the fellow confined here, but Dangjiang had a sudden realization and nodded thoughtfully.

The silver-armored man pointed to a cabinet in the room and said coldly, "But you will not be staying here for free. This cabinet contains numerous manuals—old techniques or arts confiscated from heretical paths. Immortal Official Li has descended to the mortal realm, so you will temporarily fill his position. Your task is to rewrite and expand upon these techniques. Someone will come to collect them annually."

"This subordinate obeys!"

Dangjiang was quick to fall into his new role, his mind already spinning with possibilities, his heart surging with excitement.

'If I perform my duties well, perhaps I can even be transferred to a position in the heavens…'

Seeing his enthusiasm, the silver-armored man finally showed a hint of a smile. As he was about to close the door and leave, Dangjiang quickly called out to him respectfully, "Might I ask the Immortal General's esteemed name?"

Zhengao's voice rang out, "Zhengao, holder of the rank of Supreme Yin's Luminous Immortal General."

The string of titles stunned Dangjiang, and he looked at the general with even greater reverence. He escorted him all the way out, passing several other immortal officials who ignored him completely, greeting only Zhengao.

Dangjiang knew his own status was insignificant and paid it no mind. He hurried back to his room, his face beaming with joy. He looked around, touching this and that, feeling that everything in the heavens was superior.

"My, my, this Supreme Yin pattern is the real deal…"

He finally made his way to the small cabinet. After admiring its noble carvings, he opened it with great care. He was met with a loud clatter as a cascade of jade slips tumbled out, clinking and clanking as they scattered across the floor, nearly covering it entirely.

Dangjiang stood frozen, staring at the cabinet, which was barely larger than his own body. He couldn't help but curse inwardly.

'So damn many?! What in the world was that Immortal Official Li doing? He probably descended to the mortal realm to escape his deadlines! Right, right! That plague-ridden bastard must be the laziest immortal official in existence!'

He picked up a single jade slip from the floor. Reading it carefully, he estimated its contents would fill three large chests with books. A bitter expression immediately formed on his face.

'Immortal Official Li must have been on strike for decades… Even a donkey isn't worked this hard…'

Chapter 694: The Purple Mansion Dharma Assembly (Part 1)

The waters of Moongaze Lake were placid under a cloudless sky. An indigo pavilion stood over the rippling surface, connected to a central island by a long causeway. A few stone lotus lamps flickered with a soft, magical light.

The octagonal pavilion was adorned with eight distinct runes, highlighted with cinnabar reliefs. It faced the Western Mountains, and above its entrance hung a jade plaque inscribed with large characters:

[Vermillion Bud Pavilion]

A woman in a light red, cloud-patterned satin dress sat within the pavilion. A silver necklace graced her neck, and an ancient book rested in her hands. It was Li Quewan.

The Vermillion Bud Pavilion was where she practiced her cultivation. The Dao of the Whole Pill she pursued was not concerned with the abundance of spiritual energy, but with the transformations of the material world. For this reason, Li Zhouwei had scoured the entire lake to find the location most attuned to such changes and built this pavilion for her.

While a lake had little to do with the Whole Pill, this specific spot was where the clan had once set up a formation, activated the Reflecting Metal, and dispelled the great restrictive array on the island. As such, it could be considered a place of transformation.

Mount Wu would have been the ideal location, as it was the former cultivation ground of the High Shaman Duanmu Kui. Unfortunately, after Li Ximing achieved his divine ability there, the entire mountain had been transformed into a Bright Yang sacred ground, forever changing its nature.

'The clan is going to rename Mount Wu, but I wonder what they'll decide.'

A breakthrough to the Purple Mansion Realm was a joyous occasion, but Li Quewan was tinged with worry. While clan affairs were proceeding smoothly, her own personal matters remained unresolved.

Her father, Li Baotuo, had come to the island to live a blissful life of walking his hounds and training his birds. Her brothers, however, ran a shipping business between the two shores. They were skilled, and with her influence, their business naturally flourished. But they had encroached upon another family's interests. In a fit of anger, the other party had filed a complaint with the Court of Justice, accusing her brothers of "leveraging her name for profit." That very night, they were escorted to Mount Qingdu.

Li Quewan was familiar with the clan's procedures and knew her brothers were in no immediate danger. But her father was so frantic with worry that his mouth had broken out in sores. He had already come to see her several times.

She was grateful that the breakthrough celebration was occupying everyone's attention. Her clan uncle, Li Zhouluo, who was stationed at Mount Qingdu, had not yet passed judgment. Otherwise, she couldn't imagine what a mess it would become.

She sighed and set down the book. Glancing at the time, she thought, 'Three months have passed in a flash. The other sects will be arriving at Moongaze Lake soon. I must go and receive them.'

Li Quewan and Li Jiangqian were the rising stars of their generation. With Li Ximing's ascension to the Purple Mansion Realm, the Li clan had become a Purple Mansion Immortal Clan. Her and Jiangqian's status had soared overnight. It was a world of difference.

Li Quewan pressed the book to her chest, her heart a mix of joy and anxiety.

'In the eyes of the other sects, Jiangqian and I are probably seen as figures like Chi Fubo or Si Tongyi were back in the day. We have no choice but to greet them.'

It was the way of the world. News of their clan, big or small, had likely already reached the other major powers. Li Quewan guessed that in their eyes, the clan head, Li Zhouwei, was now being compared to the likes of Tuoba Chongyuan.

'With reputation comes trouble…'

She flew from the pavilion up into the clouds, where she saw Li Minggong standing on a cloud of fire, dressed in red ceremonial robes. As a cultivator of the True

Fire Dao, her Pheasant Li March technique had an air of the Fire Luan, which was only enhanced by her attire. She stood in the air with a dignified grace.

"Greetings, my lady!" Li Quewan said with a respectful bow.

Li Minggong spent most of her years guarding the North Shore and the river border, so she and Li Quewan had rarely met. But as the eldest sister of the First Branch, she was one of her closest Foundation Establishment relatives. Furthermore, as one of the few female cultivators at that level, Li Quewan naturally felt an affinity for her.

Li Minggong's poised and generous nature had long ago earned praise from Li Xijun, and she possessed a bright, likable charisma. After Li Quewan offered a warm greeting, Li Minggong stood gracefully and replied in a light, cheerful tone, "Ah, Wan'er, you're here. Just stay behind me. Jiangqian is with Chenghui, receiving guests on the other side."

"You look beautiful, Grand-aunt," Li Quewan said with a smile, covering her mouth.

Li Minggong accepted the compliment with ease. She glanced at Li Quewan and chuckled. "I'm getting old. I can't compare to your youth."

As they spoke, Li Zhouluo arrived, leading a group of people on a current of golden qi. He was dressed in magnificent robes, blue over white, and his sixth-layer Qi Refining cultivation pulsed with golden energy. As the head of the third branch, his standing in the Li family was already quite high. For him to personally guide these guests meant they were of extraordinary status.

Li Minggong nodded in approval. Li Quewan, however, tensed at the sight of her uncle.

'Uncle Zhouluo is in charge of affairs at Mount Qingdu. My brothers' case will have to go through him…'

Unaware of her thoughts, Li Minggong smiled and stepped forward to greet the newcomers. "Welcome, friends from the Profound Peak Gate! I am Li Minggong…"

"Congratulations, congratulations!" The man at the front wore the golden robes of the Profound Peak Gate and was clearly the sect master. He had a fair, clean-shaven face and offered polite pleasantries before formally introducing himself.

"I am Kong Guxi of the Profound Peak Gate. It is a pleasure to meet you, fellow Daoist."

Kong Guxi was polite, but the old man beside him was beaming, his beard bristling with excitement. He tugged at his sleeve and laughed. "I'm Kong Yu! Do you know of me, young lady? Li Xuanxuan is a dear friend of mine! We go back many years. Where is that old fellow now?"

Old Kong Yu was a lively and sentimental man. He seemed as overjoyed as if it were his own sect that had produced a Purple Mansion cultivator.

Li Minggong laughed. "I have heard of you, Elder. My elders have mentioned you several times. They are already waiting for you on the mountain. Please, come inside."

Her words gave Kong Yu a great deal of face. The old man immediately puffed out his chest, immensely pleased. Kong Guxi smiled and added a few words of his own. "I have prepared a few small gifts along our journey. Please accept them."

These were the Profound Peak Gate's congratulatory gifts to the Li family, mostly precious herbs and magical artifacts. Any separate dealings between Daoist Master Changxi and Li Ximing would be handled later.

The cultivators flanking Kong Guxi quickly presented several jade boxes. Li Quewan thanked them repeatedly as she respectfully accepted them. Li Zhouluo then escorted the Profound Peak cultivators toward the Milin Mountains, leaving Li Minggong and Li Quewan alone in the clouds.

Li Minggong watched them go, her mind racing. 'I hear Daoist Master Changxi of Profound Peak is nearing the end of his lifespan. I wonder if it's true. Their visit this time… they likely have their own plans.'

When Li Ximing broke through, Daoist Master Changxi was the first to arrive with congratulations. While his proximity was a factor, his words had shown genuine sincerity.

Li Minggong glanced over at Li Quewan and saw the girl staring off into space. She knew what was on her mind; she had heard about the trouble with Li Baotuo's children. It was a minor issue, but it directly involved Li Quewan.

"Quewan," Li Minggong said seriously, "don't worry. The clan will handle it justly."

Li Quewan snapped back to the present and quickly thanked her.

Li Minggong then smiled. "Jiangqian doesn't know yet. If he did, someone would be in for a world of trouble."

...

Milin Mountain.

The mountain itself was not particularly tall, but its range was vast and rolling, teeming with spiritual energy. After the Yu family's fall, the area had descended into chaos. The original palaces and pavilions were shattered, leaving behind a wreck.

These structures were not ordinary buildings. They had been built by cultivators, not by simply raising them from the earth with magic. They required intricate formations, inlaid with spiritual materials and artifacts—a complex undertaking.

When the Li family took over, they were immediately beset by major events and the conflict between the North and South Shores. They had no resources to spare for repairs, focusing only on restoring the spiritual fields and herb gardens to secure resources and provide a place for cultivation.

Only after the conflict ended and the Li family enjoyed a decade of peace and growth did they have the strength to begin rebuilding Milin Mountain. In the last three months, the clan-wide celebration had transformed the entire mountain range into something new.

Pavilions and halls now cascaded down the slopes, standing tall amidst the clouds. Green stone steps wound through them, shrouded in ethereal spiritual mist. The five spiritual springs on the mountain gushed forth, their waters flowing down channels carved alongside the steps, winding through various courtyards before reaching the mountain's base.

Luminous lanterns lined the paths, each painted with the emblems of Bright Yang and Radiant Fire. The steps themselves were carved with images of flood dragons and ocean waves. Cultivators flew back and forth, landing and taking off from the courtyards.

The transformation wasn't limited to Milin Mountain. The entire area around the lake—its sixteen prefectures, two peaks, and one mountain—had been renewed. Six great gatehouses, modeled after the Radiant Origin Pass, now stood sentinel around the lake.

These gatehouses were built of white brick, with ornate corner towers and seventy-two distinct ridges. Each stood twelve zhang tall, their designs varying slightly based on their location and orientation. They were named the Four Symbols Gate, the Profound Enterprise Gate, the Courtyard Abyss Gate, the Changxi Gate, the Inherited Clarity Gate, and the Zhou Martial Gate.

The Four Symbols Gate on the South Shore was the most magnificent, standing a full head taller than the others. The Changxi Gate stood at the foot of Milin Mountain, connected to its defensive formations. All cultivators had to enter the mountain through it.

Li Zhouluo led Kong Yu and the others down to the Changxi Gate, where the brothers Li Zhoufang were on guard. The two were older than even Li Zhouwei, with grown sons of their own. Their talent was average, and they had started their cultivation late, making them look far more weathered and unremarkable.

Kong Guxi glanced around and praised, "What a fine Changxi Gate…"

All six gatehouses had been personally designed by Li Ximing and empowered by his divine ability. Their patterns not only contained the essence of Bright Yang but also held a profound mystery that captivated the eye. Though Kong Guxi and Kong Yu did not cultivate the Bright Yang Dao, they could sense its profundity.

Just as they passed through the gate, they saw a man in white and gold armor standing within. He had broad shoulders and sharp, golden eyes.

Kong Yu hesitated for a moment, but Kong Guxi was already stunned. 'The White Qilin of the Li Clan… Li Zhouwei!'

When Li Ximing had been in seclusion, the Li clan had relied solely on Li Zhouwei and Li Chenghui to hold the line. Every major power had been watching him. Kong Guxi, having just taken over the Profound Peak Gate from Kong Tingyun, knew this better than anyone.

When a demon general ran rampant on the North Shore of Moongaze Lake and the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion suddenly established themselves on

the northern bank, the Fei family had cried for help. It was Li Zhouwei who had enlisted the Elder White Ape to defend the shore. He and Li Chenghui had blocked the river, activating the ancient formation of Cloud-Gathering Southern Sky to slay the demon.

The entire affair had taken less than a night. By the time the forces from the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion were halfway there, Li Zhouwei had already killed the demon and sent its head to the Azure Pond Sect. Everyone knew the demon was almost certainly connected to the Three Sects, but with the head delivered to Azure Pond, they could only swallow the loss.

That event marked the beginning of the North Shore conflict. In the decade that followed, from covert harassment to open disputes over spiritual fields, Li Zhouwei had led the charge. With Li Xizhi's full support—who even returned personally on several occasions—the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion, despite having several times the number of Foundation Establishment cultivators, could only chip away at the Li's interests on the lake, never shaking their foundation.

As Li Zhouwei's cultivation and techniques grew, and as Li Chenghui mastered the Six Thunder Profound Punishment Talisman, the Floating Cloud Cave was rendered helpless unless their cave master intervened. In the end, even when the Floating Cloud Cave Master, Fudou, attacked personally, Li Zhouwei still managed to escape.

The Li clan then used the Cloud-Gathering Southern Sky formation to defend the North Shore. At the cost of leaving the North Shore barren, they consolidated their forces, freeing Li Zhouwei from having to stand guard constantly.

Although Li Ximing's breakthrough had led to the Floating Cloud Cave's collapse, in Kong Guxi's view, Li Zhouwei's repeated triumphs had already made it impossible for them to pose a real threat to the Li clan.

Seeing Li Zhouwei now, Kong Guxi noted the unusual color of his eyes and his powerful aura. He seemed formidable, but otherwise showed no other peculiarities.

He respectfully clasped his hands. "Greetings, Clan Head!"

The golden-eyed young man nodded at him. "The Sect Master of Profound Peak. Zhouwei greets you."

Kong Guxi's cultivation was not high, and his clan's Earth Virtue techniques were not suited for combat. He was likely no match for Li Zhouwei and quickly responded with courtesy.

Standing beside Li Zhouwei was another man, his hair half-white, his features kind and his complexion ruddy. Two strings of medicinal pouches swayed at his waist. His deep cultivation seemed to emanate from him, suggesting he practiced the Wood Virtue.

Kong Guxi had never met this man, but seeing his Xiao family attire, he knew it had to be Xiao Yuansi.

A realization dawned on him. 'In today's Li clan, only Xiao Yuansi is worthy of a personal welcome from Li Zhouwei! That pill of his… everyone once mocked him for his foolishness. Now, they all praise his foresight!'

Xiao Yuansi himself had only learned the news three months ago. The shock had left him speechless for a long time. Even now, he was filled with joy and relief. The old man looked as though he had consumed a precious elixir; his complexion glowed, and his eyes sparkled.

Kong Yu looked on with envy and sentiment. 'To have a Purple Mansion disciple, and to have played a major role in that disciple's breakthrough… this senior need not worry for the rest of his days.'

More figures began to gather at the Changxi Gate. Cultivators from various families came forward to greet the White Qilin of the Li clan. Despite his formidable power, Li Zhouwei was courteous, returning each greeting without a hint of aloofness.

Just as Kong Guxi was about to head up the mountain, a blazing ray of celestial light descended from the sky and solidified on the steps, revealing a man in a gold and white Daoist robe. His features were regular, with no striking characteristics save for his pale golden eyes and the brilliant point of light between his brows.

It could be none other than Li Ximing.

Kong Guxi did not dare to look for long, his gaze quickly shifting away. Behind the man stood a middle-aged figure with a plain appearance, wearing a brown robe with mountain patterns and a jade pendant on his chest. Kong Guxi's pupils contracted. He dropped to his knees with a thud.

"Greetings, Patriarch! Greetings, Daoist Master!"

At his cry, the other cultivators from Profound Peak Gate froze for a second before following his lead, a wave of them falling to their knees in unison. In an instant, every member of the Profound Peak Gate was kowtowing.

Kong Yu and the others were now high-ranking members of the sect; how could they not recognize their own patriarch, Daoist Master Changxi, standing beside Li Ximing? Even those who had never met him in person recognized the portrait that hung in their sect's main hall.

As the Profound Peak delegation knelt, the other cultivators were momentarily stunned before most followed suit. Even the direct descendants of other Purple Mansion cultivators bowed their heads and clasped their hands.

"Greetings, Daoist Master Zhaojing!" they all intoned.

Xiao Yuansi's head shot up, his eyes meeting Li Ximing's face. A smile spread across the old man's lips. Amidst the chorus of reverent greetings, Li Ximing gave a slight bow.

"Greetings, Master," he said softly.

Chapter 695: The Purple Mansion Dharma Assembly (Part 2)

Xiao Yuansi hesitated. The old man was not one for grand displays. He raised his eyes to Li Ximing's face, which, while unchanged, seemed entirely different.

"Ming'er…"

The face before him was well-proportioned, with long eyebrows and pale golden eyes that watched him with a gentle smile.

'Daoist Master Zhaojing, Li Ximing.'

The simmering frustration that had always seemed clenched between his brows, a look of gritted teeth and repressed anger, was gone. It had vanished completely, replaced by a single point of celestial light shimmering on his forehead.

His restless, slightly anxious gaze had also disappeared. Li Ximing's eyes now held a warm and gentle smile, free of the melancholy resolve of one marching willingly to his death.

With these two burdens lifted from his expression, his entire face came alive. He was no longer the Li clan's desperate, last-ditch gamble. He was Daoist Master Zhaojing, Li Ximing.

Tears welled in Xiao Yuansi's eyes. Under the watchful gaze of the crowd, he could only sigh.

"Daoist Master Zhaojing's fortunes are profound. This old man has basked in your light."

Li Ximing smiled and helped him up. Daoist Master Changxi, standing nearby, spoke in a warm and friendly tone, his heart filled with envy.

"Master, this way, please," Li Ximing said respectfully.

Everyone knew about the pill Xiao Yuansi had given him. They also knew how he had been reprimanded by Xiao Chuting and returned from the Northern Sea in disgrace. For the ten years Li Ximing was in seclusion, Xiao Yuansi had been either a joke or a topic of gossip among the direct lines of the major sects and clans.

Li Ximing had heard snippets of this. By coming to welcome him personally, he wanted to show everyone and restore his master's honor.

That was the first reason. The second was that Xiao Chuting had also come to Moongaze Lake. He was already on the island. True to form, the Daoist Master never involved himself personally and had simply allowed Xiao Yuansi to come from the mountains. Li Ximing naturally seized the opportunity, making it clear to all that the bond between the Xiao and Li families was as strong as ever.

Though a small gesture, it was greatly beneficial to the Li clan. Li Ximing escorted Xiao Yuansi into the mountains and saw him settled in a courtyard before returning to the main island. There, he heard from An Siwei that Xiao Chuting had already left his gift and departed alone.

Li Ximing nodded in understanding, but Daoist Master Changxi, who stood beside him, quietly lowered his gaze.

'So, Xiao Chuting is avoiding me…'

Though newly ascended and not as adept at discerning such subtleties as the more seasoned Purple Mansion cultivators, Li Ximming could see it plainly. A sense of dread grew in his heart.

'This situation with Changxi… it really is a mess.'

But no matter how close the Li and Profound Peak Gate were, and with Changxi here to offer congratulations, Li Ximing could not avoid him as Xiao Chuting had. He sat down with the Daoist Master in a mountain garden filled with blooming gardenias.

"A fine Bright Yang domain," Changxi said with a smile. "I wonder what name Daoist Master Zhaojing has chosen for it?"

Li Ximing poured him tea. "I have named this place Gardenia Scenery Mountain," he said politely. "It will be my place of quiet cultivation from now on."

"Excellent!" Changxi exclaimed. He took an item from his sleeve and placed it on the table. Inside a jade box lay a perfectly round white pearl. It radiated a brilliant, hair-thin rainbow light and was faintly carved with the image of a tiger looking over its shoulder, giving it an incredibly domineering aura.

Daoist Master Changxi's face flickered between youth and old age, shifting on the hour. He currently had the appearance of a middle-aged man, a jade pendant on his chest and a joyful expression on his face.

"Fellow Daoist Zhaojing, our two families have supported each other for a century. My family's Tingyun and your Yuanjiao were the closest of friends. Now that you have achieved your divine ability, my heart is filled with joy. I have prepared this humble gift for you."

His tone was exceptionally pleasant, and he no longer called Li Ximing 'little friend.' A man several centuries old was humbling himself to call someone not yet a hundred years of age 'Fellow Daoist,' while tactfully bringing up their old ties. It was the height of courtesy.

'His lifespan… is truly running out.'

Li Ximing could tell with a single glance that the item was at least of the Purple Mansion level, likely a Purple Mansion dharma artifact. It was relatively new, probably less than a century old. While it couldn't compare to treasures like the Xinyou Pristine Marsh Seal or the Qi Wang's Profound Heaven Hearing, it was far beyond any of the Li family's current artifacts.

'This is too valuable!'

Li Ximing was not naive about the significance of a Purple Mansion Dharma Assembly. But these Purple Mansion cultivators were a stingy lot. They would freely give away Foundation Establishment treasures, but Purple Mansion items were out of the question. The assembly was more about showing face and demonstrating goodwill by attending.

As for gifts? One couldn't expect Purple Mansion dharma artifacts or materials. At best, you might receive a fourth-grade technique. More often, it was ancient curios, rare treasures, or obscure manuals that wouldn't compromise the giver's status.

For Changxi to offer a Purple Mansion dharma artifact, his intentions were crystal clear. He wanted to create a debt that he could call upon to secure a future for the Profound Peak Gate.

As if reading his thoughts, Changxi smiled. "This artifact is called the 'Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger.' It is a mid-grade earth-element dharma artifact. It was not refined by my own divine ability but was acquired on my travels. It cannot compare to a dharma treasure, but it is quite serviceable."

"Refined by a divine ability?" Li Ximing asked, intrigued.

Changxi chuckled, his voice turning aged as he explained, "Dharma Artifacts can be roughly divided into three types. The first is made by taking an excellent artifact embryo and infusing it with one's divine ability. After a century of refinement, it becomes a dharma artifact, perfectly attuned to its master."

Li Ximing's eyes lit up. "It's that simple? Then why are there so few dharma artifacts in Jiangnan?"

Changxi stroked his beard. "Firstly, a good embryo is difficult to craft. Furthermore, since the tool is refined by a divine ability, it is bound to the same nature as its master's power. It requires constant nurturing, which drains the mind, and it will revert to its original form if separated from the divine ability for too long. It sounds easy, but such items are very difficult to pass down."

Li Ximing immediately recalled the nine gate-viewing spirit embryos that Daoist Master Tianque had spent a century forging at Daoist He's place on the western shore of Moongaze Lake. It was indeed no simple task. He nodded, and Changxi continued.

"The second type is more common, like this Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger. These are forged by Purple Mansion-level artifact refiners. Their quality varies, from high to low. The lowest grade is inferior to even a good spirit embryo, while the highest can rival a dharma treasure."

"They are also classified into upper, middle, and lower grades. A mid-grade tool is comparable to one refined by a divine ability, but it is a treasure that can be passed down through a family, and it is not restricted to a single cultivator's essence."

"As for so-called dharma treasures..." Changxi's expression turned self-deprecating, and he shook his head. "In truth, they are merely ancient dharma artifacts from before the celestial shift, like the Xinyou Pristine Marsh Seal. Back then, they were just dharma artifacts. Now, we must call them

dharma treasures… To think they are a cut above all modern dharma artifacts. It's quite ironic."

Hearing this, Li Ximing understood a great deal more, and his estimation of the Xinyou Pristine Marsh Seal rose even higher. 'No wonder Yuansu could dominate everyone with a single divine ability. He himself is formidable… but that Xinyou Pristine Marsh Seal is also no simple item.'

Changxi glanced at him and hesitated, then, as if to curry more favor, he spoke again with a smile. "I once heard of another method of artifact refinement from long ago. It is no longer viable, but it is an interesting story to share."

"Please, Senior, tell me!" Li Ximing was eager to learn more.

Changxi stroked his beard and began his tale. "It is said that a thousand years ago, cultivators with an immortal foundation had a method of refining artifacts by gathering the will of the masses. It was exceptionally effective. Ancient cultivators lived among the people, using their divine abilities to connect with them and draw upon the thoughts and will of the populace to temper an artifact, granting it a spirit. This was called the 'Refining Radiance Art.' "

"We can still see traces of it on many of the ancient dharma artifacts we find. The highest-grade magic treasures of that era also possessed this capability."

A bomb went off in Li Ximing's mind. The next thought surfaced uncontrollably.

'Lu Qi!'

'Isn't that my Immortal Mirror?!'

'The highest-grade magic treasures!'

His mind went blank for a moment as a torrent of complex thoughts rushed through him.

'No wonder I couldn't see through the Talisman Seed even after achieving my divine ability… No wonder it allows mortals to cultivate, no wonder it has the miraculous Lu Qi. It truly is an immortal tool!'

'And the Supreme Yin Profound Light is so powerful! Now that I've reached the Purple Mansion Realm, its might is even harder to fathom. A child could probably wield it and injure a Purple Mansion cultivator… What in the world could allow for such a thing? Only a true dharma treasure could have such power!'

He forcibly shoved the thoughts from his mind, struggling to maintain his composure. Without missing a beat, he asked, "Then why is it not possible now? Has the method been lost?"

Changxi was no fool. He immediately sensed Li Ximing's emotional fluctuation. Though he could never have guessed the Li family possessed such an item, he assumed Li Ximing was simply awestruck by the tale. The old man sighed. "It is no longer possible, but the method was not lost. I was very interested in this in my youth and searched everywhere, poring over many ancient texts, and managed to find some information…"

A look of confusion crossed the old man's face, and he frowned. "It is said… that the method itself was taken. Some say stolen, some say seized, and others say it was 'proven' or 'attained.' But all accounts lead to a single name."

"A name…" Li Ximing felt a sudden reluctance to hear it, fearing some world-shaking name would fall from the old man's lips.

But Changxi had already spoken: "Su Xikong."

"Su Xikong…" The name was very familiar. Li Ximing instantly recalled it. When Yu Muxian returned from the north and fought two opponents at once, he had revealed this venerable name. The various masters that Li Xuanfeng had killed had also chanted it: "The Acharya taught me, granting me the art of Su Xikong, the principles of Shakya… Su Xikong is the Revered One!"

Changxi nodded in confirmation. "Correct. The loss of this method is likely related to him. After he attained his Dao, the power of such artifacts diminished by eighty percent. In the century that followed, they grew weaker year by year, their related abilities fading away."

"After four hundred years, most of the dharma artifacts created by the Refining Radiance Art had lost all their power. Only a few that were close to the level of dharma treasures and had a strong connection to a Fruition Attainment managed to retain some semblance of their might, though they were far from what they once were. And no one since has been able to use this method."

Silence fell between them. Li Ximing immediately thought of the situation in the north and formed several conjectures. From Changxi's expression, he probably had his own ideas as well, though he would not voice them.

The topic came to a close. The old Daoist Master smiled and pushed the jade box forward. Li Ximing looked down at the glittering artifact, hesitating.

'Do I accept it… or not?'

…

Mist and clouds swirled through the mountain courtyards. Li Ximing had not yet taken the head seat, but rows of jade cushions and tables had been set out, and the crowd was growing.

Li Jiangqian sat at the head of the left courtyard, lightly raising his jade cup. Beside him was a cultivator in azure robes with a transcendent air and a calm expression. He was at the Foundation Establishment realm—the Azure Pond Peak Master, Si Tongyi.

Si Tongyi was of a similar age to Li Zhouwei. With Li Ximing's sudden breakthrough, he no longer dared to address Li Xizhi as a peer. But he was a man who could swallow his pride, and he had immediately struck up a conversation with Li Jiangqian, seating himself right next to him.

He was now pointing out various cultivators below and introducing them in a friendly manner. "That is Cheng Jinzhu of the Sword Gate. He is a good friend of your Changtian Peak Master… and a renowned sword cultivator in his own right."

Li Jiangqian followed his gaze and saw a man with a sword on his back sitting among the guests. His expression was placid, and the seats around him were empty, a clear sign that others were reluctant to sit near him.

"Thank you for the information, honored uncle," Li Jiangqian said with a warm smile.

Si Tongyi did not dwell on Cheng Jinzhu and proceeded to introduce the other guests in order. Li Jiangqian scanned the surroundings, his thoughts lingering on the few Daoist Masters seated on clouds above.

On a cloud platform to the west sat a man with broad shoulders and thick eyebrows, dressed in a fire-patterned Daoist robe. His every breath was like an invisible flame that slightly distorted the spiritual energy around him. This was Daoist Master Tianque of the Golden Feather Sect.

With Daoist Master Tianyuan of the Golden Feather Sect nearing the end of his life, Daoist Master Tianhuo in seclusion, and Daoist Master Qiushui making her presence known in the world, things had changed. After Daoist Master Zipei's fall, Qiushui had become one of the top Purple Mansion cultivators in the Yue

State. Her status was too high, so Daoist Master Tianque, who usually guarded the Wu Kingdom, had come in her stead.

The representative from the Azure Pond Sect was, of course, Daoist Master Yuanxiu. The old man always wore a stern expression. Li Jiangqian didn't look at him, instead mentally tallying the attendees.

'Of the Three Sects… Golden Feather and Azure Pond are here. Yue Cultivating Sect did not come.'

Both sects had their own agendas but had shown face. The Yue Cultivating Sect had closed its gates, so its absence was expected. Li Jiangqian was more concerned with the Seven Gates.

'No word from the Snow Wings Gate… that sect hasn't been seen in the world for centuries.'

'The Sword Gate, the Chen Clan, and the Xiukui Monastery did not send their Purple Mansion masters, only their direct lines. Their response is… proper, but neutral.'

The Myriad Radiance Sword Gate and the Great Xiukui Monastery had no strong allegiances, so their actions were normal. Besides, Cheng Jinzhu's status was not low. The other gates, however, had made clearer statements.

'The Profound Peak Gate's delegation is the most impressive, followed by the Xiao Clan. Xiao Chuting came in person… though I hear he only showed his face for a moment and left. Only a few people saw him.'

'The Purple Mansion masters of the Purple Smoke Gate and Slaughter Jun Gate are not in their sects, so they sent their successors. Their seats are still empty, as they are still on their way.'

He raised his gaze. At the head of the southern seats was a Daoist Master with a cheerful face. Beside him sat a woman in red, Bi Yuzhuang, wearing a golden bracelet and a bright smile.

'The Hengzhu Sect sent Daoist Master Hengli and Bi Yuzhuang… They also show a great deal of respect.'

Li Jiangqian surveyed the entire assembly, all while making pleasant conversation with Si Tongyi, his mind crystal clear.

Of the Seven Gates, the Changxiao Gate had not come.

Not only were Changxiao Zi and Cheng Yan absent, but even their disciples had merely offered congratulations before leaving, not even taking a seat.

Aside from the Three Sects and Seven Gates, few cultivators from Jiangbei had come, with the notable exception of the Shen Clan. As for the major immortal sects of the Wu Kingdom, not a single one had appeared.

'Hengzhu and Changxiao are at odds… and our clan has had its own share of trouble with the Changxiao Gate…'

Li Jiangqian lowered his eyes, realizing the situation was not as bright as it seemed.

'Behind our clan, we only have the Xiao Clan and the Profound Peak Gate. Xiao Chuting is a wanderer… he won't make a move casually. And once Daoist Master Changxi falls, the entire Profound Peak territory will become a burden.'

'If things go wrong then, will we have to lean on the Hengzhu Sect? They are a righteous sect, it's true… but Hengxing and the others are quite calculating…'

He could not fathom the relationships between the Purple Mansion masters. He could only look up to the head table. His father, Li Zhouwei, was in the first seat of honor, and beside him was Kong Guxi of the Profound Peak's Kong family. The two were deep in pleasant conversation, a sight that made Li Jiangqian hesitate to raise his cup.

'Profound Peak… they are a hot potato. We absolutely cannot catch it…'

Chapter 696: Gao Xuanzi

On Gardenia Scenery Mountain.

Li Ximing paused, his hand resting on the jade box. He tapped it lightly and looked at the old man before him, his tone sincere.

"Since our families share such a bond, I must ask—what plans have you made for the future? Please, tell me what you can."

Li Ximing didn't believe for a moment that Daoist Master Changxi was seeking help on a whim. 'His lifespan is nearly at its end. He must have been making arrangements for decades. He certainly has a few cards left to play… and in his original plans, I was never a factor.'

Since the Profound Peak Gate was asking for the Li clan's aid, Li Ximing could not ignore their history. But he needed to understand the situation clearly. At his question, Changxi's expression turned serious, and he let out a long sigh.

"I won't hide it from you, Zhaojing. My Profound Peak Gate… we migrated from Jiangbei. We don't belong to the Green Pine lineage, nor are we affiliated with any of the ancient Immortal Mansions. As a result, we've faced much prejudice in Jiangnan over the centuries. I've relied on my reputation alone to keep us afloat. In truth, there are very few I can call on for aid."

"Now that my time is short, even fewer are willing to lend a hand. Over the past century, I have managed to secure the help of two parties."

"The first is a Purple Mansion sect in the eastern reaches of Jiangbei, east of the Revering Radiance Gate. It is called the Profound Wonder Temple, presided over by an Elder Daoist Master Qi, whose title is Sumian."

Li Ximing recognized the name. In the last decade, two Purple Mansion cultivators had returned from overseas, establishing two new sects in Jiangbei. One was the White Ye Immortal Sect, and the other was this Profound Wonder Temple.

Seeing Li Ximing's recognition, Changxi continued, "The second is an overseas mountain called Mount Jingyi. Its master, Daoist Master Xuanyi, has taken a direct descendant of my clan as a disciple."

"I have a few other minor arrangements, but they are hardly worth mentioning, lest I make a fool of myself. Perhaps one day I can arrange an introduction for you…"

Changxi was not close enough to Li Ximing to reveal all his cards, and a general understanding was enough for Li Ximing. He had no desire to meet these allies just yet. Who knew what kind of sects the Profound Wonder Temple and Mount Jingyi were? The Profound Wonder Temple was located right next to the Revering Radiance Gate—was there friction between them? If other Purple Mansion masters misunderstood his intentions, he could find himself unwittingly drawn into some factional conflict.

"I must first visit the other clans to return their courtesy," he replied. "There is no rush to meet them."

Changxi stroked his beard. "It was I who was being inconsiderate."

Having come this far, Li Ximing hesitated, the earth-virtue dharma artifact warm in his hand. Finally, he asked the question that had been weighing on him.

"I've heard that you were once close with Situ Tang… is there any truth to this?"

The Li family's history was short, but their information network was effective. In the early days, the Kong family and the Situ family were connected by marriage, their relationship nearly as close as that of the Xiao and Li clans. And the Situ family was the Golden Tang Gate—now the Li clan's mortal enemy. How could Li Ximing not be wary?

Situ Ku was still imprisoned beneath Mount Qingdu. If his next move against the Golden Tang Gate ended up dragging in a host of Kong family members, and he had already agreed to protect them, he would be caught in an impossible situation.

His question made Changxi fall silent. The old man studied his expression and said in a low voice, "I won't hide it from you. In the early years, my family and the Situ family were indeed friends. Situ Tang, for all his arrogance, was generous and forthright with those close to him. He held most of the Jiangnan sects

in contempt and was likewise ostracized by the Seven Gates. When I traveled around seeking allies, he was the only one willing to see me. We developed a friendship and even arranged a marriage alliance."

"But he was a reckless man who offended countless Purple Mansion cultivators. After his death, I dared not associate too closely with the Golden Tang Gate. The sect fell into internal strife. His sons, though highly talented—two of them even reached the Purple Mansion realm—all looked down on me, despite their outward politeness. Our ties gradually faded."

He understood the enmity between the Li clan and the Golden Tang Gate and had no intention of mediating. He only sought to clarify his position, even offering a quiet warning.

"All cultivators know that Situ Mo has the backing of the Golden Feather Sect. You must be careful, Zhaojing. The Golden Feather Sect has been dominant for three generations. Their power is unrivaled in the Yue State, and they have more Purple Mansion cultivators than they show… Be extremely cautious."

The last thing Changxi wanted was for Li Ximing to pick a fight with the Golden Tang Gate. The Profound Peak Gate was already in a precarious state; if the Li clan collapsed while trying to help, his own sect's fate would be even worse.

"Thank you for the reminder, Elder," Li Ximing said, nodding gravely. He weighed the situation for a moment. The mid-grade earth-virtue dharma artifact, the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger, still sat on the table. He pushed it back toward Changxi.

"Senior Changxi, the bond between our families needs no further proof. If the Profound Peak Gate is in trouble, my Li clan will help. This artifact is too valuable. It is not right for me to accept it under these circumstances."

Changxi stroked his beard, a flicker of surprise in his eyes. "What do you mean, Zhaojing?"

Li Ximing thought for a moment before explaining. "Our families should support each other as allies on the same path. The Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger is a mid-grade Purple Mansion dharma artifact. You should keep it for now and see if you can use it to leverage greater support from other powers. It could alleviate some of the pressure you face. You don't need to use it to win me over."

"If the time comes when your lifespan is truly at its end and you have no other options, then give it to me. It will strengthen my hand, and I will be better equipped to handle the pressure from all sides."

Daoist Master Changxi was stunned. He seemed not to have expected such a response. He was silent for several seconds before his voice grew thick with emotion. "All those years ago, Tingyun advised against… she said some things she shouldn't have. I am truly sorry, Zhaojing."

Li Ximing knew he was referring to when Kong Tingyun had advised Li Qinghong to give the Radiant Sky Stone to Li Zhouwei instead. He shook his head. "I am not blind to the bigger picture, Senior. It was because of her reminders that I understood Senior Tingyun's earnest intentions. Not to mention the years of support, or how she helped cover for my brother when he got into trouble in the Eastern Sea. I remember all of it."

When Li Xizhi had accidentally trespassed on the Dragon Clan's territory, it was Kong Tingyun who had stepped in, using Changxi's name as a deterrent to quell Chi Zhiyun's murderous intent. In the end, only Kong Tingyun had ever truly treated the Li family with genuine kindness.

His words made Daoist Master Changxi understand that it was Kong Tingyun's friendship that held the greatest weight. He sighed. "Zhaojing… your clan truly acts with…"

Li Ximing couldn't bear to hear it. He feared the other Purple Mansion masters would label him with the high-minded title of a "righteous cultivator" only to use his clan for their own ends. He quickly cut him off with a smile.

"It is your own foresight in preparing multiple escape routes that gives my Li clan the courage to help. If the situation were so dire as to threaten our own foundation with imminent collapse, I would not dare make such a promise."

Changxi nodded silently. But he knew that if not for the Li clan's sterling reputation, he would never have dared to present the artifact in the first place. Any other Purple Mansion cultivator from the Eastern Sea would have graciously accepted it, then simply walked away after he died.

Changxi's expression grew solemn. He flicked his sleeve, releasing a curtain of earthen-yellow light that enveloped them. His tone shifted back to how it was at the beginning, no longer trying to flatter Li Ximing with the address of 'Fellow Daoist.'

"Little Friend Ximing, I will be honest with you," he said in a low voice. "Within my sect, three cultivators at the peak of the Foundation Establishment realm are in seclusion."

"Three?"

Li Ximing was taken aback. Changxi's face had transformed into that of an old, white-haired man as he murmured, "The first is my great-grandson, Kong Haiying. I have kept his existence a secret, and he has been cultivating in seclusion since he was a boy, long before Tingyun. He entered seclusion with a Purple Mansion spiritual item, the Roaming Pass Treasured Earth. Although it's not a perfect match for our clan's Fool's Mountain Chase, it's far better than what most have. He has been in seclusion for over forty years now—too long, otherwise he should have emerged before my time runs out."

"The second is a retainer of our family, Fu En. It was rumored he died overseas years ago, but he has been in secret seclusion for over twenty years. His chances of breaking through are not high; it is merely an attempt."

"The third is Tingyun. She has been in seclusion for fifteen or sixteen years. Her natural talent isn't high, and she was more of a long shot. Though her character is excellent, her understanding of the Dao is shallow. She had the lowest chance of them all. But unexpectedly, she had a fortuitous encounter within a grotto-heaven, and her chances of a breakthrough are now slightly higher than Fu En's."

A clever rabbit has three burrows, and Changxi had clearly made many preparations. Li Ximing now understood why the Profound Peak Gate had so few late-stage Foundation Establishment cultivators—Changxi had been pushing them to attempt breakthroughs for years.

After a moment's consideration, Li Ximing felt a sense of relief. If Kong Haiying succeeded, the Li clan's timely aid would be a perfect gesture of support. A sudden realization dawned on him, and he smiled inwardly.

'What an old fox… He probably wasn't revealing this out of gratitude! Even if I had refused, he would have told me about Kong Haiying to tempt me.'

He gave a solemn nod of agreement. Changxi thanked him several times. Suddenly, Li Ximing's ear twitched.

"My apologies, Elder," he said. "The other guests have arrived at the mountain. We shouldn't keep them waiting."

The two rose into the air on the wind, continuing their discussion in hushed tones as they flew toward the main assembly.

"The Purple Smoke Immortal Gate! Kong Yuzi has arrived!"

Li Jiangqian's gaze swept across the attendees. Beside him, Si Tongyi looked up just as a woman in a yellow, feathered robe descended among the tables. Before he could get a good look, another announcement rang out.

"The Slaughter Jun Immortal Gate! Gao Xuanzi has arrived!"

This name made Si Tongyi narrow his eyes. A murmur of interest went through the crowd as everyone turned to look. A gust of cold air swept through, and snowflakes materialized in the clear sky as a young man appeared at the Slaughter Jun Gate's designated seats.

The young man wore dark blue robes pleated and embroidered with frost patterns, covered by a thick brocade cloak. Sword tassels were faintly visible at his waist, and the collar was trimmed with a circle of fine, snow-white fur that framed the elegant lines of his jaw.

His lips were pressed into a thin line, his skin a touch pale, and his eyebrows were sharp and defined. His eyes were a grayer shade than those of the Li clansmen, and they held an unusual, almost demonic allure, which he quickly masked with a faint smile.

"Hmph."

Li Zhouwei took a sip of tea, his golden pupils shifting slightly. The courtyard was abuzz with lively conversation, yet it seemed everyone was discreetly observing this Gao Xuanzi.

'I've never seen him before…'

'The Slaughter Jun Gate has such a figure among their core disciples?'

'He appears to be a sword cultivator…'

Gao Xuanzi sat down. He was the sole representative from the Slaughter Jun Gate, and the dozens of empty seats around him made his solitary presence stand out starkly among the other delegations.

He seemed unconcerned, however, simply stroking his jade cup as if familiarizing himself with its texture. His gaze traveled forward, meeting Li Zhouwei's from across the expanse.

Both appeared as young men. One with solemn golden eyes, clad in white and gold armor, majestic and imposing. The other with cool gray eyes and pale skin, dressed in elegant fur-trimmed robes, as serene as winter snow. Their gazes locked in the air.

Li Zhouwei's grip tightened on his cup. The man was, after all, a core disciple of the Slaughter Jun Gate. He offered a rare smile in acknowledgment. Gao Xuanzi returned the smile, his eyes filled with approval.

"Daoist Master Zhaojing… has arrived!"

With the representatives from the Three Sects and Seven Gates all present, Li Ximing finally appeared at the head of the assembly. The Purple Mansion masters raised their cups in unison, the core disciples bowed in respect, and the unaffiliated cultivators at the lowest tables prostrated themselves, a sea of bowing heads.

"Congratulations to the Daoist Master on achieving your divine ability!"

The cry shook the heavens, scattering the clouds above. Auspicious mists swirled in the sky. Li Ximing returned the salute, and as music filled the air, the spiritual banquet began.

Changxi had already returned to the Profound Peak Gate's seats. Li Ximing did a quick survey of the guests. Tianque of the Golden Feather Sect, an impatient man, strode forward with a female cultivator named Zhang Duanyan, holding a bluestone box.

The Golden Feather Sect was now the hegemon of the Yue State. Li Ximing rose to greet them, observing the etiquette of a junior.

Zhang Duanyan spoke respectfully, "The Golden Feather Sect presents the Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier as a congratulatory gift to the Daoist Master!"

The stone box presumably held the artifact. Li Minggong stepped forward to accept it.

Tianque laughed heartily. "Zhaojing, you are an alchemist, after all. If you ever need any spirit herbs in the future, you must come to me. My Golden Feather Sect is rich in resources. I guarantee you will be satisfied."

Li Ximing naturally responded with polite pleasantries.

Tianque then added, "My sect possesses two Bright Yang dharma artifacts. If you have need of them, please send someone to retrieve them. It will save you the trouble of refining your own."

"I will remember that, junior that I am," Li Ximing replied cautiously.

Just as Tianque turned to leave, Hengli, dressed in his Li-Fire Daoist robes, flew over. Bi Yuzhuang, standing beside him, presented a jade bottle with a smile.

"The Hengzhu Sect offers a portion of Pure Feather Li-Fire to congratulate the Daoist Master!"

Li Ximing felt a touch of awkwardness. The animosity between Tianque and Hengli was common knowledge, and with the two of them here together, the air was thick with tension.

Hengli's voice was rough and booming. "Fellow Daoist Zhaojing, there is no need for formalities between our sects! My clan has also studied the art of crafting Bright Yang artifacts. If you need anything, I will personally forge it for you!"

'They're putting me on the spot…'

Li Ximing shook his head inwardly. Tianque had spoken loudly on purpose, and not just Hengli, but nearly everyone present had heard him. Hengli's words were a direct challenge. He was a magnanimous and straightforward man, but also stubborn and ruthless when offended. Li Ximing smoothed things over diplomatically. Hengli clearly had no desire to linger and soon departed.

With those two gone, the rest were easier to handle. Changxi had already told him that the Sword Gate, the Xiukui Monastery, and the Purple Smoke Gate had sent Foundation Establishment cultivators. The representative from the Purple Smoke Gate was the next to approach.

"The Purple Smoke Gate presents the Tome of Adamant Flame Alchemy to congratulate the Daoist Master!"

Li Ximing nodded slightly and raised his cup. The female cultivator, Kong Yuzi, poured a cup of wine for her master and returned the gesture from the side, avoiding a direct address.

As Kong Yuzi hastily retreated, Li Ximing finally had a moment to observe the delegation from the Slaughter Jun Gate. He saw the young man, who likely cultivated a cold-type energy, and found it logical.

'Although Tu Longjian cultivates Virile Fire, the Slaughter Jun's main lineage is the cold energy of the Lesser Yin Dao… so this is not surprising. The young man certainly has an impressive bearing…'

Gao Xuanzi was smiling faintly, his gaze directed toward a nearby table. Li Ximing followed his line of sight and saw Li Xuanxuan, surrounded by a crowd of well-wishers. Music swirled around them as the old man laughed heartily, downing cup after cup of wine. It had been a hundred years since Li Ximing had seen him so carefree.

A smile touched Li Ximing's lips. He took a step forward and materialized at the empty tables of the Slaughter Jun Gate.

Gao Xuanzi immediately stood and clasped his hands in a salute. His eyes held an enigmatic glint, and his voice was a respectful murmur laced with a smile.

"Greetings, Daoist Master Zhaojing."

Translator's Note: The original author included a greeting for the Lantern Festival. Happy holidays to all who celebrate!

Chapter 697: The White Ye Immortal Sect

"There is no need for such formality."

Something in Gao Xuanzi's tone felt strangely familiar to Li Ximing. He could tell the man's congratulations were sincere, far more so than the representatives from the other sects. He supposed that since Tu Longjian considered himself a junior to Li Yuanjiao, the Slaughter Jun Gate was genuinely pleased to see him reach the Purple Mansion Realm.

Gao Xuanzi picked up a jade box from the table. Li Minggong quickly stepped forward to receive it as Gao Xuanzi spoke respectfully.

"My master has prepared a copy of the *Art of Wondrous Transformations* to congratulate you."

The technique didn't sound particularly profound, but the gesture was what mattered. The gift itself wasn't as important as the sentiment behind it. "Please extend my gratitude to Senior Junjian," Li Ximing replied. "I have not forgotten his kindness in the matter of the Radiant Sky Stone. Without his aid back then, I would not be where I am today."

Gao Xuanzi returned the salute and promptly withdrew, unwilling to say more in front of so many onlookers.

Li Ximing took a step, and another man approached, carrying a cup. His eyes were bright, and a spear was strapped to his back. He had a handsome, refined face and was dressed in practical attire. "Zhong Qian, on behalf of the Revering Radiance Gate, congratulates the Daoist Master!" he said with a smile. "We present a set of White Shadow Gold Buckles!"

Li Ximing recognized him at once. This was the same Zhong Qian that Li Xuanfeng had befriended years ago, and he was no simple character. "So, it is Sect Master Zhong," he said, giving a slight wave of his hand.

"You flatter me!" Zhong Qian, older now, had a more grounded and steady presence. He bowed. "I was in seclusion for the past few years, and my subordinates were left unsupervised. Fortunately, they knew their limits and did nothing too reckless. I have come today to offer my apologies."

The Brahma Cloud Cave might have had ill intentions, but they had never crossed the line. Since Zhong Qian was the sect master, a familiar face, and had come to apologize in person, Li Ximing saw no reason to press the matter. He simply had Li Minggong accept the gift.

"My late grand-uncle once mentioned you," Li Ximing said. "He praised your exceptional talent and believed you had the potential to reach the Purple Mansion Realm one day."

Zhong Qian murmured his thanks. At another table, An Siwei's voice reached Li Zhouwei's ears.

"Clan Head, Gao Xuanzi is taking his leave."

Like the others whose Daoist Masters had not attended, Gao Xuanzi was departing early. His actions, and by extension, the Slaughter Jun Gate's, were not impolite. The sect was situated at the border of the Wu, Yue, and Southern Borderlands territories and wasn't truly considered a Yue State sect. They didn't even have to attend; their presence was purely a nod to Tu Longjian's personal relationship with the Li clan.

The sects of the Wu State all answered to Mount Changhuai, whose authority far surpassed that of the Golden Feather Sect in Yue. Consequently, Wu State sects rarely associated with those from Yue. The Slaughter Jun Gate maintained a cool neutrality, never aligning with any power.

Thus, Gao Xuanzi's attendance was a significant show of respect. Li Zhouwei made a point of rising from his seat and personally escorting him out of the courtyard. As they walked, Gao Xuanzi adjusted his robes and asked a few questions with a smile.

Li Zhouwei studied him discreetly. Once they had passed through the dense woods and reached the Changxi Gate, the warm, festive air of the banquet faded, replaced by a cool breeze. The young man spoke up.

"Thank you for seeing me out, Clan Head. My master wishes to avoid complications, so please, go no further. The Changxi Gate is far enough."

Hearing this, Li Zhouwei understood.

'Daoist Master Junjian doesn't want to get entangled in our clan's affairs. Or perhaps… he doesn't want his own troubles to spill over onto us.'

He gave Gao Xuanzi a deep look and nodded. "If the Daoist Master is unavailable and the Slaughter Jun Gate finds itself in difficulty, please send word to us in the Yue State. Our clan will spare no effort to assist."

Gao Xuanzi just smiled and shook his head. "I too am a sword cultivator. If your clan has any exceptional young sword cultivators, you are welcome to send them to the Slaughter Jun Gate to meet with me. While I would not call myself a Sword Immortal, I have achieved some small mastery of the Dao…"

Li Zhouwei was slightly surprised. The Li clan was known as a family of Sword Immortals. For Gao Xuanzi to make such an offer showed immense confidence in his own swordsmanship.

"Many thanks, Senior!"

Li Zhouwei expressed his gratitude, and Gao Xuanzi returned the bow. His eyes drifted over the Changxi Gate, noting the foundation stones carved from Radiant Sky Stone—simple, grand, and solid, etched with patterns of lakes and seas. The beams above were painted with scenes of snow-covered pines, rosy mists, and rainbows, while the seventy-two ridges of the roof had been dyed with the light of a Bright Yang divine ability, giving them a spectacular radiance.

"This Changxi Gate is quite impressive," he remarked with a smile.

With that, he summoned a gust of frost and snow and soared into the sky, heading southwest. Li Zhouwei watched him go, lost in thought. After a long moment, he flew back toward the banquet. By now, most of the major clans were preparing to leave.

Only the unaffiliated cultivators remained, unwilling to part with such a rare abundance of spiritual sustenance and energy. They sat silently in the courtyard, some drinking, others eating fruit, determined to fill their stomachs before they left.

A few had even begun to absorb the dense spiritual energy on the spot. Several older unaffiliated cultivators, not daring to be too obvious, secretly formed hand seals under the table, their eyes open and conversations flowing as if nothing was amiss, though who knew how effective their efforts were.

Life was hard for unaffiliated cultivators, and even harder for those who abstained from eating meat. The Li clan would not be stingy at such a grand event. Li Zhouwei called Li Minggong over and gave him a quiet order.

"For those at the lower tables who are reluctant to leave, have a pot of spirit tea sent to each of them. Don't let them sit there awkwardly."

Li Minggong acknowledged the order and left. Soon, attendants glided through the tables, carrying jade trays with steaming pots of spirit tea, and a chorus of thanks rose from the lower courtyard.

Li Zhouwei, his observation heightened by his ocular arts, watched from a distance. He saw the older cultivators hastily pour out the tea, wrap the leaves in paper to save for later, and then rise to ask for their empty pots to be refilled with spirit water.

"Clan Head Li!"

As he watched, a clear voice called out. A long-bearded man led a group forward. Judging by their attire, they were from the Xiao clan.

Li Zhouwei found his face somewhat familiar. The middle-aged man was already smiling. "I am Xiao Muyun. Does the Clan Head recognize me?"

Recognition dawned on Li Zhouwei. This was Li Qingxiao's son, the head of the Yushan branch of the Xiao clan. He was technically an elder, but as he was a Xiao and Li Zhouwei was the Li Clan Head, they wouldn't address each other by familial seniority. Li Zhouwei rose and bowed.

"So, it is the master of Yushan. Have the elders come as well?"

"My mother is with Grand-uncle Xuanxuan," Xiao Muyun said warmly. "She was absolutely delighted! When she heard Daoist Master Zhaojing had reached the Purple Mansion Realm, she was so thrilled she packed her bags at dawn and rushed back to her maiden home."

Before Li Zhouwei could ask more, Xiao Muyun continued, "To let the Clan Head know, I now have the humble honor of managing the thirteen external branches of the Xiao clan, overseeing all the vassal families of Mount Xianyou. The Xiao clan has also prepared a small gift."

"Oh?" Li Zhouwei had an inkling of what was coming and asked politely.

Xiao Muyun produced a sheepskin scroll from his sleeve. "The territory from the eastern shore of Moongaze Lake to the border of Lixia Prefecture… a total of one hundred and twenty-seven clans and sects. As of now, the seventy-nine families in the lands twenty miles west of Crowncloud Peak are all gifted to your esteemed clan!"

Xiao Muyun's explanation was lengthy, but everyone present understood its meaning. Before Li Zhouwei could speak, Li Minggong let out a soft breath, her voice thick with emotion.

"We finally have it all!"

Although the Li clan had controlled Moongaze Lake for over a decade, their hold had never been complete, particularly over the southern and eastern shores.

The southern shore was dense with forests, especially in the Eastern Yue territory near Mount Dali, which couldn't be cultivated. However, the Li clan's relationship with the Demon Caves made this land a source of abundant spiritual materials, so it was valuable even without spirit fields.

The eastern shore had been home to over ninety families during the Jiang clan's era. When the Jiang clan fell, the Xiao clan had absorbed many of them as vassals. By the time the Yu clan took over, only thirty-nine families remained in Milin Prefecture, with the rest further east, almost in Lixia Prefecture.

Neither the Yu clan nor the Li clan had been able to reclaim those seventy-nine families. The Xiao clan had even forbidden the establishment of a market at Moongaze Lake, costing the region over eighty percent of its commercial income.

Now, with the return of these seventy-nine families, the Li clan's territory around Moongaze Lake was finally whole, totaling one hundred and eighteen families—even more than the Jiang clan's original ninety. It wasn't just about reclaiming thirteen spirit mines; it meant the Li clan's influence now extended further, giving them the power to intervene in the untamed lands along the river.

'The Xiao clan is giving too much. There must be a catch.'

Li Zhouwei stared at the unfurled scroll, his mind racing. 'This is to pave the way for the Profound Peak matter.'

The Li clan and the Profound Peak Gate were separated by the wild, untamed mountains dotted with small temples that lay along the riverbank. Most of these were likely vassals of the Kong family. The Xiao clan had acted as a buffer, but by taking this step back, they were placing the Li clan directly behind the Profound Peak Gate.

Li Zhouwei glanced toward the head table, but Li Ximing was already gone. The golden-eyed young man took a sip of tea. After over a decade of putting out fires for the clan, he grasped the implications of the map in an instant.

'It seems Uncle has already agreed to help the Profound Peak Gate. The Xiao clan wants no part of it, which means our clan must give it our all.'

He rolled up the scroll and smiled. "Such a generous gift… our clan is truly humbled to accept!"

Xiao Muyun beamed, and after a few more pleasantries, he withdrew. Music still filled the air, but Li Zhouwei's mind was elsewhere. He left his seat, beckoned Li Jiangqian over, and sent a private message via a secret art.

"Go and investigate if there have been any recent territorial concessions or agreements between the Xiao clan and the Profound Peak Gate."

The look in Li Jiangqian's eyes was identical to his father's. The young man instantly understood the gravity of the decision. As the music played on, his brow furrowed.

'The Daoist Master has decided to take on the Profound Peak Gate's mess… It seems Daoist Master Changxi must have had a backup plan and offered a hefty price. It was an offer we couldn't refuse.'

He responded with a respectful nod and left the banquet as if nothing had happened. Once the decision was made to intervene, he stopped thinking about what a disaster the situation was and began to strategize.

'Kong Yu has a loose tongue and a weak will. He'll be easy to manipulate. I'll start with him.'

…

The night was serene. The scent of gardenias drifted from Gardenia Scenery Mountain on the evening breeze. Sparks of fire occasionally floated down from the fire vein at the mountain's base, which pulsed steadily, breathing out puffs of purple smoke.

A flash of light appeared on the summit, and Li Ximing materialized, his expression somewhat grim.

By now, all the guests who were going to come had come, and all the gifts had been presented. The Purple Mansion celebration could be considered over. The unaffiliated cultivators still lingering in the courtyard would likely stay until dawn.

Li Ximing sat down at the stone table and silently sipped his tea. After a moment, An Siwei landed on the mountain, looking uneasy. He bowed low.

"Daoist Master… someone from the White Ye Immortal Sect is here…"

"Let him come up."

The emissary from the White Ye Immortal Sect had been waiting on Gardenia Scenery Mountain the whole time, never daring to enter the banquet. That was why Li Ximing hadn't seen him. Not wanting to make an enemy so soon after reaching the Purple Mansion Realm, he kept the anger from his voice.

An Siwei hurried away. Soon, a cultivator in red robes approached with his head bowed, his legs trembling. He collapsed to his knees with a thud and began kowtowing, his voice frantic and desperate.

"From the White Ye Immortal Sect… this humble servant, Duche… greets the Daoist Master."

Li Ximing's expression turned cold. He instantly understood why the emissary hadn't dared to enter the banquet or even show his face—and why he was now acting like a terrified worm. Three months ago, Daoist Wenhu had come to apologize and had promised that Daoist Chidu of the White Ye Immortal Sect would personally come to make amends!

After all, the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion from Xiaoshi Mountain had openly declared themselves enemies of the Li clan!

Even Zhong Qian, whose Brahma Cloud Cave had done nothing egregious, had come in person as the sect master. Which of the other sects, aside from the Profound Peak Gate who was seeking aid, had sent their leader?

Seeing no sign of Chidu, Li Ximing asked coldly, "Where is Chidu?"

Duche hesitated for a second, his terror palpable. "When Lord Chidu heard that the Daoist Master had achieved a divine ability, he was overcome with fear and

rushed here from the Eastern Sea. But… but he was ambushed by demonic cultivators on the way and was nearly killed. He is too gravely injured to travel and is recuperating on a sea island… so… so he sent me."

After blurting this out, he didn't dare look at the Daoist Master's face. He just continued to plead and apologize, clutching the jade box containing the gift, his face pale with fright.

No matter how much Duche begged and pleaded, it did not reflect the sincerity of the White Ye Immortal Sect. Ninety-nine percent of his fear was simply that Li Ximing would strike him dead with a single palm strike. Sweat poured down his face as he trembled.

'Whether any of that is true is entirely up to his word…'

Li Ximing didn't show his anger. "Oh? Then leave the gift."

Duche could only offer the jade box with both hands. Li Ximing didn't even need to look inside. From the way the man didn't even dare to announce its contents, he knew it couldn't be anything of value.

Click.

The jade box opened on its own. The jade slip inside was dull and unremarkable. A single glance told Li Ximing it contained an unknown technique called the *Sweeping Light Art*. It was of the Bright Yang lineage, but its grade was unlisted, and the text was laughably brief.

Duche's lips trembled. "Our sect does not practice the Bright Yang Dao. My lord searched high and low to find this technique. Although it is not profound, it has an ancient charm… so he sent it as a congratulatory gift…"

Chidu's supposed misfortune could have been a setup by someone else, but the gift was unquestionably the true intention of the White Ye Immortal Sect. It was exactly the same as the offering from the Changxiao Gate! Both were shoddy, ungraded Bright Yang techniques.

When a cultivator reached the Purple Mansion Realm, everyone, unless they were sworn enemies, would attend the celebration to offer congratulations, the value of the gift reflecting their relationship. Both these sects had sent worthless techniques, but they had specifically chosen the Bright Yang lineage and left them ungraded, only describing them as having "an ancient charm."

'They're mocking me, openly and secretly. They don't care what I think, but they've gone through the motions so I have no excuse to retaliate. Without a grade or a proper name, I have no grounds to act.'

'The Daoist Master of the White Ye Immortal Sect is at the mid-stage of the Purple Mansion Realm… I wonder what his background is.'

Combined with the gift, the White Ye Immortal Sect's malice was plain to see. The story about Chidu being injured was just a lie—perhaps even one this man had invented on the spot to save his own skin.

Thud.

Li Ximing casually tossed the jade box onto the table. The dull sound made Duche jump as if his soul had left his body. But Li Ximing's cold expression had vanished, replaced by a smile.

"You may go."

Chapter 698: Taking Account

The moment Li Ximing spoke, Duche felt as if he had received a grand pardon. Sweat poured from his brow like rain as he kowtowed, striking his head against the ground a full nine times before finally retreating.

"Thank you, Daoist Master, for sparing my life!"

Li Ximing did not bother himself with such a minor figure, but the other members of the Li clan wore grim expressions. At the foot of the mountain, An Siwei refused to even glance at the emissary. Duche, knowing his place, scurried away in terror, melting into the night as he fled northward.

Li Ximing sat in quiet contemplation for a time before a middle-aged man ascended the stone steps. Dressed in resplendent feathered robes, he carried himself with an air of grace and dignity. A genuine smile finally touched Li Ximing's lips, and he rose from the table to greet him.

"Brother Zhi!"

Li Xizhi smiled and bowed his head, clasping his hands in salute.

"Greetings, Daoist Master Zhaojing!"

"Brother, please don't tease me."

With his own brother before him, Li Ximing shed the imposing air of a Purple Mansion cultivator, reverting to his old self. He pulled Li Xizhi to sit beside him, his voice filled with concern.

"You've worked hard in the sect all these years. You and Zhouwei have shouldered the burdens of our clan, preventing any loss of life or land for a decade. You even nurtured several new Foundation Establishment cultivators. It is all thanks to your efforts."

"The credit belongs mostly to Zhouwei," Li Xizhi demurred, though a worried look lingered on his face. "I just came from the ancestral hall. Uncle Yuanqin

is still paying his respects to our late grand-uncle… but on my way, I saw someone from the White Ye Immortal Sect leaving in a great hurry. Did something happen?"

"Yes…" Li Ximing murmured.

Li Xizhi continued, "Daoist Master Yehui of the White Ye Immortal Sect is at the mid-stage of the Purple Mansion Realm. He cultivates a rare Dao lineage of the Capital Guard, which makes him difficult to handle. Also, I noticed the Changxiao Gate was not present at the banquet. That sect is truly at odds with our family. Daoist Master Changxiao's divine abilities are formidable; we must be careful."

Li Ximing nodded. After a moment, Li Zhouwei arrived on a beam of light and bowed to them both. Only then did Li Ximing push the jade box forward, his brow furrowed.

"This is the congratulatory gift from the White Ye Immortal Sect."

Both men scanned it with their spiritual sense, and their expressions darkened as they exchanged a look. Li Zhouwei's voice was grave.

"Reporting to the Daoist Master, Wenhu is still stationed on the riverbank. He has not been recalled to the White Ye Mountain Gate and continues to manage affairs from his cave. This means either the emissary knew nothing, or they have something they feel confident relying on."

Li Xizhi fell silent for a breath. Seeing that Li Ximing remained quiet, he, as the eldest of the 'Xi' generation, spoke with careful deliberation.

"I heard that Situ Ku of the Golden Tang Gate is still at the Mount Qingdu Water Cave. Did the Golden Tang Gate send anyone?"

"They did not," Li Zhouwei replied grimly. "Situ Mo is a ruthless and cruel man. He won't care about Situ Ku's life. Unless you drag Situ Ku to his doorstep, he will continue to play dumb and pretend such a person doesn't exist."

Li Xizhi continued his analysis. "The matter with the Golden Tang Gate is still unresolved, and their backer, the Golden Feather Sect, has shown no intention of mediating. The White Ye Immortal Sect is also north of the river and clearly in league with the Golden Tang Gate. Our clan has no foundation in the north. A mighty dragon cannot suppress a local serpent, and Daoist Master Yehui is by no means weak.

"That is the first issue. Second, regardless of Daoist Master Changxiao's motives, the Changxiao Gate is now our enemy. He is far more terrifying than the White Ye Immortal Sect. He makes no overt moves, but who can guess what venomous schemes he is plotting? Our clan must not act rashly."

Li Zhouwei glanced at Li Ximing, now Daoist Master Zhaojing, who gave a slight nod.

"What you say is wise, brother…"

Li Ximing paused, then went on. "That man, Duche, is clever. He knew not to enter the banquet hall. Had he shamed me in front of everyone, he would have forfeited his life. I also deliberately received him here on Gardenia Scenery Mountain, away from the main island. Seeing him alone was a way to prevent our clan from suffering public humiliation."

"But…" Li Ximing sighed heavily. "All of this is merely a stalling tactic. Changxi is on the verge of death. Yehui and Changxiao are in no hurry; they are simply wary of a final, desperate counterattack from him. The moment he dies, the Profound Peak Gate will become a critical vulnerability, and they will find it easy to move against us."

Li Xizhi was alarmed, his brows knitting together. "So the rumors were true… How much longer does he have?"

Li Ximing exhaled slowly. "He was vague, but it seems to be less than three to five years."

"That's no time at all!" To a Foundation Establishment cultivator, three to five years could pass in a single session of secluded cultivation. The news weighed heavily on Li Xizhi. "And the Profound Peak Gate wishes to entrust themselves to our clan… That makes everything even more difficult. We would have to defend the northern riverbank while also managing the untamed wilderness and the Profound Peak Gate."

Li Xizhi raised no objection to helping. Years ago, when he had mistakenly wandered into dragon territory, it was the Profound Peak Gate that had covered for him. He was merely overwhelmed by the pressure. "We cannot abandon the north bank. The territory of the Floating Cloud Cave must remain under our control."

All three of them understood the implications. If the Li clan retreated from the north bank of the river, the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion would immediately

attempt to encroach upon the northern shore of Moongaze Lake. The combined pressure from Changxiao and Yehui would be immense.

'The northern shore must not be threatened.'

A Purple Mansion clan that couldn't even hold the lands of a single prefecture would become a laughingstock. And the Azure Pond Sect, the Li clan's nominal superior, would likely delight in such a spectacle. The Si family was desperate to see the Li clan humbled, to force them to come begging for aid once more. If that happened, the entire dynamic would change.

The Li clan was not the Xiao clan. Xiao Chuting had achieved the Purple Mansion Realm through a Life Divine Ability, his power was indispensable during the demon calamity, and he was an exceptionally formidable figure in his own right. Thus, he had no lingering concerns and was able to completely sever his clan's subordinate ties to the Azure Pond Sect. Li Ximing, despite his breakthrough, had left a path of retreat open and had not made a clean break. Li Xizhi had not left the Azure Pond Sect either. Their status was ambiguous; nominally, they were still an Azure Pond clan.

But if they were to ask the Azure Pond Sect for help, that nominal status would become a solidified reality. They would truly become vassals.

A moment of silence fell over the mountain. Li Xizhi finally asked, "Did Daoist Master Chuting give any instructions?"

Li Ximing chose his words carefully. "The Daoist Master hinted that I could sever ties with the Profound Peak Gate. That might not have been his true opinion—perhaps it was a test. But judging by the situation, he never takes sides. It already seems he intends to stay out of this."

He lowered his voice. "Unless our clan aligns with either the Golden Feather Sect or the Hengzhu Immortal Dao… But how is siding with Golden Feather any different from bowing to Azure Pond? And Hengzhu is far to the south. At best, we could form an alliance, but they have no shortage of enemies themselves."

Unless it was an absolute last resort, Li Ximing would never consider aligning with one of the three great sects. He poured tea for them and sighed. "Once these three to five years are up, our situation will become dire."

Beside them, Li Zhouwei raised an eyebrow and clasped his fist. "Reporting to the Daoist Master… in my humble opinion, while Yehui and Changxiao are waiting for Daoist Master Changxi to perish, we cannot simply sit by and await our doom."

"Why don't we take advantage of the time Daoist Master Changxi has left? We can settle matters north of the river first. We can strike a heavy blow against the Golden Tang Gate and the White Ye Immortal Sect, and establish a firm foothold on the north bank."

Li Ximing nodded. "I understand your meaning. But that would only amount to seizing most of the territory of the two Secret Diffusion sects. Can we truly inflict any substantial losses on the White Ye Immortal Sect? As for the Golden Tang Gate, with the Golden Feather Sect behind them, we can only demand compensation. We cannot act rashly against them."

"And when Changxi dies, how would we defend such a vast territory? We would lose it in the blink of an eye."

Li Xizhi remained silent, but Li Zhouwei's voice rang with conviction.

"Daoist Master! Every step forward we take today is another step we can retreat tomorrow! Even if the lands we conquer fall back into the hands of the White Ye Immortal Sect, they will be stripped bare—a wasteland. That is far better than leaving those resources in their hands."

Li Zhouwei's tone grew more intense. "Furthermore, the situation is gradually worsening for our clan. Right now, it is the White Ye Immortal Sect that desires stability, while it is our Li clan that needs change. Chaos creates opportunity. In a conflict lasting three to five years, who knows what new variables might emerge?"

"Whatever the future holds, it is better than doing nothing, clinging to the Floating Cloud Cave territory and waiting for death!"

Li Ximing exchanged a look with his brother and then nodded decisively.

"Good."

He stood, his expression resolute.

"The affairs north of the river are entirely in your hands, Minghuang! If you require anything, do not hesitate to ask. I will go and see Changxi. We hold leverage over Wenhu, and there is much we can accomplish!"

He gave his sleeve a gentle shake, and an array of jade boxes, stone caskets, and various spiritual items materialized on the table. "These are the congratulatory gifts from the various families. There are several Dharma Artifacts among them. Minghuang, take them and distribute them to Chenghui and the others."

Li Zhouwei offered his thanks, collected the items, and was about to depart when Li Xizhi produced two jade boxes of his own. "The gift from the Azure Pond Sect is the recipe for the Essence Gathering Pill, which is with the Daoist Master. These two Dharma Artifacts are from my personal collection. They aren't particularly precious, but they can be put to good use by the clan."

After Li Zhouwei had respectfully accepted them and departed, Li Xizhi sighed with regret. "It is a pity that I am, after all, a peak master of the Azure Pond Sect. The sect will not permit me to act freely."

Li Ximing waved his hand dismissively. "You have been wronged, brother. You still have to appease the Si family. Besides… if we were to sever ties with the Azure Pond Sect, when Chi Buzi eventually investigates, the Si and Lingu families would surely shift all the blame onto us. They could destroy our clan without any compunction. It is necessary to maintain this nominal connection for now."

His expression then turned solemn. "There is something else I must tell you, brother. And this matter is of the utmost importance."

Li Xizhi's face grew serious as well, and he leaned in as Li Ximing spoke.

"Yang Tianya broke through to the Purple Mansion Realm decades ago! He has been concealing it all this time."

Li Xizhi was stunned, looking up in utter disbelief. Li Ximing quickly recounted the entire incident involving the emissary from the Underworld. Li Xizhi listened, lost in thought, and after a long silence, he finally spoke.

"The Yang clan's ambitions are vast indeed."

Simply knowing that Yang Tianya had long been a Purple Mansion cultivator was enough for Li Xizhi to connect the dots. From the feathered robe given to him by Yang Xiao'er that had saved his life on multiple occasions, to the talisman from Yang Ruizao that had made Tuoba Chongyuan hesitate, and even the marriage negotiations between the Yuan and Yang families and the sudden

shift in the Chi family's situation—everything now cast faint, interlocking shadows.

"I understand," Li Xizhi said.

Seeing that his brother grasped the situation, Li Ximing said no more on the topic. Li Xizhi quickly moved on. "Which Daoist Masters do you plan to visit?"

This was a delicate issue, but Li Ximing was prepared. "The first, naturally, is Daoist Master Yuanxiu. The second… I must go see Senior Xiao. As for the third… I find myself in a difficult position."

Li Xizhi looked surprised. "Senior Tu Longjian…"

Li Ximing shook his head. "Daoist Master Chuting said he does not wish to be involved. I would not be able to see him even if I went."

Li Xizhi immediately understood and began to list the options. "There is no need to visit the Profound Peak Gate; Changxi no longer cares for such formalities. The Snow Wings, Changxiao, and Purple Smoke Gates are out of the question. That leaves the Sword Gate, Golden Feather, Hengzhu, and Xiukui."

Visiting the Golden Feather and Hengzhu sects was a dilemma. To visit one would be a great offense to the other. Visiting Golden Feather would anger Hengli, while visiting Hengzhu would offend Tianque. Yet, on the surface, both sects were on good terms with the Li clan.

"Tianque and Hengli are not easily fooled. Visiting the other sects would inevitably breed resentment…"

Li Ximing added, "I could, in fact, pay a visit to the Sword Gate. A record of our own senior's sword intent is inscribed on their sword stele. If I go under the pretext of paying my respects to his legacy, it would not seem like a perfunctory gesture."

Li Xizhi was not well-versed in these Purple Mansion Realm political intricacies and offered no further comment, only reminding him, "Uncle Yuanqin is here. We must go and see him."

On Pingya Island, the grand hall was bathed in brilliant light. Li Xuanxuan, dressed in a simple blue-grey robe, sat in the main seat as two figures entered from outside.

The first was a woman at the Foundation Establishment realm who appeared to be in her forties. She still possessed a graceful charm, dressed in a white Dharma robe and adorned with a cyan jade pendant. Her face held the remnants of youthful beauty, though she had deliberately allowed herself to age naturally without using her cultivation to preserve her appearance.

Behind her stood a man in black robes, his bearing heroic. He was also at the Foundation Establishment realm, and while his cultivation was not particularly profound, his gaze was piercingly sharp.

The woman curtsied gracefully.

"Hemian greets you, elder brother."

Li Xuanxuan hurried to help her up, his eyes filled with emotion as he looked at them. "Sister-in-law… we never had the chance to meet all those years ago…"

"Yuanqin pays his respects to Great Uncle!"

Li Yuanqin was exceedingly polite toward the elderly Li Xuanxuan, who quickly helped him to his feet. He studied the young man, his eyes growing red.

"You look so much like him…"

It was unclear whether he meant Li Xuanfeng or Li Xiangping. Li Yuanqin listened in silence.

"Of the four branches of our family, the youngest uncle's has long been vacant," Li Xuanxuan continued earnestly. "Yuanqin, now that you have returned, there is no need to leave again. Take your place, fill the gap in the next generation, and continue your grand-uncle's line."

Li Yuanqin hesitated, but Ning Hemian spoke up, her voice gentle.

"Elder brother, my own foolish brother brought about his own demise, and his entire line was extinguished with him, not a single descendant left. Fortunately, my cousin Ning Heyuan left behind an orphan, but he is not yet capable. The Ning family relies entirely on Qin'er for support. At this time… it is truly not possible for him to return."

Li Xuanxuan was left speechless. He could not refute her words. Furthermore, Li Yuanqin had grown up within a sect and held little affection for the Li clan; he had no personal desire to stay.

As Li Xuanxuan hesitated, a ray of light pierced the hall from outside, resolving into two men—one in a white and gold Daoist robe, the other in a feathered robe shimmering with the colors of sunset. They came to a stop in the hall.

Li Yuanqin immediately clasped his hands to bow.

"Greetings, Daoist Master Zhaojing, and Pavilion Master of the Heaven-Probing Pavilion."

Li Xizhi would not permit him to bow and helped him up. Having overheard the exchange, he tried to persuade him. "Uncle, the youngest branch of our family is empty. We need you to support it. If our late grand-uncle could see this, he too would wish for you to remain with the clan."

Li Ximing took up the plea, his tone serious. "This junior is about to visit Daoist Master Yuanxiu. Uncle, you only need to say the word, and you need not worry about anything else."

Despite their words, Li Yuanqin replied with unwavering respect. "The clan has Daoist Master Zhaojing and the Pavilion Master, as well as Minghuang, Chenghui, and the other Daoists. It is as stable as Mount Tai. Meanwhile, my mother's clan, the Ning family, is on the verge of collapse, and she cannot support it alone. I am afraid I cannot return. Please forgive me."

His expression was firm, and Ning Hemian added her own pleas. Li Xuanxuan could only sigh in resignation as he saw them out.

Li Ximing waited in the courtyard. Sometime later, Li Xizhi returned on a cloud of rosy mist.

"That the four branches cannot be made whole," he lamented, "will likely be a great regret for our grandfather."

"When Uncle has an heir, we can bring one back—even a mortal child will do," Li Ximing said. "The coming years will not be peaceful for our clan. It may be for the best that he remains in the Azure Pond Sect."

Chapter 699: The Spoils of Ascension

On the Heavenly Glow Dawn Cloudliner, Li Yuanqin stood at the rail, watching the dark night wind stream past the vessel's radiant light. His mother, Ning Hemian, stood beside him. After a long silence, she was the first to speak.

"The Southern Borderlands are stable now. It might be a good life for you, to stay on the lake."

"It would be difficult," Li Yuanqin said, shaking his head. "Li Zhouwei is a genius, and Li Chenghui is a hero of his generation. I have neither the strength nor the close family ties to compete. Daoist Master Zhaojing has reached the Purple Mansion Realm, and even if he were willing to acknowledge an elder so much younger than himself, the powers within the clan would never respect me."

He let out a sigh. "To have a high-ranking elder appear out of nowhere… no one would accept it. I'd be inviting scorn upon myself and would likely be shuffled into some sinecure to keep me out of the way. Once that happened, leaving would become difficult, and I would have offended a great many people in the process. As it stands, my position in the sect is promising. I have the freedom to advance or retreat. Isn't that far better than staying with the Li clan?"

Ning Hemian knew he spoke the truth.

"Li Xuanxuan was sincere, though," she said with a sigh. "He looks upon you as his own grandson."

"He was," Li Yuanqin agreed. "Great Uncle was very warm to me. But he's only a Qi Refinement cultivator. An old man's heart is soft, and his words carry little weight. Once I was truly back in the clan, he would be powerless to support me."

He leaned against the stern, gazing at the bright moon.

"The Li clan appears harmonious, but no clan or sect in this world is without its conflicts. Their peace is a result of strict governance, powerful elders still in their prime, and a clear hierarchy of strength from one generation to the next."

His voice became quiet and thoughtful.

"Dark days are coming for the Li clan. It was the clan my father dedicated his life to, so I will help where I can."

Ning Hemian nodded, then changed the subject.

"White Lightning has been delivered to the Southern Borderlands. Should it be returned?"

Li Yuanqin paused for a moment before shaking his head. "No need. In the entire Azure Pond Sect, there isn't a single person worthy of that bow. Si Yuanli tried to draw it himself and his hand was split open. Let it remain with the sect. If a worthy talent ever emerges in the Li clan, they can come and claim it."

After descending from Gardenia Scenery Mountain, Li Zhouwei saw Chen Yang waiting at the foot of the slope.

"Go and ask the other Daoists to return to the island," he instructed. "There are important matters to discuss."

Chen Yang acknowledged the order and sped away. Li Zhouwei flew on a beam of light into the main hall, just as An Siwei was hurrying up the steps to meet him.

"Clan Head," An Siwei said respectfully, "Tian Zhongqing went into seclusion a few days ago. He's attempting to break through to the Foundation Establishment Realm."

Li Zhouwei was slightly surprised. "He has courage," he nodded.

Tian Zhongqing was an old retainer, having once served under Li Yuanxiu, Li Xuanxuan's eldest son. He was now one hundred and five years old. He had spent the better part of his life as a late-stage Qi Refinement cultivator and was one of the few non-family members to have returned from Jiangbei.

His chances of success were pitifully low, but if the old man wanted to make one last attempt, Li Zhouwei would not stand in his way. He calculated the time and asked, "It's been seven years since Li Wen went into seclusion, has it not?"

An Siwei nodded.

The minor branches of the Li clan were not descended from the four main lines and their members generally had less talent. Li Wen was the foremost among them, yet he still hadn't been able to attempt his breakthrough by the age of sixty. He had taken an Essence Gathering Pill, so his chances were far greater than Tian Zhongqing's.

'Seven years is a little long… He must be in danger,' Li Zhouwei thought with a measure of regret, remembering the loyal, stout man who used to stand guard at the hall entrance with two golden hammers. 'He cultivated the *Aged Courtly Path Sutra* and secluded himself in the spirit jade mine. With the prevalence of jade in the world, he should have had a high chance of success…'

As he was lost in thought, several figures descended into the hall. Li Minggong, in her red dress, and Li Chenghui, in his silver armor and black robes, had arrived. Li Zhouwei walked to the main table and picked up a stone box, opening it gently.

Inside rested a small, six-pointed brazier. It was the color of brass and etched with bright red patterns of True Fire. Li Zhouwei passed it to Li Minggong with a smile.

"Aunt, this is the Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier, a gift from the Golden Feather Sect. It's a fine Foundation Establishment Dharma Artifact. You should take it."

Li Minggong thanked him profusely, accepting it with delight. The gifts from the two major sects reflected their status. While the Essence Gathering Pill recipe from the Azure Pond Sect was valuable, it felt opportunistic. The brazier was a truly practical gift.

The remaining gifts were from the seven gates. Excluding the Snow Wings and Changxiao Gates, there were five items in total. Li Zhouwei picked up a jade vial from the Hengzhu Immortal Dao and handed it to Li Minggong.

"These gates were all very thoughtful. This is Pure Feather Li-Fire. Though not a True Fire, it is a Luan-Fire, which is highly compatible with your Pheasant Li March technique. Please, take this as well."

Li Minggong was now a little embarrassed, but seeing his insistent frown, she accepted it. Next, Li Zhouwei took out an elongated jade box from the Sword Gate. Inside was a Foundation Establishment spirit sword named *Darksea Serpent*.

"In our clan, only Uncle Chenghuai uses a sword… and he's still in seclusion…" Li Zhouwei could only put it aside for now. Li Ximing had already claimed the *Tome of Adamant Flame Alchemy* from the Purple Smoke Gate. That left the gifts from the Profound Peak Gate: the Earthen Aegis and the Earth-Treading Boots.

Since the Profound Peak Gate was asking for aid, their gifts were far more generous. Li Zhouwei presented the two Dharma Artifacts. The Earthen Aegis was a shield of coalesced rock, carved with the pattern of a spirit tortoise. The Earth-Treading Boots were ornately embroidered with patterns of sky glows, yet they were undeniably Earth Virtue artifacts.

"Rampant lightning is extinguished by earth… Chenghui can't use either of these."

Li Zhouwei took the Earth-Treading Boots and gave them to An Siwei. The middle-aged man stared in shock, clearly not expecting to receive a Dharma Artifact. Li Zhouwei stopped him before he could speak his thanks.

"These boots can restore your spiritual qi when you stand on the ground and will also increase your speed. Refine them later. For now, go to the riverbank at once and deliver the Earthen Aegis to the White Ape. It's a perfect fit for him."

An Siwei nodded eagerly and hurried out, his steps light with excitement. Li Zhouwei then picked up the gift from the Xiukui Monastery—a talisman covered in intricate patterns.

"This is a Mountain Ghost Talisman," Li Zhouwei explained with a smile. "It can summon a being with the strength of a Foundation Establishment cultivator. For us, every use would deplete its power, which is a waste. I'll set it aside for Quewan. She might be able to learn something from it."

Li Chenghui, who had been examining it, knew that for him, it wasn't a matter of depleting its power—he couldn't use it at all. He just shook his head with a wry smile.

After setting aside the gifts from the three sects and seven gates, Li Zhouwei picked up the *Art of Wondrous Transformations* from the Slaughter Jun Gate. It

detailed a method of consuming Radiant Fire and Malevolent Earth to cultivate a breath of Earth Fire malevolent qi that could force hidden enemies to reveal themselves.

"Daoist Master Junjian achieved his Divine Ability through such arts. The Slaughter Jun Gate is famous for refining malevolent qi from both Earth Fire and Cold Earth." Li Zhouwei hesitated for a second. Li Chenghui couldn't cultivate this either, so he could only pass it to Li Minggong for her to study.

Now, only a single jade box remained on the table. Li Zhouwei opened it to reveal a pair of dark gold, perfectly round circlets. They were no thicker than a thumb and about the size of a palm, radiating a cold, metallic aura.

"The White Shadow Golden Clasps from the Revering Radiance Gate..."

Li Zhouwei felt a sense of helplessness. He glanced at Li Chenghui, hesitating.

Li Minggong stifled a laugh. "What a coincidence."

The dashing young man in silver armor and black robes looked equally awkward. He was good-natured about it, however, and simply smiled.

"My remnant lightning is grounded by Dui-Metal. It's fine on a normal day, but if I were injured, the cold metallic energy of my own weapon would turn against me."

Chapter 700: The Cultivators of the Floating Cloud Cave

The White Shadow Golden Clasps were ill-suited for him, but Li Chenghui showed no sign of disappointment. “Thunder-elemental Dharma Artifacts are rare in Jiangnan,” he said. “Our clan’s elders have only seen a handful in a century of cultivation. I am content with my Six Thunder Profound Punishment Talisman. This artifact, however, is a good match for Zhouluo. We can set it aside for him.”

Li Zhouwei had no choice but to put the clasps away. As the lamps in the hall flickered, his expression turned serious. “Bring those cultivators from the Floating Cloud Cave. We’re short on manpower, and we’ll need people to stand guard in Jiangbei after we cross the lake. We can promote a few of them to serve our clan.”

Wenhu and Pingwang Zi had brought back a group of key members from the Floating Cloud Cave, who were then escorted to the Mount Qingdu water caves. They had been left unattended during the recent Dharma Assembly.

“I’ll go at once,” Li Minggong said with a nod, and departed.

Li Zhouwei turned to Li Chenghui. “The White Ape and An Siwei are watching the north bank. I must trouble you, Uncle, to take some men and secure the Floating Cloud Cave’s territory. We must prevent any unforeseen incidents.”

Li Chenghui left as well. Li Zhouwei waited in the main seat, and after a short while, Li Ximing’s form materialized out of thin air at the head of the hall. The entire chamber seemed to brighten at his presence.

“Greetings, Daoist Master.” Li Zhouwei rose to show his respect.

Just then, Li Minggong returned, leading the cultivators from the Floating Cloud Cave. They shuffled forward, heads bowed, their eyes filled with terror.

There were eighteen or nineteen of them in total, ranging from late-stage Qi Refinement to the Foundation Establishment Realm. All looked dishevelled and utterly wretched. Many were injured, their faces as pale as parchment.

"Daoist Master," Li Minggong announced respectfully, "all the miscreants from the Floating Cloud Cave are here. Thirteen are at the Qi Refinement stage, and five are at the Foundation Establishment Realm. Of the five, three are demonic cultivators, and two are immortal cultivators."

Li Ximing raised an eyebrow. The Qi Refinement cultivators were in better shape, their cultivation merely sealed. The Foundation Establishment cultivators were a much sorrier sight. Their hands were bound behind their backs with heavy, grey shackles, and their necks were locked in white iron collars etched with array patterns, forcing them to stare straight ahead, unable to turn their heads.

Li Zhouwei's gaze swept over them. Nearly half of the five Foundation Establishment cultivators were shrouded in a dim, murky aura, a clear sign of their wicked deeds. A particularly tall man in the center, who might have once been handsome, had had his eyes gouged out. Iron nails pierced his collarbones, and he lay prostrate on the floor, clearly unable to stand.

"Who are these people?" Li Ximing asked as he took a seat. He had been in seclusion for years and recognized none of them. Li Minggong, however, had dealt with the Floating Cloud Cave for years and knew them well. She undid the restraints on one of the men.

He was a tall, thin old man with the face of a youth and the hair of a crane. A palm-sized indentation was sunk deep into his chest, revealing his furiously beating heart. He ignored his wound and offered a fawning smile.

"This humble cultivator pays his respects to the Daoist Master! My name is Qu Bushi. I was originally a cultivator from the Eastern Sea, invited to the Floating Cloud Cave some years ago to practice my cultivation. I never imagined that scoundrel Fu Dou would be so audacious as to offend your esteemed clan. I am truly innocent in this matter…"

He spoke fluently, but his heart was pounding with fear. Never in the Eastern Sea had he been in the presence of a Purple Mansion cultivator. He kept his head bowed, not daring to look up.

Li Minggong snorted in derision. "This man is from the Eastern Sea. He cultivates the Earth Virtue foundation, the Palace of Concealed Storage. He's vicious and cunning. In the past, he was full of schemes, but he never dared to face our clan in person."

Li Ximing's celestial eye, between his brows, twitched. He sensed that the man practiced a demonic art. He was a cultivator from the Eastern Sea, yet the turbid qi clinging to him was the lightest among the five. "I will not dwell on past grievances," he said. "However, my clan has upheld the righteous path for generations. We cannot tolerate demonic cultivators."

Qu Bushi felt as if he had received a grand pardon. He fell to his knees. "Daoist Master! My Palace of Concealed Storage may be a demonic art, but I nourish it with the corpses of those who have died of old age and have been buried for a century. In all these hundreds of years, the worst I have ever done is dig up a few ancestral graves… I have never committed any truly heinous acts!"

He wailed, "My Dao foundation is not suited for combat, and I have no taste for the flesh of the living. While my Yin Virtue may be lacking… my Yang Virtue is unstained!"

His howl was so loud it made Li Ximing frown. There were countless varieties of demonic arts, and it was possible such a method existed.

Li Minggong shot the old man a look. "Are you going to write down your cultivation art or not?!"

Old Man Qu hastily produced a jade slip from his robes. He never carried his cultivation arts on his person, but a Foundation Establishment cultivator's spiritual sense could inscribe with incredible speed. In a flash, the jade slip was presented.

Li Ximing gave it a cursory read. The art was called the *Earth-Hiding Palace-Storing Art*. He couldn't tell which branch of Earth Virtue it belonged to, but it was indeed an art that damaged one's Yin Virtue and required its practitioner to avoid excessive bloodshed. A thought suddenly struck him as odd.

'If that's the case, is this even a demonic art? It bears too much resemblance to the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao.'

The first demonic art the Li clan had encountered was the *Blood Asura Scripture*, one of the few high-grade demonic arts widely circulated in Jiangnan. Its poison had spread far and wide, with traces found even in Jiangbei, the Central Plains, and the Southern Borderlands.

Demonic cultivation was also known as the Diverse Mansion Unified Furnace Dao. The *Blood Asura Scripture* was a prime example. At the Qi Refinement stage, one would merge the Shengyang, Juque, and Qihai acupoints into an Diverse Mansion. The physical body would then become a vessel adrift on a sea of bitterness, and all subsequent cultivation would take place within this Diverse Mansion.

Having attained a Divine Ability, Li Ximing's perspective on cultivation arts was entirely different. He now possessed a profound sense that all paths led to the same destination.

Years ago, he hadn't thought much of the technique, only knowing that the *Blood Asura Scripture* required one to cultivate a 'Asura Ridge' within the Diverse Mansion to achieve a demonic Foundation Establishment. But now, seeing this new art, he had an epiphany.

'The *Blood Asura Scripture* tries its best to obscure its origins, but anyone who reaches a certain level of cultivation can see the truth. In the language of the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao, it's simply forming a Dao foundation called the Asura Ridge.'

The *Earth-Hiding Palace-Storing Art* was far more ancient and made no attempt to hide its nature. Although it also required the merging of the three acupoints, the subsequent path was much the same. Li Ximing estimated that a Purple Mansion cultivator of the Earth Virtue could likely modify this art into an immortal one.

'No wonder the northern cultivators call the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao the Purple-Gold Demonic Dao, and the Diverse Mansion Unified Furnace Dao the Heavenly Embryo Dao, lumping them into the same category… They truly aren't that different!'

'If I were to dedicate myself to studying the art of merging the three acupoints, I might even be able to convert the *Radiant Essence Scripture* into a demonic art!'

A sudden understanding dawned on him, and he frowned. 'In that case, a demonic cultivator's breakthrough to the Purple Mansion Realm would involve

pushing the Diverse Mansion into the Great Void. And since the Dao foundation is already inside the Diverse Mansion, they wouldn't need to push it into the Shengyang acupoint first, as is required in the immortal path… Could it be that their breakthrough is simpler?'

'If demonic cultivation has no other hindrances, then right now, only my Shengyang acupoint exists within the Great Void. Everything else can be discarded… which is essentially the same as a demonic Purple Mansion cultivator… The only difference is the name—one is called Shengyang, the other, Diverse Mansion.'

'In other words… if not for the fact that merging the three acupoints requires blood qi, after the great celestial shift, the Diverse Mansion Unified Furnace Dao would actually be a more advanced… a superior method of cultivation… It would save a vast amount of resources required to push one's immortal foundation into the Shengyang acupoint.'

As he examined the *Earth-Hiding Palace-Storing Art*, he became almost certain it was a technique from the time of the great celestial shift, bearing all the marks of the Heavenly Embryo Dao branching off from the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao.

'If only I had a Purple Mansion-level cultivation art from the Heavenly Embryo Dao…'

This was a significant revelation. Li Ximing felt as if a fog had lifted from his mind. 'This means I don't need to limit my search for complementary cultivation arts to immortal ones. As long as it's a Bright Yang demonic art… I can cultivate it and master another Divine Ability.'

The prospect of finding other Purple Mansion cultivation arts was remote, but a flicker of hope had been kindled. He looked up and said, "The *Earth-Hiding Palace-Storing Art* is ancient. It cannot be considered a true demonic art. You lot simply lack the discernment to see it… Minggong, release him."

Old Man Qu was stunned. He had obtained this art in the Eastern Sea, and as far as he knew, anything involving an Diverse Mansion was a demonic art. He had never heard of something not being a 'true' demonic art. But the word of a Purple Mansion cultivator was law. He was overjoyed and kowtowed. "Thank you, Daoist Master! To think I have been wrongly accused for over a century. If not for your guidance, I would have carried this injustice to my grave!"

It was pure flattery, and Li Ximing ignored it. He looked at the other two demonic cultivators. As expected, they practiced the *Blood Asura Scripture*. The turbid qi surrounding them was overwhelming; they had clearly never stopped consuming blood qi. They trembled on the floor.

Li Ximing's gaze fell upon one of them, a man with a rather honest face. Before he could even ask, the man burst into tears. "Daoist Master, please hear me out."

He knocked his head on the floor. "My name is Wen Yi, and this is my younger brother, Wen Shan. We were born in the Eastern Sea to demonic cultivators. We began our training at the age of six. We ate rice and meat, and our bowls were filled with blood qi… It wasn't until we were older and had reached the Qi Refinement stage that we learned what these things truly were. But we were in a land of demonic cultivators, taught by our parents. We never thought anything of it."

"It was only when we came inland that we realized not everyone in the world cultivates this way."

Wen Yi saw death approaching and broke out in a cold sweat. His thick eyebrows were slick with moisture, and tears streamed down his face. "It's not that I don't wish to do good, but that I never knew of the righteous path. It's not that I am wicked at heart. I have cared for my parents and been a good brother. I never thought of myself as an evil person. But… I was born in a demonic land, with no one to guide me. How could I have known I was committing a sin? I beg you, sir, to see the truth and give me a chance to start anew."

His words made Li Minggong frown. The other demonic cultivator, Wen Shan, was stunned to hear his brother speak this way. But on reflection, he realized it was the truth. He quickly kowtowed as well. "We only beg the Daoist Master for a chance to live!"

Li Minggong paused, then said hesitantly, "Whether you knew you were sinning is one thing… whether you are guilty is another…"

Li Ximing listened intently. A somber memory seemed to surface in his mind. He pondered for a few moments, then glanced at their cultivation. Both were barely at the Foundation Establishment Realm, of little use. He brought two fingers together, and a brilliant golden light, the phantom gleam of his Divine Ability, appeared at their tips.

"Go."

He drew out two wisps of his Bright Yang Divine Ability's power. They flew like serpents into the two men's Diverse Mansions, locking their immortal foundations. "The Nine Gates Mountain on the west bank is always short of cultivators for artifact refinement," Li Ximing said. "I will spare your lives. For now, go to the mountain and manage the fire veins. Supply them with your spiritual qi."

The two wisps of divine power contained the suppressive force of Heavenly Audience Gate. They could not only disrupt the brothers' techniques but also shatter their Diverse Mansions at any moment, killing them instantly. They would only be able to channel their spiritual qi and use their spiritual sense—perfect for supplying the flames of artifact refinement. The fire veins of Nine Gates Mountain were powerful and difficult for Qi Refinement cultivators to handle. The two brothers could manage them, saving the clan a great deal of effort.

"Thank you, Daoist Master!"

The two men rose, their foreheads beaded with sweat. Though they had lost their freedom, it was better than death. They knelt obediently to one side.

Two cultivators of the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao remained. Li Ximing's gaze first fell on an old woman with a rather ugly face, her clothes wrapped tightly around her. A golden qi swirled about her.

"This old one is Jiang Huzi," she said in a raspy voice. "Greetings, Daoist Master…"

Li Minggong hesitated for a moment before speaking. "Daoist Master, she is also a cultivator from the Floating Cloud Cave, but she spent all her time within the sect and was never seen outside. We have no information on her."

Jiang Huzi's voice was ancient and low. "This old one is just a talisman-maker from the State of Zhao. I settled in Jiangbei and am now over two hundred years old. My time is nearly at an end…"

She smiled, revealing yellowed teeth. "The two sects would not have left anything of value for your clan. The young and talented ones were all killed. The ones they left for you… those with some status… are all old, weak, sick, or disabled…"

There was something unusual about this old woman. Not only was her qi pure, but she was also from the State of Zhao and carried herself with a certain dignity.

Li Ximing paused. Not wanting to invite trouble, he said gently, "Since you are a righteous cultivator from the north, you are free to go. You may stay here and draw talismans, or wander the lake… or you may leave as you please."

Jiang Huzi acknowledged his words. Li Ximing's gaze then fell on the last man—the broad, handsome man whose eyes had been gouged out and collarbones pierced. Li Minggong understood at once and explained, "This is Ding Weizeng of the Floating Cloud Cave. He reached the Foundation Establishment Realm some years ago and is quite strong. His immortal foundation is the rare Palace-Yang Tiger, of the Hengzhu lineage."

"The Hengzhu lineage?"

Li Ximing frowned immediately. Cultivators of the Hengzhu lineage were exceedingly rare. While there might be some in the north, in the south, they were concentrated entirely within the Hengzhu Immortal Dao. That sect had a complete set of cultivation arts for all five immortal daos, which was why they dared to take the name Hengzhu.

The sudden appearance of a cultivator from the Hengzhu lineage, and a strong one at that, was naturally suspicious. Li Ximing looked him up and down. "Why is he in this state?"

Old Man Qu immediately chimed in. "Daoist Master, this man cultivates the Palace-Yang Tiger. This immortal foundation is well-suited for combat. It can break free from imprisonment, shatter cages, and overcome karmic obstacles through sheer will, striking enemies with a glance… At first, he was chained like the rest of us. But he was stubborn and refused to submit, repeatedly trying to escape…"

"He also had some history with Wenhu, so his eyes were gouged out, his collarbones were pierced, and his Qihai acupoint was nearly shattered… He's on the verge of becoming a cripple."

After hearing the detailed account, Li Ximing's mind stirred. With a flick of his Divine Ability, the iron nails in Ding Weizeng's collarbones clattered to the floor, and his other restraints fell away.

The man was half-dead. He mumbled a greeting to the Daoist Master. Li Zhouwei, who had been standing by for some time, finally spoke. "Daoist Master, this man is a valiant warrior."

Li Zhouwei had crossed paths with Ding Weizeng before. For him to give such an assessment meant the man was truly formidable. Li Ximing felt a flicker of admiration. Ding Weizeng, however, circulated his spiritual qi and spoke in a stiff voice. "My Qihai is damaged. My death is near. I only ask that the Daoist Master allow me to return to the mountains, to die in my homeland of Jiangbei."

Li Ximing stroked his beard, not answering. He circulated the Bright Yang Divine Ability in his hand and sent it flying into the man's body. The divine power regenerated his flesh and sealed his Qihai acupoint, preventing his cultivation from leaking away.

Ding Weizeng stood there in a daze. Li Minggong had already taken a pill from her sleeve and fed it to him. The man remained standing, bewildered. Qu Bushi, ever the opportunist, smiled. "Weizeng, what are you waiting for? Thank your new master!"

Chapter 701: A Double Blessing

Ding Weizeng finally processed what had happened. He bowed low, a gesture as grand as a toppling mountain of jade. The Divine Ability had even healed his throat, allowing him to speak for the first time in ages, though his voice was raspy. "Weizeng thanks you, Daoist Master," he croaked. "I will never forget this gift of a new life."

Li Ximing shook his head with a gentle smile. "Your wounds are grave and not yet fully healed. My Bright Yang Divine Ability is not primarily for healing, though it has the power to foster life. Your Qihai acupoint is one of the Three Mansions—not something I can mend with a mere word. For now, I have only sealed the damage to prevent it from worsening."

Li Ximing's own body was formed of pure Bright Yang; he could remake it at will. Ding Weizeng, however, was a different matter. A damaged Qihai acupoint could not heal on its own. It would require a rare treasure, like an Earth-Gazing Bloodstone or the Primal Essence of Heaven Unity. The latter was a form of Purple Mansion Spirit Water, which the Li clan did not possess. They did, however, have half an Earth-Gazing Bloodstone remaining.

But Li Ximing had no intention of using it. 'His Qihai is only damaged, not shattered,' he thought. 'Using the Earth-Gazing Bloodstone would be a waste. All we need is a Purple Mansion cultivator skilled in healing. A brief application of their Divine Ability would suffice. The stone is too precious for this.'

The Li clan did not cultivate with blood qi, making the stone's other properties all the more valuable. Li Ximing treasured it. "I have my own methods for dealing with your Qihai," he said aloud. "As for your eyes, though I have regenerated them, they have not yet been nourished by your immortal foundation. It will take time for you to refine them and restore your sight fully."

"My gratitude, senior," Ding Weizeng said, his voice low and solemn as he bowed again. Freed from his bonds, his true stature was apparent. He was far larger

than an ordinary man, with broad shoulders, a powerful waist, and a fierce, bearded visage. He looked like a crouching tiger.

Li Zhouwei watched, immensely pleased. He felt the weight of the White Shadow Golden Clasps in his sleeve and stepped forward to help the man up. "I remember you from the battle on White river Creek," he said warmly. "Fu Dou was trying to kill me, and you fought my clan uncle so fiercely you nearly gained the upper hand. You made an impression. It seems we got to know each other through conflict. Your Palace-Yang Tiger foundation is truly impressive. My Uncle Chenghui will be thrilled when he hears of this."

Ding Weizeng, a ruggedly handsome man, had believed his life as a cultivator was over. He never imagined the Li clan would save him. Now, understanding the turn his fate had taken, he knew what to say. "Greetings, Clan Head," he said, bowing. "In the past, I served a different master. I failed to recognize you and gave much offense. Please forgive me."

Nearby, Qu Bushi, who had befriended him during their captivity, grew anxious. 'This boy,' he thought, 'Floating Cloud Cave is destroyed, and he's still talking about a 'former master.' He's too dignified to grovel or curse his old loyalties. A true son of Jiangbei…'

Li Zhouwei simply helped him up again. Li Ximing observed this with a nod. "Weizeng, go to Gardenia Scenery Mountain and wait there for now."

With his hands clasped behind his back, Li Ximing flicked his sleeve and vanished. But Li Zhouwei was more elated than anyone. He took Ding Weizeng by the arm, led him to the hall's entrance, and said in a low voice, "Worry not, Weizeng. Once you have recovered, we will need you to stand guard over the White river Creek territory in Jiangbei."

The White river Creek territory was home to more than just the Floating Cloud Cave! Ding Weizeng froze, the shock contained within his gaze, not once betraying itself on his face. Li Zhouwei saw this and knew the man possessed a deep composure. A wide smile spread across his face.

Ding Weizeng merely said in a measured tone, "Thank you, Clan Head. I only worry I might offend the Daoist Master on the mountain. Are there any rules or customs I should be aware of?"

"Our Daoist Master is an amiable man," Li Zhouwei replied. "Just be at ease."

Li Zhouwei gestured for a guard to escort Ding Weizeng away. Qu Bushi watched with hopeful eyes. The old man was no fighter, but he was an expert in surveying earth veins and nurturing spirit fields. Li Zhouwei didn't yet know his character well enough to keep him on the main island. "The former territory of the Floating Cloud Cave is in disarray," he said. "My clan uncle has already returned there. Elder Qu, you know their spirit fields well. Please go and lend him your assistance."

Qu Bushi was as cunning as they come. The moment he heard this, he dropped to his knees with a thud. "I have lived a wretched life," he wailed. "Even at the Floating Cloud Cave, I was a weakling anyone could push around. To be valued by an Immortal Clan and given such responsibility… from this day forward, I will follow only the Daoist Master and the Clan Head! I swear I will never have a disloyal thought!"

Li Zhouwei dismissed him, feeling a sense of relief. The old woman, Jiang Huzi, was still standing by. Her aura was pure, and her age was considerable, so Li Zhouwei addressed her respectfully. "Senior, what are your plans?"

Jiang Huzi coughed. "I do not have many years left," she answered. "I only hope to find a small mountain among the families on the eastern shore, settle down, and live out my days making talismans for a modest living."

Li Zhouwei nodded but wasn't about to let such a resource go. "Senior, an art as profound as yours cannot simply be allowed to vanish," he said with a smile. "Have you considered passing on your knowledge and establishing a lineage?"

His words made Jiang Huzi hesitate. She considered it for several long moments before finally nodding. "Since you are willing," Li Zhouwei continued, "I will find cultivators with an aptitude for the Dao of Talismans from the families around the lake. You may screen them, Senior, and take eight or ten disciples. From them, you can choose the most outstanding to inherit your legacy."

Jiang Huzi placidly agreed. Li Zhouwei allowed her to depart on her own, and after the Wen brothers, Yi and Shan, gave their thanks and left, only the Qi Refinement cultivators remained. There was little to discuss. Li Zhouwei picked out a few whose auras seemed relatively clean and sent them to work under Qu Bushi. The rest were led away to the dungeons.

With the hall finally empty, Li Zhouwei let out a long breath. He turned to Li Minggong. "Aunt, we know nothing of that Jiang Huzi's origins. We must watch her closely."

"I understand," Li Minggong nodded. She had gained the most from the Dharma Assembly. The Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier she had acquired from the Golden Feather Sect was a remarkable treasure, and her power had risen significantly. Li Zhouwei pondered for a moment before continuing.

"Though the cultivation of the Wen brothers is unremarkable, we still don't know their true history. They must be observed carefully in the mountains on the western shore..."

With Li Ximing's breakthrough to the Purple Mansion Realm, the Li family had ascended to the rank of an Immortal Clan. They could now openly recruit Foundation Establishment experts as retainers, and men like Qu Bushi and Ding Weizeng would hardly dare harbor disloyal thoughts. The clan's shortage of manpower had been alleviated overnight.

"Aunt—" Before he could finish his thought, both he and Li Minggong looked up in astonishment, their gazes fixed on the sky outside the hall.

In the very next instant, Li Zhouwei transformed into a streak of brilliant light and shot into the air. Across the lake, every Foundation Establishment and late-stage Qi Refinement cultivator looked up, their eyes turning west.

There, on the western horizon, clouds churned in a great vortex at the edge of twilight. From its center, a pillar of milky-white light erupted, piercing the heavens and bathing the west in its glow.

Li Minggong was a moment behind him, stepping into the air. She studied the phenomenon for a breath before speaking in surprise. "Someone at the Purple Mansion Realm just failed their breakthrough to the Golden Core."

"Indeed," Li Zhouwei affirmed, his gaze distant. "It's coming from the direction of Mount Changhuai."

As the sun began to rise in the east, a subtle shift occurred. The world seemed to clarify, as if a heavy, oppressive weight had been lifted from it. Distant sights grew sharper, and the spiritual qi in the morning mist felt fresh and sweet.

Li Minggong looked up, feeling the spiritual qi within her stir and flow more freely. Li Zhouwei's golden eyes glinted with surprise. "The spiritual aura of the entire Jiangnan region... it's changed..."

For over thirty years, the spiritual qi of Jiangnan had been dominated by the Upper Evil Spirit Storage. This atmosphere favored the cultivation of Earth Virtue,

demonic arts, Mansion Water paths, and blood qi, while actively suppressing the ancient immortal daos. This had little negative impact on the Li clan; the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao was not considered an ancient path, and their recent absorption of blood qi had, if anything, accelerated their progress.

Feeling the clear spiritual energy of the world rising around him, Li Zhouwei looked at Li Minggong. "The spiritual era has only been in place for thirty-odd years. By all rights, it should be at its zenith. For it to shift now..."

Li Zhouwei nodded grimly. "The death of that Mount Changhuai cultivator is no ordinary event. We must consult the Daoist Master."

He dispatched a messenger to Gardenia Scenery Mountain and landed in the courtyard with Li Minggong. He was about to speak when his brow furrowed again. His golden pupils dilated, his expression turning sharp. The mark of the Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light between his brows began to glow faintly as he fixed his gaze on the entrance to the hall.

An instant later, the radiant Grand Ascension Halberd materialized in his grip. "Who's there?!" he demanded, his voice like ice.

Li Minggong hadn't sensed a thing. A half-beat behind, she summoned her own flames. Lacking an ocular art, she took a half-step back, shrouding herself in fire as a precaution.

A flicker of grey light pulsed, and a wisp of black energy coalesced at the entrance to the hall, forming the figure of a man. He had a high brow, grey-black eyes, and a faint smile. He looked utterly unremarkable in his simple brown robes, a sword hanging at his waist.

As his form solidified, he quickly waved a placating hand. "It has been many years," he said with a chuckle. "Your mastery of the Radiant Splendor arts has grown truly formidable!"

"Little brother!" Li Minggong cried out, her face breaking into a joyful smile. She dismissed her flames and rushed forward. "It's you! You've finished your seclusion! But why was there no celestial phenomenon?"

The man was none other than Li Chenghuai.

Li Zhouwei's tense expression melted away, and the Grand Ascension Halberd vanished. He offered a respectful salute. Li Chenghuai, looking vibrant and full of energy, laughed. "Elder Sister, have you forgotten? I cultivate the Shamanic

Talisman's foundation, *Untraceable Presence*. It conceals my form, hides my aura—spiritual sense cannot find me, and the naked eye overlooks me. One would need a divining talisman to even sense my presence. What phenomenon could there possibly be?"

He paused for a moment, studying their faces. "From the look of you both, it seems the clan's situation has stabilized?"

Li Chenghuai had entered seclusion during the clan's most difficult period, a time when Li Zhouwei was still being hounded by the Floating Cloud Cave. He had been deeply worried, which was why he had come straight to the main hall. But to his surprise, Li Minggong let out a giggle, covering her mouth with her hand. "Little brother," she said, her eyes dancing, "Clan Uncle has reached the Purple Mansion Realm!"

"Oh…" Li Chenghuai froze. A flush crept up his neck as he stared blankly into space. Several long seconds passed. "What?"

Li Minggong beamed. "It happened just a few days ago! All the major families came to offer their congratulations. We had several Purple Mansion cultivators attend the Dharma Assembly in person. It was a magnificent affair! If only you'd emerged a few days sooner, you could have seen it all!"

Li Chenghuai felt as if he were dreaming. It was utterly unbelievable. "Then our clan…" he whispered, "is now a Purple Mansion Immortal Clan?"

"Precisely!" Li Zhouwei confirmed.

Li Chenghuai could no longer contain his joy and burst into loud, incredulous laughter. "You're not joking, are you? Then… what about the Floating Cloud Cave?"

"The Floating Cloud Cave? We destroyed them!"

As Li Minggong recounted the events, an irrepressible smile spread across Li Chenghuai's face. He let out a long sigh of relief. "During my seclusion, I worried constantly about the clan. It took me nearly a year of conditioning before I even began the breakthrough process. It was an arduous struggle, and I was growing weaker by the day. Fortunately, the Essence Gathering Pills gave me the strength to persevere."

"I still had a long road ahead, and success was far from certain. But then, I felt the spiritual qi of the world suddenly shift. In that instant, countless new insights flooded my mind. It was as if the heavens themselves were aiding me, and I broke through in a single, fluid motion!"

"So that's it!" Li Zhouwei and Li Minggong exchanged a look of sudden understanding. "It was the change in Jiangnan's spiritual aura! An event like this might not happen in decades… What a blessed opportunity!"

Li Minggong sighed in amazement. Li Zhouwei was also deeply moved. "On the path of cultivation," he said, "the role of fate and fortune can truly never be underestimated."

He sighed once more, then broke into a smile. "Since you've broken through, Uncle, this is another great blessing for our clan. Aunt Minggong no longer needs to stand guard here; she can now go to Jiangbei… First, however, you should pay your respects to the elders, share the good news, and take over the affairs of Mount Qingdu."

"Of course," Li Chenghuai said thoughtfully. He immediately took his leave to pay his respects to Li Xuanxuan. Meanwhile, Li Zhouwei took out a sheet of paper and began to write with a flourish. 'I must also send a letter to the main sect,' he thought, 'and inform the elders of this joyous news.'

Li Minggong waited by his side. After a moment, an old man approached them. He had a bald head, a snow-white beard, and a sturdy frame. It was An Zheyan. At nearly one hundred and seventy years of age, he had mellowed considerably. He bowed. "Reporting to the Clan Head," he said. "A message from Gardenia Scenery Mountain. The Daoist Master left with Ding Weizeng some time ago. Their destination is unknown."

An Zheyan was one of the clan's most senior and loyal retainers. Li Zhouwei nodded to him, then turned back to Li Minggong. "Aunt, let's you and I make a trip to Jiangbei first."

"Great-Grandfather… Great-Grandfather, you needn't see me out…" Li Chenghuai said as he emerged from the hall. But Li Xuanxuan, beaming, held fast to his hand and walked him all the way to the entrance. This string of

joyous news had brought a healthy, ruddy glow to the old man's face, making him look years younger.

"Huai'er," the old man said, his voice thick with emotion, "your father was always the most sensible of his generation. Now that you've reached the Foundation Establishment Realm, he would be so, so proud…"

Li Xuanxuan rambled on, lost in memory, and Li Chenghuai listened in silence. The old man pulled him aside and took a brocade box from his robes. "Huai'er," he whispered, "when Ximing achieved his Divine Ability, your parents came back to visit. Xiao'er came to see me as well. You, however, were in seclusion and missed them. They only met with Zhouluo… they had a good talk and gave him many spiritual treasures."

"Your father left this with me for you," he continued, opening the box. "It is a Supreme Feather Night-robe. Dharma Artifacts for High Shamans are exceedingly rare; he spent years searching for this one. He said that if you succeeded in your breakthrough, it was to be yours. If you failed, it would go to Zhouluo."

Li Chenghuai's gaze lingered on the robe, and he let out a slow breath. Li Xuanxuan then added, "Your mother also came to see me privately. She left this for you—a Secret Talisman of the Night Ghost. It's a direct-lineage heirloom of the Yang family. I don't know what it does, but she wanted you to have it…"

Both items lay within the brocade box. Li Chenghuai accepted it in silence. A pang of pity went through Li Xuanxuan. "For many years… your father could barely ensure his own safety, and he's not a man of many words. Your mother, as a direct heir of the Yang family, has always had her hands tied. You must not blame them… Now, with Ximing's breakthrough, and your father as the Master of the Heaven-Probing Pavilion, he finally has the power to help you. But he would find it hard to say these things himself."

Li Chenghuai shook his head. "It was never about the Dharma Artifacts."

Li Xuanxuan patted his shoulder. "There is nothing that cannot be resolved between a father and son. Look at me… I lost my own father at birth, my mother in my youth, and my own sons in my middle years. Now, in my old age, I tend to their graves. Even your Uncle Ximing, for all his power, carries this same regret… Cherish your family."

"Now, both you and your father are Foundation Establishment cultivators. Others would be green with envy... For now, go and see to the affairs of Mount Qingdu. After a few days, you should take a trip to the Azure Pond Sect."

Li Chenghuai tucked the brocade box into his sleeve and took his leave, his voice thick. He took a moment to compose himself before silently riding the wind across the lake.

He replayed the words of Li Xuanxuan and Li Zhouwei in his mind, and a knot of apprehension tightened in his stomach. '*First, go and see to the affairs of Mount Qingdu*... It seems Zhouluo hasn't been managing things well.'

Not daring to delay, he changed course and headed straight for Mount Qingdu. Passing through the defensive formation, he saw the flickering lights of the main hall and could faintly hear the sounds of someone grinding an inkstone and turning the pages of a book.

Li Chenghuai knocked gently on the door.

A clear voice called from within. "Is that you, clan brother? Please, come in!"

Chapter 702: The Shifting Spiritual Aura

"Father!"

Li Zhouluo looked up from his desk and saw the man standing in the doorway. Surprise and delight washed over him as he hurried down from the main seat to greet him. "Father! You're out of seclusion!"

Li Chenghuai smiled and nodded. Li Zhouluo, his face flushed with excitement, led his father to the seat of honor. "Congratulations, Father! This is wonderful news!" Overjoyed, he momentarily forgot his worries. "You've established your immortal foundation! A fourth-grade one at that… and with the Dharma robe Grandfather left you, you'll surely soar like a great roc!"

Li Zhouluo was well aware of the complicated history between his father and grandfather, but having recently met Li Xizhi, he had been captivated by the man's charisma. He felt a sense of shared glory and even saw him as a role model, so he was quick to put in a good word.

But Li Chenghuai was not one for pleasantries. He seized on his son's earlier distraction, his gaze sharp. "A clan brother, you said? Which one?"

Li Zhouluo had no choice but to bow and explain. "It's about Quewan… Someone in the prefecture has accused her brother of using her influence for personal gain…"

"Let me see."

Li Chenghuai took the letter from his son's hand. He glanced at it, noting that both parties were involved in the shipping business, then flipped through the documents Li Zhouluo had prepared. A scornful laugh escaped him, and he slammed the papers down on the desk with a sharp crack.

"What utter nonsense!" he scoffed. "This is 'abusing influence'? That's 'abusing influence'? By that logic, we might as well lock up every cultivator's family in a formation and raise them like two-legged pigs!"

Li Zhouluo had rarely seen his father so furious. "Father," he said quickly, "there's more to it… If I simply suppress the matter, it will only serve as proof and harm Quewan's reputation…"

"Of course I know there's more to it!" Li Chenghuai sneered. "What are they saying behind her back? That she was just lucky, that she stumbled into good fortune when an elder passed by the prefecture? I'll bet the people jealous of her could line the shores of the entire lake! All this scheming instead of focusing on their own cultivation. Pathetic!"

Li Zhouluo didn't dare say more.

"Have him come in," Li Chenghuai commanded.

Li Zhouluo sent for the accuser. Soon, the sound of footsteps approached, and a middle-aged man in fine brocade robes entered. He saw Li Zhouluo and bowed with a smile. "Greetings, my lord!"

His father was still sitting silently behind him. The man's friendly tone sent a shiver down Li Zhouluo's spine. He quickly stepped aside, remaining silent.

The middle-aged man froze, his eyes finally landing on the figure in the main seat. He recognized Li Chenghuai at once, and a flash of pure terror crossed his mind.

'He reached Foundation Establishment?'

"Li Dongti greets… my lord!"

"So it's you…" Li Chenghuai squinted, recognizing the man as a member of a relatively close branch family. "I hear Li Quewan's brothers have been throwing their weight around. Is there any truth to this?"

Li Zhouluo, though intelligent, was still young and lacked his father's cunning. But at this point, there was no turning back.

Li Dongti understood his predicament. If he stuck to his story, he might face punishment, but to show weakness now would be a death sentence. "It is true!" he cried out in a sorrowful voice.

As he watched from the side, Li Zhouluo saw his father dip an index finger in ink. With a speed that was nearly invisible, his finger danced across a sheet of paper, tracing a talisman.

The moment Li Dongti finished speaking, a dull *thump* echoed in the hall. The paper burst into brilliant flames and burned to ash.

"The audacity!" Li Chenghuai's voice was ice.

In a single step, he closed the distance and slapped the man across the face. The force snapped Li Dongti's head back, sending a spray of blood and teeth across the floor. Before he could fall, a backhand caught him on the other cheek, sending him flying.

Li Zhouluo was horrified, afraid his father might kill the man. "Father! Father, mind your hand!"

Li Dongti tumbled several times before coming to a stop. It took him a long moment to recover. He prostrated himself on the ground, mumbling incoherently, "My lord… how can you… enforce the law… like this…"

"Like this?" Li Chenghuai flicked his sleeves. "No need for theatrics. My immortal foundation can discern truth from falsehood." He paused, a cold smile touching his lips. "You… and the rest of you cowards hiding in the shadows… can all prepare for disaster."

Azure Pond Sect.

The grotto-heaven on the highest peak of the Azure Pond Sect faced east, a place where the essence of the sun and moon gathered amidst ethereal white clouds. It was the most spiritually dense location in the entire mountain range; the ambient spiritual qi was so thick it seemed perpetually on the verge of condensing into dew on the grass and trees.

Li Ximing waited on the immortal peak for only a few moments before a clear laugh rang out. An elder in azure robes appeared at the mountain gate. He looked vigorous, holding a golden talisman in his hand. "I was wondering which esteemed guest had arrived," he chuckled. "It's Zhaojing!"

That Li Ximing had come to see him first instead of Xiao Chuting was a great compliment to Daoist Master Yuanxiu. It put him in an excellent mood. Sensing

from a distance that Li Ximing was waiting respectfully before the gate like a disciple, he lifted his chin, his laughter growing heartier.

Li Ximing returned the smile. Once the elder was close enough that others couldn't hear, he bowed. "This junior greets the Daoist Master! Zhaojing was able to break through in peace largely because Daoist Si Yuanli blocked the demonic cultivators and secured the northern territories of Yue. I am deeply grateful!"

Yuanxiu quickly waved him off. "My friend, what are you saying?" he said, his aged voice full of laughter. "Yuanli is your junior. There's no need for such formality. Besides, it was Li Xuanfeng who turned the tide on the river… Yuanli was merely doing his duty."

Yuanxiu was an old fox, after all. Li Ximing was just glad he had waited until he was close to speak quietly.

"Please," the old man said, gesturing.

The two Purple Mansion cultivators proceeded into the grotto-heaven. Inside, the spiritual qi was so rich it dripped like dew. A massive pool of Pristine Water, shimmering like a sheet of emerald, dominated the space. A potent wave of Pristine Water power washed over them, causing Ding Weizeng, who followed behind, to grimace in discomfort.

Above the pool hovered six magnificent thrones carved from green jade. The dense spiritual energy, mixed with the light of the Dharma, created an almost tangible, iridescent glow that illuminated the entire cavern.

Countless Pristine Water cultivators had likely broken through in this very place. Yuanxiu gestured for them to be seated, but he did not take the main throne himself, instead choosing the highest one to the side.

Li Ximing used his divine ability to shield Ding Weizeng from the oppressive aura of the Pristine Water and took a seat on a lower jade throne. He was about to speak when he paused, his expression shifting. Above him, Yuanxiu also stopped, then let out a cold sneer.

"Qingtangyin of Mount Changhuai has fallen! The old miser was stingy to the very end! He wouldn't even invite guests to witness his Golden Core breakthrough… The old ghost!"

Li Ximing immediately understood. The Profound Light between his brows pulsed faintly. "The spiritual aura has changed!" he said in surprise. "It's too early… The era of the Upper Evil Spirit Storage should be at its zenith…"

The smile vanished from Yuanxiu's face, replaced by his usual stern demeanor. "Early is hardly the word for it," he said, shaking his head. "Zhaojing, have you not noticed? The Upper Evil Spirit Storage has been laughably weak. Forget demonic cultivators… it hasn't even given rise to any special spiritual lands or treasures…"

'I've been in seclusion day in and day out,' Li Ximing thought wryly. 'What could I possibly know about any of that?'

Outwardly, he maintained a faint smile and nodded slowly as the light between his brows flickered. "Indeed…"

Chapter 703: Yuanxiu's Intent

Li Ximing agreed. Behind him, Ding Weizeng kept his head bowed, not daring to speak. This was a conversation between two Purple Mansion cultivators; every word he overheard was a stroke of fortune. He was inwardly stunned.

'Daoist Master Zhaojing just broke through to the Purple Mansion Realm,' he thought. 'Daoist Master Yuanxiu is a late-stage Purple Mansion cultivator, one of the most powerful in all of Jiangnan. Why is he being so polite?'

He knew nothing of the intricacies of the Purple Mansion Realm, nor of divine abilities and lifespans. He only knew it was best not to overthink it. As he relaxed, Si Boxiu glanced at him before continuing to speak to Li Ximing.

"There is a reason for the weakening of the Upper Evil Spirit Storage. It began here in Jiangnan. Years ago, Zipei fell. Kan Xuyu was a grand master of 'Purple Qi.' Zhaojing, do you know the metallic Dao name of Purple Qi?"

"I would be honored to learn of it," Li Ximing said with a smile.

Yuanxiu's expression turned serious. "Its full name is the 'Heavenly Cultivation Purple Qi Immortal Origin Metallic Essence' "

The name alone told Li Ximing a great deal. As he expected, Si Boxiu continued, "The impact of her breakthrough and subsequent death on the spiritual aura of the Upper Evil Spirit Storage was immense. Just look at the word 'Immortal' in her Dao title. And she was a grand master of it. The fact that the Upper Evil Spirit Storage didn't dissipate on the spot can only be attributed to the lingering, overwhelmingly destructive effects of the rain from Chi Wei's downfall!"

The genesis of the Upper Evil Spirit Storage had been the turning point in the Yuan family's decline, when their ancestor Yuan Licheng failed his Purple Mansion breakthrough. His death caused it to rain for days across several prefectures. The Azure Pond Sect had secretly sustained the downpour to disrupt the previous era of Balanced Qi. It was a sordid affair, but Yuanxiu mentioned it

with ease, pinning the infamy on Chi Wei and, by extension, the Chi family. Li Ximing immediately played along.

"The weather was erratic back then. The common folk suffered terribly. An aunt from my clan also failed her breakthrough and perished during that rain. She was from the Xiao family, in fact…"

In truth, the Li family had later investigated and found that the rain's effect on mortals was not nearly as great as imagined; it had a larger impact on cultivators, but it was nowhere near "overwhelmingly destructive." The truth, however, mattered little to either of them now.

Yuanxiu smiled. "And now that the old miser is dead, the Wu Kingdom is at peace, and Jiangnan has changed. From the looks of it, we are entering the era of 'Inward Heart Surging Profundity.' It benefits the Ancient Merging and Immortal Daos, closed-door cultivation, and artifact forging. It also suppresses spiritual sense, weakens Earth Virtue, and inhibits demonic arts, while greatly enhancing Fire Virtue powers and clarifying the Twelve Qis."

The Si family's heritage was extraordinary. According to Li Xuanfeng's records, they were descended from the Sima family, a great northern clan. An ordinary person would be lucky to recognize the name of the new spiritual era, and even an immortal sect would likely only know the basics, not such intricate details.

But as Li Ximing heard the description of Inward Heart Surging Profundity, his heart sank.

'Of all things, it had to be Earth Virtue! What terrible luck. The Profound Peak Gate lineage of Changxi's clan is based on Earth Virtue. With this era suppressing it, the already slim chances of those three Foundation Establishment cultivators breaking through have just become even slimmer…'

He wanted to help them, and a new Purple Mansion cultivator for the Profound Peak Gate would have been the best outcome. It seemed heaven itself was working against them.

Li Ximing didn't think this new era was intentionally targeting the Kong family. After all, the spiritual aura had been shifted by the successive deaths of Qingtangyin of Mount Changhuai and Daoist Master Zipei. Changxi's clan was insignificant compared to them, and using one's own death as part of a scheme was unthinkable.

Li Ximing nodded his thanks. Si Boxiu observed him shrewdly. "Years ago, while I was in seclusion, Si Yuanli took care of the sect. I heard that Li Xizhi provided invaluable assistance and deserves much credit. I have not yet had the chance to meet him since I emerged."

"I've also heard that the Yuan family tried to harm him on several occasions. Is this true?"

The question was abrupt. Li Ximing hadn't expected him to sound as if he were planning to settle scores with the Yuan family, especially since Yuan Chengzhao was now a loyal dog of the Si family. He simply smiled. "Not exactly. Those were all Chi Zhiyan's schemes. The Yuan family was an innocent party, and we were on good terms with them in the early years."

Though Li Ximing spent most of his days secluded in cultivation, he had been raised and educated as a potential clan head. He might not be the equal of Xiao Chuting or Si Boxiu yet, but he wouldn't stumble over such a simple political test. The excuse came easily. "Later, some unpleasantness arose from a marriage alliance. The people below love to gossip, and as rumors spread, people add and subtract details to suit their own preferences. It's a common occurrence."

It was a clean deflection. Si Boxiu nodded, appreciating his tact. Having the Yuan and Li families at odds served as a useful buffer for Moongaze Lake. "The Yuan family has an unusual ancestry," he said. "Even I cannot see it clearly. Zhaojing, it would be best not to lower yourself to their level."

Li Ximing couldn't tell if this was a threat or a genuine warning, but it was clear they had a mutual understanding: the Yuan family would remain.

Yuanxiu smiled. "Zhaojing, you hide your talents well. The younger generation is truly formidable."

"Yuanli is in seclusion now and cannot meet you. But the sect's main seat is empty, and that Tantai Jin is an outsider who joined us midway. He cannot command the respect of the masses. When all is said and done, there is only Xizhi."

Yuanxiu smiled faintly. "Why not let Xizhi become the new sect master? It would satisfy everyone and demonstrate our sect's impartiality."

"Absolutely not!"

The last thing Li Ximing wanted was for Li Xizhi to become sect master. Such a position required a corresponding level of backing. It sounded prestigious, but if they were to swallow that bait, the Li family would not only be firmly tied to the Azure Pond Sect's faction but also be forced to clean up the Si family's messes. He would never agree.

"Senior!" he said in a low, firm voice. "My family has never had any designs on power within the Azure Pond Sect! My brother is not suited to be a sect master. It is out of the question!"

"Zhaojing, don't be so quick to refuse," Yuanxiu said calmly. "Putting other benefits aside, the sect master's seat grants access to the Pristine Merging Owl Pool. Within it grows a Moon-Glazing Glass Tree. Consuming its fruit can enlighten one to all Dharmas and greatly increase one's chances of breaking through to the Purple Mansion Realm."

He stroked his beard. "You know my time is short. While my situation is not as dire as Changxi's, my end draws nearer each day. If Xizhi is willing to take the seat, a share of that spiritual fruit will naturally belong to the Li family."

"As for the Azure Pond Sect's Purple Mansion spiritual items and artifacts… Zhaojing will not be left out. When I pass, they can all be handed over to the Li family."

Yuanxiu's voice was warm. "Your clan is a family of sword immortals. Zhaojing, would you not like to see the spirit sword, 'Great Snow's Severing Edge'? It rests at the bottom of the pool right now!"

"I also know that the White Ye Immortal Sect and the Changxiao Gate have some friction with your clan. If you agree, I will immediately mediate between the three of you. I will ensure everything is arranged to your satisfaction."

'The Moon-Glazing Glass Tree…'

Li Ximing was silent for a breath before bowing. "Senior, you think too highly of us. My family has always been respectful to the main sect; we would never dare to be so audacious. A Purple Mansion breakthrough is a rare opportunity. Please, save such a treasure for Yuanli!"

"Purple Mansion spiritual items are exceedingly rare, and Great Snow's Severing Edge is a spirit sword… The Li family dare not covet them. Besides… with Daoist Master Suiguan overseeing all, everything should be decided by him."

Would Si Boxiu really be so generous? Li Ximing wouldn't believe this old fox if his life depended on it. Not to mention Chi Buzi was still out there, and Suiguan's whereabouts were unknown. Did Si Boxiu truly have the final say in the Azure Pond Sect?

Daoist Master Yuanxiu did not seem angered by the refusal. He casually poured some tea and took a sip. "So be it. Thank you, Zhaojing, for watching over the north for my Azure Pond Sect. If Yehui pushes you too far and you find yourself outmatched, you can always request aid from the sect. My previous offers will still stand. It would only take a single word."

'If I agreed, not only would I have to face Suiguan, I'd probably have to enter the Pristine Speech Heaven. A single word, he says…'

Li Ximing let Si Boxiu's beautiful promises go in one ear and out the other. Seeing that he was unshaken, the old man simply smiled and looked at Ding Weizeng. "And this is…?"

Li Ximing had been waiting for this. He smiled. "This is a newly recruited retainer of my family. Unfortunately, his Qihai was injured by the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion. While my Bright Yang divine ability can foster life, my lineage does not specialize in healing. I thought I would take this opportunity to ask the Daoist Master for his opinion."

Si Boxiu was a great cultivator of Wood Virtue, and a late-stage Purple Mansion one at that—likely the only one of his kind in the entire Yue State. Li Ximing wasn't one to stand on ceremony. An opportunity not taken was an opportunity wasted. Since he was already here, he might as well ask. It was a small matter, after all.

A damaged Qihai was a death sentence for a clan, but it was nothing to a Purple Mansion cultivator. Si Boxiu heard him out and nodded with a smile. "When it comes to healing, 'Valley Water' is first. Below that come 'Pristine Water' and 'Horn Wood.' However, the Dao I cultivate is a unique branch of Wood Virtue called 'Upright Wood.' It is the union of Jia and Yi wood, hard as stone with properties akin to Metal. It does not foster growth."

Li Ximming nodded slightly. Si Boxiu was saying his 'Upright Wood' was an anomaly among Wood Virtue paths, and his healing abilities were no better than his own. A thought sparked in his mind.

'No wonder Si Yuanli's swordsmanship is so ethereal, with no sense of Wood Virtue. His family's Dao, Upright Wood, is hard as stone and takes on the properties of Metal. A sword is the killing instrument of Metal. It all makes sense…'

As his thoughts churned, Si Boxiu smiled. "If you're interested, you could take a trip to the Eastern Sea. Near the Beihai Sea, there is a Changliu Mountain. The Daoist nun Xiang Chun who resides there cultivates 'Valley Water.' She is a charitable person and might be willing to help."

This wasn't a matter that required him to go out of his way to seek the aid of a Purple Mansion cultivator. Li Ximing frowned slightly. Si Boxiu, reading his expression, chuckled. "Ah, but I forgot the bond between the Xiao and Li. You could also ask Xiao Chuting. He cultivates 'Pit Water' and could give it a try."

Li Ximing's heart eased. After exchanging a few more pleasantries with Si Boxiu, he finally heard the old man speak in a softer tone.

"Zhaojing, since you came to visit me first, I will be clear with you. The Hengzhu Immortal Dao has a feud with the Changxiao Gate, and thus they view you favorably. However, the Golden Feather Sect has its eyes on Hengzhu…"

"I had many disputes with Hengzhu in my youth. Now that I am old, I see things more calmly… but…" Yuanxiu paused, then said casually, "No matter who the Li family allies with, you must not get too close to Hengzhu. It would be dangerous."

It was clear now. The three individuals Li Ximing planned to visit each represented a faction. Purple Mansion cultivators were all shrewd. Having chosen to visit Si Boxiu first, he could not, under any circumstances, go to Hengzhu now. To do so would be to alienate both sides and be left with no allies at all.

'But I had to come to the Azure Pond Sect,' Li Ximing thought with a sense of helplessness. 'Si Boxiu is nearing the end of his life and is naturally sensitive. And with Jiangbei so perilous, I cannot afford to have an unstable rear…'

'Hengzhu is at odds with the Golden Feather Sect and on poor terms with the Azure Pond Sect… who would dare get close? And my Moongaze Lake is situated right between the Golden Feather Sect's poisonous flood dragon and the Azure Pond Sect's sick tiger…'

"This junior understands," Li Ximing said gravely. Only then did he take his leave. Yuanxiu rose to see him out. The moment they left the Pristine Merging

Owl Pool, the world felt clear and bright again. They walked out of the Azure Pond Sect, and Li Ximing departed, vanishing into the Great Void.

Yuanxiu watched him go before returning to the mountain. He slowly stroked his beard, musing, "Next is Xiao Chuting. Who knows if that fellow will even see him. Li Ximing speaks well. His fortune is strong, and he is not a fool… just too young."

The Great Void.

After leaving the Azure Pond Sect, Li Ximing did not immediately head for the Xiao family's grand formation. Instead, he traversed the Great Void, following the flows of spiritual energy until he came to a stop before Mount Xianyou.

A formal visit like this was different from a private one. One could not simply step out of the Great Void into their territory. At the Azure Pond Sect, he had entered through the main gate, a gesture signifying goodwill between the two families. If he had done so for the Azure Pond Sect, it was even more imperative for the Xiao family.

'What kind of figure is Hengzhu, to have reached such a state?' he wondered. 'I haven't heard of him being particularly close to any family, yet he has managed to offend so many.'

This reminded him of something. "When Murong Xia came south all those years ago, he devoured one of Hengzhu's direct descendants. At the time, I just thought the monk was arrogant, but thinking back on it now… perhaps Hengzhu's predicament was already beginning to show then…"

The Three Sects and Seven Gates had always been aloof and remote. Only upon reaching the Purple Mansion Realm did he understand the sheer amount of in-fighting that occurred within their ranks. As he was lost in thought, a figure approached from the mountain ahead. The man, dressed in a long robe, clasped his fist. "Xiao Ruyu of the Xiao family greets the Daoist Master!"

The middle-aged man had a warm smile and a humble, courteous demeanor—clearly a man of the world. Li Ximing had heard his name before; he had some dealings with his father's generation. He waved his hand. "So it is Market Master Ruyu."

Xiao Ruyu had once been a leading figure in the Xiao family, but it seemed he had made some mistake and was sidelined for decades, tasked only with guarding the market. With no interaction, the relationship with the Li family had cooled.

There was no trace left of the high-spirited youth who had pursued the Golden Tang Gate alongside Li Xuanfeng. All that remained were the deep marks of time's cruel passage. The life of that once-righteous young man had not been smooth either. He had endured different hardships than Li Xuanfeng, and his sharp edges had been worn completely smooth.

He bowed his head respectfully. "My clan uncle, Xiao Yongling, should have been the one to greet you, but he entered seclusion years ago to attempt his breakthrough to the Purple Mansion Realm. I can only ask for your forgiveness for having to receive you in his stead."

'Xiao Yongling is attempting to break through to the Purple Mansion Realm…'

Li Ximing was surprised. After a moment of thought, he asked, "If I recall correctly… he cultivates the 'Eastern Feather Mountain' lineage, does he not? Which branch of the Dao is it?"

Coming from anyone else, the question might have seemed like prying into their cultivation secrets. But from a Purple Mansion cultivator, it was a gesture of concern. Xiao Ruyu answered respectfully, "Reporting to the Daoist Master, my clan uncle cultivates the 'Capital Guard' lineage from the Ancient Merging Dao. It is a path that has been lost to the Yue State for many years. It was a chance discovery by our own Daoist Master."

It was the first time Li Ximing had heard of this lineage. He committed it to memory but knew it was not the time or place to inquire further. He followed Xiao Ruyu into the mountain. When they arrived before the main peak's formation, Xiao Ruyu finally spoke. "I must ask this Fellow Daoist to wait outside."

He was, of course, referring to Ding Weizeng. The big man hesitated, looking to Li Ximing. A thought stirred in Li Ximing's mind, and he immediately sensed something was wrong.

'If Xiao Chuting hadn't given a specific order… Xiao Ruyu would never dare to bar my way… What does this mean?'

Chapter 704: The Dawn of an Immortal Clan

He waved a hand dismissively. “Weizeng, the Daoist Master and I have important matters to discuss. Please wait at the foot of the mountain.”

Ding Weizeng naturally complied. As Xiao Ruyu led him away, the burly man, despite his power, felt a wave of apprehension. He was a known figure in Jiangbei, but he had never experienced the grandeur of a true immortal clan. In the presence of the Xiao family, he felt utterly out of his depth.

Li Ximing ascended the main peak of Mount Xianyou alone, his steps measured as he approached the deep pool. This time, no snow fell; the stone path was clear, and the air was filled with a serene, welcoming tranquility. When he reached the water’s edge, he found the old man not fishing, but sitting peacefully and sipping tea.

“Zhaojing pays his respects to the Daoist Master,” Li Ximing said with a bow before taking a seat at the table.

Xiao Chuting’s demeanor was as unhurried as ever. “There is no need for such formality.”

This was an official visit, far different from his previous attempt to foster goodwill. The tea Xiao Chuting served was a pale yellow, shimmering with a potent spiritual energy that marked it as a high-grade brew. Li Ximing took a small sip. While it was of little use to a Purple Mansion cultivator, its fragrance was exquisite.

After a moment’s pause, Li Ximing lowered his voice. “Senior… that cultivator from Jiangbei follows the Hengzhu Immortal Dao. Is there any sign of a hidden motive?”

Xiao Chuting had barred Ding Weizeng from the mountain, and Li Ximing's first instinct was that the man was trouble. But the old man simply shook his head. "Si Boxiu sent him, didn't he?"

Understanding dawned on Li Ximing, and he recounted his recent conversation. Xiao Chuting let out a soft laugh. "He suspects the extent of my divine abilities and wanted to test whether I have mastered 'Holding the Ridge.' So first, he mentioned Daoist Xiangchun, knowing you would find it too troublesome. Then he mentioned me, making the suggestion seem casual."

He elaborated, "My path of 'Pit Water' includes the divine ability 'Holding the Ridge.' The water dwells within the mountain, sustained by its source, making it inexhaustible. It has the power to heal and restore life, and it could certainly cure your retainer."

"All he needed to do was watch. If your retainer left Mount Xianyou fully healed, he would know with near certainty that I, Xiao Chuting, have mastered the ability."

"This junior was ignorant of such subtleties and nearly caused a problem," Li Ximing said apologetically, thanking him for the guidance. Xiao Chuting could have easily dismissed the matter with a simple excuse; his detailed explanation was a clear gesture of instruction.

A more serious thought struck Li Ximing, and he frowned. "I wonder, was Daoist Master Yuanxiu merely seizing an opportunity, or did he use his life divine ability to orchestrate this? Would he truly concern himself with such a minor affair?"

"He was merely seizing an opportunity," Xiao Chuting replied casually. "A passing test. Though his 'Wood Becoming Principle' is a life divine ability, it doesn't focus on manipulating events. Besides, he is far too proud to bother with such schemes."

It was clear from his tone that he had dealt with countless such ploys over the years; this was nothing more than a trivial distraction. He changed the subject. "Regarding Changxi, it seems you have agreed to his request. Do you know the full story behind the Radiant Sky Stone?"

Seeing the conversation turn to the Kong family, Li Ximing replied, "I know the basics, but I would be grateful for your instruction, Senior."

He knew that the Kong family had only provided information without getting directly involved, but he listened as Xiao Chuting began to explain.

"Years ago, Tu Longjian remained unaligned for a long time. After his breakthrough to the Purple Mansion Realm, he entered a long seclusion, seeing no one. It was a clear statement that he wished to remain neutral. Since he had made his name in the Yue State, such an attitude earned him more than a few cold shoulders."

"The incident with the Radiant Sky Stone was engineered to force his hand. When Li Xijun was led to the cultivators from the Crimson Reef Island, it was to compel Tu Longjian to choose between returning the spirit item and siding with the Hengzhu Immortal Dao. He staunchly refused to choose, and so, Li Xijun died."

As Li Ximing remained silent, Xiao Chuting continued, "The role the Kong family played in all this is… difficult to say for certain. Changxi was an outcast in Jiangnan. If an opportunity arose to curry favor with the major powers by fanning the flames, he would not have passed it up. Furthermore, knowing Tu Longjian's character, he likely calculated that even if he couldn't save Li Xijun, the Radiant Sky Stone would still end up in your family's hands."

"He had some ties to the Crimson Reef Island. A solution that pleased both sides was not beyond his means."

Though Xiao Chuting claimed it was "difficult to say," his meaning was clear: Changxi had been a key instigator. He had helped the Crimson Reef Island lure Tu Longjian while ensuring the Li family obtained the Radiant Sky Stone.

'It's even possible,' Li Ximing thought, 'that the Radiant Sky Stone was the payment the Crimson Reef Island promised the Profound Peak Gate for luring Tu Longjian. Changxi simply passed it along to my family as our 'reward.' '

He understood now. Without the information from the Profound Peak Gate, the Li family might never have pursued the stone. It was precisely because they valued their relationship with the Kong clan, and because they had followed Changxi's wishes by pressuring Si Yuanli, that they saw the stone as due compensation and decided to act.

Looking back, the entire affair was a web of complexity. His family had merely been the killers; behind the scenes, several Purple Mansion cultivators had been pulling the strings.

'And the Changxiao Gate, who seemed to gain nothing… what was their role in all this?'

As his mind churned, Xiao Chuting took another sip of tea. "Did you accept Changxi's gift, Zhaojing? Knowing this now, how will you proceed?"

Li Ximing fell silent for a moment. Changxi's actions hadn't been intended to harm his family, merely to make their decisions for them. From any objective standpoint, trading a Foundation Establishment cultivator with no hope of reaching the Purple Mansion for a Radiant Sky Stone was a monumental gain.

'But back then, my family was just a noble house. Did we ever truly have the power to make our own decisions?'

He could hardly seek justice for Li Xijun's death. At most, he could hate the Crimson Reef Island. He certainly couldn't voice any blame in front of Xiao Chuting. "The Crimson Reef Island wanted to entrap Tu Longjian," he finally answered. "My family would have been caught in the crossfire regardless. Without the Profound Peak Gate, they would have used even crueler methods. Given their animosity toward us, it might not have been just my cousin who perished."

"This was like someone holding a knife to my throat to force my elders to act. Daoist Master Changxi merely tugged on his sleeve and secured some compensation for us. What he gained is another matter. My family was a minor house then. When a Purple Mansion cultivator offers aid, one does not have the luxury of being picky."

Whatever his true feelings were about Changxi, his words were exceedingly diplomatic, and not just for his sake.

The Profound Peak Gate had fanned the flames, but the Xiao family had remained completely aloof. They had controlled the eastern shore, denying the Li family the right to build a market, and had stood by during numerous conflicts. If Li Ximing spoke ill of Changxi, what would that make Xiao Chuting?

Li Ximing remembered one crucial fact: Mount Xianyou was not the Li family. Though the memory of Li Xijun's death was a knot in his heart, who truly cared? All anyone wanted was a gesture.

His reply elicited no significant change in Xiao Chuting's expression. The old man simply nodded. "You see things clearly, Zhaojing. That is no small feat."

His voice carried a hint of lament. Reaching the Purple Mansion Realm was a glorious achievement, enough to make even the most resolute cultivator swell with pride. And now, it was Changxi who was old and frail, begging for help.

After a moment, Xiao Chuting smiled. "As for your retainer, you can ask Changxi. He will have a way."

Li Ximing offered his thanks. As their conversation wound down, and it seemed his visit was nearing its end, he recalled Si Boxiu's parting words. "Senior, you have supported the Xiao family alone in Jiangnan for so long. You must have infringed upon the interests of many Purple Mansion cultivators. Are there any misunderstandings with other Daoist Masters that I should be aware of?"

He was asking about Xiao Chuting's enemies. The old man understood at once, but his reply was nonchalant. "I keep to myself in Jiangnan. No one would believe you and I have formed an alliance. You need not worry. Go on now."

Moongaze Lake, Vermillion Bud Pavilion.

The bluestone lantern stands cast a hazy glow, their light reflecting on the ink-black surface of the lake. The night was deep.

Li Quewan concluded her cultivation and stood for a moment in the pavilion. Since her Daoist Master's breakthrough, the Bright Yang in the sky above the lake had become too potent and unstable. It was better to cultivate her Whole Pill in the dead of night. She had thus shifted her schedule, and now, as she finished, the world was shrouded in darkness.

"Sister Quewan!"

She had barely begun to rest when a figure on a flying shuttle zipped across the lake and landed beside her. It was a distant cousin from her own branch of the family who usually cultivated on the main island. Li Queyi was younger than her, dressed in a pink skirt, with a round face and delicate ears that gave her a refined, lovely appearance. She smiled brightly. "Congratulations, sister! Your brothers have all been released!"

"What?!"

Li Quewan's heart had been heavy with worry, expecting a summons to Mount Qingdu. The news was so unexpectedly good that a fleeting look of joy crossed

her face, quickly replaced by a flicker of unease. "How was the interrogation handled?"

She understood why Li Zhouwei had delayed, and she feared he might simply quash the matter without a proper investigation, which would only harm her in the long run.

But Li Queyi just smiled. "Don't worry, sister! Grand-uncle Chenghuai successfully broke through and has taken charge of Mount Qingdu. He used a truth-discerning talisman from his 'Untraceable Presence' lineage to expose all of Li Dongdi's lies! The rumors have collapsed on their own!"

A slow, genuine smile spread across Li Quewan's face. "Grand-uncle succeeded in his breakthrough? That's wonderful news!"

Li Queyi paused for a moment before adding, "Dozens of people involved have been captured, from outside families and branch lineages, even some from the main line. They've all been taken to the Water Cave on Mount Qingdu."

Li Quewan's joy quickly faded. She spoke softly, "I entered the main island and rose to stand with the Young Lord, despite coming from a branch family. It's only natural that there would be gossip and jealousy. We shouldn't be too harsh. If it causes chaos within the clan, the fault will ultimately be mine."

Li Queyi, who was also from the main line of the First Branch and was very close to Li Quewan, stared. A sense of injustice had long simmered within her, and her delicate eyebrows furrowed. "Sister, you think too highly of them. They're just insignificant nobodies."

Li Quewan simply shook her head. She rose from her seat in the pavilion, intending to go to Mount Qingdu to pay her respects to Li Chenghuai. But before she could leave, a man in black robes descended on the wind, landing before her. It was Chen Yang.

"Greetings, my lady," Chen Yang said with a cupped-fist salute. Without waiting for a reply, he stated gravely, "The Clan Head summons you. Please follow me to the island at once."

Not daring to delay, Li Quewan flew with him. As she arrived at the main hall on the island, she saw two youths waiting outside. One was dressed practically, with an ordinary face. The one beside him, however, was built for battle, with a bold and resolute air, thick eyebrows, and a suit of armor. Both had golden eyes.

"Greetings, Clan Sister," they both said.

Li Quewan quickly nodded in return. They were the Second Young Lord, Li Jianglong, and the Third Young Lord, Li Jiangxia. Both were younger than her, only eighteen or nineteen, and both cultivated the Bright Yang arts.

The Fourth Young Lord, Li Jiangliang, was still a child, but these two were formidable figures. Li Jianglong was known in the clan for his magnanimity and foresight, while Li Jiangxia had held a position of authority for some time, having recently returned from managing affairs on the eastern shore for the Purple Mansion Dharma Assembly.

Upon seeing Li Quewan, Li Jiangxia laughed heartily. "It's been many years, Clan Sister! A pity the Xiao family has returned the lands east of the shore. I will likely have to bid Father farewell and go back to take charge. There won't be much time to chat!"

Li Jiangxia was noticeably more outgoing than his brother, with a more striking presence and a more ruthless approach to his duties. He had distinguished himself early on and was favored by Li Zhouwei, who entrusted him with great responsibilities.

Li Jianglong was more reserved. He inquired after Li Quewan's brothers, and she answered his questions. Soon, they were summoned, and the three of them entered the hall together.

The hall was brightly lit. Li Zhouwei was still at his desk, marking documents with a vermillion brush. The end of the Purple Mansion Dharma Assembly had left a mountain of loose ends to tie up—which families had sent gifts, whose were more generous, who hadn't come, who had left halfway through. It was not a task that could be finished quickly.

He only set down his brush when the three of them approached. His eyes fell first on Li Quewan, his voice low and deep. "Wan'er, the matter within the clan has been settled. I've spoken with Uncle Chenghuai. For the time being, send your brothers to Mount Qingdu. They can work on the old master's talisman peak to keep him company."

The "old master" was, of course, Li Xuanxuan. After this ordeal, even if her brothers were released, their businesses were ruined. This arrangement was more than suitable. Li Quewan bowed respectfully. "Thank you, Clan Head."

Li Zhouwei nodded. "There has always been gossip in the clan—just power struggles between the sixteen prefectures. If it wasn't this rumor, it would have been another. Stay in the Vermillion Bud Pavilion and focus on your cultivation."

Li Quewan quickly agreed. Li Zhouwei then turned his gaze to his two sons, sliding a jade tablet across the desk. "Jiangxia, the Xiao family has ceded seventy-nine families on the eastern shore. Take this token, go to Mount Qingdu to get the immortal registers, and select a few Peak Attendants, Prefecture Stewards, and Guest Elders. Make a trip there and clean things up."

"Yes, sir!" Li Jiangxia's eyes lit up, his eagerness palpable. His brother, Li Jianglong, simply lowered his head, his expression unreadable.

Li Zhouwei picked up his brush again, not looking up as he asked, "Do you have a plan?"

Li Jiangxia answered without hesitation. "I've already thought it through, Father. Besides the tributes, first, we will station garrisons along the eastern shore to prohibit blood-qi consumption, hoarding of rice and meat, and forced mergers. Then, we will establish a market to facilitate trade. Finally, we'll establish a palace in the dense forest to govern the one hundred and eighteen families of the eastern shore."

"Every five years, twenty-four youths will be selected from those families to train at the mountain palace. Their treatment will be linked to their clan's status. Those who succeed in their cultivation can become stewards or Guest Elders in our service. Those who fail will return to their own families to manage their affairs."

Li Zhouwei's brush paused. "And if they don't wish to stay?"

Li Jiangxia frowned. "Then they can return to govern their own families."

Li Zhouwei glanced at Li Jianglong, who had been standing silently. "Jianglong, your thoughts."

Li Jianglong stepped forward and bowed. "Reporting to the Clan Head, my third brother's plan is excellent. The palace in the forest is currently empty and would be perfect for housing the geniuses from these families. However, we should frame it more favorably. Announce that once they complete their training and reach Qi Refinement, they are free. They can request to stay with our clan or

on the mountain, return to their own families, or even travel the world as they please."

Li Jiangxia understood immediately. The youth grinned. "I was short-sighted. My brother's way certainly sounds better."

In the impoverished and narrow lands of the eastern shore, how could any of the one hundred and eighteen families support even a single Qi Refinement cultivator? A clan head was the absolute peak. Even if they wanted to return home, they lacked the resources. To protect their families, their only real choice was to remain at the lake.

Besides, the Li family never restricted their cultivators from venturing out into the world. But most would return within a year or two, having learned the harsh realities of life as a rogue cultivator—constantly scrambling for spiritual energy, lacking spirit rice for sustenance, always hiding, always wandering. When compared to the techniques and resources the Li family provided, the choice was obvious. They would come back on their own.

Chapter 705: The Myriad Radiance Sword Gate

With the decision made, Li Jiangxia reported to Li Zhouwei, took the offered token, and departed, his spirits high as he went to assemble his forces for the eastern shore. Li Zhouwei raised a hand and turned to his other son.

"Jianglong," he began, "the Profound Peak Gate has requested a marriage alliance. We must send a young woman and betroth one of the brothers. Excluding the youngest, Jiangnian, who do you think is suitable?"

Only then did Li Jianglong bow formally, his tone respectful. "Father, in my opinion, this alliance is merely a gesture of goodwill. The future is uncertain. We should choose one of the younger brothers and postpone the wedding. This will give us room to maneuver if circumstances change, avoiding any future difficulties."

"As for which daughter to send," he added, "that will depend on the proposal the Profound Peak Gate brings."

"This is meant to reassure them," Li Zhouwei countered. "It cannot be a perfunctory gesture. Your suggestion lacks sincerity."

Li Jianglong bowed again. "Then I am willing to go to the Profound Peak Gate to cultivate as a direct descendant. This will put their minds at ease. As for the marriage, I implore you to arrange it for one of my younger brothers. I fear my own involvement could lead to disaster!"

Li Jianglong's reasoning was sound. Once Changxi died, the fate of the Profound Peak Gate was unknown. In the worst-case scenario, if the gate was destroyed, having an adult heir like Jianglong or Jiangxia married to one of their direct descendants would only burden their own children with a legacy of vengeance.

In contrast, Li Jiangliang was still a child. A wedding would be at least a decade away. By then, Changxi would be long gone, and the situation at the Profound

Peak Gate would be clear, preventing the Li family from becoming too deeply entangled.

His offer to go there himself, however, was unexpected. Li Zhouwei looked up at his son, his voice deep. "I had planned to give you authority over the dense forest and the one hundred and eighteen families once the eastern shore was settled, and send your brother in your stead. You wish to go to the Profound Peak Gate instead? Are you certain?"

All of his sons were capable leaders. As descendants of the Bright Yang lineage, they were ambitious and had already formed their own factions—a stark contrast to the deferential humility of previous generations. Li Zhouwei knew that even young Li Jiangliang harbored great aspirations. In this new, vibrant era of the clan, distancing oneself from the center of power was a major disadvantage. Li Jianglong's proposal was truly surprising.

Li Zhouwei asked again. Seeing his son bow low, he heard him say, "I have considered it carefully. I believe this journey will greatly benefit Moongaze Lake. I ask for your permission, Father."

"Very well." Li Zhouwei gave him no chance to equivocate, nodding immediately. "Go and choose two companions for your studies. I will speak with their Daoist Master myself. When you arrive at the Profound Peak Gate, be humble and cautious. Do not disgrace our family's name."

"You have my word, Father!"

Li Jianglong expressed his thanks and withdrew. Li Quewan, who had been listening quietly in her long, cloud-silk dress, found her opinion of him rising. She did not expect Li Zhouwei to turn to her next.

"Wan'er, regarding the eastern shore, who do you think should be sent to govern it?"

"This junior wouldn't dare overstep… It would be a breach of protocol."

"Speak freely," Li Zhouwei insisted.

Li Quewan had no choice but to bow. "Clan Head, the elders are needed to guard the northern shore and cannot be easily moved. Now that Grand-uncle Chenghuai has taken over Mount Qingdu, Uncle Zhouluo is available. However, his cultivation is at a critical stage, and I worry this might hinder him."

"Uncle Zhouming also reached Qi Refinement a few days ago," she continued, "and there is also Aunt Xinghan. Both could contribute."

She couldn't help but acknowledge a harsh truth: the conflict between the north and south had devastated the Chengmíng and Zhouxing generations. With Li Chenghuai, Li Minggong, and others already assigned crucial roles, the only remaining member of the Zhouxing generation with notable cultivation was Li Zhouluo. After him was Li Xinghan of the First Branch, a quiet cultivator who was rarely seen outside of her seclusion.

As for Li Zhouming, though he was a direct grandson of the clan's Daoist Master, his talent was lackluster. He was over thirty and had only managed to break through with the aid of a talisman pill, making him less accomplished than even the brothers Li Zhoufang and Li Zhouyang.

Li Zhouwei sighed inwardly. The Zhouxing generation's talent was on par with that of an ordinary noble house, but lacked any truly outstanding figures. They had come of age during the tumultuous north-south conflict, a time of instability that not only deprived them of practical experience but also left many of them orphaned, with nothing but a storage pouch to inherit.

The vassal families had fared no better and had yet to recover their strength. The An clan was fortunate to have produced a Foundation Establishment cultivator, and the Chen clan had Chen Yang, with Chen Donghe still at the Jade Court. But the other prominent families of Lijing, despite their outward splendor, were suffering from a decline in talent, their prestige slowly fading.

"Uncle Chenghuai is now at Mount Qingdu, so it would be inappropriate for Zhouluo to enter the dense forest… For now, send one of the old masters to oversee things. Have Zhouming and Xinghan accompany them to learn."

Having issued his orders, he finally set down his brush. "I will be traveling to Jiangbei in a few days," he said softly. "I am leaving Jiangqian in charge of clan affairs. I want you to assist him. With Uncle Chenghuai here, there shouldn't be any trouble."

Li Quewan bowed her head in assent. Li Zhouwei then took the Mountain Ghost Talisman from his sleeve and placed it in her hand.

"This is a Mountain Ghost Talisman. It holds the power of a Foundation Establishment cultivator. Study it. It can also serve to protect you."

The Myriad Radiance Sword Gate.

The Myriad Radiance Sword Gate was located in Jingchuan Prefecture, a region of rolling hills and lush vegetation. The sect's mountain, Yuchuan Sword Peak, rose from the earth like a greatsword piercing the heavens. From its summit, the Eastern Sea, less than two hundred miles away, stretched out in a vast, breathtaking panorama.

Atop the sharp, sword-like main peak grew a Profound Horn Treasured Tassel Pine. Unlike ordinary pines that grow straight and tall, this one spread out like a magnificent canopy. Its needles, clustered like tassels of emerald jade, marked it as a Purple Mansion spirit pine of the Horn Wood path, famed throughout Jiangnan.

The Sword Gate was a place of quiet cultivation. Pavilions were scattered across the peak, yet few people were about. Only one person came to greet Li Ximing—Cheng Jinzhu, who had attended the Dharma Assembly. With a sword on his back, he led Li Ximing up the mountain. A southeast wind rustled through the pine needles, scattering iridescent light.

The Profound Light in the center of Li Ximing's brow stirred. He sensed something unusual about the wind, a verdant, life-giving quality that resonated with the Dao of Horn Wood.

"A fine Horn Wood spring breeze," he remarked.

His Profound Light divine ability could detect anomalies, and he had noticed it at a glance.

"The Daoist Master's perception is truly profound," Cheng Jinzhu said quickly. "This is indeed of the Horn Wood path. We call it the Treasured Tassel Spring Breeze. Whenever the wind blows from the southeast and passes through the branches of our Ancestor Tree, it transforms, gaining the power to nourish the people and the land."

He elaborated, "The wind travels from the southeast to the northwest until it reaches Salt Lake. There, it merges with the sea breeze, turns west, and follows the river, bringing life to Jiangnan."

'So that's it,' Li Ximing thought with a quiet sigh. 'No matter how many demonic or bloody calamities the Azure Pond Sect suffers, its population always recovers quickly. This Purple Mansion spirit tree must be a major reason why!'

Just as the thought crossed his mind, a figure materialized beneath the tree. He was a middle-aged man in a Daoist robe, his hair and beard streaked with white. He held a sword in his arms and wore a faint, surprised smile.

"I am Lingmei," he said. "Greetings, Zhaojing."

"Greetings, Senior!" Li Ximing returned the bow. The cultivators of the Myriad Radiance Sword Gate were renowned for their combat prowess, and few were willing to offend them. He was naturally polite.

Daoist Master Lingmei approached and made another introduction. "And this is Senior Tianjiao."

Li Ximing then understood he was referring to the Profound Horn Treasured Tassel Pine before him. He quickly offered a respectful bow. "This junior pays his respects."

Li Ximing had three spirit trees of his own: a Snake-Dragon Fruit Tree and a Wanling Flower Tree, neither of which had gained sentience, and a Spirit Persimmon Tree from the Quanwu Mountains. Though the persimmon's origins were far humbler than the other two, it had developed a nascent consciousness.

The Profound Horn Treasured Tassel Pine, however, gave no response.

"The old senior sleeps often," Lingmei explained. "He hasn't stirred in nearly fifty years. Please do not take offense."

Li Ximing nodded and followed him forward. Daoist Master Lingmei gestured for him to sit. "This senior has quite a history," he said with a smile. "When True Monarch Taiyu cultivated on this mountain, the golden qi he radiated was so intense that it left the land barren for hundreds of miles. He had to plant this tree to shield the area. Later, when the founder of our sect, the Myriad Radiance Sword Cheng Liuxing, became the True Monarch's disciple, he had to address this tree as Martial Uncle..."

"Planted by a True Monarch!"

Li Ximing was stunned. True Monarch Taiyu was a legendary figure. The power of this ancient tree had to be supreme among Purple Mansion cultivators. As long as it stood here, who would dare attack the Sword Gate?

A clear note of pride entered Lingmei's voice. "Our swords may cleave the sky and our golden qi may be overwhelming, but we have never brought harm to the people of Jingchuan Prefecture, all thanks to this old senior!"

He led Li Ximing to a table beneath the tree, its surface covered in jade-like pine needles. With a sweep of his sleeve, Lingmei cleared a space and poured tea. "I must say, your visit is quite a surprise, Zhaojing!"

Li Ximing merely smiled and replied courteously, "My ancestors were renowned as sword immortals, their names recorded in Chenghua Hall's *Myriad Radiance Sword Tome*. Now that I have reached the Purple Mansion Realm, it is only right that I come to pay my respects. Furthermore, my family has practiced swordsmanship for generations, sharing a spiritual lineage and a righteous bond with the Sword Gate. How could I not visit?"

"Indeed." Lingmei nodded, looking pleasantly surprised. His face was squarish and honest, but his eyes shone with approval. "Our founder once said that anyone whose name is recorded in the *Sword Tome* is an honored guest of our gate. In matters of life and death, they may call upon us for aid."

A pained look crossed his face. "Though many years have passed and our founder is long gone, our gate still considers the world's sword immortals our friends. It is a great regret that by the time we learned of your ancestor's plight… he had already been slain!"

Li Ximing sighed. "The affairs of the world are unpredictable…"

Lingmei did not dwell on the past. He changed the subject, his voice softening. "Fate works in strange ways. You and I, Zhaojing, share the same family name."

"Oh?" Li Ximing was taken aback. "Is the Daoist Master not named Cheng?"

Lingmei laughed heartily. "My birth name is Li Mei."

He paused, observing Li Ximing's expression, and stroked his beard. "In the path of cultivation, when one person achieves the Dao, their entire lineage benefits. The descendants of cultivators are born with exceptional talent that mortals cannot match. Thus, most sects and clans are built upon bloodlines."

"But the talent for the sword is different," he continued. "The son of a farmer might draw a treasured sword of immense power, while the child of a Purple Mansion cultivator might not be able to wield a simple three-foot blade. Our Sword Gate honors swordsmanship above all, so it is common to see Qi Refinement cultivators as Peak Lords and Embryonic Breathing cultivators as Guest Elders."

Understanding dawned on Li Ximing.

Lingmei went on, "Our sect follows the righteous path, and our core disciples come from many families. The Cheng clan are the descendants of our founder, so they are naturally respected and often represent us, holding the position of Sect Master."

"A truly righteous path!" Li Ximing praised, finding it hard to believe.

Lingmei, however, looked weary. "Perhaps not… It has its own flaws, hardships only we can understand, though the other sects can see it plainly enough… As I was just explaining to you."

"Our gate honors those with exceptional swordsmanship and virtue. But how many cultivators are there to begin with? To find someone who excels at both, and also possesses supreme talent for cultivation… you might not see one in a century!"

"As a result, the truly talented often lack resources, while the mediocre squander countless treasures just to take a single step forward. To gain resources, one must first practice the sword, then go out into the world to help the common people and demonstrate virtue. But with the exception of a few geniuses, swordsmanship deepens with age. By the time they have perfected their art, they have missed their window for a breakthrough. This has thrown the entire sect into chaos. There have even been cases of Embryonic Breathing elders enjoying the resources of a direct disciple for a hundred years, only to die upon breaking through to Qi Refinement…"

"That…" Li Ximing frowned at the thought.

Lingmei sighed. "I lived through that era. After I reached the Purple Mansion Realm and took charge, I used the founder's grace as a pretext to strongly promote the Cheng clan and change the situation. I enacted many reforms and ignored countless objections. That is how we came to see the rise of talents like Cheng Mianfu, Cheng Gao, and Gu Pang…"

"Even so, to this day, most of our direct disciples are weak in cultivation, skilled only in swordplay… or in some cases, possessing only virtue. The mess left behind, the countless bad debts from those who consumed resources without contributing… it's a reckoning that can no longer be calculated!"

Hearing this, Li Ximing finally understood why the Myriad Radiance Sword Gate—a lineage of sword immortals and successors to a Golden Core cultivator—was unable to contend with Crimson Reef Island and the Pure Unity Dao Gate, leaving them floundering in the Eastern Sea. His heart sank.

"The righteous path is difficult," he said. "It is fortunate you appeared to set things right."

"It's too soon to say," Lingmei replied, shaking his head. "I have not yet changed the fundamental law of selecting disciples based on virtue. There are already undercurrents of resentment against me within the sect. If I were to touch that core principle, I fear they would all go to Chenghua Hall to prostrate themselves before Senior Tianjiao and demand that the *Sword Tome* be used to execute me as a heretic. How history will judge me is anyone's guess."

Daoist Master Lingmei was entirely different from Si Boxiu or Xiao Chuting. Perhaps because the Li family also followed a righteous path and was a clan of sword immortals, his attitude was far more earnest. His cultivation of both the sword and virtue gave his words a steady, sincere weight.

"In any case, your visit at this time has truly helped me. There are many stubborn elders in the sect who hold the Li family in high regard… especially after the Celestial Moon Sword sacrificed themself to slay the Wrathful Manifestation, an act that has been recorded in Chenghua Hall and earned great renown. For this, I thank you, Zhaojing!"

With that, the mighty mid-stage Purple Mansion cultivator rose from his seat to offer a formal bow.

Startled, Li Ximing shot to his feet to avoid it.

"However," Daoist Master Lingmei said humbly, "my family has a rule. We do not participate in the struggles between sects and clans, nor in the schemes of Purple Mansion cultivators. We aided the Green Pine Temple because they sought to retrieve an artifact of their founder, a justifiable cause. Otherwise, our gate would not have acted… If you have other intentions, Zhaojing, I am afraid you will be disappointed!"

No one who reached the Purple Mansion Realm was a fool. Lingmei's words were sincere, but he was well aware of the unspoken currents in any meeting between cultivators of their level. His statement drew a clear line. His gratitude might be genuine, but it also served as a polite refusal that Li Ximing could not take offense to.

The thanks had been solemn, but the boundary had been drawn with unimpeachable righteousness. What could Li Ximing possibly say? He had come to the Sword Gate precisely to avoid choosing between the Golden Feather Sect and the Hengzhu Immortal Dao, and he had never expected them to forge an alliance with his family.

He replied respectfully, "Senior, you misunderstand. I have come this time only to pay homage to the sword intent of my ancestors. I have no other motive. I only ask to be allowed to see the true face of the *Myriad Radiance Sword Tome*."

Chapter 706: The Vicissitudes of the World

At Li Ximing's request, Daoist Master Lingmei nodded. He asked Li Ximing to enjoy his tea while he went to Chenghua Hall to retrieve the tome. After a considerable wait, he returned, holding a Daoist scripture in his hands.

The book had a deep blue cover and pages of pale yellow. It was held half-open in Lingmei's hands, and even when he arrived back under the pine, he did not place it on the jade table.

"Zhaojing, please, have a look."

It seemed awkward for him to continue holding it, but since such treasures often possessed strange properties, placing it on the table might risk shattering the jade. Li Ximing activated his divine ability and reached for it with both hands. But Daoist Master Lingmei raised a hand to stop him.

"Zhaojing, the *Myriad Radiance Sword Tome* is no ordinary artifact," Lingmei said with a smile. "Allow me."

"If one possesses sword intent, the tome is as light as silk," he explained. "Even an elderly farmer could tuck it under his arm and walk away. But for one without a cultivation in the sword Dao, it is heavier than a mountain. Even a Purple Mansion cultivator would struggle to lift it."

Li Ximing smiled back and nodded, his gaze falling upon the tome. Lingmei had opened it to a page near the end. Six or seven pages had been turned, revealing a few small, bright characters:

□White Pear□

The two characters were a stark, snowy white. A few lines down, more small, white characters appeared:

□Imperial Sun□

Following these were even smaller, fly-speck characters that read: 【Pure Yang Sword of the Imperial Sun Spirit】. What came next was a complex series of symbols and phrases, impossible to decipher.

Using his own divine ability, Daoist Master Lingmei flipped through the pages until he reached the very last few. There, written in ancient, cyan-white script, were the words:

【Azure Ruler】

Li Ximing recognized it as the name of a sword. A few lines below, however, the characters were written in ordinary black ink:

【Celestial Moon】

Beneath these two words was a note: 【Autumnlight Sword of the Celestial Moon's Profound Union】. Li Ximing studied it carefully, a bitter feeling rising in his heart. "What is the name that follows?" he asked. "And why are its characters not as bright as the ones before?"

Daoist Master Lingmei sighed. "When a sword intent manifests in the world, its name is recorded in the tome. If the characters are bright, it means that sword intent still exists. The names you see are those of the intents themselves."

The sword intent sealed by the Li family had been used long ago, so its entry was naturally dim. Li Ximing bowed in reverence. After a long, silent moment, Lingmei returned the tome to its place and offered a word of comfort.

"It is often said that a grudge can be avenged even after a century. But there are times when there is no target for vengeance. To have all that power coiled in your hand with nowhere to release it… that is the true hardship."

Li Ximing understood he was referring to the fact that Chi Wei was long dead, and the Chi family had withered to the point where only a few insignificant members of a branch family remained. Though the Li family now had a Purple Mansion cultivator, there was no one left to take revenge upon.

"Thank you for your understanding, Senior," he said softly.

When he thought about it, Li Xuanfeng and Li Xizhi had played a crucial role in the Chi family's destruction. With the exception of Chi Zhiyun, who was in seclusion, every direct descendant of the Chi clan had been wiped out. In a way, vengeance had already been served.

'And Chi Zhiyun is in seclusion somewhere,' Li Ximing thought fleetingly. 'Si Boxiu will most likely never let him out.'

The thought sparked another memory—his uncle Li Yuanjiao's friend, Cheng Gao. "Daoist Master, you mentioned a Cheng Gao earlier," he asked. "He has some history with my family. Might I ask where he is now?"

Lingmei paused for a moment before answering. "He is still stationed in Ganzi, in the Great Western Plains, guarding the Bai Liqiang kingdom. It's a small nation, but the Long region is rife with demonic cultivators these days, so he cannot be easily moved."

The Myriad Radiance Sword Gate's main sect was in Jiangnan, yet their jurisdiction extended all the way to the border of the Wu and Zhao kingdoms in the northwest. Li Ximing had wondered about this for years, and now he had the perfect opportunity to ask. Lingmei answered readily.

"This traces back to the True Monarch. When our founder sought the Dao, he originally planned to establish the sect right here on Yuchuan Sword Peak. But when he consulted the True Monarch, his request was denied."

"The True Monarch said, 'The Dao lineages of the world may change as they will, but two things must not be altered. The first is that sword sects must choose their mountains in the Shu region. The second is that shamanistic talismans must flourish in the Southern Borderlands.' Our ancestor asked for a reason time and again, but the True Monarch would only say that it was more pleasing to the eye of the Immortal Monarchs…"

"'More pleasing to the eye?'"

Li Ximing frowned, puzzled. But the words of an Immortal Monarch surely held a deeper meaning.

Lingmei continued, "So our ancestor established the sect in Shu. In Jiangnan, we only had two locations: Sword Ferry and Sword Peak. At our zenith, our power extended across both Long and Shu. After our founder fell, the sect gradually declined. And since our ancestral tree in Jiangnan could not be moved, we slowly migrated to the more spiritually abundant lands here. That is why we still have foundations in Long and Shu to this day."

Understanding dawned on Li Ximing, and he began to calculate inwardly. 'I've heard that the founder of the Wei Li family was originally from the Li clan of

Long. I'll have to make a trip there someday. If the Sword Gate has a presence there, I can ask them for information.'

After a few more pleasantries, he rose to take his leave. Lingmei, not wanting him to have come all this way for nothing, took a jade box from his sleeve. He had clearly prepared it when he went to retrieve the *Sword Tome*.

"My apologies for the trouble, Zhaojing," he said. "I hear your clan has a Wanling Flower Tree. Please accept this Horn Wood Golden Tassel. It will be of great benefit to the spirit plant. Consider it a gift from our Sword Gate in return for your visit."

Li Ximing was unable to refuse and accepted the box. He left the mountain peak and stepped into the Great Void. Only then did he open the box. Inside lay a single, gleaming golden needle from a Horn Wood tassel.

'This is from that Profound Horn tree. It's a resource on the level of the Purple Mansion realm, far better than any ordinary treasure.'

He put the box away, a sense of relief washing over him. He had successfully managed his dealings with all three major powers. Though the Sword Gate had politely seen him off, his business with them was concluded, and his mind felt much lighter.

'My relationships with the Three Sects and Seven Gates are stable for now. Next… I can turn my attention to Jiangbei!'

Pingya Island.

Li Jiangxia emerged from the hall, his armor clanking with every step. He strode to the edge of the island, where a golden light glowed beneath his feet. A black horse with scales on its belly and crimson eyes stood waiting, snorting impatiently.

The steed was a crossbreed of the famed Zhongsa horse from the Eastern Yue region and the black-scaled horses of the great desert. An Zheyan had spent over three years capturing them, and several more breeding them. By the time the colt was grown and sent to Moongaze Lake, Li Zhouwei had already reached the Foundation Establishment realm and had no need for it. He had gifted it to his favored son, Li Jiangxia.

Just as Li Jiangxia swung himself onto the spirit horse and turned its head, a figure emerged from his lower left. The man had clearly been waiting for some time. He called out past the guards.

"Third Prince! Third Prince!"

Li Jiangxia looked down, a flicker of confusion on his face. His brother, Li Jianglong, who had been a step behind, caught up and glanced at the man.

"Third Brother," he said with a smile, "you may not know him. This is the illegitimate son of a cousin from the twenty-sixth branch. Outside the main lineage, his name is Hun."

"So it's you!"

Li Jiangxia was rarely in the clan and knew nothing of a Hun or a Xing. He urged his horse forward, and the two guards blocked his path with their cold, gleaming iron spears. Li Hun, who was older than both of them, cried out.

"Ah, the Second Prince is here as well! This nephew pays his respects."

Li Jiangxia noted the man's thin frame and plain features. He raised his whip and laughed heartily. "Second Brother, this man looks just like you! He must be family. Except for the eyes, the resemblance is uncanny!"

Li Jiangxia's boisterous, energetic demeanor was a world away from Li Jianglong's, but since Li Hun's maternal clan was the Chen family—the same as Li Jianglong's—a resemblance was to be expected.

Li Jianglong's expression was one of mild amusement as he joined in the laughter. On the ground, Li Hun went pale and dropped to his knees with a thud.

"You honor me too much, my lords!" he cried. "How could this nephew be so fortunate? I have only just come of age and was looking for some work on the island. I did not expect to see the Third Prince. My father often speaks of you, and I became a little excited…"

'He still calls him Third Prince, eh?'

Li Jianglong saw at once that the man was trying to latch onto his brother. It was common knowledge that Jiangxia was destined for the eastern shore. For Li Hun to be here in the main hall meant his father must be a Qi Refinement cultivator. A smile played on Li Jianglong's lips.

'So, he's here to curry favor with my little brother.'

How could Li Jiangxia not see it? He let out a great laugh and tucked his whip away, pulling on the reins. "Fine, fine! When I have a moment after I return from the eastern shore, you can come and find me for a proper chat."

Without waiting for a reply, he spurred his horse and galloped off, leaving a stunned Li Hun in his wake. Before the man could react, Li Jianglong had already helped him to his feet.

"Cousin, you came to the island to…?"

Li Hun answered instinctively, "They said a guest had arrived on the island. My father brought him into the hall. Several elders went as well, to see the Clan Head. He…"

He trailed off, realizing his mistake. But Li Jianglong had already let go of his hand, his expression one of surprise. "Oh, it's clan business! I thought you were just visiting relatives. My apologies for asking. You shouldn't have said anything… really, you shouldn't have! You have a loose tongue, child. You shouldn't wander around the hall like this in the future. If you stumble into something important… be careful you don't get punished on Mount Qingdu!"

His words struck fear into Li Hun's heart. As he spoke, Li Jianglong's hand had deftly unfastened the token from Li Hun's waist, palming it. His tone grew heavier.

"It's a good thing I ran into you, to keep you from wandering off. Come, let's go see your father."

Without his token, Li Hun was trapped. He could only follow numbly, his mind racing. Panic finally set in.

"Second Prince, my father… he's in the middle of something important! It's really not a good time to see him!"

"It's fine."

Li Jianglong paused at the top of the steps and turned back with a pleasant smile. His golden eyes were piercing.

"I'll wait for him in the side hall."

Li Hun froze, unable to move. Li Jianglong gently took his hand and led him through the corridors. By the time they reached the side hall, Li Hun was ready to collapse.

Li Jianglong paid him no mind, his attention focused elsewhere. He saw a disheveled middle-aged man walk past the guards. He appeared to be a late-stage Qi Refinement cultivator, but his cultivation was unstable, clearly propped up by spiritual items.

'Who is this…?'

Li Ximing traveled for a short while in the Great Void before piercing through his family's great array. He descended on a beam of celestial light, flying straight into the great hall. A journey that would have taken days before he reached the Purple Mansion realm now took less than half an hour. The sky had barely changed.

Li Zhouwei was standing in the hall, more than a dozen jade boxes laid out on a table before him. He was writing on them with a vermillion brush. When Li Ximing appeared, he bowed.

"Daoist Master, the reciprocal gifts for the Three Sects and Seven Gates are ready."

Of the various powers in the Yue State—the Three Sects, Seven Gates, and two clans besides their own—Li Ximing had chosen to personally visit three. That did not mean the rest could be ignored. For every Purple Mansion cultivator who had attended his Dharma Assembly, a letter and a gift had to be sent, explaining that he was in seclusion to stabilize his divine abilities and could not visit in person.

Li Ximing had already prepared his letters for the Golden Feather Sect, the Hengzhu Immortal Dao, and the Profound Peak Gate, each with a specially chosen precious herb. Li Zhouwei took them and then reported Li Chenghuai's breakthrough. Li Ximing was very pleased.

"Have him come see me," he said with a nod.

Just as the words left his lips, a figure hurried in from outside the hall. "Reporting to the Clan Head and the Daoist Master," he said respectfully. "Someone has come to the island, claiming to be the son of an old friend. He requests an audience with the Clan Head."

'The son of an old friend.'

The phrase sparked a thought in Li Zhouwei's mind. He wondered who it could be. He saw the celestial light in the center of Li Ximing's brow stir. Li Ximing took a seat to the side, his voice turning slightly cold.

"Let him come up."

The man quickly retreated. After a dozen breaths, the sound of frantic footsteps echoed on the stairs. A man stumbled into the hall, looking utterly wretched. He fell to his knees with a thud and began to kowtow.

"Greetings… greetings to the Clan Head!"

Li Zhouwei studied him. He was a middle-aged man with a scruffy beard and a late-stage Qi Refinement cultivation. His face had a certain noble air, but it was contorted with panic and fear. His legs trembled as he knocked his head against the floor.

Li Zhouwei did not recognize him, but he saw Li Ximing take a sip of his tea. "Well, if it isn't Young Master Yuan," Li Ximing said casually. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

The words struck the man on the floor like a bolt of lightning. His entire body went cold, as if he might drop dead on the spot. He was so terrified he couldn't even speak. Li Ximing simply lowered his eyes and continued to drink his tea, not sparing him another glance.

After a moment, Li Chenghuai entered the hall and moved to the side. He glanced at the kneeling figure, and a feeling of familiarity washed over him. His heart jolted.

"Yuan Fuyao!"

The man was indeed the son of an old acquaintance: Yuan Fuyao, son of Yuan Chengdun.

Years ago, after Yuan Tuan disappeared, Yuan Chengdun had prepared to sail out to sea, not expecting to return. He had used the friendship between their families and his entire life's savings to arrange a marriage for his son, Yuan Fuyao. But Yuan Huwei and Yuan Hudu, seeking to curry favor with the Chi family, broke the agreement. They told Yuan Fuyao to take his inheritance and marry a young lady from the Song family instead.

That was the moment the rift between the Li and Yuan families began, a rift that had now grown so wide that Li Xizhi and Yuan Chengzhao were enemies.

Li Ximing knew all of this. He also knew that Yuan Fuyao had gone on to live a comfortable life with a beautiful wife, becoming the master of the Song estate. And now, here he was.

The expressions on the faces of the Li family members were varied, but Yuan Fuyao was too terrified to speak. His life with the Song family had indeed started idyllically, filled with cultivation and music. But a decade passed in the blink of an eye, and the north-south conflict erupted.

Thanks to his family's status, Yuan Fuyao was spared from fighting on the riverbanks. He had just breathed a sigh of relief when the Song family suffered devastating losses in the war. They began to eye Yuan Chengdun's legacy, borrowing five coins one day, ten the next, pressing him relentlessly.

The world was in chaos, and he had nowhere to run. Then came a string of calamities. The main line of the Chi family was annihilated, and the Song family's fortunes plummeted, which only made them more desperate. Fortunately, his father's inheritance was vast. He held onto it tightly and managed to survive for over a decade, though the comfortable life he once knew was gone.

He heard tales of the Li family's rise, of how Li Xizhi—the man who was almost his brother-in-law—had become a renowned master known throughout Jiangnan as the "Heavenly Pavilion Heavenly Glow." Regret gnawed at him like a rat, and he tossed and turned at night.

Then, the sound of Li Ximing's ascension, the sheer power of his divine ability, echoed through the Great Void across Jiangnan. Yuan Fuyao was struck with terror. He immediately jumped out of a window and fled, not daring to take anyone or anything with him. He hid in the wilderness for months. It was there he learned that the Azure Pond Sect had descended upon the Song estate that very night, leaving no survivors. His wife, concubines, and children were all dead.

But he had been born a coddled young master. Even at his worst in the Song household, his life had been one that ordinary rogue cultivators could only dream of. Hiding in the wild, afraid to be seen, was no life for him. He lived in constant fear that Li Ximing would remember him, tear open the void, and come for him. Finally, he had made his way to the lake himself.

He trembled for a long time before finally recounting his tragic tale. "I… I regret it all, but it is too late!" he choked out. "I beg the immortal clan to be magnanimous…"

Li Zhouwei had heard enough. He looked on with cold eyes. 'He has a bit of cunning… but his character is too weak to amount to anything.'

Chapter 707: The White river Creek Territory

Li Ximing understood the moment Yuan Fuyao finished his tale.

‘The wilderness is the territory of the Xiao and Kong families, and my clan is about to establish a presence there. He must have become a topic of conversation, a potential gift for someone to capture and present to us for favor. After the Si family destroyed the Song clan, his own bloodline fell into their hands. Finding him was only a matter of if they wanted to, not if they could.’

‘Coming to my family was his only real chance to save his life and fortune. A clever move.’

Though Yuan Fuyao was a coward, his father, Yuan Chengdun, had been a true hero. He had slain demons, earned a great name for himself, saved countless lives during the demonic calamity, and shared a bond with Li Yuanjiao. The Li family had long ago promised that even if the marriage alliance fell through, they would still look after Yuan Fuyao. Despite the disgrace Yuan Fuyao had brought upon himself, the Li family, out of respect for his father’s memory, would never truly harm him. Using him as an example of their magnanimity was the more logical path.

Yuan Fuyao had almost certainly realized this, which gave him the courage to make the journey. The man had some cunning. He even knew to seek out the Clan Head, Li Zhouwei, first, preventing any lesser members from capturing him for their own gain.

With Li Ximing seated to the side, Li Zhouwei naturally refrained from taking the main seat. He stood by, silent, but the cold glint in his eyes made it clear that he, too, saw through the entire affair. Li Ximing took a sip of tea and said softly, “You overstate things. My family has no interest in settling scores with you. Chenghuai, escort the young master back to the Mushroom Forest Plains.”

"Yes, Daoist Master," Li Chenghuai replied respectfully.

Without another word, he moved to Yuan Fuyao's side. As a Foundation Establishment cultivator, a simple touch was enough to immobilize the man. Li Chenghuai had known Yuan Fuyao since they were young, and he couldn't help but sigh inwardly as he dragged him away.

Li Ximing sat with the teacup in his hands, a long silence stretching before he finally spoke. "Yuan Chengdun was a hero of his time, yet his son is no better than a rat in a temple—useless, surviving only by the grace of his station. Talent is one thing, but to be so shortsighted and utterly dependent on his inheritance… The matter of heirs is truly unpredictable."

The words were laden with meaning. Li Zhouwei could only offer a quiet reply. "Yuan Fuyao has a certain quick-wittedness, but he was spoiled by the Yuan family. He's clever, but he was allowed to drift through his youth, so his ambitions are small. Even a fool, if guided and mentored daily, can be shaped into something useful."

Li Ximing waved a hand, dismissing the topic. He produced a jade box from his sleeve. "Enough of that. I received a Horn Wood Golden Tassel at the Sword Gate. Take it and use it to nourish the Wanling Flower."

"The matter of transplanting the Wanling Flower has not yet been settled," Li Zhouwei noted. "Is it…?"

Only then did Li Ximing understand. The Wanling Flower had been planted on Mount Huqian for years. In the Li family's early days, the mountain was considered adequate, but now it was a spiritually barren land. Moreover, its location by the lake was no longer secure. It was time to move it to the main island.

"Then let's wait. The Wanling Flower is too precious to be moved carelessly. I was just thinking of visiting Changxi; I'll discuss it with him as well."

Having concluded his clan business, Li Ximing vanished into the Great Void. Li Zhouwei remained in the hall for a few moments before taking the main seat. He picked up his vermillion brush and issued a command.

"Have the Peak Administrator come here at once."

This "Peak Administrator" was the Qi Refinement cultivator who had guided Yuan Fuyao to the island. He was Li Hun's father, Li Anshuo. He should have been named Li Jiangshuo according to his generation, but his poor talent had

denied him a place on the island when he was young. He had grown up on the outside, so he was more accustomed to his birth name. He currently served as an administrator for one of the prefectures on the western shore.

An attendant bowed and hurried out. A minute later, a man entered and prostrated himself in the hall. Without looking up, Li Zhouwei asked, "What did you receive in return?"

Li Anshuo remained on the floor. "Reporting to the Clan Head, Yuan Fuyao offered a staff technique to the clan. It was handed over to the island authorities upon his arrival."

"Cautious, I see. It must be Yuan Chengdun's staff technique, then. No wonder you were willing to take such a risk to personally introduce him." Li Zhouwei made a mark on a scroll, showing no sign of anger. "Yuan Fuyao isn't a fool, either. I imagine the scroll didn't specify the technique's grade… all the better to reduce your own liability."

The two statements left Li Anshuo drenched in a cold sweat. "The Clan Head's insight is profound. The Yuan family wrote it themselves, so it was not graded."

"Sit."

Li Zhouwei gestured for him to take a seat to the side before finally looking up. Li Anshuo couldn't meet his gaze.

"Don't direct your scheming at the island," Li Zhouwei said casually. "Since you have such an ambitious mind, you'll accompany me to the eastern shore tomorrow. There will be plenty of opportunities for you to scheme there."

"If you perform well, you will be rewarded. If you fail, I will settle today's matter with you then and there."

Li Anshuo was both shocked and overjoyed. He hurriedly expressed his thanks, his face beaming with confidence. It seemed that years as a minor administrator by the lake had been a waste of his talents. Li Zhouwei waved him away.

"You may go. Second Brother is waiting for you in the side hall."

The words wiped the smile from Li Anshuo's face. He froze for a second before hastily retreating. As he left, Li Zhouwei sent someone to retrieve Yuan Chengdun's staff technique and rubbed his temples.

'This Li Anshuo… he might be useful.'

The Li family was currently facing a severe shortage of talent. The handful of Foundation Establishment guest elders had eased the pressure at that level, but there was a gaping hole in the ranks of Qi Refinement cultivators. Eighty percent of the Chengming generation had died on the riverbanks, and the Zhouxing generation was lackluster. The four vassal families of Lijing, their pillars for a century, had been crippled, and the eastern and western shores had yet to recover their strength. All the while, the family's own enterprises were expanding faster than ever.

"Clan Head."

Li Zhouwei looked up to see Li Chenghuai glide into the hall like a phantom. He presented a jade scroll. "A message from the Fei family has arrived," he reported in a low voice. "There are two pieces of news."

Li Zhouwei took the scroll containing the staff technique and began to read it as Li Chenghuai continued.

"First, the Fei family's old patriarch, Fei Tongyu, passed away a few days ago. He died attempting to break through to the Foundation Establishment Realm. He had only been in seclusion for a few months, and there were no major phenomena."

"Old men… they can be stubborn."

With Fei Tongyu's broken body and shallow cultivation, attempting a breakthrough was a death sentence. It was a foregone conclusion. Fei Qingyi had sent several letters in an attempt to dissuade him, but the old man would not be moved. His death was like a single grain of sand, causing a small ripple in the Fei family that had already dissipated by the time the news reached the lake.

Li Chenghuai didn't dwell on it. "The Fei family's Fei Qingyi has broken through to the late stage of Qi Refinement. She has left Cold Cloud Peak and is waiting on the island, hoping to serve the clan."

With his pressing need for manpower, Li Zhouwei simply nodded. "He'll go to Jiangbei with the others."

Li Chenghuai withdrew. By then, Li Zhouwei had finished a rough scan of the jade scroll. Yuan Chengdun was truly a genius. The *Green Mountain Demon-Subduing Staff* technique was likely a fourth-grade art, valuable enough to serve as the core inheritance for an ordinary cultivator family.

The Great River was the world's artery, flowing from west to east and dividing the land into north and south. Across the river lay Jiangbei, the northern territory of the State of Xu. The first domain one encountered was the White river Creek territory, controlled by the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion from Xiaoshi Mountain.

Li Chenghui flew on a bolt of lightning above White river Creek, surveying the land. To the north lay the Tangdao Mountains, the domain of the Golden Tang Gate; he could faintly make out its rolling peaks. To the east was the White ye Creek territory of the White Ye Immortal Sect, obscured by a vast expanse of hills. Beyond White ye Creek was Chengshui Marsh, and further east still, bordering the sea, was the White sea Creek territory of Profound Wonder Temple.

If one flew higher, they would see that Jiangbei was trisected by three waterways: the White river, White ye, and White sea. Old Man Qu had told him that these three creeks were once a single great river, the Huai. During the cataclysm when six commanderies sank into the sea, the Huai River had vanished, leaving only these three streams behind.

Li Chenghui, along with Qu Bushi and An Siwei, landed before the Floating Cloud Cave. The path was littered with debris. The population had been plundered, and the spirit rice fields had been utterly ruined, leaving nothing but bare earth.

They descended before the entrance of the sect, which was situated on a low mountain. The protective array had been shattered long ago, and collapsed masonry was strewn everywhere. A few low-level rabbits and mice scurried through the dilapidated courtyards. Qu Bushi led the way with a practiced air. "My lord, Fu Dou's immortal foundation was 'Wood Leaning on Spring.' When he fell on this mountain, the flora erupted with life. It's only been a few months, but it looks like decades have passed."

An Siwei went to the summit and performed a quick divination. "Jiangbei is truly overflowing with spiritual energy," he marveled. "No wonder every Foundation Establishment cultivator wants to come here. Even a small peak like this can support several of them…"

Aside from the Li family's core territories—the dense forest, Gardenia Scenery Mountain, and Pingya Island, which could support a Purple Mansion

cultivator—the number of their lands that could sustain multiple Foundation Establishment cultivators could be counted on one hand. This place had neither high peaks nor deep earth-veins, yet it was remarkably rich.

"Protector, the Floating Cloud Cave territory has plenty of spirit fields," Qu Bushi explained, "but it's mostly hills. You won't find a single tall mountain. The Foundation Establishment cultivators were scattered across the low peaks… even the main peak had few residents."

Li Chenghui was aware of this. Floating Cloud Cave had been less of a centralized sect and more of a loose alliance of Foundation Establishment cultivators. They were large but hollow, each with their own agenda, which was why they had been powerless against Li Zhouwei. It was also why, when their doom was sealed, they had turned on Fu Dou to fight over his spoils.

"They divided the spoils and fled for their lives. At least they left the place clean."

Li Chenghui dispatched Qu Bushi to inspect the land and An Siwei to survey the various peaks. He sent his own cultivators to spread out and occupy the territory. The Floating Cloud domain was about the size of the Li family's western shore, but it was desolate and empty of people, giving it a hollow, abandoned feel.

It took three days of hard work just to get the cultivators settled and have them begin repairing their new residences. With no local populace to manage, claiming the territory was a straightforward process. Another half day passed, and the Embryonic Breathing realm cultivators arrived—runners, farmers, and qi-gatherers, nearly a hundred of them. Li Chenghui assigned them to his Qi Refinement subordinates, and the entire Floating Cloud territory began to stir with life, finally showing the signs of a proper cultivator settlement.

Though not a master administrator, Li Chenghui was competent. It still took him nearly half a month to establish a basic framework. The rich spiritual energy of Jiangbei motivated his subordinates; had it been a barren land, the process would have taken several times longer.

Just as he was getting things in order, An Siwei returned on the wind. "There were traces of demonic beasts in nine locations," he reported softly. "Six were minor demons, and the teams I sent have already driven them off. Two were at the late Qi Refinement level, which I dealt with myself. But one location appears

to be the residence of a Demon General. I don't know his background, so I sent an invitation. The response was that he is in seclusion."

Li Chenghui summoned Qu Bushi. The old man lacked leadership experience, but his age and expertise in surveying spirit fields were invaluable, and his work was progressing steadily. Hearing An Siwei's report, he waved a hand. "To inform the master of the house, there is a demon flood dragon in White river Creek. He is of the dragon lineage and settled in the river long ago. I've heard that when a Dragon Prince passed through White sea Creek, he sent a messenger to summon him for questioning. He's not someone to be offended…"

"He has a late-stage Foundation Establishment cultivation and belongs to a noble species. He's been ennobled as the Northern Brocade River King. His domain isn't just White river Creek; all three rivers are under his rule. He just prefers to live here because the water is clearer."

"The one on the mountain is a snake demon, who took the River King as his adoptive father, which is why he acts so arrogantly. When Fu Dou was here… he had to send tribute every year."

"So he really does have backing," An Siwei murmured. Sending an invitation first had been the right move.

Li Chenghui nodded in agreement. As he was about to speak, a woman descended onto the peak. She wore a red dress patterned with True Fire and a golden sash around her waist. In her delicate hand, she held a golden brazier from which a flicker of reddish-white flame danced.

Li Chenghui rose and bowed with a smile. "Elder Sister, you've arrived."

In her hand, Li Minggong held the Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier, and nestled within it was the fluffy, glowing Pure Feather Li-Fire. The mere presence of the flame was enough to incinerate the thorns along her path.

"I came ahead of the Clan Head," she said with a smile. "He will be here shortly. I came to see if my brother has concluded matters at Floating Cloud Cave."

"All that's left is to pacify the local demon," Li Chenghui replied, his brow furrowing. "If he's in seclusion, then so be it. My family is a Purple Mansion clan; as long as we don't bother each other, that should be enough. We don't need his mountain. He can have it for his cultivation."

"About that…" Qu Bushi, who had spent the last few days learning the ways of his new masters, interjected cautiously. "That snake demon is vicious. He never gave Fu Dou any respect and would demand a blood sacrifice every eighth month. It's the ninth month now… I fear he woke up long ago."

Li Chenghui understood the implication immediately. Even Li Minggong raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" Li Chenghui's voice grew heavy. "So he simply doesn't wish to see us?"

Li Minggong scoffed. "Whether he wishes to or not is irrelevant. With a Purple Mansion cultivator present, does he dare say another word?"

Though she spoke with disdain, she was laughing at the snake demon's ignorance.

'Never mind a distant relative of dragon-kind; our Clan Head has conversed with a Dragon Prince himself. But that involves the Fox and Dragon clans, so we cannot speak of it openly…'

When Li Zhouwei had his breakthrough, dragons had come to offer invitations and serpents had bowed in respect. The Li family, fearing that borrowing the dragons' prestige would attract even greater enemies, had not spread the tale. Furthermore, with their great-aunt's fate still unknown, they were even more reluctant to speak of it. But many of the older Purple Mansion cultivators in Jiangnan knew. Otherwise, no matter how Li Zhouwei had struggled, he never would have survived the last decade. He would have been killed long ago.

Li Chenghui knew this as well and was not concerned. "An invitation must still be sent," he insisted. "We need to meet him at least once. My family plans to relocate our people here. If he goes mad one day and comes down the mountain looking for a blood sacrifice, there will be lives lost!"

His words were veiled. Whether the lives lost would be human or demon was left unsaid. Qu Bushi understood perfectly and smiled grimly. "Placating the Northern Brocade River King is what's most important," he advised diplomatically. "This snake demon is merely relying on him. I'm afraid Wenhu of Dense Cloud Cave has already made his move to win over the River King… which would put our clan in a difficult position…"

Chapter 708: An Audience with the Great King

Qu Bushi was a wily old man. He racked his brain before whispering, "That snake demon is weak, so he wouldn't dare say much… but the Northern Brocade River King is a demon favored by a Dragon Prince. He holds authority over all three rivers. A few years ago, even a cultivator from the White Ye Immortal Sect paid him a personal visit…"

The old man's implication was clear. 'Your clan may have a Purple Mansion cultivator, but so does his backer. Since when have the dragon clans feared anyone?' He was trying to be diplomatic, afraid that the Li family's direct approach would offend a powerful figure. The veiled warning made Li Minggong chuckle to herself.

Li Chenghui simply smiled. "Rest easy, Honored Retainer."

As he spoke, a brilliant light gathered in the sky. Several figures descended from the south, landing on the mountain. The leader was clad in gleaming plate armor and gripped a halberd, his golden eyes flashing. Beside him stood a man in black robes with a somber expression and a sword at his waist.

Li Chenghui and the others rose to greet them. "Greetings, Clan Head!"

Li Zhouwei helped him up and strode into the newly repaired hall. He remained standing and asked, "What is the situation here?"

Li Chenghui reported on their progress, explaining that everything had gone smoothly except for the matter of the snake demon. He had Qu Bushi recount the tale from the beginning, and the old man, not daring to be careless, explained every detail.

Li Zhouwei's brow furrowed as he listened.

The problem was simple. He had a decent relationship with the Dragon Prince, Dingjiao, but the chasm between their families was as vast as the one between the clouds and the earth. Such a connection couldn't be cashed in like currency. The moment he used it, his ties to the Dragon Prince would be severed—a price Li Zhouwei had been unwilling to pay even for a Purple Mansion-grade ancient spiritual item.

'And Dingjiao is a White Dragon Prince. The faction behind this Northern Brocade River King might not be the White Dragons at all! The other branches are one thing, but if he's allied with the Black Dragons… that would be inviting a mountain of trouble for no reason!'

Li Zhouwei had long heard that the dragon clans were not a monolith. He had seen for himself in the Southern Sea how Dingjiao had made things difficult for Miao Ye. At its root, it was all part of the conflict between the White and Black Dragons.

'The dragon clans will probably not interfere directly, but if this River King decides to make trouble, demanding a blood sacrifice now and then, it would be a nauseating problem with no clear recourse…'

After a moment of thought, Li Zhouwei asked, "What is this Northern Brocade River King's true form?"

"That…" Qu Bushi froze, unable to answer for a long moment. Finally, he managed, "I do not know. I have only heard rumors… that the River King cultivates the Dao of Converging Water and possesses a powerful profound light. Wherever it passes, it can conjure maddening illusions and dissolve a person into a pool of blood."

Li Zhouwei fell into a thoughtful silence, an understanding dawning in his mind. Suddenly, a calm, ethereal voice, as if drifting from the Great Void itself, echoed by his ear.

"Minghuang, go and see this snake demon at once. Take your men."

Recognizing Li Ximing's voice, Li Zhouwei put away his weapon and immediately gave the order. "I will go see this snake demon."

He was a man of action. As soon as the words left his mouth, he called for Li Chenghui and Li Minggong, leaving only An Siwei to guard the mountain. He took to the sky, his thoughts racing.

'This snake demon is a nobody. For a Purple Mansion cultivator to intervene, this must be about Dense Cloud Cave.'

With that realization, his pace quickened. In less than fifteen minutes, White river Creek lay before them.

The waters of White river Creek were clear with a faint blue tint, the longest and purest of the three streams. It even fed a small lake, a stark contrast to the murky White ye Creek to the east.

The lake was no match for Moongaze Lake, spanning only fifty li, but from a distance, it looked like a lovely blue gem set among the rolling hills. They flew another fifty li past the lake before a small, lush mountain with a jagged peak came into view.

This mountain was far taller than Floating Cloud Cave's main peak and was likely the finest spirit mountain in the entire domain. Fu Dou, lacking the backing, strength, and cunning to compete, had naturally lost it to the snake demon.

Li Zhouwei halted his light before the mountain and sent Qu Bushi to announce their arrival. Li Chenghui moved closer, speaking through a private transmission. "Clan Head, I see people waiting at the foot of the mountain. It seems someone has beaten us here."

"Dense Cloud Cave, without a doubt." Li Zhouwei narrowed his eyes and concealed his aura. After a short wait, Qu Bushi returned on the wind, looking utterly dejected. He bowed. "Reporting to the Clan Head, the demon claims he is entertaining guests and cannot see us."

Seeing his sorry state, Li Zhouwei guessed the demons had been far less polite than their words suggested. He nodded. "This snake demon has been preying on humans for a long time. There is nothing more to say. We will eliminate him today and spare ourselves future trouble."

He shot into the sky, heading straight for the mountain. Seeing the lush vegetation, he drew his long halberd. As he descended with a cold expression, two demon soldiers blocked his path before a cave entrance. One held a saber, the other a spear. Seeing more visitors, they grew impatient. A leopard-headed demon shouted, "Who are you now? I already told you, my master is not seeing anyone! What part of the demon tongue don't you understand?"

Li Zhouwei stood tall, his halberd in hand, his armor shimmering with golden light. "Use your dog eyes before you speak," he said coldly.

"Oh?" The leopard-headed demon threw his spear to the ground, rolled up his sleeves, and took a step forward. But when his eyes met Li Zhouwei's golden gaze, he froze. He sniffed the air, his bravado vanishing. "Ah… so it is a master who has arrived. Forgive me, but from which mountain do you hail? This lowly leopard failed to recognize your eminence…"

Li Zhouwei, remembering Bai Rong's advice on how to handle demons, stared him down. "Witless slave. Do you not recognize a noble species when you see one? Have your master roll out here and pay his respects to me."

His words sent a chill of terror through the two demons. They exchanged a panicked glance, and one scrambled back into the cave. A dozen breaths later, a man in a garishly multicolored python robe emerged, flanked by a host of lesser demons. He stretched his neck and squinted at them from the cave entrance.

Li Zhouwei met his gaze with an icy stare.

The snake demon's heart pounded in his chest. He had no choice but to hurry down the mountain, still craning his neck to get a better look. But no matter how he looked, the man before him was clearly of high demonic lineage, his bloodline undeniably noble. He chose his words with care. "I wonder which mountain's great king you are? This humble demon is but a minor steward from the Northern Brocade River King's mansion, trying to make a living here. If you have any commands… I can arrange for you to meet the River King…"

Li Zhouwei didn't move. He planted his halberd in the ground, his face a mask of contempt. "And what are you? Which palace does your master serve?"

This approach worked perfectly on demons. The snake demon's suspicion melted away. He forced a smile and scurried to the edge of the defensive array, hesitating for a moment before stopping. He flicked his forked tongue and replied, "It is a great honor for my humble abode to receive a noble one such as yourself. My master is not from a direct palace lineage; he was ennobled by the Dragon Prince to temporarily govern the three rivers…"

"Not from a direct palace lineage?" Li Zhouwei scoffed, his face twisting with disdain. "In that case, how dare he not come out to greet me now that I have arrived in his domain? Which lineage branch does he belong to?"

That last question drained the color from the snake demon's face. He began to wail, "Your Majesty… I am just a lowly steward in the mansion! How would I know such things? Please, allow me to introduce you to the Great King…"

Li Zhouwei bared his teeth in a cold, menacing grin. "Then why haven't you invited me inside?"

"Ah!" The snake demon leaped from his spot as if struck by lightning. He flung aside his gaudy robe, scrambled out from behind the array, and dropped to his knees, his face a picture of pure sycophancy.

"I pay my respects, Your Majesty!"

Chapter 709: The Northern Brocade River King

As the demon prostrated himself before the array, Li Zhouwei suspected that the cultivators from Dense Cloud Cave were still inside. He took a step forward, the light from his halberd casting a Heavenly Glow, and demanded, "This king smells humans on your territory. How many cultivators are there? Are they for boiling or for stewing? Or are they envoys from some other power?"

The question made the snake demon realize why this powerful figure had demanded he come out rather than entering the array himself. "This lowly demon has no great backing," he said respectfully. "I was unaware of Your Majesty's arrival and would never dare to harm you. The ones in the array are from a small, local power… called Dense Cloud Cave. They came to deliver some blood-food to me."

He continued, "A new Bright Yang Purple Mansion Immortal Clan has appeared to the south, and they want to claim this land. They're a rather stubborn lot. Though I do not fear them, I can't be bothered to deal with them. I accepted the blood-food from Dense Cloud Cave and offered to introduce them to my great king."

"Oh?"

Li Zhouwei remained outside the array, seating himself on the ground. "Your great king intends to meddle in the affairs of mortals?"

"Of course not…" The snake demon hesitated for a moment, but deciding this wasn't exactly a secret, he focused on pleasing the golden-eyed beast before him. "It's just a small matter. White river Creek is the main waterway here, and my king cultivates the Dao of Converging Water. As the master of these waters, it is a simple thing for him to control the spiritual springs and, by extension, influence the spirit rice paddies…"

He lowered his head. "The people from the White Ye Immortal Sect also seem to have other matters to discuss with the Great King… As for what those are… this one does not know."

As he spoke, his gaudy, multicolored robes pooled on the ground around him. Li Zhouwei judged from his appearance that his true form was likely a patterned python. Just as he came to this conclusion, two more cultivators flew out from the cave on the mountain. The leader was a woman wearing heavy, garish makeup, her face a mask of vigilance as she descended.

The snake demon didn't recognize Li Zhouwei, but no one from the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion could ever forget him. The moment he had appeared before the mountain, the disciples from Dense Cloud Cave had identified him. Within a few sentences, their own Foundation Establishment cultivator had been summoned.

Li Zhouwei secretly tightened his grip on his halberd. The Concealed Plunder Gold in his Juque Palace flared, and he silently activated Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light, pushing his spiritual qi to its absolute peak. The patterned python demon heard a frantic shout from within the array.

"Manghuazi! Don't let him fool you… He's from the Li clan!"

The python demon, Manghuazi, looked up in a daze. Li Zhouwei's expression was unchanged, but a single point of golden light suddenly erupted from between his thick brows.

Boom!

A deafening crack echoed from above as a golden flash of Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light flickered through the air, gone in an instant. The light was so bright it brought tears to Manghuazi's eyes. He scrambled to his feet and summoned a demonic wind, trying to flee.

But the woman in heavy makeup had just exited the array and flown right into the path of the attack. It struck her with a resounding bang, sending a shower of fiery sparks from her body as white smoke billowed forth.

"Aiyee… the pain!" she shrieked.

With the snake demon right in front of him, how could Li Zhouwei let him escape? Using Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light on him would have been a waste. He had first used the brilliant flash of light to take down the strongest of the

Dense Cloud Cave cultivators. Only then did he raise his Grand Ascension Halberd.

"And where do you think you're going?"

Manghuazi was shocked, furious, and deeply ashamed. He assumed Li Zhouwei had used some bizarre Immortal Foundation or strange shamanic art to trick him. He summoned a bone-white dharma treasure and brandished it, snarling, "You—"

He only managed to get out a single word before the Grand Ascension Halberd was at his chest. A black and red halo, a signature of the Cyclic Soul-Refining Halberd Arts, flew out, melding with the bright light and casting an inky shadow. Manghuazi had no time to speak; he could only grit his teeth and block with his dharma treasure.

Clang!

The halberd slammed into the bone artifact with a dull thud. Manghuazi's face went white, and he nearly reverted to his true form.

Li Zhouwei had been at the Foundation Establishment Realm for over a decade, spending far more time on his techniques than on cultivation itself. His constant struggles against the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion had forged him into an exceptional warrior. Though only at the mid-stage of his realm, he was a veteran of a hundred battles, his cultivation base incredibly solid.

Manghuazi was also a mid-stage Foundation Establishment demon, but his skills were unremarkable. He was no match for Li Zhouwei. The moment their weapons met, he knew he was in trouble. Only the quality of his dharma treasure saved him from total humiliation.

But Li Zhouwei simply applied pressure, turning the Grand Ascension Halberd so its specially crafted crescent blade hooked the bone artifact, trapping it in a surge of radiant light.

Manghuazi couldn't pull his weapon free. He saw another bright light gathering between Li Zhouwei's brows and felt his soul tremble in terror. 'What kind of man is this?' he thought, aggrieved. 'He must be a direct descendant of a Purple Mansion cultivator! A figure like the Northern Brocade River King himself! This is like using a butcher's cleaver to kill a chicken!'

He took a sharp breath, drew upon his spiritual qi, and activated his Immortal Foundation, Concealing Dust Mist. A cloud of absolute darkness erupted from his mouth, shrouding his form completely and hoping to make the light between his foe's brows lose its target.

"A cheap trick!"

Li Zhouwei's eyes snapped open, blazing with a golden light that pierced through the darkness. The Way of the Bright Yang was not lacking in perceptive arts, to say nothing of his own innate ocular abilities.

"By my decree!" he commanded.

A spark of fire exploded, and the white smoke scattered. Manghuazi let out a wretched cry as a rain of blood fell from a new, gaping hole in his chest. "Please, My Lord, spare me!" he shrieked in a panic. "Report to my great king first, it won't be too late to kill me then…"

Before he could finish, the Grand Ascension Halberd descended from the sky. Manghuazi could no longer maintain his human form and reverted to a massive, brightly patterned python. He crashed into the forest below, and the halberd followed, pinning him through his vital point, seven inches below his head, rendering him immobile.

Li Zhouwei had not even used his full strength. His Yang-Li Crimson Sparrow Banner remained in his sleeve, and he had not yet prepared the Sun's Resonant Radiance Art. The demon was subdued. He strode to the python's head and ordered, "Summon the Northern Brocade River King."

While Manghuazi was swiftly defeated, the others from Dense Cloud Cave fared no better. Li Chenghui's reputation was well known, and with their leader already injured by Li Zhouwei, none dared to challenge him. They scattered in retreat.

Li Minggong held her Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier. The woman who had taken the first hit managed to steady herself and maintain the defensive array. "Are you from Moongaze Lake?" she yelled from the edge of the barrier. "My Dense Cloud Cave has not offended your immortal clan! Why do you attack me?"

"Dense Cloud Cave?" Li Minggong shook her head, her voice ringing out. "We were ordered to eliminate demons. All we see here are a few demonic cultivators colluding with evil. We see no one from Dense Cloud Cave."

The woman was speechless. Contacting the demon wasn't a major crime, but being cornered by the Li family like this, they could say whatever they pleased. Fury rose in her heart. "Don't push us too far!"

"Push you too far?" Li Minggong found this laughable. She recognized the woman now—it was Miaoshui of Dense Cloud Cave. They had clashed before, and back then, neither had shown any mercy. She raised the Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier, puffed out her cheeks, and blew gently.

With her breath, the Pure Feather Li-Fire within the brazier erupted in a flurry of crimson and white feathers, drifting down toward Miaoshui's face.

Miaoshui, of course, remembered Li Minggong, but in her memory, the girl had been a nobody, easily beaten within twenty exchanges. She hadn't given her a second thought. But now, as the feather-like flames drifted toward her, she felt a stinging pain on her skin.

She was already injured and her spiritual qi was in turmoil from Li Zhouwei's attack. In contrast, Li Minggong, newly equipped with the Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier, now wielded an enhanced Pure Feather Li-Fire. For a moment, Miaoshui was completely suppressed. Even more terrifying was Li Chenghui, standing right behind Li Minggong!

Li Minggong alone was more than she could handle, to say nothing of Li Chenghui watching like a tiger. "Quickly, come out of the array and help me!" Miaoshui cried.

The great array belonged to Manghuazi. It was easy enough for Miaoshui to exit, but she couldn't simply retreat back inside. The few people still within the barrier heard her plea and hesitated.

'Li Zhouwei is out there, too,' they thought. 'Going out now would be suicide.'

The weakness of a motley crew like Dense Cloud Cave was once again on full display. Not a single person moved. Miaoshui was livid. "Staying in the array is just waiting to die! What's the difference?" she snarled.

Finally, someone rode the wind out of the array, shouting that they were coming to her aid. The old man, Qu Bushi, ever the opportunist, immediately grabbed his own dharma treasure and moved to assist Li Chenghui. Li Chenghui held one hand out flat, and six silver-white talismans of profound punishment rose into the air, spinning around his wrist and emitting an intense, crackling light.

"Where Yang culminates, the Six Thunders are born!"

Qu Bushi tied up one opponent, and Li Chenghui's silver lightning immediately surged forth, striking the other. The demonic cultivator didn't even utter a word, only a world-shaking scream as black energy rolled off his body.

Though Li Chenghui's cultivation was not yet at the level of the late Li Qinghong, his mastery of lightning arts was only a step behind. A single bolt had nearly knocked his opponent unconscious. Li Qinghong had possessed great talent for cultivation and a passion for the spear, but she had little aptitude for spellcasting. Li Chenghui was entirely different. Not only was his cultivation method the more complete Celestial Cloud Thunder-Questioning Method, but he had spent his life practicing amidst the thunderstorms of the Eastern Sea. By the time he reached Foundation Establishment, the Li family was already a great clan, and the resources he received were far superior.

Most critically, all of Li Qinghong's lifelong research into the profound-light secret arts of the Dao of Thunder-Guiding and Cloud-Anchoring had been left to the clan!

Wielding his dharma treasure, he was a truly imposing figure. His opponent was a demonic cultivator, and within twenty exchanges, the man was already half-dead. Qu Bushi watched, his eyes burning with excitement.

"Excellent, excellent... The Li clan is truly on the rise! Li Chenghui alone is formidable enough, and they still have Li Zhouwei!"

The old man had cultivated for many years and had a sharp eye. Li Chenghui's Six Thunder Profound Punishment Talisman was clearly superior to the Crimson Flame Brazier, and he could see at a glance that Li Minggong relied on the power of her treasure, whereas Li Chenghui's strength was his own.

While Li Chenghui suppressed the demonic cultivator in a matter of moments, Li Minggong steadily kept the pressure on Miaoshui. She knew the woman was cunning and that calling her allies out was merely a ploy to create a chance for her own escape. She remained vigilant, never giving her an opening.

It was only when Li Zhouwei returned, having subdued Manghuazi, that Miaoshui finally understood there was no escape. "For your esteemed clan to suppress a member of the water clans like this... Do you hold the Northern Brocade River King in such low regard?" she said in a low voice. "My cave

master has already paid his respects to your Daoist Master. Our two families have reconciled. Why must you do this to me?"

She was playing dumb, but Li Zhouwei didn't bother to answer her. He simply felt the moisture in the air thicken. The creek began to rise, the waters of White river Creek churning below them. He crossed his arms and waited.

Li Chenghui sensed it too and narrowed his eyes.

"It's the Northern Brocade River King!" Qu Bushi said in a panic.

As if on cue, a waterfall erupted from the surface of the creek, spraying white water high into the sky. A magnificent, aquamarine chariot burst from the waves, shimmering in the light. Two rows of shrimp soldiers and crab generals rode the water, flanking the carriage as the creek surged, flooding the base of the mountain.

Manghuazi, pinned to the ground, gave no reaction, but a wave of relief washed over Miaoshui. Though still surrounded by enemies, she couldn't help but smile to herself. 'Now things are truly messy… With me and Manghuazi on the same side, it couldn't be clearer who's in the right and who's in the wrong, could it?'

At the front of the carriage stood a hunchbacked old man in a heavy, ink-black coat, holding a conch shell that seemed entirely out of place. The carriage sped toward the base of the mountain. "I wonder which mountain's great lord you might be?" the old man called out in a gravelly voice. "If this little snake has disturbed you, there was no need to go this far…"

His words were polite, but his expression was anything but. If not for Li Zhouwei's unusual appearance, he likely wouldn't have bothered with even that much courtesy. Hearing this, Miaoshui quickly shouted, "My Lord, these are the soldiers of the Li clan! They attacked Manghuazi without any provocation…"

Li Minggong gritted her teeth, and the flames from her brazier burned hotter. But a clear, cold voice cut through the air from within the carriage.

"Shui Zhao… enough!"

The old man in black, Shui Zhao, fell silent. The crystal curtain of the carriage was drawn aside, and a man stepped out.

He was tall, dressed in a turquoise, silk-brocaded shortcoat, over which he wore a white velvet cloak embroidered with a scene of a great green sea. One could

faintly see fine, azure scales covering his neck, giving him an air that was both demonic and majestic.

The moment he appeared, Li Zhouwei recognized him.

'So, it's you…'

The suspicions Li Zhouwei had been harboring were finally confirmed. A wave of relief washed over him, and he had to suppress a laugh.

Years ago, as a guest of the Dragon Prince Dingjiao, Li Zhouwei had been entertained with wine and song aboard his vessel. The entertainment had included a battle between two noble beasts for sport… one was a Treasure-Scaled Ferry-Beast, and the other was an Azure-Necked Flood Dragon. Before Dingjiao, they were like two dogs, tearing into each other for their master's amusement.

This Northern Brocade River King—was none other than that same Azure-Necked Flood Dragon!

He even recalled Dingjiao asking for his opinion on a technique, the Converging Water Profound Light. The memory had stuck with him. So when old Qu had mentioned a master of the Dao of Converging Water who used a profound light to create maddening illusions and dissolve people into blood, the connection had immediately formed in his mind.

Seeing him now, he knew his guess was correct. Li Zhouwei's face remained impassive, but inwardly he was laughing. 'I heard the Dragon Prince valued him highly. Whenever the prince passed by White river Creek, he would specifically send for him. Well, how is this not sending for him specifically? Excellent!'

As Li Zhouwei recognized the Azure-Necked Flood Dragon, the Northern Brocade River King's sharp, authoritative gaze swept over the scene. His face was a mask of clear displeasure—until his eyes met Li Zhouwei's.

In a single instant, his expression shifted from calm to startled, and from startled to utter, abject terror. The Azure-Necked Flood Dragon was horrified. He immediately rode the water over, and before the stunned eyes of everyone present, he arrived before Li Zhouwei, bowed deeply, and said with the utmost respect:

"Greetings, Great King… A lowly demon under my command has been so blind as to offend Your Majesty… I am overwhelmed with shame and fear. I will have this thing's life at once and prepare a snake stew for you."

The Azure-Necked Flood Dragon turned his head, and the look he gave the pinned Manghuazi was filled with a chilling hatred and disgust, as if he were looking at something utterly repellent.

"Shui Zhao," he commanded coldly. "Kill it at once!"

Chapter 710: Floating Cloud Cave Settled

The Northern Brocade River King's words left everyone stunned. The Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier in Li Minggong's hand trembled, the flames momentarily receding. Her bright eyes darted toward the scene, and understanding dawned. She let out a sigh of relief.

'I thought we'd have to negotiate with this imposing Northern Brocade River King, a supposed guest of a Dragon Prince… but it was settled so easily.'

The two demonic cultivators were still gasping for breath in Qu Bushi's grasp, unable to move. The old retainer's face was flushed with disbelief, his mind reeling. Having seen much in his life, he sensed something was amiss. 'This isn't how you treat a Purple Mansion Immortal Clan. The Northern Brocade River King wouldn't be this deferential even to Zhaojing himself! No wonder Li Chenghui was so fearless. I thought the man had lost all sense of caution…'

While their reactions differed, even Li Chenghui was surprised. The young man in silver armor and black robes frowned. 'From the looks of it, the rumors of the Northern Brocade River King being favored by the Dragon Prince… are likely false.'

But no matter how astonished they were, none could compare to Miaoshui. The color drained from her face, all the way down to her neck. The spell in her hands dissipated, and Li Minggong's Li-Fire scorched several black marks onto her robes as her grip slackened.

"As you command, Your Majesty!" The old demon, Shui Zhao, hastily rode the water downward.

Shui Zhao's true form was likely a black turtle, a proper steward of a water palace. When the Northern Brocade River King had first said, "enough," his face had turned cold. He was completely unprepared for his master to immediately

grovel, not even daring to raise his head. The sheer disparity left Shui Zhao reeling, making him question his own judgment.

'"Enough"... so that's what he meant... The cold words were for Manghuazi. I truly misjudged the situation!'

Fortunately, he hadn't been too offensive earlier. He scrambled down from the carriage, rolled up his sleeves, and stomped on Manghuazi's forked tongue. "You patterned loach!" he cursed. "Such audacity, to go around swindling people using my great king's name!"

The old turtle was a cultured demon, and his insults lacked bite. He raised a hand to strike Manghuazi's head, but the great halberd pinning the snake moved slightly, catching the light. Li Zhouwei's voice carried from a distance, "There is no need to trouble yourself."

The old turtle snatched his hand back as if it had been burned. The hierarchy among demons was strict, and even more so among dragon-kin. Servants like them could act high and mighty in front of outsiders, but they alone knew the true bitterness of their position. He dropped to his knees, his face slick with cold sweat, and waited respectfully by the halberd.

The Northern Brocade River King's legs felt even weaker.

No one present understood the weight of the man before them better than he did. The Dragon Prince Dingjiao had feasted with this man while he and that Treasure-Scaled Ferry-Beast from the Vermillion Sea had fought to the death, all for their amusement. Though he had embellished his own status and borrowed much of the prince's influence, that facade was paper-thin before this man!

The demon's features were imposing, but his posture was utterly humble. "This lowly one is named Ying Hebai," he said respectfully, "and I have the undeserved honor of leading the water clans of the three creeks. Now that you have arrived, My Lord, you need only give your command."

Ying Hebai stood stiffly, not knowing how Li Zhouwei would expose him. He exhaled quietly, steeling himself for complete humiliation.

While the Azure-Necked Flood Dragon hesitated, Li Zhouwei understood the situation perfectly. Ying Hebai was borrowing Dingjiao's prestige to intimidate others, but was he himself not doing the same? Dingjiao had shown him and Bai Rong some courtesy, but his true motives were still hard to guess...

If not for Dingjiao, Ying Hebai wouldn't have given the Li clan the time of day. Li Zhouwei decided not to expose him. He clasped his hands behind his back and said, "So it is you. We met once, years ago. I did not expect to find you serving here."

"Yes… I was fortunate enough to witness Your Lordship's esteemed presence. I have not dared to forget it to this day!" Ying Hebai was momentarily stunned, then felt a wave of genuine relief wash over him. He understood the man was giving him a way to save face. Overcome with gratitude, he was unsure how to respond. A voice, faint and ethereal, echoed in his ear.

"What happened between myself and Dingjiao that day is a secret. Do not reveal my identity, and do not mention it."

Li Zhouwei had no desire for the dragon-kin to think he was throwing Dingjiao's name around. They were dragons, after all. He could skirt the edges of their influence, but he couldn't act like a fox borrowing a tiger's might. Offending that dragon would be troublesome indeed.

At these words, Ying Hebai knew it was a spiritual transmission. Now he was in a difficult position—he couldn't be overly fawning, but he feared causing offense. "I invite you all to be guests in my palce," he said respectfully.

Manghuazi had mentioned that the White Ye Immortal Sect had been in frequent talks with this Northern Brocade River King, Ying Hebai, and that they had many plans. Being unfamiliar with the territory, Li Zhouwei certainly needed to speak with him. He had no fear of being harmed, but with Miaoshui and her people just captured—a fact that even Dense Cloud Cave might not yet know, let alone the White Ye Immortal Sect—he didn't want to lose the element of surprise.

"I have urgent matters to attend to here," he said. "I cannot leave for the moment."

"It is no matter, no matter at all!" Ying Hebai replied deferentially. "This lowly one will wait by the river."

It seemed the Azure-Necked Flood Dragon intended to wait right there in White river Creek for them, which was far too conspicuous. Li Zhouwei considered for a moment. "I ought to accept the Northern Brocade River King's gracious invitation," he said softly. "Once I have concluded my business here, I will send someone to you."

"Yes." Ying Hebai sensed his displeasure and immediately prepared to take his leave. He was visibly relieved not to have to host Li Zhouwei in his palace. He had Shui Zhao bring the carriage around and departed into the river with a flurry of apologies.

Once the procession of water-kin was gone, Li Zhouwei turned his gaze to Miaoshui. She was still listlessly fending off the Li-Fire, the crimson and white feathers fluttering around her, her spiritual qi hissing as it burned.

The Golden Feather Sect's Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier wasn't adept at killing, but it was an excellent tool for trapping foes with Li-Fire. It was a vicious, insidious weapon that wore its victims down like a dull knife scraping at bone. Wounded and having lost the initiative, Miaoshui was trapped, unable to advance or retreat.

As Li Zhouwei approached, her despair deepened and her expression grew harder. But then she heard his clear voice. "There is no need to struggle. It is a waste of effort. Put away your weapon and surrender. It will save me the trouble of capturing you."

Miaoshui had watched the Northern Brocade River King depart, and she had been weighing her chances in an all-out fight, prepared to sacrifice everything but her life for a sliver of hope. But there had never been any real chance of escape. Seeing that Li Zhouwei's killing intent was not strong, her desperate resolve softened. She raised her brows and called out, "This humble woman pays her respects, My Lord! I have long heard of your clan's good name and have always admired it. It is only that in my past wanderings through the mortal world, I have been stained by some impurities. I feared tarnishing your esteemed clan's name and thus did not dare to surrender immediately."

At her words, the two demonic cultivators also looked up. The cultivators of Dense Cloud Cave were a slight improvement over those from Floating Cloud Cave, but seven out of ten had still dabbled in unclean practices. How the Li clan dealt with them would almost certainly determine the morale of the entire Dense Cloud Cave.

Cultivators like Miaoshui, who hailed from Jiangbei and the north, still had some reservations. They had not yet stooped to the level of demonic cultivators who slaughtered indiscriminately to advance their cultivation. But blood qi, blood pills… they had occasionally turned a blind eye and consumed them.

When gravely injured and near death, they weren't picky about what kind of flesh they ate, either.

In truth, these people's attitudes were not so different from minor clans like the Yuan and Yu. They couldn't measure up to the likes of the Xiao or Li, but they were a cut above the demonic cultivators and those from the Eastern Sea.

Miaoshui was no fool. The Li clan's next move would likely be against Dense Cloud Cave. Even if they didn't attack, using her as an example could greatly weaken their enemy's resolve. She posed her question with trepidation. Li Zhouwei remained silent, but unexpectedly, Li Minggong spoke up.

"Clan Head… Fellow Daoist Miaoshui has not committed too many great sins. Blood pills are common in Jiangnan; it is normal to be stained by some impurities…"

Her words made Miaoshui look up in surprise. She had only met Li Minggong a few times, and she had even injured her in a past battle. Li Minggong was the last person she would have expected to plead her case. She turned her head in astonishment.

Li Minggong's reasoning was simple. Dense Cloud Cave was backed by the White Ye Immortal Sect. Though the Li clan had Li Zhouwei and Li Chenghui, they were still short on manpower. Even if they had to make a move, they certainly didn't want to face an unyielding, monolithic enemy who would fight to the death.

'Even if we are to settle this score… it must be done after the autumn harvest, not now! Miaoshui is somewhat soft-hearted; by Dense Cloud Cave's standards, she is relatively clean. If we kill her, everyone in Dense Cloud Cave will know they have no chance of survival in our hands.'

With her words, Li Zhouwei had a convenient way to step down. He was already thinking of launching a surprise attack before Dense Cloud Cave could react. He certainly couldn't kill Miaoshui and alert Wenhu.

"Since my aunt vouches for you, I will spare your life for now," he said in a low voice. "Sheathe your weapon."

After a final moment of hesitation, Miaoshui's water sword flew back to her. A moment later, Li Minggong's Li-Fire vanished. Miaoshui sped before Li Zhouwei and bowed with some awkwardness. "Greetings, My Lord."

Li Zhouwei nodded. The two demonic cultivators were still held by Qu Bushi. A single glance was enough to tell they cultivated the *Blood Asura Scripture*, the sort of lucky ones who had reached Foundation Establishment by murdering and refining resentment and malevolent qi. The demonic energy above their heads practically soared into the sky.

The Wen brothers, who were currently tending to the fire meridian on the mountain, were at least orthodox Eastern Sea demonic cultivators. These two, however, had flimsy cultivation bases and were utterly useless, yet they were stained with heavy sins. Li Zhouwei didn't spare them a second glance. "Bind them and lock them up on the mountain. We will deal with them upon our return."

A chill crept into Miaoshui's heart. 'Who knows how they'll deal with me then… I can only take it one step at a time… I just fear that expert from the White Ye Immortal Sect is a mid-stage Purple Mansion cultivator. If Daoist Master Zhaojing is no match for him, I will have no way to live.'

As her heart turned to ice, she heard Li Zhouwei speak casually. "You must have realized that Dense Cloud Cave is backed by the White Ye Immortal Sect… but having a Purple Mansion power supporting you is one thing, and being a Purple Mansion power yourself is another. For you to leave a puppet like Dense Cloud Cave and join my clan… this is a matter not even worth Daoist Master Yehui's notice."

"But if you are feigning surrender… then you would be jumping from the protection of a Purple Mansion to the domain of a Purple Mansion power. No matter how things end, it would be perfectly reasonable for my clan to kill you. It would be effortless, and no one would protect you. Weigh your options carefully. Do not bring about your own ruin."

His words sent a shiver down Miaoshui's spine, leaving her deeply shaken. She was completely unfamiliar with the struggles between Purple Mansion powers. If she truly was to join the Li clan, she would be laughing with joy; her only fear was a future reckoning.

After hearing his words, she dared not have any other thoughts. "This subordinate has received your grace and will never have a second thought!"

Li Zhouwei didn't care what she was thinking; he still harbored a great deal of suspicion toward her. "What is the layout of the arrays in Dense Cloud Cave's territory?" he asked.

Miaoshui's mindset shifted quickly. "Dense Cloud Cave has eleven peaks and twelve Foundation Establishment cultivators," she answered promptly. "Seven of them are guest retainers from overseas. Their strength is lacking, and they use demonic arts, so they are not a major concern. Of the remaining five, besides myself, Wenhu is the strongest. The other three each have their own tricks… The two most outstanding among them could probably hold their own against someone at the level of the Azure Pond Sect's peak lords."

This matched the intelligence the Li clan had gathered. Dense Cloud Cave was, after all, a puppet, and many of its members were guest retainers brought in from overseas by the White Ye Immortal Sect. Their overall strength wasn't that different from the Li clan's.

'Wenhu will naturally be my opponent,' Li Zhouwei calculated. 'Uncle Chenghui and Aunt Minggong, along with Miaoshui, can handle the other two. But Qu Bushi can't fight several demonic cultivators on his own. Even with Elder White Ape and An Siwei… they can't handle the rest of them… to say nothing of the arrays.'

If Miaoshui's surrender was genuine, their top-tier combat strength was not inferior to their opponent's.

However, Wenhu would clearly not expect a sudden attack. With the element of surprise, it wouldn't be a simple matter of one-on-one fights. If they moved quickly, they could definitely wipe out those few demonic cultivators…

'Does that expert from the White Ye Immortal Sect have a Life Divine Ability… And what are Daoist Master Zhaojing and Changxi's plans…'

Seeing Li Zhouwei lost in thought, Miaoshui quickly added, "Only the main peak has a Foundation Establishment-grade array. The others are all Qi Refining-level and not worth mentioning. And I don't know where Wenhu is…"

Li Zhouwei simply drew his halberd, sealed Manghuazi's cultivation, and dragged him away. He pointed to the two lesser demons and ordered, "No matter who comes, just say Manghuazi is in seclusion and seeing no one."

The two little demons had witnessed everything and were scared out of their wits. Crying out "Elder," they quickly agreed. Li Zhouwei glanced around, got his bearings, and said, "We'll head straight for Floating Cloud Cave, drop these people off, then continue north to rendezvous with An Siwei and the others and proceed to Dense Cloud Cave's territory."

Gardenia Scenery Mountain.

Gardenia blossoms fell like rain under a bright, clear sky. Li Ximing materialized. Before him, at a desk, sat a white-haired old man, his brow deeply furrowed, seemingly weighed down by many troubles. It was Daoist Master Changxi.

It was impossible for the old Daoist Master not to know about the changes in Jiangnan's spiritual atmosphere. He himself possessed an Earth Virtue divine ability; he knew better than anyone whether this change was beneficial or detrimental. With his three juniors still in seclusion, it was no wonder he looked so worn out.

The problem was, Kong Tingyun and the other two were attempting to break through to the Purple Mansion Realm. It was not an ordinary seclusion. They couldn't be moved, or else they could have relocated from Jiangnan to somewhere else…

"Zhaojing, please do not be offended by my unannounced arrival!" Seeing Li Ximing appear, the worry on Changxi's brow immediately vanished, replaced by a smile.

Li Ximing had been observing the situation from the Great Void in Jiangbei. He had felt a stir from the divine ability he had left on Gardenia Scenery Mountain and had broken through the void to return. As expected, it was Changxi.

Li Ximing picked up a jade pot and poured him a cup of tea, then sat down opposite him. "Senior has come at just the right time," he said with a smile. "I was just thinking of meeting with you."

"Oh?" Changxi raised an eyebrow. He was being as polite as he possibly could be to Li Ximing. He adopted a posture of one ready to listen intently.

"Senior," Li Ximing began, "do you know of any remedy for a damaged Dantian?"

"So that's what this is about!" Changxi laughed and shook his head. "Do you remember old Daoist Master Qi of the Profound Wonder Temple? He cultivates 'Treasured Earth,' which has powerful nourishing properties. Though it cannot compare to 'Valley Water' or 'Horn Wood,' it is more than sufficient for such an injury."

Chapter 711: Sumian

"Treasured Earth?"

The Earth Virtue Dao was one of the rarest lineages in the world, and Li Ximing had never even heard of Treasured Earth.

"Treasured Earth is a type of Earth Virtue that nurtures plant life and promotes the growth of crops," Changxi explained. "It can nourish people and artifacts alike. It is because of this ability that old Daoist Master Qi has extensive connections with the cultivators of the north."

Seeing the understanding in Li Ximing's eyes, the old man continued in his gravelly voice,

"The Proclamation and Returning Earths of the ancient Jixian Immortals are almost entirely lost to time. Wu Earth and Bound Earth are still relatively common, but Treasured Earth is even rarer. It is perfectly normal that Zhaojing would not know of it."

Li Ximing looked up.

"I was originally thinking of introducing you to him," Changxi said. "Now is the perfect time. You can bring your man along, and he can heal him while you're there."

Changxi had prepared two safety nets for the Profound Peak Gate. The first was his alliance by marriage with the Profound Wonder Temple, securing Daoist Master Qi as a backer. The second was having his direct disciples study under Mount Jingyi in the Eastern Sea. Li Ximing's need to heal Ding Weizeng played right into his hands.

Although this Daoist Master Qi—Sumian—sounded like someone worth knowing, Li Ximing asked cautiously,

"What is his background? Which lineage does he belong to? Are there any entanglements?"

Changxi was prepared for the question.

"He comes from the state of Zhao, originally a cultivator from near Mount Yan. By some stroke of fortune, he obtained his Daoist lineage and went to the Eastern Sea, where he achieved his Dao. He is already four hundred years old."

"The Daoist Master is advanced in age and prefers to act with caution in all things. He befriends cultivators from all over to ensure the future security of Profound Wonder Temple. This is not the sort of person who invites trouble… Furthermore, his lineage is a special branch of Earth Virtue, so there will naturally be no complications."

Having lived for centuries, Changxi understood Li Ximing's concerns and laid them out plainly. This piqued Li Ximing's interest in meeting the man.

"What is his cultivation level?" he asked.

"Initial-stage Purple Mansion!"

Li Ximing frowned. A bitter expression crossed Changxi's face.

"Zhaojing must understand… we are Earth Virtue cultivators!" he said with grave sincerity.

"Any given Earth Virtue lineage has only a handful of practitioners… To reach the Purple Mansion Realm at all is a stroke of immense fortune. Where would one find others of the same path to consult with? Most of us have no powerful backing… which makes things even more difficult."

A look of regret washed over him, and he lowered his head, his expression weary.

"There are only so many ways for us to complete our lineages. In my younger years, I was arrogant, thinking only of finding Purple Mansion-grade techniques. After hitting a wall for over seventy years, I finally gave up that hope and started searching for Foundation Establishment techniques instead."

His words were veiled, but Li Ximming understood immediately. 'Searching for Foundation Establishment techniques… that can only mean he intended to use a path-continuation art to seize another's Immortal Foundation. Changxi has no Life Divine Ability, no skill in alchemy, and no profound Daoist lineage. From the looks of him now, it clearly did not go well.'

Changxi was nearing the end of his lifespan, his recent years sustained only by medicine. Recalling these past events brought a look of remorse to his face, which was now veiled by a faint, gray aura of death.

"There are many who cultivate the Bound Earth Dao, but at the Foundation Establishment Realm, they all practice either Fool's Mountain Chase or a substitute for it. I finally managed to find two manuals among rogue cultivators, but their quality was far too low…"

"The Profound Peak Gate already lacked successors. I could not bring myself to make my own disciples cultivate a path just to extend my own. So I sent the techniques out into the wilderness and the Eastern Sea, intentionally providing some resources to see if anything would come of it."

"But I have no Life Divine Ability, and who knows which Daoist Master from which sect… simply erased them with a wave of his hand. Or perhaps the techniques themselves were just too inferior. Not a single person succeeded. Few even reached the Qi Refining stage."

"In over a hundred years, I only had a few successes. But I knew nothing of this method and had to research it all myself… In the end, nothing came of it. I could only accept them as guest retainers."

The path-continuation method was clearly no simple matter, especially for a small sect like Profound Peak Gate. Li Ximing mentally calculated the timeline. "The Green Pine Grotto-Heaven… Tingyun went, did she not?"

"She did." Changxi nodded and sighed. "I had no right to a share of the old Mirrored-Mirrage Grotto-Heaven. Fortunately, the Green Pine Grotto-Heaven appeared later. I fought tooth and nail just to send Tingyun inside. She transcribed three techniques from the Three-Drum Wall, and all three were dead ends!"

"I spent the better part of a century modifying them… scattering the manuals and then gathering the disciples to check on their progress. I finally managed to revise one of them by sixty or seventy percent… but by then, it was too late."

A self-deprecating smile touched Changxi's lips. "Blame me for being arrogant at first, and then for overreaching. A hundred years passed in the blink of an eye. And what if I had succeeded in mastering that divine ability? I would still be facing death. This half-finished technique can only be left for my descendants… If the Profound Peak lineage can be preserved, a successor can pick up where I

left off. In less than a hundred years, they could at least cultivate a second divine ability."

A chill went down Li Ximing's spine. The old man's words seemed to be aimed at him, a subtle warning using his own life as an example. He remained silent.

"The Three-Drum Wall in the Green Pine Temple left us three techniques," Changxi continued. "If a successor can revise another one, in five hundred years, my Profound Peak Gate will have a mid-stage Purple Mansion cultivator. And who can predict the fortunes of future generations? Perhaps one will find a way to cross the threshold into the immortal realms."

Seeing that Li Ximing was still silent, he finally offered his advice directly. "We are not of the Green Pine lineage, after all. We cannot cultivate it just because we wish to. I have seen how your clan searches for techniques; your Bright Yang lineage is also incomplete. You must be careful."

Li Ximing nodded in acknowledgment. A visit to Profound Wonder Temple was certainly in order. Not only was the old Daoist Master of Treasured Earth a significant figure, but his own plans for Jiangbei would benefit from the temple's support.

'Besides, it was Daoist Master Chuting who suggested I seek out Changxi. With his skill in divination, he clearly saw no problem with it… perhaps he even hoped my clan would get involved in Jiangbei.'

He and Changxi took to the air. Li Ximing activated his divine ability, lifting Ding Weizeng from where he waited below, and together they flew into the Great Void. As they traveled through the ethereal plane, Li Ximing took the opportunity to ask, "Daoist Master, what are your thoughts on the matter of Dense Cloud Cave?"

Changxi looked slightly embarrassed. Li Ximing's words were polite, but to Changxi's ears, the meaning was clear: 'My people are already on the move, securing the Floating Cloud territory and have now crossed White river Creek… Where are your Profound Peak disciples?'

"My clan's cultivators have already reached the wilderness," he said quickly. "They are using artifacts to conceal themselves and are secretly advancing toward Dense Cloud Cave."

"Dense Cloud Cave is merely a subordinate of the White Ye Immortal Sect. Yehui has no Life Divine Ability and is not skilled in divination. He will not be able to predict this."

Li Ximing wasn't worried about Yehui, but about Changxiao. However, those two had no real friendship, only a shared interest in opposing his clan. He considered this and replied, "Profound Wonder Temple is but a stone's throw from White river Creek, so it can be watched over. Besides, you and I appearing at Profound Wonder Temple at this time… who knows what suspicions that will raise."

The White Ye Immortal Sect had a few notable figures, but Li Zhouwei was carrying the Li clan's trump card—a Purple Mansion-grade talisman. Li Ximing's only fear was that the White Ye sect might be prepared and that Li Chenghui and the others would be lost. Hearing that the Profound Peak disciples were on their way, he finally felt at ease.

After a brief conversation, they emerged from the Great Void. A deep black cliff loomed before them on the edge of the sea. Massive waves crashed against it, creating a thunderous roar.

Cultivators could be seen flying to and from the cliff. A short distance away, the terrain rose into a small, verdant hill. There were no pavilions or halls, only a scene of natural beauty, with a single Daoist temple at its peak.

Changxi led him toward the temple. The great array was already open, shimmering with a clear, rippling light. A young man stood before the gate, dressed in a simple white robe, his Daoist cap faintly glowing. He was tall, with slightly deep-set eyes, not looking like a southern cultivator.

"Greetings, Daoist Master Changxi, Daoist Master Zhaojing." He bowed his head, performing a perfect circular salute. "This humble Daoist welcomes you both! My master has been waiting for some time for your esteemed arrival."

"It has been a while, Qiuxin. Your cultivation has improved again!" Changxi laughed, his tone warm and familiar, like one speaking to a junior of his own family. They landed within the temple grounds, and Changxi headed for the main hall.

The hall was plain on the outside, but the interior was furnished in rich, dark colors. The scent of incense hung in the air. Li Ximing's gaze swept across the

room. At the head of the hall was a white cloth hanging, on which was painted a faceless Daoist riding a donkey.

"Fellow Daoist Changxi! It has been too long!"

A middle-aged abbot walked out from within the hall. He had a squarish face and wore simple, unremarkable clothes. This was, of course, the master of Profound Wonder Temple, Daoist Master Sumian!

He bowed, then looked at Changxi's face. The abbot seemed to know some art of qi observation. His expression changed. "My friend… how have things become so dire?"

Sumian and Changxi were clearly old friends, and both were Earth Virtue cultivators. A sense of shared sorrow filled his face with worry. Changxi returned the bow. "Mount Jingyi had some trouble a few years ago. Xuanyi asked for my help. I didn't expect to receive a minor injury, and with the recent shift in the spiritual atmosphere, my complexion has worsened."

Li Ximing watched closely. At the mention of Daoist Master Xuanyi, Sumian frowned slightly but said nothing more. He sighed. "The workings of heaven are boundless and ever-changing. The Upper Evil Spirit Storage can no longer hold… It is beyond our power. So be it, so be it!"

Sumian was also an Earth Virtue cultivator. The current spiritual atmosphere, the Inward Heart Surging Profundity, was detrimental to earth, which was clearly not a good thing for him. He looked up at Li Ximing. "You must be Zhaojing!"

"I am… Greetings, Senior!"

"Ah," Daoist Master Sumian smiled. "Zhaojing, no need for such ceremony. Please, come inside."

They entered, offered incense together, and then moved to the rear courtyard. "My Profound Wonder Temple carries the lineage of the ancient Comprehending Profundity Palace," Sumian said leisurely. "The painting you saw depicts True Monarch Xu Xiang of the Comprehending Profundity Palace, who attained the fruition of the Treasured Earth Dao…"

"So, a True Monarch." Li Ximing had already suspected as much when he saw the faceless painting. 'Since the lineage is so grand, yet he only has a single Purple

Mansion divine ability, it is likely not the orthodox line,' he thought. 'Nine times out of ten, he stumbled upon a piece of the inheritance by chance.'

Sumian led them to the rear courtyard. In its center stood an ancient, bronze-colored alchemy furnace of excellent quality. Other than that, there were only a few meditation cushions. After they were all seated, with Ding Weizeng standing respectfully to one side, Sumian picked up the conversation. "Changxi, did you come this time to introduce Zhaojing?"

"Indeed." Changxi drew a breath, his face reverting to its middle-aged appearance. He made a gesture and gave a brief introduction, but Li Ximing had already been briefed on the old Daoist Master, and Sumian likewise knew of the newly ascended Purple Mansion cultivator. They exchanged some pleasantries.

Sumian's attitude toward him was friendly. "I hear Zhaojing is an alchemist," he joked. "I will have much to ask of you in the future. I must make sure to build a good relationship with you now!"

"Senior is too kind!" Li Ximing knew not to take such words at face value. Judging by the alchemy furnace in the courtyard, it was entirely possible that Sumian's skill in alchemy surpassed his own.

The requirements for alchemy were a balance of yin and yang within the Shengyang Acupoint and a vibrant Cinnabar Cloud within the Sea of Qi, where water and fire were in harmony. These conditions were rare, but for a Purple Mansion cultivator, they were trivial.

A Purple Mansion cultivator could shape their own Sea of Qi. Never mind a vibrant Cinnabar Cloud and the harmony of water and fire; they could even create the unified yin and yang and the vast sky glows required by a weapons refiner. Aside from a few specific lineages, most Purple Mansion cultivators could mold their internal environment as they wished.

Balancing yin and yang in the Shengyang Acupoint was slightly more difficult, but as long as one's lineage was among the twelve core Qis, or not too heavily skewed toward yin or yang, it could be gradually adjusted.

Li Ximing was born with these conditions, but cultivators like Changxi could also practice alchemy if they so chose. It was merely a matter of proficiency… they simply wouldn't be as naturally gifted as Li Ximing.

Changxi, listening nearby, feared Li Ximing might ask an awkward question. He quickly interjected, speaking on his behalf, "Fellow Daoist Sumian has taken a great interest in alchemy in recent years. He cultivates 'Treasured Earth' and is a northern cultivator, quite different from those in Jiangnan… You can let him take a look at your retainer."

"Then I must trouble you, Senior!" Li Ximing smiled and bowed.

Sumian had already noticed Ding Weizeng. He beckoned him over, took his wrist, and diagnosed his condition without a moment's thought. He nodded. "A fine 'Palace-Yang Tiger'! Your Immortal Foundation is the same as that of Daoist Master Yanque of the Hengzhu Dao, two hundred years ago. He was a great cultivator of his time."

He released his hand, formed a seal with one hand, and with a gentle pull, drew a handful of ash from the alchemy furnace. He sprinkled it into a jade bowl, then broke a branch from a willow tree in the courtyard. He deftly dipped it in clear water and said in a warm voice, "Do you practice alchemy or weapon refining? Your Dantian is damaged, and your yin and yang qi have been leaking. I will mend it for you now, but you will no longer be able to practice alchemy or weapon refining in the future."

"Replying to the Daoist Master," Ding Weizeng said respectfully, "this lowly one never had such fortune to begin with."

Sumian had him hold the jade bowl. He then took the water-dipped willow branch and struck him twice across the abdomen. "Close your eyes!" he commanded.

Ding Weizeng shut his eyes just in time to see a multicolored light of a divine ability spray from Sumian's mouth and flow over his body. A faint light stirred between Li Ximing's brows. He knew that Ding Weizeng's injury was already healed.

'Healed, just like that!'

Of all the things Sumian had done, only the handful of ash, burned from some spiritual material, was even remotely mystical. The rest were all common items. An injury that was incurable for Foundation Establishment and Qi Refining cultivators, save for a few special spiritual medicines… was healed, just like that!

Seeing their astonishment, Sumian smiled and shook his head. "Not at all. On one side, we have Bright Yang; on the other, Bound Earth. My Treasured Earth

merely acted as a medium, creating a situation where the heavenly sun shines, all plants flourish, and life abounds. I simply borrowed the Purple Mansion dignities of you both and took a small shortcut…"

"But it is more than enough to demonstrate the Daoist Master's profound skill!" Li Ximing praised. From what he had seen, Sumian acted with integrity. Regardless of his hidden thoughts, his conduct so far suggested he was reliable and worthy of friendship. He smiled. "Weizeng, quickly, thank the Daoist Master!"

Chapter 712: The Matter of the Capital Immortals Dao

"My deepest thanks, Daoist Master!"

Ding Weizeng's voice was heavy with respect. He was a hearty man with a square jaw and a bristling beard, and his simple, earnest bow was more convincing than a thousand fawning compliments. The old Daoist Master nodded, pleased.

After Ding Weizeng paid his respects, Sumian remained smiling but silent. The conversation that followed was not for his retainer's ears, so Li Ximing gestured, sending him out of the courtyard.

"I must thank Daoist Master Qi," Li Ximing said sincerely. "I only recently broke through, and my clan's precepts forbid me from engaging with matters of blood qi. I'm not skilled in this area, unlike you, whose divine abilities make such healing seem effortless."

"Zhaojing, you jest," Sumian replied, shaking his head as he poured the tea. "If you truly wished to heal his injury, it would hardly be a challenge. I merely had the advantage of a convenient divine ability."

He filled their cups just as a cool, quiet rain began to fall outside. Changxi watched Li Ximing with a complex expression, a finger resting on his teacup as if to steady himself.

"Seeing you in your prime, Zhaojing, is like looking at myself three hundred years ago. It brings back a flood of memories."

Changxi was not yet five hundred, only around four hundred and fifty. Li Ximing had long been puzzled by the lifespan of Purple Mansion cultivators. He paused for a moment before asking, "Even after attaining a divine ability, if one cannot achieve transcendence, is it not possible to at least enjoy a millennium of life? Five hundred years is hardly enough time for cultivation."

Sumian smiled wistfully.

"That's a fine question, one I asked myself in my youth. My lineage's records touch upon it briefly. Allow me to share what I know."

"Lifespan consists of two parts, the life of the body and the life of the spirit. The former is tied to your physical nature, the latter to your destiny. We of the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao cultivate our physical nature. Our souls are bound to our bodies, so while the body itself may endure, our destiny is finite. When it runs its course, the soul weakens, and we die."

A flicker of understanding crossed Li Ximing's face. Changxi added with a wry smile, "Look at the Buddhist cultivators of the north. They cultivate destiny. Their physical lifespans are short, but when one body perishes, they simply find another. Their Merciful Ones, for instance, changes bodies every century or so. Though they must reforge their Dharma body each time, living for over a thousand years until their destiny is exhausted is no problem at all."

"Precisely," Sumian agreed. "Therefore, it shouldn't be called a five-hundred-year lifespan, but a five-hundred-year destiny. Before the heavens changed, this was all recorded in the registers of the Underworld—so-and-so cultivator, fated to live for so many years… I've even heard tales of cultivators bribing officials in the Underworld to extend their time."

Changxi sighed.

"After the heavens changed, the Underworld became inaccessible. Everyone's destiny became fixed. Purple Mansion cultivators have five hundred years. Those who cultivate a Life Divine Ability can live a little longer and have a chance through possession, but with my divine ability… I can only wait for the end."

Li Ximing mulled this over for a moment.

"What of the ancient arts of cultivating Qi and nurturing one's nature?"

"The way of the ancient immortals is superior, of course! To master a divine ability and perfect both body and destiny—that is the path to true longevity!" Sumian laughed. "But how many can actually succeed? Look at the Wang and Xie families, hiding in their vast Grotto-Heavens with millions of mortals. Do they even have ten cultivators among them? And of those who cultivate, does even

one in a thousand attain a divine ability? Even if you could find such an immortal scripture, your entire Moongaze Lake might only produce one or two children capable of using their powers for something as simple as calling rain."

Li Ximing nodded in acceptance, took a sip of tea, and changed the subject.

"Is the old Daoist Master secure in these lands?"

Sumian knew he was asking about the White Ye Immortal Sect.

"Rest assured, Zhaojing, I have always lived peacefully here by the sea. Shen Yuming of the Shen family, Master Minghui of the Lotus Temple, and even Yehui of the Capital Immortals Dao and Chang Yun of the Revering Radiance Gate have all paid their respects."

His meaning was clear. The Profound Wonder Temple had no grand ambitions. Sumian wished to live out his final years in peace, maintaining good relations with his neighbors. He had no desire to get involved in the tense standoff between Changxi, the Li clan, and the White Ye Immortal Sect.

He glanced at his two guests before adding, "But now that I have promised Changxi I would look after the Profound Peak Gate, I will naturally keep my word."

Li Ximing was not surprised. He chose his words carefully.

"When I broke through to the Purple Mansion Realm, this Daoist Master Yehui sent no congratulations. That I can overlook. But he then went out of his way to mock me without cause. I am at a loss as to how I offended him."

"I am aware that the White Ye Immortal Sect is blocked to the north by the Revering Radiance Gate—and Chang Yun is a formidable figure. To the east, they have Profound Wonder Temple; to the south, your Profound Peak Gate; and to the west, the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion. They are natural rivals to my clan… but there was no need for him to bare his fangs so soon."

Yehui was not the only one who knew that the Azure Pond Sect, the Li clan's backer, would not welcome their prosperity. Sumian and Changxi knew it as well. It was this knowledge that fueled Yehui's greed. The two old men exchanged a look, and Sumian sighed.

"There is something you don't know, Zhaojing. Yehui obtained his great opportunity in the Encompassing Profundity Grotto-Heaven, and he owed his entry to the support of Guo Shentong… In the early days of the conflict between the

east and west isles of Crimson Reef Island, many held back from attacking the west isle out of respect for his connection to Guo Shentong."

The final piece of the puzzle clicked into place for Li Ximing.

'So that's it,' he thought with a deep sigh. 'In the end, it all comes back to our feud with Crimson Reef Island. No wonder he was so hostile. The vendetta between our clans and the direct lineage of Crimson Reef is not easily resolved.'

As he processed this, Changxi's voice grew low and cold.

"I heard that opportunity was meant for Lingshu! That man is a snake! Zhang Lingshu is dead, and I'd wager Yehui had more than a little to do with it!"

The name Zhang Lingshu sounded familiar. After a moment's thought, Li Ximing remembered that Li Xizhi had inherited the title of Changtian Peak Lord after the line was broken with Zhang Lingshu's death. She had originally been a Peak Lord in the Azure Pond Sect.

Sumian shook his head, looking slightly uncomfortable.

"It's a complicated matter. In the end, Haiying and Lingshu never married. You have no grounds to accuse him."

"Hah!" Changxi let out a heavy sigh.

Li Ximing, however, felt a jolt. *Haiying* could only be Kong Haiying, the Purple Mansion seed of the Kong family, currently in seclusion for his breakthrough. From their words, it seemed Kong Haiying and Zhang Lingshu had nearly become Dao companions.

'This is a blood feud,' he realized. 'If I were Yehui, the moment Changxi dies, I would invade the wilderness… I'd strike at Profound Peak Gate until it trembled, then press the attack, disrupting Kong Haiying's breakthrough and ensuring his failure.'

It was a grudge tantamount to murdering one's beloved. Yehui understood the gravity of the situation, which only deepened Changxi's worries.

'So there was more to the story.'

A flash of annoyance at Changxi's secrecy crossed Li Ximing's mind, but this was not the time or place to show it. Besides, the source of his own clan's conflict with Yehui was now crystal clear and seemingly irreconcilable. He lowered his head and sipped his tea.

Changxi, who had been watching him closely, felt the awkwardness and quickly moved the conversation along. Sumian, with the wisdom of his centuries, smoothly filled the silence.

"Zhaojing, are you aware… Yehui cultivates the 'Capital Guard' of the Ancient Merging. It is an ancient Dao of exorcising ghosts, guarding mountains, and empowering rivers. Its history is long, and he has mastered three divine abilities. He is not to be underestimated."

Li Ximing had only just learned of the Capital Guard Dao. If not for Xiao Ruyu mentioning that Xiao Yongling's Eastern Feather Mountain was of this path, the Li clan would have remained ignorant. He decided to ease the tension.

"This junior is inexperienced and has never encountered the Capital Guard Dao before. I would be grateful for the senior's guidance."

"It's actually quite common in Jiangnan," Sumian said with a smile. "The Capital Guard Dao has lacked a Fruition Attainment cultivator for many years, so it has waned. Below the Purple Mansion Realm, it's unremarkable, mostly consisting of Immortal Foundations based on the spirits of mountains and rivers. There are many such cultivators here, but they are difficult to identify. Most mistake them for substitutes of the Earth or Water Virtues, or of the High Shaman and Hengzhu Rites, never recognizing their true nature."

"The famous Eastern Feather Mountain of the Xiao clan, the Soul-Summoning Lore favored by the Yue cultivators, and the Sorrowful Southern Water of the Lingu family are all of this path. More famous examples… are not in Jiangnan, such as the Western Heaven Plateau of the Baiqiang and the Northern Desert Court of the Di tribe."

This made sense. The Li clan had once assumed Eastern Feather Mountain was an Earth Virtue foundation and had only recently learned the truth.

Changxi, clearly familiar with the topic, added, "Many fallen Dao lineages survive as substitute foundations. If not for the famous Duanmu Kui appearing in Jiangnan, most cultivators would still think the Locust Shade Ghost was just a Wood Virtue substitute, believing its connection to Lesser Yin made it an inferior path."

"Exactly!" Sumian laughed heartily. "As long as the cultivation art is powerful, how can the Immortal Foundation be weak?"

All three men laughed. They all knew how rare and precious powerful arts and techniques were. Unless a clan faced utter annihilation, no one would let their jade slips fall into outside hands; they would destroy them first. If not for the Immortal Mirror's transmissions, the Li clan would still be practicing the *Great River and Grand Tomb Scripture*.

"No wonder they're called the Capital Immortals Dao. The 'Capital' is from the Capital Guard. What mysteries do its divine abilities hold?"

Sumian lowered his head to his tea, but Changxi answered, "At the Foundation Establishment Realm, it is merely the manipulation of the malevolent qi of mountains and rivers. But at the Purple Mansion Realm, one can command spirits and drive out evil, using wondrous spiritual arts to face enemies. And yet, among the Ancient Merging arts, the Capital Guard is not considered particularly demonic. Thunder and Heavenly Light are not its natural counters."

Li Ximing committed this to memory while trying to pry more information about Yehui's specific divine abilities. He had asked Changxi before, but he didn't know. After a few subtle attempts, it became clear Sumian was unwilling to speak on the matter.

'Either he truly doesn't know, or he's afraid of getting involved in our conflict. A cautious old master indeed.'

The three chatted for a while longer. The cold rain in the courtyard grew heavier, drumming a steady rhythm on the eaves. The fragrance of tea filled the air. A figure appeared outside and spoke respectfully through the door.

"Reporting to the Daoist Masters! The Radiant Splendor Daoist has broken through the river peaks of the Dense Cloud Sect and has slain Pingyang Zi of Pingshui Hill. He is now advancing deep into their territory. The Secret Diffusion region is in an uproar, and cultivators have already been dispatched from White ye Creek!"

"Good." Changxi pinched his fingers, calculating the time and distance of Li Zhouwei's advance. He smiled. "Worthy of being called the White Qilin of the Li clan! Now, Yehui will be forced to act."

Li Ximing stroked his beard and smiled, though a deeper thought surfaced in his mind.

'Here we sit, discussing idle matters over tea in the cold rain. Yet in the shadows of our robes, generals march and soldiers move, breaking formations and slaying enemies. Thousands of lives are maneuvered like pieces on a board. A Foundation Establishment cultivator, a master of his own domain, is reduced to a bargaining chip. The hegemon of a river, on whom countless cultivators depend, is nothing more than a watchtower…'

'This is the Purple Mansion Realm… this is true power.'

Li Ximing had not forgotten the generations of his ancestors who had been swept along like driftwood in the currents of Purple Mansion cultivators, used as pawns and sacrificed. From the moment Li Tongya first looked up from Mount Huaqian to Li Qinghong flying alone into the Eastern Sea, the clan had sacrificed everything to push him to where he sat today.

'I will trade the freedom of my divine abilities for the peace and prosperity of ten thousand households.'

Li Ximing finished his tea and rose with Changxi to take their leave. Sumian knew they were heading for the White river Creek region and did not detain them, simply having Qiuxin escort them out. The young man seemed to be related to the Kong family by marriage and was quite close with Changxi.

As they stepped out of the courtyard, Qiuxin bowed to Li Ximing.

"There is something I must return to the Daoist Master," he said respectfully.

He drew an object from his sleeve and presented it with both hands. It was a small purple cauldron with two handles and three legs, covered in intricate patterns that seemed to shimmer with faint flames.

Four small, elegantly inscribed characters were on the lid: "Shengle, Tuoba."

Not waiting for Li Ximing to ask, he explained, "Years ago, when our temple was still in the Eastern Sea, I accepted an invitation from Xi Chang of the Pure Unity Dao Gate to exorcise demons at an estuary near Salt Lake. There, we encountered a cultivator from your esteemed clan who practiced thunder arts. We did not make things difficult for her and allowed her to leave, but she left an old man behind."

"He was killed by the Pure Unity Dao Gate, but I kept this item. I return it to you now to settle the matter."

Li Ximing actually remembered the incident. The old man was Yu Yuwei of the Yu family, whom Li Xizhi had mentioned was the maternal uncle of Li Quantao from the Azure Pond Sect. Qiuxin—or rather, Sumian—was unsure of the connection and decided to return the item to be safe.

Li Ximing accepted it casually. "This belongs to a cultivator of the Yu family. If I have the chance, I will see that it reaches his relatives."

Changxi watched with a pleased expression. His sharp eyes noticed something else. "How did you get injured?" he asked Qiuxin.

"Replying to the Daoist Master," Qiuxin said respectfully, "the spirit mine at the Quanyuan ferry was overrun by a school of Thread River Demon Perch from the sea. I was injured while rescuing people."

"Ah," Changxi said. "Those demon perch have some backing. Their constant harassment must be trying for you."

Li Ximing understood the implication immediately but kept his expression neutral. He scoffed internally. 'A subtle hint, is it? But my clan has no connection to dragon-kind! What Thread River Demon Perch? What am I supposed to do about it?'

Meanwhile, in the territory of Dense Cloud Cave.

Dense Cloud Cave lay slightly northeast of Floating Cloud Cave, further downstream. The terrain was more varied, not just rolling hills but also gentle plains and several towering peaks. It was a fine piece of land.

Beyond the border at Pingshui Hill, several bustling cities came into view. Li Zhouwei flew high above, his cloak whipping in the wind. His armor gleamed, his great halberd held at the ready, and in his other hand, he carried a gruesome, severed head.

Pingyang Zi had been a demonic cultivator from the Eastern Sea, a mid-stage Foundation Establishment cultivator of decent strength, certainly stronger than Wen Yi. But the formation on his mountain was only at the Qi Refining level. Surrounded by Li Chenghui and Li Minggong, there was no escape. Li Zhouwei had ended his life with a single strike of his halberd.

Now, having crossed Pingshui Hill, they were deep in enemy territory. The cities below were in chaos. Li Chenghui looked down with a trace of regret. "These cities are well-managed. It's a shame we don't have the strength to secure them. We must focus on the main peak."

Li Zhouwei nodded and made a quick estimation. "Dense Cloud Cave abducted the population of Floating Cloud Cave. Including their original people, there should be over a million mortals here. That's a significant prize."

Population was still a vital resource for the Li clan. They had no shortage of cultivators at the Embryonic Breathing and miscellaneous Qi stages, but they were desperately lacking at the Foundation Establishment level. They couldn't even manage their own affairs, which was why they had taken the risk of employing men like Qu Bushi.

Large families that had produced Foundation Establishment cultivators were valuable not only for their potential to provide guest retainers but also for their ability to supply a steady stream of mid and late-stage Qi Refining cultivators with pure Qi. These were the true backbone needed to govern a region, unlike the Li clan's current situation, where they had fewer than ten late-stage Qi Refining cultivators, most of whom were either elderly or from the direct family line.

Chapter 713: Wenhu

Li Zhouwei hoped that the clan's core members could spend more time on their cultivation. People like Li Minggong and Li Chenghui had already lost years to other duties. The matter of Mount Qingdu had been unavoidable, but everything else felt like a waste of their precious time.

'Of the old Moongaze Lake families, the Yu had a noble ancestry, but their main line was extinct. Fortunately, we gained the An family, who have become a cornerstone of our strength. The Fei family, on the other hand, never had a strong foundation and struggled to produce Foundation Establishment cultivators. As vassals, they were always a step removed.'

The An patriarch, his son, and even his grandsons all held respectable positions within the Li clan. An Siwei was even the first outsider to reach Foundation Establishment under their banner. Their loyalty was unquestionable, but relying so heavily on another family was not a good long-term solution.

Li Zhouwei had been keeping this in mind. As they flew, he took note of the size of each city and the number of cultivators present, making a quick calculation.

"The White Ye Immortal Sect must know by now," he said. "Their spirit vessel can be here in less than fifteen minutes!"

Li Zhouwei had discussed this with Li Ximing beforehand. As a Purple Mansion cultivator, Li Ximing's attitude toward Wenhu had been remarkably lenient, making it clear that he wished to avoid conflict and settle matters peacefully.

The Capital Immortals Dao had likely not anticipated the Li clan's sudden, explosive attack. But considering their strange and unpredictable arts, it was safest to assume they had known the moment the assault began.

Li Chenghui nodded. "Fifteen minutes… That's only enough time for us to capture two more mountains. Once the Capital Immortals Dao arrives, regardless

of how they react, we'll be forced into a stalemate. The borders will be redrawn, and it will be much harder to make a move in the future."

The Capital Immortals Dao was a Purple Mansion sect that had relocated from the Eastern Sea, a far cry from the cultivators of Dense Cloud Cave. Wenhu, the most formidable figure in the entire cave, would only be considered a "Peak Lord" in the Capital Immortals Dao. Miaoshui was nothing more than a guest retainer.

'Two more mountains…'

Even if they took two more mountains, they would only control forty percent of the territory—not enough to split the region evenly with the Capital Immortals Dao. That wasn't good enough for Li Zhouwei. And that was only the first problem.

"Furthermore… the Ding family is at the foot of Hongfu Mountain, the main peak of Dense Cloud Cave…"

When Floating Cloud Cave was breached, the Ding family—a local power with over ten thousand members—had been captured and relocated to Hongfu Mountain. Ding Weizeng was destined to become one of the clan's key commanders, and it wouldn't do to have his people in enemy hands.

Seeing Li Zhouwei's frown, Li Chenghui, who was well aware of the situation, said gravely, "If we can take Hongfu Peak, seventy percent of the territory will be ours."

"Taking it would be ideal. If you and I went together, my aunt and An Siwei could capture the two mountains behind us. But if we fail and get pinned down deep in their territory, we'll be in trouble!"

Li Zhouwei possessed a Purple Mansion-grade talisman called the Profound Bright Treasured Protection, which could summon a divine ability to protect him. With it, he could move freely through Jiangbei. The talisman was a gift from Daoist Master Yuanwu to Yu Muxian. After the Li clan killed Yu Muxian, it had fallen into their hands.

At the time, only two cultivators in the Azure Pond Sect were skilled enough in the Dao of talismans to have reached the Purple Mansion Realm. One was Chi Wei, whose cultivation of Pristine Water aided his craft, and the other was

Daoist Master Yuanxiu, who came from a long line of talisman masters. Li Xuanfeng had asked Daoist Master Yuanxiu about the talisman, and he had recognized it as his own work, as they had both studied under the same master. Thus, Li Zhouwei now had a Purple Mansion talisman at his disposal. Even if surrounded, he could escape. Li Chenghui, however, could not.

As he spoke, the Great Void rippled, and a heroic figure with a swallow's jaw and a bristling beard emerged. He was tall and powerfully built, with the broad back and muscular waist of a tiger, and clad in crimson soft armor, exuding a formidable aura.

"Greetings, Clan Lord!"

Li Ximing's decision to send Ding Weizeng was a timely relief! Li Zhouwei laughed heartily. "Congratulations, Weizeng!"

"This subordinate does not dare accept such praise!"

Ding Weizeng was built like a tiger, a full head taller than the men beside him. Li Zhouwei knew that Li Ximing must have healed his injuries, and he was thrilled. But this was no time for idle talk.

"With you here, Weizeng, I'm confident we can succeed! Clan Uncle, Aunt Minggong, you will lead our forces and secure the rear. Weizeng and I will make a lightning raid on Hongfu Mountain and rescue the Ding family!"

He sheathed his great halberd. Ding Weizeng was stunned by the order, only then realizing his entire family had been taken to Hongfu Mountain. He was deeply moved, but he still advised caution. "Clan Lord, Hongfu Mountain is defended by four Foundation Establishment cultivators, including Wenhu and Wang He. They are not to be underestimated, and they have a Foundation Establishment-grade array. For the two of us to go alone is too risky."

Li Zhouwei gestured toward Miaoshui. "We'll have her, too," he said with a smile.

Ding Weizeng frowned but still summoned a gust of wind to carry them eastward. As they flew at top speed, Li Zhouwei added, "Besides… with the current situation, do you really think all four of them are still guarding Hongfu Mountain? And did I say we were going to launch a direct assault? His Immortal Foundation is Hurricane Ghost Yin. My family cultivates Bright Yang, Thunder, and True Fire. He's walked right into the blade!"

"Li Zhouwei broke through Pingshui Hill?"

Wenhu stood on a mountain peak, his expression grim, his heart filled with a terrible unease.

Ever since he learned that Yehui had not gone to the Li clan, Wenhu had maintained a calm exterior, but inwardly he knew things had taken a turn for the worse. The relationship between the Li clan and their backer, the Capital Immortals Dao, was bound to sour, and he was caught in the middle. His end would not be a pleasant one.

'What is this madness…'

He was at his wits' end. Though the White Ye Immortal Sect would receive the news no later than he did, he still dispatched a messenger before pacing back and forth in agitation.

'In this situation, my only path is to hold back the Li clan for the Capital Immortals Dao for as long as possible!'

His fears from the moment he'd left the Li clan's territory had become reality, but he never thought it would happen so quickly. More tragically, Pingwang Zi's words had also come true.

'A bird seeks a branch, a man seeks a master. There's no chance to play both sides.'

"The men from the White Ye Immortal Sect will be here soon, so I don't have to worry about dying. Right now, no one can stop Li Zhouwei. I have to go myself."

Though he had only been a guest retainer in the Eastern Sea and lacked command experience, he understood the basics of defense. He appointed one person to guard the mountain and took the other two with him as reinforcements.

Wenhu understood deeply that anyone in Dense Cloud Cave could surrender to the Li clan except him. He had been personally recruited by Daoist Master Yehui. The others served him; he served a Purple Mansion cultivator.

'Purple Mansion cultivators are beings on high. There's nothing they can't negotiate. All this territory is just a bargaining chip. If I surrender to the Li clan and the two sides make peace, I'll be the one they sacrifice.'

'My only way to survive now is to throw my full support behind the Capital Immortals Dao and resist the Li clan. The more ruthless I am, the better my chances of survival. It won't be more than thirty minutes. Li Zhouwei can't kill me in that time!'

Wenhu was, after all, Yehui's man. He had seen more of the world. While Miaoshui needed Li Zhouwei's prompting, he understood the gravity of his situation on his own. He flew out from the mountain and had traveled barely thirty miles when his vision flashed and a sharp pain erupted in his chest.

"Ah!"

Wenhu vaguely saw a shower of sparks and thick white mist rise from his chest, followed by a searing pain. A brilliant light shot toward him from the distance. He quickly pressed down on the wound, swallowed the blood rising in his throat, and roared, "Li Zhouwei!"

The great halberd grew from a distant meteor to fill his vision. A cold sweat broke out on Wenhu's back. He was confident Li Zhouwei couldn't kill him, but that didn't mean he could survive two strikes from this White Qilin after being caught off guard. He hastily clapped his hands together, summoning a stream of pure qi.

As the qi billowed out, Wenhu reappeared dozens of feet away. The wound on his chest was sealed, but his spiritual qi was draining away in waves. He silently gave thanks.

'Thankfully… Bright Yang is a noble, righteous path. Using its Profound Light for a sneak attack diminishes its power… otherwise, that blow would have been devastating…'

The halberd was already stabbing toward his chest. Wenhu had no time for curses. He activated a white jade artifact and threw up a talisman to block the attack. The young man materialized before him, his golden eyes dark and deep.

"You're a clever one," he said with a smile.

"Clang!"

As he spoke, the halberd slammed into the artifact, shattering the talisman's protective light. The white jade artifact groaned under the strain. Wenhu had specifically bought it after the True Monarch's ascension, and it had indeed proven its worth. He spat out a mouthful of black gas.

"Hoo!"

A gale tore through the forest, thick with black, sinister qi. The light rain falling from the sky seemed to empower his Immortal Foundation, Hurricane Ghost Yin, and frost began to form on the ground.

But Wenhu felt no confidence.

The reason was simple: the Li clan's patriarch had achieved the Purple Mansion Realm through the Bright Yang Dao!

As expected, Li Zhouwei simply drew a small flag from his sleeve and tossed it into the air. In an instant, the wind died and the rain stopped. Five-colored Radiant Fire—ochre, pale yellow, canary yellow, bright red, and crimson—leapt into existence, bathing the area in brilliant light and burning away the yin energy.

Wenhu felt a wave of helplessness, but at least he had bought a moment. His two subordinates quickly gathered around him. One of them, Wang He, held a feather fan and was Wenhu's most capable officer. His face was etched with apprehension.

Before Wenhu could feel any relief, a reddish-bronze halo appeared. The brawny, bearded warrior materialized in mid-air, a cold sneer on his face, his eyes locked onto them.

"Ding! Wei! Zeng!"

For the first time, Wenhu's mind went completely blank. He instantly understood what had happened. The black qi swirled in his hands, but he could only watch as Ding Weizeng, his expression like ice, slammed a palm down, crushing Wang He. The man stood in the air like a great tiger, watching its prey.

In that instant, envy, jealousy, and terror flooded Wenhu's heart.

Honestly, Wenhu had not wanted to offend the Li clan, nor the Capital Immortals Dao behind him. He knew he wasn't even a pawn in their game; the slightest displeasure from either side would result in a miserable end for him.

That was why he hadn't stayed to defend Hongfu Mountain!

Did he not know that holding the mountain was the strategy that would incur the fewest losses? With four men defending the array, no matter how fiercely Li Zhouwei attacked, they would lose no more than half their territory. If Hongfu Mountain held, when the Capital Immortals Dao arrived, the Li clan would gain no advantage in the region.

But Yehui had many enemies within the Capital Immortals Dao. If Wenhu just sat in the mountain like a dead man, those stubborn purists in the sect would surely speak out. He had to be seriously injured, and losing territory was an expected outcome—after all, his opponent was a Purple Mansion clan, and the attacker was Li Zhouwei himself.

However, if he defended the mountain to the last, the Li clan's interests would be severely hampered, and they would hate him for it. Wenhu had no desire to provoke the Purple Mansion cultivator Zhaojing or the future Purple Mansion cultivator Li Zhouwei. Ceding Hongfu Mountain was the only way to satisfy them.

Thus, between the crime of incompetence and the crime of cowardice and treachery, he had chosen the former.

In his scenario, Miaoshui would most likely surrender. Li Zhouwei would seize the opportunity to occupy the mountain, then turn to besiege him. He would be gravely wounded, and then rescued by the Capital Immortals Dao. How the two clans divided the territory afterward would have nothing to do with him. That was the only way to avoid offending either side!

But Li Zhouwei had cornered him here… and Ding Weizeng, the man he had looked down upon, had become a formidable general of the Li clan!

Wenhu nearly lost his composure. He couldn't stop the bitter thought from rising in his heart.

'A hundred cunning schemes are no match for a handsome face and a powerful lineage. A thousand careful calculations cannot compare to a fate that turns disaster into fortune!'

But he was a rogue cultivator who had risen to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the disciples of great sects. His willpower was extraordinary. He instantly regained his clarity. Though the Profound Light searing his body sent up wisps of green smoke, he grit his teeth and did his best to parry Li Zhouwei's halberd.

In terms of pure cultivation, Wenhu was far superior to Li Zhouwei, having already broken through to the late stage of Foundation Establishment. With a different Dao foundation, he might have been able to fight the White Qilin to a standstill.

But now, his artifacts and techniques were inferior, his Immortal Foundation was completely suppressed, and he had been wounded from the start. His spiritual qi flowed with difficulty, and he could only rely on his vast experience and deep reserves to barely hold on.

Li Zhouwei had no time to waste. He formed a hand seal, pointing his index finger forward. A hint of sunlight pierced through the clouds, and a brilliant light gathered at his fingertip.

"Sun's Resonant Radiance Art!"

The Sun's Resonant Radiance Art was an art of endless variations. At this moment, it reflected the sunlight, seizing control of the jade shield. The dark silhouette of the great halberd plunged toward the wound on Wenhu's chest.

But Wenhu was no ordinary man. He bit down hard on his tongue and spat out a mouthful of essence blood. A roaring sound erupted from his mouth as a torrent of deep black light shot toward Li Zhouwei, shattering the Profound Light around him.

For the first time, a look of surprise crossed Li Zhouwei's face.

"The Great Wind of the Abyssal Depths?"

This was not, of course, the true Great Wind of the Abyssal Depths, famed for its ability to disarm opponents. Wenhu had only managed to imitate some of its profound power using his Hurricane Ghost Yin foundation, but it was enough to catch an ordinary Foundation Establishment cultivator off guard and cause Li Zhouwei to pause for a fraction of a second.

But Li Zhouwei was familiar with this wind. The Great Wind of the Abyssal Depths from his clan's Chongming Profound Insight Screen was far more powerful. That artifact, however, had an extraordinary origin and was currently in Li Ximing's possession.

He broke free with a slight struggle, and the great wind lost its source. Although Wenhu hadn't expected him to escape so quickly, his next spell was already complete. A black light coalesced around him.

"By my decree!" he said coldly.

A blast of black light erupted, stirring up a hurricane of ghostly qi. A light shone from between Li Zhouwei's brows as Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light flew out to meet it. The two attacks collided with a deafening roar.

"Boom!"

Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light effortlessly obliterated the black light and slammed into the distant Wenhu, who was still controlling his jade shield. The shield billowed with white smoke and was covered in cracks. Li Zhouwei narrowed his eyes, his golden gaze sweeping the area.

'A fine technique!'

He took a step north, leaving Wenhu behind. The great halberd shone with celestial light as he thrust it into the empty air. A muffled cry of pain was heard as a figure was forced out of hiding, his face covered in blood. Who could it be but Wenhu?

"To cultivate a minor foundation like Hurricane Ghost Yin to such a degree… you're quite the talent!"

Chapter 714: The Probe

With a single motion, Li Zhouwei ran his halberd through Wenhu's trusted subordinate. He flexed his forearm, flipping the man over on the weapon's shaft. Wenhu, his face pale and smeared with blood, continued to desperately conjure techniques, a bloody light surging around him as he prepared to fight to the death.

Li Zhouwei raised his other hand, and a brilliant radiance descended, enveloping Wenhu's face and suppressing him. The Sun's Resonant Radiance Art was a fifth-grade art that excelled in subduing foes with its endless variations. Wenhu's Hurricane Ghost Yin foundation was not only weak to Bright Yang, but even more so to Supreme Yang. The instant the light struck him, his techniques scattered, and a wave of searing heat washed over his mind, nearly knocking him unconscious.

Yet Wenhu clenched his jaw, forcing his eyes open on a single held breath. Though the sun's radiance had burned his eyes milky-white and scorched his face, he still reached for his storage pouch.

'Impressive. Truly impressive willpower.'

Li Zhouwei merely withdrew his halberd, then unleashed Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light from between his brows, severing both of Wenhu's arms. He bound the man in solar light, rendering him immobile.

Meanwhile, Ding Weizeng had already beaten the other two cultivators into a sorry state. His Immortal Foundation was incredibly potent, suffusing his body with a flowing red light and turning his pupils a brownish-yellow. The weaker of the two demonic cultivators was half-dead and out of the fight, leaving only the cave's second-in-command, Wang He, struggling to hold on.

After subduing Wenhu, Li Zhouwei's gaze swept over the remaining fight, causing Wang He to break out in a cold sweat, his heart seized with fear. Just as he was about to speak, a white light flared on the horizon.

The light flickered once before appearing right in front of them, landing beside Wang He in a streak of light and revealing its true form.

"I am Song Yunbai of the Capital Immortals Dao. Greetings, fellow Daoist."

A woman materialized, her hands forming a seal around a talisman. She had a slightly round face with sharp eyebrows and was dressed in a crisp white robe, her features typical of those from Jiangbei. Her sharp gaze fixed on Li Zhouwei and Ding Weizeng.

She clearly didn't recognize either of them. Her eyes swept over Ding Weizeng, pausing for only a moment before settling on Li Zhouwei.

Song Yunbai froze, a strange expression on her face. She took a half-step back, suddenly hesitant. Her bright gaze quickly shifted away, and her voice became somewhat muted.

"Dense Cloud Cave was brought to enlightenment by my Capital Immortals Dao. For your clan to attack without cause… what is the meaning of this?"

Wang He and the other survivor retreated behind her. Li Zhouwei, halberd in hand, replied, "So, a friend from the Capital Immortals Dao. This Wenhu from Dense Cloud Cave deceived a Daoist Master and offended the dignity of a Purple Mansion cultivator. I came specifically to apprehend him. Now that he is captured, I intend to take him away."

Song Yunbai's tone was polite, so Li Zhouwei saw no need to start with threats. He simply held his captive, creating a standoff. In the time it took for this brief exchange, thunder rumbled from behind them, and two figures arrived amidst flowing True Fire.

A radiant and graceful woman holding a lamp and a man with eyes like polished lacquer riding a bolt of lightning—it was the siblings, Li Minggong and Li Chenghui. Before they could even speak, two more streaks of light shot in from the north and south, stopping nearby.

The lights resolved into human forms. On the left stood a tall woman in a colorful dress, holding a jade-green ribbon. Her expression was one of fury. To the right was a man in a bamboo hat and brown clothes, a saber at his waist, carefully observing the scene.

"What is the meaning of this, Li clan!" the woman in the colorful dress demanded without preamble. She brandished her ribbon-like artifact, pointed at

Wenhu, and raged, "This cultivator was personally guided by our Daoist Chidu! Your clan is a noble family of Jiangnan. Are you truly unaware that Dense Cloud Cave is a vassal of our Capital Immortals Dao? We were already being exceedingly generous by allowing you to take the territory of Floating Cloud Cave! How dare you press your advantage and invade Dense Cloud Cave!"

"Ridiculous!" Li Chenghui wasn't about to let Li Zhouwei personally engage in a shouting match. He stepped forward and said coldly, "Since you are so aware that Dense Cloud Cave is your vassal, have you ever bothered to manage their actions? For ten years, Dense Cloud and Floating Cloud have harassed the northern shores of our Moongaze Lake. Did you ever say a single word then? You only show up now, conveniently late, and act as if you've been wronged?"

"You!" The woman's fury rose, and she gave a cold, mocking laugh.

The man in the bamboo hat finally spoke, cupping his hands in a salute. "I am Gongsun Bofan of the Capital Immortals Dao. Greetings to the three noble scions of the immortal clan. Now that the esteemed master of your clan has reached the Purple Mansion Realm, these past matters should be swept away. Even if you cannot let bygones be bygones, it should be a matter for Purple Mansion cultivators to discuss and resolve. There was no need to strike so suddenly and seize our interests."

He addressed all three of them, and Li Minggong replied, "Good. Since your sect is aware that our clan's master has ascended, do you know who you sent to congratulate him? And with what gifts? Given how Floating Cloud and Dense Cloud provoked us, do you think our master didn't give them a chance? Did your sect truly have no idea how this situation came to be?"

Li Minggong's tone was not harsh, but her questions silenced Gongsun Bofan. It was not his place to answer such things, and he lowered his head in silence.

Watching the brief exchange, Li Zhouwei was already beginning to form a theory. No organization was a monolith, especially not the Capital Immortals Dao, which had only been in Jiangbei for a little over a decade.

The first to arrive, Song Yunbai, was the lowest in status and weakest in power. She was only here first because she was the closest. She likely represented a local power, the White Ye Song family, holding a position in the Capital Immortals Dao similar to Li Xizhi's former role in the Azure Pond Sect. Naturally, she wouldn't be hostile, preferring to remain detached, hence her polite words.

Gongsun Bofan was undoubtedly a guest retainer, much like An Siwei was to the Li clan. Though he defended the Capital Immortals Dao, he held no real decision-making power, so he also tried to be diplomatic.

Only the furious woman in the colorful dress was likely a true core disciple of the Capital Immortals Dao.

Just as he predicted, Gongsun Bofan fell silent, and the woman gritted her teeth. "If you want to condemn someone, you can always find a pretext. Just admit you covet the territory instead of hiding behind false accusations! We are in Jiangbei, you are in Jiangnan. We had no obligation to congratulate you, so why make such demands!"

Seeing her completely ignore Dense Cloud Cave's past transgressions and cling to any point that favored her, Li Chenghui's face hardened. He knew that the Revering Radiance Gate, another Jiangbei power, had sent their sect master to offer congratulations!

Having sorted out their identities, Li Zhouwei finally spoke. "There's no need for further talk. Dense Cloud Cave harassed my clan for ten years and nearly killed my direct kin on several occasions. This debt must be paid. My family has already taken Hongfu Mountain. You should all return to where you came from!"

Li Zhouwei had already sent Miaoshui to take Hongfu Mountain. With her access token, she would have entered the mountain by now. The woman in the colorful dress had anticipated his words and gave a cold sneer. "Do you really think you have us cornered?"

The moment she spoke, the tension snapped. Swords were drawn and bows were strung. Li Chenghui's hand immediately went to his Six Thunder Profound Punishment Talisman. Gongsun Bofan also gripped the hilt of his saber, while Wang He and the others exchanged terrified glances, their faces slick with sweat.

In truth, Li Zhouwei was not afraid of them. Before Ding Weizeng arrived, he might have had to weigh his options, but now, with the brawny warrior and Li Chenghui by his side, they were more than a match for the three newcomers.

'I'm only worried about more Capital Immortals Dao reinforcements…'

It was almost certain that in the Great Void, Purple Mansion cultivators were already facing off. If Li Zhouwei fought them now, a victory would be fine, but

a loss would mean Li Ximing would also lose a step in his own confrontation, putting him at a disadvantage.

He weighed his options, holding his halberd ready. His eyes narrowed, his intentions unreadable, as he said coldly, "You are welcome to try!"

Just then, a loud laugh echoed from the horizon, and a voice called out, "Friend Minghuang, I've come to help you!"

All eyes turned to see a brownish-yellow spirit vessel made of profound stone speeding toward them, parting the air in its wake. Standing at the prow was a man in a patterned black robe. He was clean-shaven with a pale face and looked rather anxious. It was none other than Kong Guxi, the Sect Master of the Profound Peak Gate!

The face of the woman in the colorful dress changed instantly. Realization dawned, and she let out a laugh that was more rage than mirth. "I see now, I see! So you two families have colluded. No wonder you were so bold!"

Kong Guxi arrived in a flash. Four figures disembarked from the spirit vessel behind him—three men and a woman, two of whom were mid-stage Foundation Establishment cultivators. The five of them stood with the Li clan, and the tables immediately turned.

Yet the woman in the colorful dress seemed utterly fearless. Her gaze shot past them to land squarely on Kong Guxi. "Kong Guxi!" she yelled. "How much of your master's lifespan is left? How dare you antagonize my Capital Immortals Dao!"

Kong Guxi met her glare with a cold expression of his own.

Though he was all smiles with the Li clan, when the pale, beardless man turned grim, he possessed a chilling ferocity. "I've been sick of the sight of you for ages!" he cursed. "You cultivate some cursed, headless ghost Dao, and you strut around with more arrogance than a dragon princess!"

His words, so unlike him, came like a slap to the face. They stunned the woman into silence, her face flushing red. Just as she was about to retaliate, Gongsun Bofan grabbed her. "Watch out!" he shouted.

The woman instinctively turned her head and saw a brilliant light emanating from between the brows of the man with the halberd—a vast, majestic radiance of Bright Yang.

Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light!

Li Zhouwei had planned this all along, waiting for the exact moment her gaze was diverted. His ability erupted, smashing toward her. In that split second, a sharp clang rang out as a cold light flared to life.

Gongsun Bofan had drawn his saber, unleashing a wave of Geng Metal light to block the attack. In an instant, the tense silence was shattered by the roar of thunder, the surge of True Fire, the rise of earthen mountains, and the clash of Geng Metal.

In the Great Void.

Li Ximing stood with his hands behind his back, clad in a white and gold Daoist robe. A brilliant light shone from his brow, and the rainbow glow of his divine ability pulsed around him. Beside him, Changxi had channeled his own power to its peak, appearing as a middle-aged man with a white jade pendant on his chest.

Before them stood another man in a deep blue robe. He had a short, sharp-featured face that was rather handsome and spirited. He cradled a sword in his arms, his long hair tied back behind his head. He was seated on a crow-like beast covered in scales, its eyes like pools of ink. The Daoist watched them in cold silence.

"Daoist Yehui," Changxi said, his voice cold.

Yehui, caressing the slender, elegant ritual sword in his arms, finally spoke. "Zhaojing, what is the meaning of this?"

He seemed genuinely surprised, as if he had never expected the Li clan to erupt so suddenly, let alone take up the Profound Peak Gate's cause. He ran a hand along the blade. "I thought you were just placating the old man," he said softly. "Waiting for him to die so our two families could split the Profound Peak Gate's assets fifty-fifty. No grand campaigns, no confrontation between Purple Mansion cultivators. Wouldn't that have been better?"

The sword in his hands did not seem to be a weapon of the sword Dao, but rather a ritual instrument for casting spells. It pulsed with rings of spiritual light. Yehui smiled. "Then we could have negotiated our interests. The Profound

Peak's territory would be up for grabs, its people would go to you, the mountain gate to me…"

"I never thought that while I held back, you would be the one to move on my things. Now it's come to a confrontation between us, creating all this unpleasantness. What was the point?"

The smile faded from Yehui's voice. He sighed. "You truly want to make an enemy of me… A mid-stage Purple Mansion cultivator in his prime versus a crumbling sect with no Purple Mansion master… Is the choice not obvious?"

He completely ignored Changxi, as if the man wasn't even there, speaking only to Li Ximing. Changxi's expression darkened. "Yehui!" he growled.

Yehui glanced at him. "Do you wish to fight me to the death, old-timer? You're nothing but a divine ability. What good would sacrificing yourself do? You're already at death's door, yet you still insist on meddling and sowing discord."

Changxi fell silent.

Li Ximing finally spoke. "There is no need for such pretense, friend Yehui. Dense Cloud Cave has harmed my clan on numerous occasions, and Daoist Chidu has also acted without courtesy. If your sect had shown even an ounce of goodwill, we would not be at this point."

"Hahaha," Yehui laughed. "And what if we didn't? There is no friendship between Purple Mansion cultivators, no goodwill. If you fail to see that, Zhaojing, you will suffer for it sooner or later."

He seemed to have no desire to talk further. "Since Wenhu offended your family, you can have the rogue cultivator. I won't hold the losses in Dense Cloud Cave against you. Retreat to Floating Cloud's territory, and there is still room for negotiation between our families!"

"Retreat?" Li Ximing's hand, hidden in his sleeve, tightened slightly. He didn't believe a single word of Yehui's offer. Splitting the Profound Peak Gate, negotiating interests later—it all sounded tempting, but it was just his side of the story.

Besides, saving the Profound Peak Gate didn't mean he had to defend them on all fronts. Li Ximing had a favorable impression of the Profound Wonder Temple, and now he had even more leverage. Not to mention there was still Mount Jingyi across the sea.

He said coldly, "Since you were unwilling to offer congratulations for my ascension, I will take the territory of Dense Cloud Cave as my congratulatory gift!"

Yehui's brow furrowed. He stared at Li Ximing from across the Great Void, and ripples of spiritual light seemed to spread between them. The ritual sword in his hands began to tremble. Changxi stood firm, his stance making his intentions clear.

Li Ximing was not afraid of a fight. Not only did he have Changxi, who cared little for his own life, but the moment they clashed, the ones who would suffer most would be the Capital Immortals Dao disciples on the ground. By the time their battle concluded days later, Li Zhouwei would have probably fought his way to the White Ye region.

"Fine, fine, fine," Yehui said, nodding. "You can have the territory. But remember this, Li Ximing: you did not win Dense Cloud Cave through some grand strategy. When that old man finally dies, I'd like to see how you handle the fallout!"

"You need not trouble yourself with my affairs!" Li Ximing replied with a smile.

Yehui sneered and turned, vanishing back into the Great Void. A single, cold parting shot remained.

"Old-timer, the Profound Peak Gate will inevitably be carved up by the other families. That day is not far off!"

Changxi remained silent. Li Ximing watched Yehui depart but offered no words of comfort. The old master had, after all, concealed the truth about Kong Haiying, and Li Ximing was still displeased with him. He was in no mood to offer consolation.

The two of them steered their divine abilities back toward the lake. Changxi finally sighed. "I have made a fool of myself in front of Zhaojing…"

Chapter 715: Entering Dense Cloud

"You're too kind, Senior," Li Ximing replied, though he didn't pursue the topic. He gazed through the Great Void. Li Zhouwei and the others had clashed briefly with the core disciples of the Capital Immortals Dao. Both sides had suffered minor injuries, but once Yehui departed, the Capital Immortals Dao cultivators ceased their attack and retreated to the few remaining mountains under their control in Dense Cloud Cave's territory.

'We've taken about seventy percent of the territory. That's not a small gain.'

Leaving the affairs of Dense Cloud Cave to Li Zhouwei and his group, Li Ximing steered his divine ability away. He remained silent on the journey, a clear sign of his displeasure. Changxi, of course, noticed and could only sigh inwardly. When they landed on Gardenia Scenery Mountain, the old Daoist Master spoke in a weary voice.

"Yehui is a cultivator from the Eastern Sea. Though he was fortunate in his Dao lineage to have reached his current level, his words are not to be trusted. Zhaojing, don't let them trouble your mind."

Li Ximing's mind was a tangle of its own. Yehui's provocations held little credibility. If that Purple Mansion cultivator from the Capital Immortals Dao truly intended to carve up the Profound Peak Gate, wouldn't it have been more logical for him to send congratulatory gifts and make his intentions clear sooner?

But now, a different question arose in Li Ximing's thoughts.

'Then why didn't he?'

Even if Changxi were to die, there was no way Yehui could seize all of the Profound Peak Gate's territory. The Li clan was right next door. If trouble befell the Profound Peak Gate, the Li clan's intervention would be seen as assistance, while the Capital Immortals Dao's would be seen as an invasion. The speed at which they could take control of the land would be worlds apart.

From Li Ximing's perspective, if Yehui wanted to occupy a larger share of the Profound Peak Gate's territory, he shouldn't have pushed them toward the Li clan. Even if he bore the Li clan ill will, he should have feigned goodwill for the time being, pretending to have no interest in the Profound Peak Gate. That would have made a future betrayal far more convenient.

'As it stands now, with Changxi still alive, my clan will send people to help defend their borders. He'll have to face the united front of the Profound Peak and Moongaze Lake clans. The difficulty is a world of difference from what it was before!'

'Either he has some other ace up his sleeve… or his goal isn't the Profound Peak Gate's territory at all…'

Li Ximing still had no idea what Daoist Master Yehui truly wanted, and that was the most dangerous part. He dismissed the man's arrogant words as mere misdirection.

As he was lost in thought, Changxi continued, "Zhaojing, although Yehui has retreated, it's only because he is unwilling to clash with us at this moment…"

Li Ximing frowned. "Is Yehui truly so arrogant that he doesn't fear a counterattack from you, Senior? If you know anything more, I must ask you to tell me everything. Any concealment now could lead to disaster."

Changxi had previously hidden the fact that Kong Haiying's wife had been killed by Yehui. This was no small matter. In the future, Yehui's ambitions would extend beyond the Profound Peak Gate's territory and Dao lineage; he would be after the lives of Kong Haiying's entire line. The feud would escalate to an entirely new level.

Changxi didn't have much time left, and Yehui was already an enemy. Li Ximing felt it wasn't his place to press the matter of Kong Haiying, but he had made his current request clear. Changxi nodded with a heavy sigh.

At this point, he no longer held anything back. "Zhaojing, you may not know this, but he possesses two spell-type divine abilities and one body-type divine ability. My Fool's Mountain Chase can neither suppress nor entangle him. While I could likely injure him if I fought to the death, it's not that simple."

"Years ago, Daoist Master Chonghe of the Earth Bamboo Gate, a mid-stage Purple Mansion cultivator, pursued Yanque of the Hengzhu lineage. Yanque's body-type divine ability dragged the chase across the Great Void of Wu-Yue for six

years, yet Chonghe still couldn't succeed. The disparity between Yehui and myself is even greater."

"I am not Ning Tiaoxiao, who possesses an ancient spiritual artifact to suppress his foes. If we were to truly fight, and I was willing to throw my life away, he would surely refuse to engage me unless… he had an ambush prepared in the Great Void."

Having reached the Purple Mansion Realm himself, Li Ximing understood how difficult it was to kill another Purple Mansion cultivator when their divine abilities were of a similar level. But his intention wasn't for Changxi to fight Yehui to the death. The Capital Immortals Dao was still in Jiangbei. The man could run, but could the sect?

Before he could even hint at this, Changxi continued, "As for targeting his clan's juniors… my Dao lineage still exists in this world. I cannot commit such an act that would leave my name in infamy for ten thousand years, nor can I condemn my descendants to die without a burial place, forever shouldering a cursed reputation."

"And as for attacking his sect in White Ye to force his hand… Zhaojing, think for a moment. Whose efforts nurtured the lands of Jiangbei?"

Understanding dawned on Li Ximing. "The conflict between the north and south… is this the will of those who have attained Fruition?"

"Exactly!" Changxi's expression was filled with sorrow. "How many people did the various sects commit to the conflict between north and south to cultivate Jiangbei into what it is today? Though it was mainly by carving flesh from the Azure Pond Sect and drinking the blood of demonic and rogue cultivators, this land is absolutely off-limits."

"The moment I set foot in White Ye, Yehui would laugh out loud. He would certainly appear to meet me, and the moment we clash, the spiritual energy in the White Ye region would be severely damaged. That would be a catastrophe."

"Before we could even truly fight, the other major powers would appear to mediate. Yuanxiu from the south, Qiushui from the west, Yuming and Shanbai from the north, Sumian from the east… even the various Buddhist sects would intervene to stop me."

Changxi looked at him deeply, his voice aged and grave. "His sect is in Jiangbei, and thus, he acts with impunity!"

Only then did Li Ximing understand why Yehui held Changxi in such low regard. He fell silent for a moment, at a loss for words. "Senior, do you have a plan? If we are limited to our current methods, I fear it will be difficult to fend off the enemy."

After all, based on the current situation, unless the Capital Immortals Dao crossed the river to attack, Changxi was truly powerless. Seeing Li Ximing's troubled expression, Changxi took a sip of tea, the wrinkles on his face deepening.

The old man finally spoke. "Zhaojing, if, after my death, the situation becomes truly perilous and beyond hope, you may cede Shanji Prefecture to the Purple Smoke Gate in exchange for their protection… as long as the main gate of our sect remains, it will be enough."

Li Ximing breathed a sigh of relief and said with great solemnity, "Very well! With your words, many things become easier to handle. I only hope you will leave a letter or a handwritten note as proof."

The Kong family had cultivated Shanji Prefecture for generations, and they had never enforced a strict separation between cultivators and mortals. Not only were there many with Kong family blood, but the vast majority of the populace had deep ties to the cultivators of the sect. Li Ximing had no desire to be hailed as a savior only to be cursed later. He wanted it all in writing.

Changxi craned his neck and nodded. "This matter should not be widely known, otherwise the entire Profound Peak Gate will lose its will to fight. I have actually already written a final testament and hidden it beneath the first seat of Xiyue Hall on the main peak. I will write another copy for you now, so the two can be cross-referenced."

Li Ximing produced a sheet of spiritual cloth. Changxi used his divine ability as a brush and wrote two lines, then handed it to Li Ximing. The cloth was now as heavy as a boulder, weighing over a thousand pounds.

As the old man placed it in his hands, his aged appearance seemed to intensify. He said respectfully, "My thanks, Zhaojing!"

With that, he offered no further pleasantries, simply clasping his hands in farewell before using his divine ability to enter the Great Void and vanish.

Li Ximing turned the cloth over to read it.

"I entrust Fellow Daoist Zhaojing to watch over the Profound Peak Gate. Should the situation turn dire, he has full authority to cede Shanji Prefecture to another power in exchange for aid."

Although Changxi's divine ability was not suited for combat, its profoundness was not lacking. The very act of writing produced strange phenomena. The characters were like stone carvings, looking as if they might fall right off the cloth. Li Ximing nodded to himself in appreciation.

His own divine abilities were also of the spell type, but they bordered on body arts. With the Bright Yang fire in his heart, he manifested Bright Yang both inside and out. The Purple Yang Fire resided within his Juque Palace, and the Heavenly Radiance was born between his brows. Beyond that, there was only Heavenly Audience Gate. He was not weak in combat, but his abilities lacked versatility.

When the Li family had moved Mount Qingdu, they had invited Kong Yu for assistance. The old man had used a piece of Changxi's calligraphy to aid in moving the mountain. While the characters Li Ximing had inscribed on the six gates over his lake could reflect the heavenly light, they couldn't be used as talismans like Changxi's writing could.

'Once this is all settled, I can make a trip to the Cui family in the Eastern Sea… I should be able to find compatible cultivation methods to study there. I can also inquire about Purple Mansion-level array formations along the way… I need one that can at least cover all of Gardenia Scenery Mountain.'

'As for Yehui… I wonder what he's after… Daoist Master Chuting isn't always at Mount Xianyou, and we're not related by blood or friendship. I can't keep troubling him… Alas… if only Brother Jun were here!'

He gathered his thoughts.

'On the way, I'll sound Changxi out again. Maybe I can get the formula for a spiritual artifact embryo out of him!'

White river Creek.

A brocade-like light floated over Hongfu Mountain, forming a circular halo. Soft, cotton-like motes of light drifted through it. From a distance, it looked less like a cultivator sect and more like the residence of an immortal clan.

When Li Zhouwei and the others arrived on streaks of light, Miaoshui hurriedly emerged from the array to greet them. The arrival of the cultivators from the White Ye Capital Immortals Dao had terrified her. She had hidden within the formation, clutching the array disk, pretending to be oblivious. Fortunately for her, no one had paid her any mind.

Now, as Li Zhouwei flew closer, Miaoshui presented the multi-colored array disk with both hands.

"Greetings, Clan Head. This is the array disk for the Grand Array of Cloud and Sky on Hongfu Peak. It is a low-grade Foundation Establishment array."

"It can thwart an early-stage Foundation Establishment cultivator. Not bad."

Li Zhouwei accepted it with a measure of delight. The Li clan had only recently become an immortal clan, and their only Foundation Establishment arrays were on Lijing Peak and Mount Qingdu. While the Grand Array of Cloud and Sky was inferior to the Cloud-Gathering Southern Sky and the Five Waters Imperial Heaven, it was still the most valuable asset on the entire mountain. If not for the backing of the Capital Immortals Dao, Wenhu would never have been able to set up such a thing.

As he examined it, Li Cheng stepped forward and took it. "It's of the Auspicious Qi lineage. This array might offer some assistance in alchemy and artifact refinement."

"Excellent!"

The Li clan members had fought less than a hundred bouts with the Capital Immortals Dao cultivators and had the advantage in numbers. None of them were seriously injured, save for Qu Bushi, who had hurt his hand, and An Siwei, who had taken a palm strike. A few months of recuperation would see them healed.

Li Zhouwei immediately instructed the two of them to choose a cave residence on the mountain to recover, then strode into the main hall. Turning to Li Chenghui and the others, he asked, "Elders, how was the situation in the Dense Cloud territory as you fought your way here? Were the local magnates cooperative?"

Li Minggong replied, "We've taken the various peaks. All of Dense Cloud Cave's Foundation Establishment cultivators have retreated. A number of Qi Refining cultivators were captured. The White river Creek area is a mix of cultivators and

mortals, so the locals probably don't have a very favorable impression of us. As for the powerful local families, you'll have to ask Weizeng."

At the mention of his name, Ding Weizeng immediately stepped forward and bowed. "Clan Head, the White river Creek area is dominated by four families: Wang, Zhou, Huang, and Ding. A few hundred years ago, they were all noble families of the State of Xu. They have risen and fallen over time, and now only the Wang and Ding families have Foundation Establishment cultivators… My own has already entered the peak. The Huang family is in the territory of Brahma Cloud Cave."

"Oh?" Li Zhouwei's mind was sharp. He immediately asked, "The Wang family's Foundation Establishment cultivator… is that Wenhu's subordinate, Wang He?"

"The very same!"

With Ding Weizeng's confirmation, Li Zhouwei understood how Wang He had become the second-in-command of Dense Cloud Cave. Wenhu must have been trying to win the support of the local powers. "Now that Wang He has thrown his lot in with the Capital Immortals Dao and left, has the Wang family of White river made any moves?"

Before anyone could answer, Li Chenghui spoke up. "The common folk haven't moved, but the direct lineage has most likely been sent to White Ye."

This was an inevitable conclusion that needed no proof. Li Zhouwei scanned the list of names that had been submitted and discovered that this place had indeed produced a fair number of Foundation Establishment cultivators. Though most were demonic cultivators, it was a testament to the region's potential.

The territory of Dense Cloud Cave was unlike other places. It was home to millions of mortals, and there had never been a rule separating them from cultivators. The bloodlines of the powerful families were deeply intertwined. Any one of them could be considered a local tyrant with a population of over ten thousand.

These people had their hands in many unclean dealings and had connections to several different powers. After all, the spiritual energy in Jiangbei was now extremely potent. Floating Cloud Cave, on the periphery, was one thing, but Dense Cloud Cave was truly rich in spiritual resources, all of which were exported through these local powers.

For this reason, even the ruthless Dense Cloud Cave had found it troublesome to take over this land, to say nothing of the more rule-bound Li clan. After a quick review, Li Zhouwei announced grimly, "It is not suitable to establish a Prefecture Peak in the White river territory… The conditions here do not allow for it. If we were to hastily set one up, we would face at least a century of unrest. The income wouldn't even cover the stipends, and we'd end up with widespread resentment. It would be best to govern through autonomy."

It had taken the Li clan over a hundred years to solidify their rule over Moongaze Lake. Even now, their true foundation was still the ancestral lands on the southern shore and the dense forests on the eastern shore. The hundred-plus families further east were still only loosely controlled vassals, and the various families on the western shore remained stubbornly attached to their Prefecture Peaks, not to mention the Fei family on the northern shore.

Furthermore, a territory in Jiangbei might be won today and lost a few years later. Li Zhouwei had no intention of wasting his efforts for nothing.

Li Chenghui strongly agreed. "Just one thing," he added. "The Ding family are cultivators from the Floating Cloud territory. That land is now almost completely empty. We must make arrangements for Weizeng's family."

The Ding family was also a powerful clan. As much as Li Zhouwei valued Ding Weizeng, he wouldn't place this local tyrant back in his old territory. Since Floating Cloud was empty, it was better left that way. Li Zhouwei smiled. "Weizeng has worked hard on this journey. However, the situation is volatile, and we may not be able to hold the Floating Cloud territory. It would be best to relocate the Ding family's people to the Prefecture Peaks on the eastern shore. As for your direct relatives, Weizeng, they will be safest on our clan's own island."

This was a plan to move the entire Ding clan to the lakeside. Ding Weizeng's own life had been saved by the Li clan, and his entire clan had been freed from Hongfu Peak. He was in no position to object and could only express his gratitude respectfully.

Li Zhouwei did value him, however, and showed some consideration for his feelings by not splitting the Ding family among different Prefecture Peaks, which would have truly dismantled the clan, leaving only Ding Weizeng's immediate family.

After Ding Weizeng expressed his thanks, Li Zhouwei picked up a brush. "Though we will not establish a Prefecture Peak or appoint officials, that does

not mean we will let them run wild. First, we will use the peaks as boundaries and station the Jade Court Guard there. Let them sweat for a few days. Then, we will offer a few positions and invite the direct descendants of their families to cultivate in the dense forests."

Li Cheng acknowledged the order.

Li Zhouwei added casually, "We'll nurture a few of the local magnates' direct heirs. Even if the situation changes in three to five years and our clan has to withdraw from this territory, as long as these heirs become successful, reintegrating this area should we return to Jiangbei one day will be a simple matter of a single command."

Both Li Cheng and Li Minggong nodded in agreement with his words.

"I'm afraid they won't send their true direct heirs, but rather some side branches or children of concubines," Li Minggong pointed out. "On Moongaze Lake… this is a tired old trick played by all the families."

Li Zhouwei laughed. "It's of no consequence. Our clan is inviting their legitimate, direct heirs. We will bring the person they send, parade them through the streets with gongs and drums, and congratulate them for three full circuits. Then we'll spread some rumors about their secret, noble bloodline—everyone loves to hear such tales. They won't dare to deny it. They won't be able to."

"If our clan says they are a direct heir, then they are a direct heir."

He spoke without any attempt to hide his words from Ding Weizeng, who was waiting outside. The warrior broke into a cold sweat as he listened. He quickly excused himself and waited outside the hall. As the details were being discussed inside, an indescribable feeling welled up within him.

'I used to think demonic cultivators were the only ones who acted without scruples. It turns out the righteous path is filled with its own calculations.'

Chapter 716: Establishing the White River Command

Ding Weizeng stood waiting outside the main hall when Qu Bushi ambled up. Despite a minor injury, the old man was practically glowing with satisfaction, every wrinkle on his face creased into a smile. He hummed a little tune as he approached, first offering congratulations before taking Ding Weizeng's hand and whispering, "I've finished organizing the land deeds for the Floating Cloud territory. I'm about to present them to the family head. Has the Ding Clan made arrangements? Are you returning to your ancestral lands… or have you chosen a new place to settle?"

Ding Weizeng understood the old man's intentions. Having just surveyed the spirit fields, Qu Bushi would know exactly which plots were fertile and which were barren. This was his way of offering an inside tip. Yet Ding Weizeng remained perfectly composed. "Senior Qu," he said steadily, "my family will be moving to the lake to continue our cultivation on the isles."

"Oh! Congratulations are in order, then!" Qu Bushi exclaimed.

Realizing that even a valued general like Ding was being relocated, he understood that the family's control over the Floating Cloud territory would be strict, leaving no room for maneuvering. He let go of any notion of settling his own people there, gathered his robes, and headed inside, muttering to himself, 'When did Ding Weizeng become so humble? Back in Floating Cloud Cave, he wouldn't hesitate to scowl at Fu Dou's own son. Now he's as proper as that An Siwei…'

Qu Bushi actually had a decent impression of An Siwei. The young man was a typical cultivator from the mainland, one who had scraped his way past the Foundation Establishment threshold through sheer luck, potent elixirs, and a dense spiritual environment. In the seas, his standing would likely be even lower than Qu Bushi's.

'At least he comes from a good family,' Qu Bushi mused. 'His father was incompetent but had the good sense to pledge allegiance to the nascent dragon, becoming a loyal vassal for generations. Even Ding Weizeng has to treat him with courtesy.'

His thoughts wandering, Qu Bushi looked up. At the head of the hall, a young man in golden-white armor was writing something with his head lowered. To his left stood another young man of about the same age, clad in silver armor and a black robe, his eyes dark as lacquer, arms crossed. To the right, a resplendent woman in palace attire pondered thoughtfully, her hand shielding a brilliant treasure lamp.

These were three of the four most powerful figures in the Li family. He had heard there was another overseeing matters on the lake, but he had yet to meet them. Qu Bushi clasped his hands respectfully. "I have completed my survey of the Floating Cloud land deeds and have come to report to the family head!"

"Proceed," Li Zhouwei replied without looking up.

"In the Floating Cloud region," Qu Bushi began respectfully, "there are a total of two thousand and fifty-one spirit fields. Of these, two hundred and eleven are of the highest grade, five hundred and sixty-one are of middle grade, and one thousand two hundred and seventy-nine are of the lowest grade."

Moongaze Lake was said to have ten thousand spirit fields, but most were controlled by the various peaks, and the majority were barren plots whose yields barely covered the cost of their upkeep, so they were left fallow. Since every field had a different spiritual density, discussing area was meaningless. Li Zhouwei cut to the chase. "Elder Qu, your Immortal Foundation is the Palace of Concealed Storage, and you are well-versed in agriculture. What is your estimate of the total output?"

"I have calculated each one," Qu Bushi said deferentially. "The yield should be around ten thousand catties. If we install a full array of formations and properly regulate the water channels, it could exceed twenty thousand."

"Truly a rich land."

The Li family's control was strongest along the southern and eastern shores of Moongaze Lake. The towns below the main peaks, excluding labor costs, contributed all their output to the clan, amounting to a yield of roughly fifty thousand. Pingya Island was primarily for cultivation and could be disregarded. The

various families left behind by Daoist Master He on the western shore and the Fei family on the northern shore each contributed over ten thousand, and the hundred families of the eastern shore added another ten thousand. All told, the total output approached one hundred thousand.

This hundred-thousand-catty figure, however, was just for calculation. Now that the Li family no longer paid tribute to the Azure Pond Sect, they didn't plant spirit grain exclusively. Vast tracts of land were used to cultivate more precious resources for Qi Refinement cultivators, like Pinewood Fruits and Lacquer Ridge Grass. The actual yield from land dedicated to spirit grain was only around thirty thousand.

This meant that Floating Cloud Cave, which constituted half of the White river Creek region, already produced a fifth of Moongaze Lake's total output. It was an astonishing figure.

"No wonder so many sects and families have settled north of the river," Li Minggong remarked. "Only lands this fertile could support such a dense population."

Li Zhouwei did a quick mental calculation. 'Our ten thousand spirit fields yield a hundred thousand catties, which translates to nearly a thousand spirit stones in annual income. But our clan has grown massive. First, the number of cultivators we support is staggering. Second, the stipends for our Foundation Establishment cultivators are extremely generous. And third… we have yet to establish our own market.'

'Although life in the clan has become comfortable,' he thought, 'after deducting costs and salaries, the annual surplus is quite small—only ten to twenty percent of our income… less than a hundred spirit stones.'

A surplus of a hundred spirit stones a year might not sound like much, but it was actually an immense sum. It meant that every month, the clan generated enough wealth to cover the entire life savings of a Qi Refinement cultivator. Every year, they could build a top-tier Qi Refinement formation. In three to five years, they could construct a full Foundation Establishment-level grand array.

The only awkward part was that without their own market, most of their surplus was stored as spirit grain and other resources. These often spoiled from improper storage. The supply of spirit stones in the Jiangnan region was limited;

if they tried to convert all their surplus, they would only succeed in driving up the price of spirit stones.

'Besides, items at the level of treasure panaceas are rarely traded for spirit stones. It's also nearly impossible to buy all the materials for a Foundation Establishment grand array with spirit stones alone.'

Li Zhouwei hesitated for a moment. While a ten-thousand-catty yield was worth a hundred spirit stones, spirit resources were often harvested annually. It would be a shame to lose these lands before the crops matured.

"For now, have Siwei arrange for spirit grain to be planted. There's no rush to build top-tier formations, either. It would be a waste if we have to leave in a hurry."

Qu Bushi nodded and withdrew. Li Zhouwei was now left with the headache of storing this massive amount of spirit grain. He sighed inwardly. Li Minggong, sensing his concern, spoke up. "Now I understand why the Xiao and Yuan families designated large swathes of spirit land and spent a fortune to cultivate just one or two valuable spirit plants. But we'll only be occupying these places for a short time… so that approach isn't suitable for us."

"Indeed," Li Zhouwei said gravely. "For now, we'll convert some of the larger spirit fields at home to grow White Origin Fruit. We'll have to dip into our reserves for the time being…"

Fortunately, this headache was limited to the ruins of the Floating Cloud territory. In the Dense Cloud territory, they simply needed to levy taxes on the established families—a much simpler and faster process. After discussing the matters in detail, Li Zhouwei asked Li Minggong to return and guard their home base, finally concluding the affairs of White river Creek.

At last, he had a moment of peace. He gestured for Li Chenghui, who had been standing by his side, to sit. "Uncle, what are your thoughts on the cultivators from White Ye?"

Li Cheng paused, his brow furrowed. "They won't be easy to deal with. I've already made inquiries. The one in the colorful robes is a direct descendant of the White Ye sect named Guan Lingdie. Her Immortal Foundation is the same as the Lingu family's, Sorrowful Southern Water."

"As for the saber-wielder, Gongsun Bofan, he was originally a rogue cultivator from north of the river. He cultivates the Pit Water, the Way of the Jing Dragon

King, and has since joined the White Ye Immortal Sect. His saber techniques are formidable. The last one, the young lady from the Song family, is the daughter of a prominent northern clan."

This intelligence matched Li Zhouwei's own assessment. He thought for a moment. "Guan Lingdie's words were sharp, but her combat experience is not to be underestimated. Gongsun Bofan's Dao lineage is profound, not at all like a common rogue cultivator. As for Song Yunbai, her presence suggests that the White Ye Immortal Sect's control over its territories isn't particularly strict."

Guan Lingdie was, after all, a direct descendant of a Purple Mansion clan. She had managed to hold off both Li Chenghui and An Siwei, even managing to injure the latter on her own. Her strength was not to be taken lightly. Li Zhouwei committed their names to memory. "And as for the Profound Peak Gate… they truly have no one. It's a sign of their decline."

He had a point. Kong Guxi, the esteemed sect master of the Profound Peak Gate, had been locked in an even fight with the daughter of a minor northern clan. If not for the Profound Peak's numerical advantage and the White Ye's early retreat, the casualties might have been far worse.

This situation was a direct result of Daoist Master Changxi's repeated demands for his descendants to strive for the Purple Mansion realm. When the opportunity of the Upper Evil Spirit Storage arose, Changxi had been overjoyed, and several of his core descendants had entered seclusion, leading to the current state of affairs.

It was for this very reason that Kong Tingyun later ascended to the position of Sect Master, gradually earning Changxi's favor and bringing the Profound Peak Gate and the Li family closer. It was, Li Zhouwei mused, a true testament to the workings of fate.

"The Profound Peak Gate still has Fuyuezi on Yuezhou Island," Li Chenghui offered as a comfort. "His strength is considerable. He can contribute when the time comes."

Li Zhouwei remained silent. After a moment, Chen Yang came up from below to report that the various families of the Dense Cloud territory had sent their representatives. The initial arrangements were settled, and the territory was, at least for now, under their control.

"With Dense Cloud secured… it is time we returned to the mountain. I must see the Daoist Master." Li Zhouwei put down his brush.

"There's still the Northern Brocade River King waiting in White river Creek," Li Cheng reminded him.

"Of course…" Li Zhouwei, who had been pondering who to station as a guard in the Dense Cloud territory, nodded. "I intend to establish a command post for the White river Creek region to govern Floating Cloud and guard Dense Cloud. An Siwei is capable enough to manage the administration of Floating Cloud, but he lacks the strength to defend it. I'm afraid I must ask you, Uncle, to assume this post and oversee things here."

Li Chenghui had fought alongside Li Zhouwei through more than a decade of peril; they knew each other too well for pleasantries. He simply nodded. "I will do my best to protect this place."

Li Zhouwei considered for a breath before continuing. "Since the Secret Diffusion Sects have been broken and Hongfu Mountain has been conquered, it is time for a new order in the Floating Cloud and Dense Cloud territories. With Manghuazi Mountain as the border, the southern part of Floating Cloud will be renamed Funan, and Dense Cloud will be renamed Midong. We will establish the White river Command, headquartered on Hongfu Mountain. The official positions and decrees… the clan will send them shortly."

He let out a small laugh. "If we can hold these two territories and Funan begins to generate an income, the salaries for the command post can be drawn directly from the rear. It will be far more convenient."

It was still a form of puppet rule, but Li Zhouwei was determined to secure the legitimacy of their claim. He wouldn't call it a Gate or a Cave, but a Command, an entity that could be dissolved at any time. They had already burned their bridges with the White Ye Immortal Sect, and no one in the Midong territory expected the Li family to last long anyway. They were all just living day by day, so there was no need to worry about winning their loyalty.

"As for the Northern Brocade River King…" Li Zhouwei had already thought this through. "He knows a great deal. In his eyes, I am a figure on par with Dragon Prince Dingjiao. It would be utterly inappropriate for me to visit his estate. My presence would only make him suspicious and cause him to overthink things. But we cannot let such a valuable asset go to waste. You should go in my stead. He will not dare to be disrespectful."

Li Chenghui nodded.

"He's not some esteemed guest of the Dragon Palace as the rumors claim; he's a minor figure there," Li Zhouwei continued. "You only need to be clear on one point: the dragons are not to get involved in our affairs. He can gather information and help with the waterways, which is useful enough."

"Qu Bushi, Ding Weizeng, and Miaoshui will all remain here with you. You cannot manage this all on your own. If you need anything, do not hesitate to ask the family. Aunt Minggong is just across the river on the northern shore, a short trip from Funan, and can provide timely support. As for Wenhu…"

A smile touched Li Zhouwei's lips. "I will take him to Gardenia Scenery Mountain. Let the other families see… that our Daoist Master is not so easily trifled with."

Wenhu, despite his cunning, had been incredibly unlucky. In addition to the man, Li Zhouwei planned to take the flower python back as well. He had been at the mid-stage of Foundation Establishment for years; using a talisman ritual to break through to the late stage now would not seem abrupt.

However, with the Li family's recent ascension to a Purple Mansion clan, they were no longer a minor family under the thumb of the Azure Pond Sect. Any major event was likely to attract the attention of other Purple Mansion cultivators, making the ritual a tricky affair.

Rituals conducted at the foot of their mountain could be disguised as local Moongaze Lake customs, but a ritual on the mountain itself would involve secrets from the *Sacrificial Rites Manual*. If another Purple Mansion expert saw through their methods, it would be disastrous.

They should have consulted the Immortal Mirror, but ever since it had vanished into the Great Void, they hadn't been able to see its physical form even when invoking its power. They didn't know what phenomena consulting it might produce. With the Li family in the spotlight, Li Ximing and Li Zhouwei dared not be careless and had postponed the matter.

'It would be best to wait until a Purple Mansion-level array that can isolate the Great Void is established before performing the ritual,' Li Zhouwei thought. 'But even if we can't perform the ritual right away, we can still bring the flower python back first…'

As his thoughts drifted, Li Chenghui walked with him to the riverbank. Li Zhouwei came back to himself with a sigh. "This will be difficult for you, Uncle. But remember, everything else is secondary. Your own safety is what matters most. We can afford to lose this land. If something were to happen to you, it would be a blow to the very foundation of our family."

The White river Command might look like the domain of a regional tyrant, but it was anything but a comfortable post. Daoist Master Changxi could pass away at any moment in the next few years. If the situation changed, the White river territory would be the first to fall. When the cultivators of White Ye swarmed over, a moment's hesitation could mean being completely surrounded.

Li Cheng knew this well. He steadied himself and replied, "I command the thunder. In our family, no one surpasses my escape arts. With Profound Thunder in the Thunder Pool and the protection of the grand array, if I am determined to flee, no Foundation Establishment cultivator can stop me."

Li Chenghui saw the group off, then summoned a bolt of lightning and flew back, his mind already racing. He was a man of his own ideas. 'I should make some preparations,' he thought. 'Since I can use the Dragon Prince's reputation to my advantage, and Ying Hebai is the master of three rivers… think of how many water spirits he commands. Won't they be like a network of eyes spreading through every waterway? If I make an agreement with him, a flare of light over the White Ye Immortal Sect's domain could be reported by a demon here in an instant!'

Although a demon's flying speed couldn't compare to that of a Foundation Establishment expert, a warning could be sent with the simple crushing of a jade talisman.

With a plan in place, Li Chenghui felt more confident. He summoned Ding Weizeng and the others. After looking them over, he said, "Weizeng, come with me to the river."

Ding Weizeng acknowledged the order. Below them, the dark, overgrown slopes of Manghuazi Mountain stretched out. The mountain's grand array had long been dismantled, and the demons had scattered, leaving it empty. The two landed by the river, where they saw the figure of an old man in black robes materialize. He had clearly been waiting for them and hurried over, bowing deeply.

"Shui Zhao greets you, my lord."

Li Chenghui nodded and announced, “Are you here at the invitation of the Northern Brocade River King?”

“Indeed!” The old demon Shui Zhao beamed, then squatted down and transformed. In his place was a black turtle the size of a house, its four limbs marked with brownish-yellow patterns, clearly a unique breed. Its neck was remarkably long, and its voice was a low hum like a great bronze bell.

“I have been awaiting your esteemed arrival for some time!”

Chapter 717: The Story of the Secret Diffusion Sects

The waters of White river Creek were exceptionally clear, its bed a dense carpet of green stones. The underwater palace was grand, filled with shrimp and fish that had taken human form. Some played celestial music while others carried spirit delicacies, weaving through the halls in a lively spectacle.

Ying Hebai might be a nobody in the eyes of someone like Dingjiao, but the Azure-Necked Flood Dragon was a local hegemon in his own right. His palace lacked nothing in luxury and elegance. It was adorned with luminous pearls and featured stairs of gold—a dazzling and extravagant display.

'He is, after all, a demon just a step below the Purple Mansion realm,' Li Chenghui thought, assessing the situation. 'He has borrowed the prestige of the dragons to become master of three rivers. Of course his domain would be impressive.'

Li Chenghui knew that Ying Hebai might seem deferential, but without Li Zhouwei's reputation backing him, he himself might not have even been granted entry. He shed any pretense of arrogance, rode the giant turtle to the riverbed, and followed Shui Zhao, who had resumed his human form before the palace.

"This way, please!" Shui Zhao said with a bow.

Li Chenghui stepped forward. A tall man was waiting inside the main hall, dressed in a brocade jacket of slate-blue silk beneath a white velvet cloak embroidered with a scene of an azure sea. Scales were visible on his neck, and his eyes were sharp and piercing. He was a handsome figure. Seeing Li Chenghui, he smiled. "So it is fellow Daoist Chenghui. But why do I not see the lord?"

"Our family head is currently occupied."

With that simple reply, Ying Hebai understood everything. He didn't need to be overly deferential to Li Chenghui. Taking a half-step back to reveal his turquoise and white boots, he announced, "Please."

As Li Chenghui took his seat, Ying Hebai immediately cupped his hands. "First, allow me to congratulate you, fellow Daoist, on conquering the White river Creek territory. This is a land of abundant spiritual energy, and it falls within my jurisdiction. The waterways are clear and well-connected, ensuring a good harvest every year. If you ever need to divert a remote water channel, you have only to ask!"

"You are too kind, Great King." Li Chenghui, of course, had no concerns about the waterways. He began, "The White river Creek region has no high mountains, and there are no noteworthy demons on the land. However, the extensive network of waterways makes it very convenient for water spirits to come ashore and prey on humans…"

"I understand."

Li Chenghui, mindful that Ying Hebai was a demon, had spoken plainly. The Northern Brocade River King nodded at once and agreed readily. "I will restrain all the water spirits of the three rivers from preying on humans. I will send messengers to warn the demon generals in the outlying waters. If any demon dares to come ashore and harm people, simply send word, and I will investigate thoroughly."

It had to be said, having a powerful backer made all the difference. A grave matter that the Secret Diffusion Three Sects had been powerless against—even having to offer up blood sacrifices to the flower python year after year—Li Chenghui had resolved with a single sentence.

With such a thorny issue settled so easily, Li Chenghui was in high spirits. Seizing the opportunity, he asked, "Great King, do you know of any special places or secret histories in the lands of White river and White ye? For the Secret Diffusion Three Sects to choose this location to establish themselves… it seems rather unusual, does it not?"

The very founding of the Secret Diffusion sects felt strange, so Li Chenghui naturally took the chance to inquire. Hearing this, Ying Hebai's expression turned serious. "The lands of White river hold their own mysteries. Allow me to explain it to you, fellow Daoist."

"First, you should know that my aunt is a favored concubine of the Thread River Demon King, and my elder brother also serves under him. It was through this connection, and by making myself known to Lord Ranwu of the Dragon Prince's court, that I was granted this post overseeing the three rivers."

After laying out his own background, he continued, "When the three caves established their sects here, I grew suspicious. I made a special trip to the Thread River and asked the Demon King about it. Only then did I learn that the root of the matter lies with the Xiaoshi Mountain Dao Lineage."

"The Xiaoshi Mountain Dao Lineage?" The name sounded familiar to Li Chenghui. He vaguely recalled his family having captured someone from that lineage before.

"Precisely," the River King affirmed. "Near Chengshui Marsh, there is a mountain called Xiaoshi. On that mountain was a declining Daoist lineage that ran the Secret Diffusion Temple. During the height of the Xu Kingdom, the Secret Diffusion Temple was a celestial temple with its own Purple Mansion cultivator. It was one of the most prominent temples to emerge from the ruins of the Wanling Sect's domain."

Only now was Li Chenghui beginning to understand the origins of the Secret Diffusion Three Sects. He watched as Ying Hebai's expression grew solemn.

"It was said this celestial temple had powerful connections. Later, its Purple Mansion expert perished, and the succeeding generations were inept. Yet no sect or clan ever dared to make a move on them. Instead, they were instigated by various powers until they fractured and turned on one another, each clinging to a piece of that mountain to survive."

"This continued until the war between the north and south. The monks swept down from the north and finally disturbed this place. How could the various caves of Secret Diffusion resist? They were shattered and scattered, fleeing for their lives across the land."

He stroked his beard. "I overheard my lord chatting once. He said the Secret Diffusion Temple has a treasure, an ancient spirit artifact… it lies hidden in the Great Void. If a descendant of the Secret Diffusion Temple can gain its recognition, it will descend from the Great Void… Several Purple Mansion cultivators covet it."

With that, Li Chenghui finally understood the fundamental reason for the Secret Diffusion Three Sects' existence. They were essentially seeds planted by the surrounding Purple Mansion powers, who would select talented individuals from among them to cultivate, all for the sake of that spirit artifact.

The schemes of Purple Mansion cultivators were often hard to fathom. While the demon king's words couldn't be trusted completely, the origin of the Secret Diffusion Temple was almost certainly true. Li Chenghui committed this to memory. "I see…"

But then a thought struck him, and he realized his family had grievously offended Yehui. 'I wonder which Daoist Masters are involved…' he pondered. 'But then there's the Brahma Cloud Cave, which means the master of the Revering Radiance Gate has a hand in this as well. This matter is of great importance. I must report it to the Daoist Master!'

Li Chenghui no longer had the heart for idle chat. After asking a few more details, he cut straight to the point. "The people of Dense Cloud Cave have retreated, but who knows when they will return. Great King, you guard the three rivers. If you hear any news, I ask that you inform me… My family will reward you generously!"

Anyone would know that Dense Cloud Cave was just another name for the White Ye Immortal Sect. But since the sect was a legitimate Purple Mansion power, mentioning it directly would put the other party in a difficult position. By substituting its name, he made things easier. Ying Hebai smiled. "But of course! They are merely a few Foundation Establishment remnants. I will have my people watch them. If there is any news, I will immediately dispatch Shui Zhao to inform you."

Ying Hebai was no fool; how could he not understand Li Chenghui's meaning? He was under strict orders from his own superiors not to interfere in human affairs, especially those involving Purple Mansion clans. He couldn't openly take a side. But rules were rules, and some things were best left unsaid between them. By referring to them as Dense Cloud Cave, Li Chenghui had made it even more convenient. The flood dragon agreed enthusiastically and personally saw him out.

"I will have Shui Zhao visit a few times in the coming months to maintain contact. That way, it will be easier to notify you, fellow Daoist. It would be troublesome if something happened and we were unable to communicate in time."

Li Chenghui knew this was likely a prelude to gift-giving. He would decide whether to accept based on the value of the gifts when they arrived. He summoned a bolt of lightning, shot out of White river Creek, and hurried to write a letter to his family.

Ying Hebai returned to his hall, the smile vanishing from his face. He frowned. "Shui Zhao… during the war between the north and south, wasn't there a thunder pearl that fell to the bottom of the river? A pity, it's probably too valuable, he most likely wouldn't accept it… Go check the treasury for any other thunder-attribute treasures."

Shui Zhao acknowledged the order and departed. A sense of calm settled over Ying Hebai. "This one is easy to get along with. The phenomena of falling water and rising thunder in the Eastern Sea might be ending soon. I should take the opportunity to prepare a few more thunder-related gifts…"

Gardenia Scenery Mountain.

Li Zhouwei returned to the clan on a ray of Profound Light. He dismissed his retinue, tossed the flower python to the White Ape for safekeeping, and without a moment's pause, grabbed Wenhu and rushed to see Li Ximing.

When he reached the foot of the mountain, a messenger informed him that Li Ximing was on the summit. He breathed a sigh of relief, dragged his captive up the mountain, and threw Wenhu onto the Radiant Sky Stone.

"This villain offended the Daoist Master with deceitful words!" he announced respectfully. "We have now broken through Hongfu Mountain and captured him!"

Li Ximing had been waiting for him on the mountain. He rose with a cheerful laugh. Although this had all been planned in advance, and he had already intercepted the other Purple Mansion experts in the Great Void, the extent of their gains still depended on Li Zhouwei's strength.

"Excellent, excellent," he said with a smile. "Have him taken away for now. You and I will talk. We can interrogate him later."

Li Ximing had little desire to control the family's every move and was thus extremely pleased with Li Zhouwei. A Purple Mansion's divine abilities were

formidable, but a top-tier Foundation Establishment cultivator was just as invaluable. Otherwise, why would Ning Tiaoxiao have gone to such lengths to promote Li Xuanfeng? If the Li family didn't have Li Zhouwei now, how could they have advanced into the Midong territory? With only Li Chenghui and Li Minggong's strength, they would have been lucky to hold the Funan territory on the opposite shore.

He helped his white qilin to its feet and recounted everything regarding Daoist Master Changxi. Li Zhouwei listened and considered it carefully.

"I suspect Yehui has other motives," Li Ximing said. "Otherwise, he wouldn't have been the first to jump out and oppose our family. That's the first thing. The second is… while Changxi is still alive and can offer some protection, I want to make a trip to the Cui family and inquire about Daoist lineages."

"The affairs of Purple Mansion cultivators are not so difficult to unravel," Li Zhouwei replied. "Especially since neither the Revering Radiance Gate nor the Capital Immortals Dao behind the Secret Diffusion sects possess a Life Divine Ability. As long as our information is good, we can guess at their motives. Changxi might not be ignorant of this; it's more likely a matter of interests. If we don't ask, he won't tell. At worst, we can try to befriend that cultivator Sumian."

His assessment was nearly identical to Li Ximing's own. "Changxi is a clan cultivator who attained the Dao in the Eastern Sea," Li Ximing responded. "He was never a particularly good person. Even at death's door, he's still scheming. If I were in his shoes, I might not fully trust our family either. After all, from his perspective, if the Profound Peak Gate falls, our family stands to gain the most."

Li Ximing had a point. If the Profound Peak Gate were to collapse, its talents, resources, and Daoist lineages would inevitably flow to Moongaze Lake.

"As for the Cui family…" Li Zhouwei continued, "they are backed by Dongfang You's faction, who are also supporters of Dingjiao. If you're just asking for information, they shouldn't refuse you, Daoist Master. I am certain the trip will be fruitful."

"Good!" This was precisely what Li Ximing wanted to confirm. Hearing the connection to Dingjiao, he was ninety percent certain of his success. They chatted a bit more about the White river territory, and when he heard the name "White river Command," he couldn't help but laugh. "How domineering. It certainly has the autocratic flavor of the Bright Yang Dao."

Li Zhouwei smiled without embarrassment. After another moment of light-hearted banter, Li Ximing's expression grew worried. "Do you still have connections among the dragon clans? Don't forget to inquire about our elder…"

Li Zhouwei knew he was referring to Li Qinghong. He sighed inwardly. It was a sensitive matter, not something one could ask about easily. He simply nodded in silent agreement.

Li Ximing seemed to sense his thoughts. A colorful light, the sign of a Bright Yang divine ability, pulsed from his sleeve as he tore open a path to the Great Void, leaving a final message. "I am leaving the Profound Pattern Vase to nurture in the Purple Flame Earth-Baleful Spring on Gardenia Scenery Mountain. If you have need of it, you may take it."

The Profound Pattern Vase could absorb the power of fire channels, refining the Profound Light within it with the energies of Radiant Fire and Bright Yang to increase its power. Li Ximing had left it on the mountain ever since his breakthrough.

With that final reminder, he stepped into the Great Void. He traveled for some time, his heart filled with joyful anticipation for his trip to the Cui family. After a short while, the Purple Mansion grand array of the Profound Peak Gate materialized before him. A stream of black and yellow energy sank to its base, while an aura of deep blue light floated above. It looked even more formidable than the array at Mount Xianyou.

'Every art has its specialty,' he mused. 'The Bound Earth dao excels at defense. A sect's grand array would naturally be more robust.'

As he approached, an entrance naturally appeared in the array, and Changxi's voice echoed out. "Fellow Daoist Zhaojing, please enter."

He passed through the array, and the world before him opened up. In the distance, he could see the brilliant white expanse of Salt Lake, with a few wisps of cloud drifting past. Li Ximing turned back to see the cave's interior, its floor covered in rolling green stones.

Seated upon the central dharma seat was a stone man with a distinct nose and face. Its beard and eyebrows were like jade, standing out stiffly from its cheeks. Its eyes were textured stone, a solid, unnerving black that stared blankly ahead. It was a rather frightening sight.

Li Ximing paused. A muffled rumbling came from within the stone man's belly. "Zhaojing, wait a moment."

The stone man rose with great difficulty, scooped up a handful of sand from the floor, and pressed it onto its face, sculpting a new visage and neck. It covered the rest of its body with robes and sat down at a table, forcing a smile. But its eyes remained black stone, cold and devoid of emotion.

"A disgraceful sight…" Changxi laughed. The two stone orbs slowly grew flesh, returning to their usual kind and amiable appearance.

Li Ximing let out a breath. "Senior, how is your health?"

"Less than three years." Changxi shook his head, his condition truly dire. "You must have come for a reason, Zhaojing," he said wearily. "Please, speak."

Li Ximing felt as though Changxi might drop dead at any second. Not daring to delay, he quickly asked, "There will be a great war in a few years. This junior wishes to refine a spirit embryo… It's not a matter for just the next few years; refining it sooner would grant me a bit more strength."

"Ah!" Changxi feigned a look of sudden understanding.

'He's asking me for the technique to refine a spirit embryo!'

At this point, what excuse could Changxi possibly have? To put it bluntly, if he were to die tomorrow, what secret technique of the Profound Peak Gate couldn't Li Ximing take if he so wished? What spirit resource would the Li family not dare to touch?

Besides, Changxi had never put much faith in sentiment. The Kong family had once been the region's hegemon, yet when their clan was scattered, no one offered aid to their descendants out of some past friendship. The Li family was willing to help; it was only right that Li Ximing receive a share of the Profound Peak Gate's legacy.

The old man coughed, suppressing his thoughts and forcing a smile onto his aged face. "It is my fault. I told you about it before and should have given it to you to study then. To make you come all this way to ask… my apologies."

He took a jade slip from his sleeve. "This is called *Viewing the Pavilion's Divine Ability, Forged in Fire*," he said with a cough. "I obtained it in my early years from the Eastern Sea. It is a clean technique. It is the same one I use for my own refinement. You can rest assured, Zhaojing."

"Many thanks, Senior!"

Li Ximing accepted the slip. His spiritual sense swept over it. The jade was of exceptionally high quality, seemingly reinforced with an Earth Virtue divine ability, making it as heavy and sturdy as a Foundation Establishment artifact. The small slip contained millions of words and numerous diagrams, clearly the product of a complete and orthodox Daoist lineage.

Chapter 718: The Cui Clan of Chongzhou

Li Ximing studied the old man's weary expression as he calmly accepted the item. He offered a few words of comfort, then casually asked, "Senior, have you found a home for your Bound Earth spiritual artifact, the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger? If not, you could always give it to the venerable Daoist Master Sumian, or even Daoist Master Xuanyi."

Changxi sighed wistfully. It was clear this was a plan long in the making, and one that had yet to bear fruit. "I have other gifts for Sumian," he replied. "As for Xuanyi, I have made arrangements for her as well. These days, those who would dare accept it won't help, and those who would help won't accept it. It remains in my hands. When my time is up, I'll have it sent to Zhaojing."

Hearing this, Li Ximing knew that the chances of trading the spiritual artifact for the support of a Purple Mansion cultivator were all but gone. In the end, it would be sent to his own clan to ease Changxi's conscience. "Take care of yourself, senior," he said. "The Profound Peak Gate's domain is vast. It would be best to recall the island's garrison leader from Yuezhou."

Changxi knew his clan was short on people; Fuyue-zi was the only one left to manage things. "I've already sent him out," he said, his voice raspy with age. "He is to give Yuezhou to Mount Jingyi. Once it is done, he will return. Zhaojing need not worry."

Li Ximing sighed inwardly for the old man but said no more. He nodded and took his leave, traveling from the Profound Peak Gate through the Great Void until he emerged into the Eastern Sea. The light of Converging Water shimmered everywhere he looked.

He journeyed through the Great Void, and whenever he encountered one of its towering peaks, he knew it would harbor spiritual items or waters. He would break through the boundary, casually collect them, and move on. Along the

way, he gathered six spiritual items suitable for Qi Refining cultivators and one spiritual water—a Malevolent Earth Coldspring.

The spring was guarded by a hook serpent, which likely used it for its own cultivation. When Li Ximing appeared, the demonic beast was so terrified it froze, not daring to make a sound. Given that they were in the territory of a dragonkin, Li Ximing spared its life, took the spiritual spring, and departed.

In less than a night, by his reckoning, he had reached the Great Void above Chongzhou Island. He saw the illusory radiance of Bright Yang rippling through the void, forming a milky-white barrier of light that enveloped the island below in a brilliant glow. Li Ximing was slightly surprised.

'A starved camel is still bigger than a horse… The Cui clan of Chongzhou has a Purple Mansion formation… Impressive, truly impressive!'

With his hands clasped behind his back, he tore through the Great Void and came to a stop at the island's edge, standing upon a shaft of celestial light. Immediately, vibrant clouds gathered, interwoven with threads of purple and gold, and the sky turned bright and clear. Li Ximing released his spiritual sense, sweeping it across the island, and located a cultivator who looked to be from the main family line. He took a step forward.

The next moment, his figure materialized behind the patrolling cultivator. An intense celestial light immediately burst forth, casting a stark white glare upon the surroundings.

The man spun around instantly, his pupils dilating. He was frozen for a moment, then immediately dropped to his knees, trembling from head to toe. His face drained of color in terror, his eyelids twitched uncontrollably, and he stammered in a hoarse voice, "Chongzhou… Cui… Xinzhan, pays his respects to the Daoist Master!"

It was no wonder Cui Xinzhan was in such a state. He was merely a mid-stage Qi Refining cultivator; to him, even a Foundation Establishment cultivator was a formidable figure. For a Purple Mansion master to suddenly tear through the Great Void before him—the fact that he could speak at all was a testament to his courage.

Li Ximing hadn't meant to frighten him so badly. "Go inform your elders," he said casually, "that Daoist Master Zhaojing of Moongaze Lake has arrived."

"Yes, sir!" Cui Xinzhan scrambled to his feet, drenched in sweat and so drained he nearly collapsed. He rushed toward the formation, and as he called out at the entrance, a streak of light descended before him, materializing into a woman holding a golden hoop.

She bowed her head respectfully and said, "Cui Wanqing of Chongzhou greets the Daoist Master! A senior from Moongaze Lake visited us in years past. To now be graced by your celestial presence is the greatest honor for all of Chongzhou!"

His own aunt had indeed visited Chongzhou Island, a fact Li Ximing was well aware of. He gave a slight nod. "I've come this time to honor the friendship between our families. There's no need for such ceremony."

When Cui Wanqing heard he was a Daoist Master from Moongaze Lake and saw that he cultivated the Bright Yang Dao, she knew his surname must be Li. Feeling a sense of kinship, she had come out to greet him personally. "This way, Daoist Master, please…" she said with a gentle smile.

She led Li Ximing into the formation. However, this was merely the outer Foundation Establishment array of the island. The Cui clan had fallen on hard times, and though they possessed a Purple Mansion formation, it was only large enough to cover the core mountain at the very center. The rest of the island was protected by arrays suitable for Foundation Establishment or Qi Refining cultivators. And though the Cui and Li families were close, there was no reason to invite a potential threat directly into their home right away.

Li Ximing looked down and saw bustling crowds of mortals below. They showed little fear, most simply lowering their heads and moving aside. The population was remarkably dense. "Chongzhou governs its people well," he praised.

Cui Wanqing smiled, a hint of pride in her expression. "As the Daoist Master knows, the Bright Yang Dao is a path of worldly engagement. Many of our clan's cultivation arts and secret techniques focus on governance, with personal cultivation as a secondary benefit. That is why our numbers are so large. The number of cultivators and clan members who migrate elsewhere each year is quite substantial!"

"Most of the Cui cultivators and families in the Eastern and Southern Seas can trace their lineage back to Chongzhou. Every ten years, Cui clan members from all over the world return to the island. It is truly a grand event."

With this explanation, Cui Wanqing made Chongzhou's standing clear. With the White Dragon's line backing them, no one dared to trouble them, and it was considered a good thing for distant relatives bearing the Cui name to return and pay their respects.

Just as they set foot on the steps leading to the main hall, a middle-aged man hurried out to meet them. He had a stern expression, with a long mustache that drooped at the sides. He approached, turned sideways, and bowed with utmost respect.

"Junior Cui Xianye greets the Daoist Master!"

Though older, Cui Xianye was far less at ease than Cui Wanqing. The man, who appeared to be of a similar age to Li Ximing, was extremely reserved. He kept his head pressed to the ground, not daring to rise. "My father is currently in seclusion and cannot personally welcome you. As the acting head of the island, I, Xianye, offer you a welcome on behalf of the Cui clan."

"Rise."

Li Ximing smiled and entered the hall. Cui Xianye led him to a seat and personally served him tea. "Some years ago, the Li family of Moongaze Lake corresponded with our Cui clan of Chongzhou," he said respectfully. "However, the letter came from a senior who cultivated the path of thunder. My elders were unsure of its authenticity and did not dare to place their full trust in it. But now, seeing you, Daoist Master, we know you are of the true Bright Yang lineage."

Li Ximing chose not to dwell on the past. The Li family had indeed been obscure and struggling back then. Their situation was slightly better now, but they had only just begun to make a name for themselves. The fact that the Cui clan had provided them with any information at all, even without handing over the full lineage, was generous enough. He nodded. "Indeed. Travel was inconvenient then, so contact was sparse. We can communicate more frequently from now on."

His intention to let bygones be bygones was clear, and a wave of relief washed over Cui Xianye. "Thank you for your understanding, Daoist Master," he said, bowing.

Li Ximing cut to the chase. "How many Purple Mansion Realm cultivators does the Cui clan have at present?"

Cui Xianye answered quickly. "Daoist Master, our island was once home to Daoist Master Mingzan, my great-grandfather. He passed away over a century ago. Several elders of his generation suffered from spiritual energy backlash while in seclusion and showed signs of passing away in recent years. My father also entered seclusion some time ago, so there are currently no Purple Mansion Realm cultivators on the island."

"However," he continued, "a descendant from my great-grandfather's ninth branch, who migrated away long ago, has achieved the Purple Mansion realm. His Daoist name is Yangya. He resides in the Western Sea, in the far west, and has established his own foundation there. He rarely returns, only visiting when a major event occurs."

Li Ximing frowned. The Cui clan's bloodline was strong, and they possessed numerous cultivation arts that led to the Purple Mansion realm. With no external threats and judging by the spiritual energy on Chongzhou—which should have produced more than one Bright Yang Purple Mansion cultivator—it was an excellent, resource-rich land. It was unthinkable that they couldn't produce a single Purple Mansion cultivator.

He had come hoping to find allies, and a seed of disappointment took root. "The Cui clan has cultivated this land for a thousand years. Surely your strength should be greater than this."

Cui Xianye hesitated before speaking. "Daoist Master, it is not just my great-grandfather. His younger brother was also a Purple Mansion cultivator, but he died in service to Li Xunquan when his kingdom fell. My great-great-grandfather was also at the Purple Mansion realm; he and two of our most talented elders fell while following Li Xuan. During the era of the Dongli Sect, Chongzhou was its vassal territory, and all our clansmen were conscripted. Every last one of them perished. As for how many Foundation Establishment cultivators and Purple Mansion masters were among them… no one knows."

He refilled Li Ximing's cup. "This junior means no offense," he added. "I am merely answering your question. I beg your forgiveness."

His words left Li Ximing speechless. Though everyone claimed that the Moongaze Lake Lis were descendants of the Wei-Li, it was not something he dared to openly admit. He could only sigh. "The Cui clan's loyalty and sacrifice are truly moving."

After Cui Xianye's explanation, Li Ximing's tone softened considerably. "My Li clan began as a small lakeside family with an incomplete Dao lineage," he said gently. "I have come this time for two reasons. First, to honor the friendship between our families. Second, to inquire about your lineages, in the hopes of completing my own. I will, of course, offer fair compensation."

Cui Xianye had clearly anticipated his purpose; after all, Li Qinghong had inquired about their Bright Yang lineage once before. "Rest assured, Daoist Master," he said. "Our family has preserved the Bright Yang lineages. May I ask which Dao you cultivate?"

Li Ximing saw no reason to hide it. He tapped his teacup. "Heavenly Audience Gate."

"Ah, a Divine Ability of the Celestial Gate Arts."

His term, "Celestial Gate Arts," clearly referred to the entire system of high and low-grade cultivation methods related to Heavenly Audience Gate, including the Radiant Origin Pass. Cui Xianye watched his expression and explained, "The orthodox Bright Yang path has three spells, one body, and one Life Divine Ability. The spell art Divine Abilities are 'Heavenly Audience Gate,' 'Crimson Severing Arrowhead,' and 'Imperial Observation of the Origin.' The Body Divine Ability is 'Sovereign Treading Peril,' and the Life Divine Ability is 'Luminous Heart.'"

Li Ximing only knew that 'Imperial Observation of the Origin' was his clan's 'Eternal Brightness Steps,' and he had heard of the 'Luminous Heart' in the Eastern Sea. The others were new to him. After a moment to process, he asked, "Do they have other names?"

As he expected, Cui Xianye replied, "Indeed, Daoist Master. 'Imperial Observation of the Origin' has always been passed down exclusively within the imperial palace. The version available to outsiders is called 'Eternal Brightness Steps.' 'Luminous Heart' was also known in ancient times as 'Illumination of All Under Heaven.' Only these two are widely circulated. As for the myriad lower-tier Dao foundations, there are far too many to list. I will present you with a catalog later."

Li Ximing was delighted and nodded. Cui Xianye continued respectfully, "The Divine Abilities for 'Imperial Observation of the Origin' and 'Luminous Heart' can only be bestowed by the imperial family itself. We do not have them here in

Chongzhou. We only possess 'Heavenly Audience Gate' and 'Sovereign Treading Peril.' "

'The Body Divine Ability, Sovereign Treading Peril!'

A wave of elation washed over Li Ximing. It was almost too hot to contain. Besides the 'Luminous Heart,' this Body Divine Ability was the second thing he had hoped to obtain on this trip!

Ever since his Foundation Establishment days, he had heard of the power of such foundations—from the Yu family's 'Jade Court General' to Ning Tiaoxiao's famous 'Spring Echo.' Even Daoist Master Sumian had praised Ding Weizeng's 'Palace-Yang Tiger.' After hearing Changxi speak so often of the advantages of a Body Divine Ability, his heart had long been moved!

At this moment, he felt nothing but gratitude for his Bright Yang lineage and the legacy left by his predecessors, which had spared him the struggles faced by men like Changxi. He nodded and smiled. "I wish to study them. What is your price?"

Li Ximing knew that Purple Mansion cultivation arts were priceless. Back at Hengzhu, the minimum exchange for a Purple Mansion spiritual item was a Purple Mansion art or a spiritual artifact. The Cui clan of Chongzhou was not a family to be trifled with, especially given their deep historical ties to his own.

He saw Cui Xianye hesitate for a breath. Since Chongzhou had no urgent needs, he pondered, "Daoist Master… do you have a Bright Yang Purple Mansion spiritual item?"

Li Ximing had expected this question. It reminded him of his own clan's past struggles. "I would like one myself," he said with a hint of wistfulness. "Unfortunately, the only one my clan fought tooth and nail to acquire has already been used."

Cui Xianye asked again, "Then… does the Daoist Master have a Bright Yang Purple Mansion spiritual artifact?"

He paused, then added, "We would not dare ask for a spirit treasure, only a spiritual artifact. And we cannot accept an embryonic one, as we have no Purple Mansion cultivator with the divine ability to refine it."

Li Ximing sipped his tea. "I have a spiritual artifact, but it is not of the Bright Yang Dao."

"This…"

Now it was Cui Xianye's turn to be hesitant. Seeing his difficulty, Li Ximing asked, "What is the nature of your clan's 'Heavenly Audience Gate' lineage?"

Although he lacked a suitable spiritual artifact, he possessed a Bright Yang Purple Mansion cultivation art. A one-for-one exchange would not be unfair. In response to his question, Cui Xianye answered, "It is the *Upper Mansion Audience Scripture*, a fifth-grade cultivation art… with… three secret methods."

Doubt flickered in Li Ximing's mind.

He remembered Kong Tingyun once asking Li Qinghong how many secret methods the Li family's art had. Li Qinghong had said one, and Kong Tingyun had replied, 'That's quite normal.' At the time, he thought she was just being polite. Considering his clan's *Scripture of Heavenly Radiance and the Waning Sun* and the *Golden Book of Divine Attendance*, it seemed to him that most clans should have at least four or five secret methods, if not six or seven.

But now, he saw that the illustrious Cui clan's art had only three. Meanwhile, the *Radiant Essence Scripture* in his possession had a staggering nine!

For a moment, he didn't know how to respond. A single thought surfaced in his mind:

'A blessing and a curse.'

He remembered Xiao Chuting mentioning the *Secret Records of Dongli*. Most cultivation arts of the Bright Yang lineage were likely catalogued within it! And the phenomenon from his own breakthrough to Foundation Establishment had been witnessed by many!

But what had he used for that breakthrough? Not the *Radiant Essence Scripture*, but the *Golden Hall Radiant Origin Art*! He had switched to this Purple Mansion art later on.

Why had Daoist Master Yuanxiu and the others always considered him a non-threat? It must be because the *Secret Records of Dongli* contained an entry for the fourth-grade *Golden Hall Radiant Origin Art*, likely listing it with one secret method, or perhaps none at all. And Si Boxiu had observed his breakthrough phenomenon perfectly…

But when he later broke through to the Purple Mansion realm, he had been using the new art, and its phenomenon was something no one could comprehend.

Now, if he were to trade his cultivation art, did the Cui clan have any related records? If someone from their clan used this art to break through, would it be discovered?

The fact that the *Golden Hall Radiant Origin Art* was in the *Secret Records of Dongli* proved that the arts bestowed by the Immortal Mirror were pre-existing techniques. This meant the *Radiant Essence Scripture* could very well lead to disaster.

'And the Eldest Scion cultivated this in the Eastern Sea, so his case isn't a useful reference…'

All these thoughts flashed through his mind in an instant, but Cui Xianye's mind was racing just as fast.

'The Moongaze Lake Li family started from nothing. The Purple Mansion art they luckily obtained probably can't compare to our *Upper Mansion Audience Scripture*, let alone the number of secret methods… His silence… only confirms it.'

Chapter 719: Sovereign Treading Peril

'If the Li Clan's techniques were inferior, why would the Cui Clan even propose an exchange?' Li Ximing's hesitation was born from this exact thought. Cui Xianye instantly grasped the situation. To spare the Daoist Master any awkwardness, he spoke with deep respect.

"Daoist Master, our *Sovereign Treading Peril* is merely a fourth-grade technique, and it comes with only a single secret art. How could it possibly compare to your clan's esteemed immortal methods? Furthermore, the *Upper Mansion Audience Scripture* is one of our most fundamental treasures. I would never dare offer it without the express permission of my elders."

Decisively, he dropped to his knees and bowed low.

"This junior is willing to present the technique to you, Daoist Master. In return, I ask only for a single favor. Your divine abilities are as radiant as the sun, a shield for all of Chongzhou. Should our clan ever face a crisis, I pray you will protect our peace and safety."

Li Ximing paused, his mind racing.

'A single favor for a Purple Mansion cultivation method? Even if it's only fourth-grade with a single secret art… it's still a *Purple Mansion* technique!'

Cultivation in the Purple Mansion realm was vastly different from Foundation Establishment. Upon breaking through, a cultivator couldn't immediately begin working on their next divine ability. First, they had to refine their current one to the point of perfection. This could be a slow, grinding process, taking decades of patient cultivation to max out the ability. Or, one could accelerate the process by using various spiritual treasures, pills, or specific continuation arts.

Once a divine ability was perfected, the cultivator had to immediately begin on the next. To do this, they needed a Purple Mansion technique to condense a new Immortal Foundation within their sea of Qi and then transfer it to their

Shengyang Acupoint. Aided by their existing divine ability, the process was less arduous than the initial breakthrough to Foundation Establishment, but it still demanded a great deal of time.

Some cultivators could resort to unorthodox methods, like refining pills or even consuming another's Immortal Foundation, using specific arts to absorb it directly into their Shengyang Acupoint and gestate a new power. But for someone like Li Ximing, the only path forward was to follow a proper Purple Mansion technique, building his power step by painstaking step. Without such a technique, he would be trapped with a single divine ability until his death. Its importance to him was immeasurable.

For a cultivator like Ning Tiaoxiao, who had been stuck in the early Purple Mansion realm for years without a proper technique, a method like this would be priceless. He would trade almost anything for it. A Purple Mansion expert might scheme endlessly for such an opportunity; a single favor was a pittance in comparison.

Though Li Ximing generally trusted the Cui Clan, he didn't accept the offer right away. He took a slow sip of tea, saying nothing. Cui Xianye, his forehead still pressed to the floor, continued to speak.

"The Cui Clan has been isolated overseas for a millennium, but our loyalty has never wavered. In all the dealings between our two families, we have always supported one another. My request today is not merely a transaction; it is an appeal based on the bonds of our shared history."

"Our clan has the protection of a draconic ally, so we rarely face threats to our very foundation. The favor I ask is for a future possibility: if we ever discover the location of a Bright Yang spiritual item, we would need to ask for your aid in securing it."

Li Ximing was mostly convinced. He gave a thoughtful nod, a smile touching his lips.

"Favors are a part of any lasting relationship. As long as what you ask is within my power, I will certainly lend my aid."

"What's most important is that our families strengthen our ties. Everything else is a natural part of that friendship. Now that we're renewing our old bonds, the Cui Clan should send some of your younger generation to cultivate by the lake, and my Li Clan will send some of ours to your island."

Only then did Cui Xianye rise, taking a respectful step back.

"As you command, Daoist Master. The Jue generation of our clan is just now reaching maturity. I shall summon one for you to inspect."

He turned, first addressing Cui Wanqing.

"Go and fetch the *Treasure Scripture of the Body Guarding the Tiger Pass*."

Cui Wanqing bowed with grave formality and departed. He then summoned another attendant.

"Bring Jueyin here."

The entire sequence of actions was a masterclass in showing respect, and Li Ximing couldn't help but admire the Cui Clan's discipline. A moment later, a figure entered the hall.

The man's features were pleasant enough, with well-defined brows, but what truly stood out was his scholarly and graceful bearing. He entered the hall, bowed first to Cui Xianye, then turned his attention to Li Ximing. He immediately took a respectful step back and bowed deeply.

"Greetings, Daoist Master!"

Cui Xianye turned to make the introduction.

"This is Cui Jueyin, the second eldest of our Jue generation. He has been known since youth for his humility and grace, and is held in high esteem by the clan."

Li Ximing was in dire need of capable hands. Seeing that Cui Jueyin was a mid-stage Foundation Establishment cultivator and, more importantly, a direct descendant of a Purple Mansion clan, he was delighted. The Cui might have declined, but their heritage was undeniable.

"Jueyin," he said warmly, "would you be willing to return with me to the lake?"

Though he'd been summoned abruptly, Cui Jueyin was sharp. From Cui Xianye's demeanor, Li Ximing's welcoming tone, and the mention of "the lake," he had already pieced together the situation. He bowed again.

"To meet you, Daoist Master, and to have the chance to cultivate at the immortal lake is the greatest fortune of my life. I am both humbled and overjoyed to accept."

Li Ximing laughed heartily as Cui Wanqing returned, presenting a jade tray. "Daoist Master," she said softly, "the *Treasure Scripture of the Body Guarding the Tiger Pass*, its secret art, and the activation incantations are here."

She presented the tray. On it lay three jade slips and a small jade box. Li Ximing swept his spiritual sense over them, identifying the contents: one slip for the *Treasure Scripture of the Body Guarding the Tiger Pass*, one for its secret art, and a third containing the incantation to unlock them.

'A Purple Mansion technique, after all,' he thought. 'Even the unlocking incantation needs its own jade slip.'

Given its value, it was best to verify the contents immediately. Without delay, he used the incantation to access the scripture and began to read.

"The Divine Ability of the Supreme Radiance Profound Dharma Body is attained by embracing the nature of Bright Yang and treading a perilous path. Through the cycles of descent, one arrives at the realm of awakened clarity. With a focused heart and a purified will, the divine ability is forged. Only then is it understood that a treasured vessel finds its perfection through its flaws. From this emerges a form clad in profound robes and golden armor, borne upon a chariot drawn by a white luan…"

His eyes scanned to the end, where a particular phrase caught his attention. It was strikingly familiar.

"Shining upon the eight directions, all sovereigns pay homage. Ten thousand spirits bow in reverence. Supreme Radiance, the Celestial God!"

Those were the exact words of the casting incantation for his own technique, Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light!

'So, Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light and Sovereign Treading Peril are deeply connected!'

His spirits soared. He turned his attention to the secret art. Its name was *The Art of the Body That Breaks a Hundred Formations*. He read it through and muttered to himself.

"Isn't this just my clan's Folding technique? Why give it such a ridiculously long name?"

Li Ximing had studied all nine of his clan's secret arts. The text for *The Art of the Body That Breaks a Hundred Formations* was pathetically short compared to his

own clan's version of the Folding technique. After reading it through once, he was simply stunned.

He couldn't stop himself from reading it a second time, his mind reeling.

'What??'

Li Ximing had always lamented how difficult it was to cultivate his clan's secret arts. He'd assumed they were the raw, original texts, full of archaic and obscure language. He often imagined that major sects like the Azure Pond or Golden Feather must have volumes of annotations and interpretations, allowing their disciples to learn with twice the results for half the effort.

But looking at this, he realized *this* was the original text. His clan's version was the heavily annotated one!

Reading *The Art of the Body That Breaks a Hundred Formations* made his scalp crawl. If his clan's version was a finely prepared cake, this was the raw, unhusked grain!

'No wonder it was so easy to learn…' he thought, a little deflated. 'And here I was, thinking I was a peerless genius…'

He gave a wry laugh, though he didn't feel particularly discouraged. His clan lacked the deep heritage of a major sect; it was only natural that his cultivation path would be smoother, and his understanding less profound than that of their core disciples.

He collected the jade slips and turned back to Cui Xianye.

"I will accept this technique," he said. "When you need my help, send a messenger inland."

Chapter 720: A Fulfilling Return

Amidst the respectful farewells of the Cui clan, Li Ximing departed the island. Cui Jueyin stood bathed in the heavenly light, a touch of melancholy in his eyes, but Li Ximing had no time for him. He was engrossed in reading *The Art of the Body That Breaks a Hundred Formations* over and over, gaining a deeper understanding of the secret art.

'It's like a small fragment torn from the full "Art of Returning Fold," ' he mused. 'As if eight out of every ten words have been removed. It's incomplete, yet it resonates with the *Treasure Scripture of the Body Guarding the Tiger Pass*, making it just barely possible to cultivate.'

'If I were using a different Immortal Foundation… one for Heavenly Audience Gate, for instance, this would be impossible to learn.'

His mind was already racing with calculations.

'*The Art of the Body That Breaks a Hundred Formations* can't be used with Heavenly Audience Gate, but my family's complete "Art of Returning Fold" is likely compatible with any Immortal Foundation. Once I have all nine secret arts in hand, I can choose any cultivation method within the Bright Yang Dao, and my family will have nine corresponding arts to master!'

'Even the imperial clans of old could boast no more than this!'

He felt a flash of embarrassment, recalling his earlier complaints about the secret art being too simplistic. He retrieved a jade slip from his robes. To Cui Jueyin, his expression was solemn and profound, as if he were contemplating a pivotal move involving a great divine ability. The younger man didn't dare to speak.

But inside, Li Ximing was muttering to himself, 'What even is this?'

The jade slip contained nearly a hundred thousand words detailing his understanding of the secrets of Yang Origin. Comparing it to the profound art he now

held, his lengthy treatise was less like grinding wheat and more like teaching someone how to swallow a pastry without choking.

He winced, cringing at the thought.

'Back then, the family's legacy was incomplete, and my understanding of the Bright Yang Dao was hardly better than a rogue cultivator's. If I left this in the clan archives, I wouldn't dare sign my own name… Future generations would see it and wonder how the great Daoist Master Zhaojing, the first of his rank in the Li family, could have written almost a hundred thousand words of utter nonsense.'

He wanted to toss it away but felt it was a waste. Instead, he found the signature line and casually inscribed the name "Daoist Master Gufeng." Only then did he tuck it back into his sleeve. Seeing his calm and resolute expression, Cui Jueyin sighed internally.

'The thoughts of a Daoist Master are truly impossible to fathom… Our clan's support must have given him even greater confidence.'

With that small matter settled, Li Ximing finally turned his thoughts to the origins of the *Radiant Essence Scripture*.

'Nine secret arts, yet it's only a fifth-grade cultivation manual! The Immortal Mirror's gifts… what is the principle behind them?'

The *Radiant Essence Scripture* had been bestowed upon Li Zhouwei. That White Qilin, a talent the Li family might see only once in a century, was clearly the reason for the nine secret arts. And yet, the scripture itself was only fifth-grade.

'Based on the examples of Jiangqian and Quewan, it seems the cultivation method and the secret arts are granted separately… Minghuang's destiny is unique, so he received the ultimate number of nine secret arts…'

He hazarded a guess, a rough calculation forming in his mind. As he flew onward, the winds over the sea grew stronger, and the waves swelled. A few fish darted across the surface, and when the occasional demonic beast emerged, the heavenly light beneath his feet would graze it, instantly turning it to ash.

Li Ximing was no longer the man he once was. The light between his brows pulsed, connecting him to the Great Void and allowing him to perceive the subtle shifts in the spiritual qi.

'The spiritual qi is growing more volatile toward the southeast…' his calculations revealed.

'The fall of water and the rise of thunder are the affairs of True Monarchs. Meddling will only lead to disaster. Even with a divine ability, one cannot simply go wherever one pleases.'

He triangulated the position, which seemed to be near the World's Navel island. The Eastern Sea was the domain of dragons, and he had no intention of wandering into their territory without a guarantee of his safety. He steered his course back toward the mainland and Moongaze Lake.

'Still,' he thought, 'the spring water on that World's Navel island is said to have some miraculous properties. When my other affairs are settled, it might be worth a visit.'

The Great Void was a turbulent expanse, and this was Cui Jueyin's first time witnessing it as described in the records. He observed his surroundings with great curiosity. Li Ximing, pleased with his new subordinate and the renewed progress on his cultivation path, was in high spirits. Not wanting to waste time, he took out the scroll Changxi had given him, *Viewing the Pavilion's Divine Ability, Forged in Fire*, and began to read.

The name alone suggested it was no modern creation. The incantatory, insight-driven naming convention was similar to the *Six Chapters on Seeking Immortality* and other texts his elders had recovered from the Green Pine Grotto-Heaven. It likely hailed from at least that same ancient era.

Li Ximing skimmed the contents. It mostly described profound and wondrous methods involving high-platform rituals, various spiritual materials, Radiant Fire, and Malevolent Earth Qi. A number of cultivators were required to assist in refining a spiritual embryo over a great many years.

He looked closer at the description of these assistants: "Their seas of qi show a floating light, yet to reach Shengyang; possessing some minor wonders, but not yet divine abilities."

'So, Foundation Establishment cultivators… The ancients really had a grand way of speaking.'

Li Ximing scoffed inwardly. It seemed the ritual required twelve Foundation Establishment cultivators, working in two alternating teams of six. Furthermore, their Immortal Foundations could not conflict with the spiritual embryo. For

example, when refining a Bright Yang artifact, cultivators of the Veiled Yin or Dry Qi paths were unsuitable, and it was best to also avoid Pit Water from the Water Virtues.

'Thankfully, our family doesn't practice those first two paths.'

He paused, his attention caught by the mention of Pit Water. If there was one potential conflict, this was it. His family possessed quite a few Pit Water cultivation methods, and he had practiced them himself. Logically, there was no inherent conflict between Bright Yang and Pit Water. With his current level of understanding, he made an educated guess.

'Radiant Fire and Bright Yang are of the same Dao. Radiant Fire and Pit Water are opposites. That must be the reason.'

Dismissing the thought, his mind turned to selecting a spiritual embryo.

He didn't have many Foundation Establishment-level Dharma Artifacts. The Sun Seeker Ring was inscrutable, and it bore the name of a Green Pine Temple cultivator, so he couldn't use it. Aside from a few lesser items, the only ones worthy of being a spiritual embryo were the Chongming Profound Insight Screen, the Yang-Li Crimson Sparrow Banner, and the Profound Pattern Vase.

The Chongming Profound Insight Screen was mysterious; he was almost certain it was fundamentally an artifact of the Supreme Yang Dao. It was one of the few confirmed ancient artifacts in his family's possession, and he had always treasured it, believing it held a profound secret.

The other ancient artifact was the Profound Pattern Vase. While it lacked overwhelming power, its marvelous versatility had long been valued by the Li family. They had never seen another artifact that could change and adapt along with its wielder, as if its wonders were limitless—a testament to the supreme skill of the ancients.

'Since the Profound Pattern Vase was part of the Wei-Li inheritance, it's very likely it can be used as a Bright Yang artifact. It's worth a try. Even if this method fails, the Azure Pond Sect's Purple Mansion cultivators have entered the Dongli Grotto-Heaven. It wouldn't be too difficult to trade for a top-tier Bright Yang artifact from them.'

Inside the world of the Immortal Mirror.

The Saintly Palace of the Supreme Yin's Luminous and Primordial Purity.

Within the obsidian hall, the power of the Supreme Yin surged. Golden osmanthus and silver cassia patterns adorned every surface. Moonlight lamps cast a cold glow upon constructs of sculpted snow. Everywhere one looked, there were images of jade rabbits and moon toads. A few snowflakes drifted down from the ceiling. A figure walked through the palace, hands tucked into his sleeves.

The young man had a broad forehead and a thick head of hair and beard that cascended down his cheeks. His face was pale, his eyes a light shade of teal. His sleeves were embroidered with crashing waves. He walked into a courtyard, found a spot, and sat down. When he saw another official from the palace take a seat nearby, he asked:

"Lord Liu, do you have any connections in the lower realm? When will Lord Li be returning?"

The other man, an immortal official in white robes, simply shook his head.

"Time flows differently in the lower realm. We have no sense of the years there. If he has taken up cultivation, it could be a thousand years for all we know. He won't be back so quickly."

"A thousand years? Ugh! This is going to kill me!"

The news struck the young man like a physical blow, and he slumped in his seat, dazed.

This was, of course, Dangjiang. He had been here, transcribing techniques for who knows how long. He studied day and night, his mouth dry from the endless work, while the cabinets continued to spew forth an inexhaustible supply of jade slips.

Dangjiang was not a diligent person by nature, and compiling techniques was grueling labor with no rest. Having finally earned a short break, he had come out to ask for news of the Li Immortal Official, only to be met with this crushing reality.

He sat there for a long time, in no mood to appreciate the snow falling in the courtyard. Suddenly, the immortal official beside him, Lord Liu, shot to his feet and bowed respectfully.

"Greetings, my Lord!"

Dangjiang quickly looked up to see a stern-faced immortal general in silver armor standing at the edge of the courtyard. The general's features were sharp, as if carved from stone. The young man scrambled to his feet and sighed.

"Greetings, Immortal General!"

The man was none other than Zhengao, the Supreme Yin's Luminous Immortal General. Ever since Dangjiang had arrived, Zhengao had dumped him in this forsaken place to toil endlessly. The people here were few and far between, all of them elusive and taciturn. Finding Zhengao himself was next to impossible. Dangjiang was about to burst from frustration.

Finally seeing his superior, he was overcome with emotion. "It has been a long time, my Lord!"

Zhengao replied coolly, "A trip to the lower realm. It was not so long."

In the world within the mirror, everyone but Dangjiang was an illusion. Zhengao was, of course, a puppet controlled by Lu Jiangxian. Even Lord Liu at his side was the same. The reason they were so quiet was simply that Lu Jiangxian couldn't be bothered to respond to the talkative fellow.

During Li Ximing's breakthrough journey, he had visited several powers: the Azure Pond Sect, Mount Xianyou, the Myriad Radiance Sword Gate, the Profound Wonder Temple, the Profound Peak Gate, and the Cui family's Chongzhou Island.

Lu Jiangxian hadn't watched constantly, but the Immortal Mirror's gaze had followed from the Great Void, collecting every technique and secret art it could. However, most sects had their secret arts locked down, making them difficult to decipher. The harvest was thus neither large nor small.

Chongzhou Island, the Sword Gate, and the Azure Pond Sect each had specialized secret locks on their cultivation manuals. For any high-grade method, the decryption keys seemed to be passed down through individual peaks or bloodlines, not recorded in the jade slips. The gains there were minimal.

As for that old fox Xiao Chuting of Mount Xianyou, he had locked every single one of his cultivation methods from beginning to end. From the entire, vast Mount Xianyou, Lu Jiangxian had come away with nothing.

Only the Profound Wonder Temple and the Profound Peak Gate had shallow foundations and lacked a grand heritage. The decryption arts for their techniques were recorded on jade slips. Profound Peak was slightly better; the keys for their Purple Mansion methods were likely in Changxi's storage pouch. But everything else was laid bare. As for the Profound Wonder Temple, which had only been in Jiangbei for a little over a decade, its systems were incomplete. The decryption method for their Purple Mansion technique was right behind the statue of their patriarch, True Monarch Suxiang, allowing Lu Jiangxian to sweep the place clean.

'Most of it is just miscellaneous arts and Foundation Establishment techniques. I got a good number of third and fourth-grade sword arts from the Sword Gate. The Profound Wonder Temple had the fewest techniques overall, but they did have one fifth-grade Purple Mansion method, the *Sutra of the Majestic Jeweled Visage and Treasured Earth*… a rare technique of the Treasured Earth Dao.'

These were all expected gains. But as Li Ximing sped across the Eastern Sea, Lu Jiangxian had unintentionally scanned a grotto-heaven that seemed to belong to some ancient cultivator.

The grotto-heaven's formations were flawless. Even if Li Ximing had been standing right in front of it, he wouldn't have noticed a thing. Lu Jiangxian didn't bother wasting effort to break them; his divine sense simply passed through the arrays for a quick tour. The space inside was quite large, but held nothing of exceptional note. He simply read the formation plates and committed them to memory.

All the other cultivation methods were dumped into the Scripture Pavilion on the mountain, left to gather dust. These techniques bore the distinct signatures of their parent sects. Without being modified by Dangjiang or himself, they couldn't be used freely and could only serve as references.

Now, however, an idea began to form in his mind. He didn't want Dangjiang just altering minor arts day after day. The number of techniques in the pavilion was becoming absurd, and bestowing them upon the Li family one by one was too inefficient. He wanted to find a way to use the connection between the Talisman Seeds to let the Li family members choose for themselves.

'If I do that, I'll need someone in the pavilion to manage things and guide them. In the future, if there's more information I can disclose to the Li family, this would also be more convenient.'

'Take that grotto-heaven, for instance. If I had a point of contact, I could invent an excuse and bestow it upon them, rather than letting it go to waste at the bottom of the sea.'

In any case, it made no difference to Dangjiang where he worked. And if he wasn't in this palace, Lu Jiangxian wouldn't have to constantly manifest illusions to deal with him. Possessing memories from generations of the Li family, Lu Jiangxian had no intention of ever meeting them directly. This was all just proactive planning.

Thus, inhabiting the body of Zhengao, he had sought Dangjiang out. He nodded. "Although I was on a trip to the lower realm, Lord Liu informed me that you have been diligent and hardworking, burning the midnight oil. I have also reviewed the techniques you've modified. Most are useful. Although some were sent back for revision, I can see that you put your heart into it."

"This… Thank you for your understanding, my Lord!"

Dangjiang was overjoyed to hear this and shot a grateful look at Lord Liu.

Zhengao continued, "Since you are so dedicated and capable, I will arrange an official post for you in the heavens. What do you think?"

This was the moment Dangjiang had been working so tirelessly for. He was ecstatic and bowed low.

"My lord's grace… is etched upon my very soul… I…"

Before he could finish, Zhengao waved his hand. "I have already spoken with the Ministry of Merit. I have found a pavilion for you at the edge of the heavens. We are short-staffed, and that pavilion has been abandoned for a long time. It was originally the official post of Immortal Official Li. Now that he has returned from the lower realm, he is certain to receive a fine new position, leaving this one vacant. Since you are so skilled in Daoist arts, I will dispatch you there to manage the cultivation techniques and secret arts. You will hold the post in his stead for now."

'Huh?'

Hearing that it was the same soul-crushing work, Dangjiang nearly cried out. He lamented internally, 'What do you mean, "skilled in Daoist arts"? What else have I been allowed to do? You could have sent me to meet people, to patrol a pavilion, to stand guard in the heavens, or even to slay demons in the lower

realm! Anything would have been better… Why is it "skilled in Daoist arts" again?!'

Lu Jiangxian knew he was a chatterbox by nature and not suited for the quiet work of modifying techniques. But where was there a heaven for him to patrol? Where were there demons for him to slay? He asked coolly, "Are you suggesting the post is too humble?"

The question sealed his fate. How could Dangjiang dare to argue? He shook his head repeatedly, spouting words of gratitude. Lu Jiangxian found it amusing and, controlling Zhengao, turned to leave.

"Pack your things. I will take you to the edge of the heavens."

After Zhengao left the courtyard, Lord Liu was no longer a respectfully silent attendant. He came to life at once, clasping his hands in congratulations.

"Congratulations, congratulations!"

Dangjiang was torn between joy and sorrow. He was happy to finally have an official post in the heavens, but he despaired at having to continue this exhausting work, which would likely now come in even greater volumes. Lu Jiangxian, inhabiting Lord Liu, drew on the management-speak of his past life to console him.

"This position is quite good, you know. We are colleagues now! Which of the immortal officials didn't start this way? Just keep your head down and work hard! You'll see the light at the end of the tunnel eventually!"

Dangjiang gritted his teeth and replied, "When I finally make something of myself and get a chance to go to the lower realm, I'm going to have a long, long talk with Fellow Daoist Li… This is hundreds of years of work he's dumped on me!"

Chapter 721: The Secret of the Essence Gathering Pill

Li Ximing tore through the Great Void and descended upon Gardenia Scenery Mountain. After settling in, he sent a messenger to summon Li Zhouwei and took a seat at a table. Cui Jueyin, not daring to sit, stood respectfully to the side.

As Li Ximing asked a few questions about matters overseas, which Cui Jueyin answered with deference, a figure was seen ascending the mountain path.

The man was tall and lean, radiating a powerful, athletic energy without appearing overly muscular. At a glance, he seemed formidable but not extraordinary. His golden eyes, however, were another matter entirely—one look was enough to inspire a deep-seated awe.

The moment Cui Jueyin saw those golden eyes, his mind went blank.

'An imperial descendant? The Li family of Moongaze Lake has a legitimate bloodline!'

The Cui family might mistake many things, but they could never be wrong about the Wei-Li lineage. The man before him might not be on par with the Crown Prince Li Xunquan of old, but he was certainly at the level of Li Xuan, who had nearly restored their dynasty. Shaken to his core, Cui Jueyin immediately bowed low.

"Greetings, Your Highness!"

Li Zhouwei, who seemed to be in good spirits, did not recognize the man before him. He offered a slight nod and a grunt of acknowledgment, his expression quizzical.

"Minghuang," Li Ximing said with a smile, "this is a direct descendant of the Cui family."

Understanding dawned on Li Zhouwei. "Ah, from the Cui clan," he said, nodding. "There is no need for such ceremony."

Cui Jueyin respectfully stepped aside as another man came up behind Li Zhouwei. This newcomer was a mountain of a man—burly and broad-shouldered, with a pair of golden hammers in his hands.

A hint of pleasure touched Li Zhouwei's face. "Daoist Master, Li Wen has succeeded! He has reached the Foundation Establishment Realm!"

This was indeed Li Wen, who had been in seclusion at the spirit jade mine in the Helin Mountains. Li Ximing's eyebrows shot up. "What a stroke of good fortune!" he exclaimed with a laugh.

And what fortune it was. Among all the Li family members, Li Wen's breakthrough to Foundation Establishment was a perfect confluence of timing, location, and opportunity. Li Ximing had assessed him long ago; the man's chances were far slimmer than those of the fallen Li Chengliao, yet he had been the one to succeed.

Li Ximing looked at him with a sense of wonder. "You cultivate the path of Jade True, and your innate talent is comparable to An Zheyan's. A breakthrough should have been beyond your destiny. Yet, during your time as a Qi Refining cultivator, a True Monarch achieved their Dao, causing a surge in the world's jade essence and giving you a sliver of a chance."

"Then you went into seclusion. The family was embroiled in the war between the north and south, and the Essence Gathering Pills that were once unobtainable became available. You were also in the newly discovered spirit jade mine in the Helin Mountains, a place blessed with its own spiritual nexus. Not even a direct disciple of the Azure Pond Sect could ask for better circumstances."

"You were in seclusion for seven years, and the breakthrough must have been incredibly difficult. But then, the master of Mount Changhuai fell. The spiritual feedback from his death, 'Inward Heart Surging Profundity,' was beneficial to the Ancient Merging and Immortal Daos, and especially to those in seclusion. And the path of Jade True is a branch of Ancient Merging. You truly had every advantage!"

Li Wen, a simple and honest man, merely knelt and nodded.

Li Ximing let out a hearty laugh. "With all that, how could you possibly have failed?"

Li Zhouwei smiled and nodded in agreement. Li Wen, in his booming voice, said, "It was all just luck. But the real congratulations belong to you, Daoist Master. One Purple Mansion cultivator on the lake is worth more than a hundred of me."

Li Wen was one of the old guard. Li Ximing remembered seeing him by Li Yuanping's side since he was a child and recalled the old man's bitter tears when his father had died. The memories warmed his heart, and he felt a surge of genuine delight, repeating, "Excellent, excellent!"

Cui Jueyin watched from the side, taking careful note. Though he was confident this rough-hewn man wouldn't last fifty rounds against him, his close relationship with Li Ximing was clear.

"Jueyin," Li Ximing said, turning to him, "what cultivation art do you practice? What scriptures have you studied? What techniques have you mastered?"

Cui Jueyin quickly replied, "I cultivate the 'Eternal Brightness Steps,' a fifth-grade art. I have studied most of the family's Bright Yang scrolls and have trained in the required magical arts, radiance techniques, ocular arts, and movement skills. Among my peers on the island, I rank in the top three."

He continued, "In combat, demonic and rogue cultivators are no match for me. As long as our Dao paths are not in direct conflict, I can hold my own against mid-stage and even late-stage Foundation Establishment cultivators. Against noble demon beasts of the same level in the sea, I can fight them to a standstill."

Li Ximing nodded, satisfied. He then instructed Li Wen, "Take this young master of the Cui family down and arrange a place for him to stay on the island."

Cui Jueyin rose to leave, his gaze still lingering on Li Zhouwei.

"Once everything is settled," Li Ximing said with a smile, "you can have a proper talk with my Minghuang."

As the two departed, Li Ximing's expression grew serious. "This journey was indeed fruitful."

He recounted his gains, taking out the *Treasure Scripture of the Body Guarding the Tiger Pass* for Li Zhouwei to inspect. "Cui Jueyin is not one to boast," he concluded. "If he says he can 'hold his own,' his strength must be comparable. With his wide range of techniques and deep cultivation, you are likely the only one

in the family who can definitively suppress him. If Cheng'e or Weizeng were to fight him, they would be at a disadvantage within a hundred rounds, and in serious danger if the fight went on longer."

Cui Xianye had clearly not been perfunctory. While it wasn't the all-out support of Li Xunquan and Li Xuan's era, he had still sent one of his family's most outstanding disciples.

"The Cui and Li families emerged from the same Wei dynasty," Li Zhouwei said, nodding. "Of the four Wei-Li True Monarchs, the Cui clan claimed two. They have been loyal for generations, a trait that remains even now that they are but a single branch. Their situation is far better than ours." The Cui clan of Chongzhou Island could trace its lineage directly, unlike the Li family, which had to publicly deny its heritage.

Li Zhouwei produced a letter from his sleeve and handed it to Li Ximing. It was Li Chenghui's report on the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion.

Li Ximing read it carefully, his interest piqued. "Since the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion have a legacy, could they have…"

He was, of course, thinking of the Immortal Mirror fragment he had once obtained from a Secret Diffusion cultivator. He didn't need to say it aloud; Li Zhouwei understood.

"On matters concerning the Purple Mansion, we cannot rely on a single source. This may not be as simple as it appears. Our family has many other priorities at the moment, and this Dharma Artifact is not something that can be dealt with in a year or two. We should observe for now."

"As for Wenhu… he holds the legacy of the Dense Cloud Cave, so we cannot kill him carelessly. Let's place him under house arrest to recover and slowly gather information. If this matter proves true, we won't be without a card to play."

"Proceed as you see fit." Li Ximing had complete faith in Li Zhouwei's judgment. He took out the *Viewing the Pavilion's Divine Ability, Forged in Fire* that Changxi had given him and tasked Li Zhouwei with planning the construction of the high platform.

"What is the status of the Jade Court for the Courtly Red Dust Qi?" he asked.

The *Aged Courtly Path Sutra* practiced on the lake was also a Purple Mansion art, but its Courtly Red Dust Qi required a massive Jade Court. This was the very reason the Li family had been mining in the Helin Mountains.

"We gathered enough material years ago," Li Zhouwei replied. "The mining operations in the Helin Mountains have ceased. But our family has been in turmoil these past years, and we've had no mind to build any Jade Court. The quarried jade is piled up like mountains, most of it still in the Helin range, not yet transported back."

"Besides," he added, "building this Jade Court is an enormous undertaking that would drain our resources and manpower!"

From Li Zhouwei's tone, Li Ximing understood the issue. When it came to moving mountains and hauling stone, who was better suited than their neighbors at the Profound Peak Gate? It was a simple matter of him giving the word. "That's easily solved," he said. "Write a letter to Kong Guxi and ask him to send some of his Earth Virtue Foundation Establishment cultivators to help us move the materials back. We can then use the immortal foundation to construct the Jade Court. We should use these next three years to get it done."

"Also, ask Kong Guxi for a handwritten letter from Changxi authorizing us to move our family's Foundation Establishment spirit root to the island."

With these matters arranged, Li Ximing prepared to enter seclusion. He handed over one last item—a small, purple-flamed cauldron. "This was Yu Yuwei's Dharma Artifact. Send someone to return it."

Even if the cauldron didn't bear the Tuoba family's mark, the Li family would not covet his belongings. With the Yu family scattered, and Yu Yuwei himself having been estranged from them, sending it to Li Quantao to decide its fate was the proper course of action.

After settling the miscellaneous affairs, Li Ximing gave his final instructions. "Our family is experiencing a golden age, the likes of which we haven't seen in a century. With you presiding over the 'Bright Yang' path, we have An Siwei and Li Wen for 'Jade True,' Chenghui for 'Celestial Thunder,' Minggong for 'True Fire,' Chenghuai for 'High Shaman,' and the Elder White Ape for 'True Qi.' Externally, we have Qu Bushi of 'Earth Virtue,' Miaoshui of 'Converging Water,' Cui Jueyin, who also follows 'Bright Yang,' and Ding Weizeng of 'Hengzhu'..."

"Excluding those in the dungeon, those under seal, and Jiang Huzi who is near death's door, our family has eleven Foundation Establishment cultivators. We have already caught up to the Yuan family of old, and that's with me overseeing everything… At a time like this, we must be even more cautious."

By Li Ximing's count, their eleven cultivators were still one short of the twelve needed for the *Viewing the Pavilion's Divine Ability, Forged in Fire*. Moreover, not everyone was available; each was busy with their own duties. They were still short-handed.

"Who else in the family has a chance at Foundation Establishment?" he asked.

Li Zhouwei knew the roster by heart. "If Chen Mufeng and An Siming from back then were still alive, they could be attempting it now. The two from the Tian family died in seclusion, and we've lost a third from the Jade Court Guard during their breakthrough attempt. The Xu clan has declined… but there is a Fei Qingyi from the Fei family. The descendants of the Western Tan have many Qi Refining cultivators, but they were severely weakened after changing their surname, and none are ready for a breakthrough yet."

"Only Chen Yang is very close."

"Chen Yang…" The name finally registered with Li Ximing. "He cultivates Pit Water… a pity, but he can free up someone else. As for the Fei family… there was a Fei Qingyi who served my elder brother. She could be useful."

The topic of breakthroughs brought a sudden silence. After a moment, Li Ximing asked, "Are there any Essence Gathering Pills left from the ones the Azure Pond Sect gave us? Bring one for me to see."

"Of course."

Li Zhouwei sent someone to fetch them. A short while later, Chen Yang arrived with the pill. Li Ximing glanced at him, took the pill, and immediately dismissed him.

"We received seven from the Azure Pond Sect in total. Father, Aunt, Uncle, Siwei, Li Wen… that leaves two."

The Profound Light in Li Ximing's brow pulsed as he scanned the pill. Finally, he closed his eyes and ground out a single word through his gritted teeth.

"Good!"

The Li family now possessed the formula for the Essence Gathering Pill and could refine it themselves. They were no longer reliant on begging others for something they barely understood. With a single look at the formula and the pill, Li Ximing immediately saw the truth.

The principles behind the Essence Gathering Pill were similar to the methods Purple Mansion cultivators used to extend their path or use spiritual items to aid in mastering divine abilities. Li Ximing had some knowledge of both. Though his skill in magical arts was lacking, his mastery of alchemy was profound. The answer came to him with crystal clarity.

"An Essence Gathering Pill, no matter how many precious secondary ingredients it contains, is fundamentally defined by one primary ingredient. In ancient times, they used 'Lanhu Spirit Grass,' an impossibly rare herb. The modern method is to tailor the ingredient to the individual. For a Pit Water cultivator, the best ingredient would be a Pit Water-aligned material, preferably refined using a divine ability. That would create a true Essence Gathering Pill, far more effective than the one-and-a-half-success-rate versions."

Their own ancestor, Li Tongya, had consumed such a treasure pill, meticulously refined by a Purple Mansion expert, which was why his breakthrough had been so effortless.

Li Ximing sighed internally. "The best choice for the primary ingredient is a fellow cultivator of the same path. A demon beast is the next best thing. Only as a last resort should one use treasure medicines—three at best, one at the very least."

"Now I understand why the direct disciples of Purple Mansion sects have so many successful breakthroughs. They all share the secret of the Essence Gathering Pill and never publicize it. The pills they release, with their paltry success rates, are given to guest elders and peak lords as 'inner sect treatment.' Secretly, they give better ones to the obedient and worse ones to the rebellious or threatening. They might even use a conflicting primary ingredient to sabotage someone. The actual effect is entirely in their control!"

Li Zhouwei's head snapped up, his eyes flashing with dawning horror. The calm in his gaze was instantly replaced by a venomous, astonished rage. "The ones the Azure Pond Sect gave our family!?"

"They were the worst kind. And not just the worst kind!" Li Ximing finally dropped all pretense of restraint, his voice turning vicious. "I've inspected the

primary ingredients. They were all Veiled Yin and Dry Qi! Why did Chengliao fail his breakthrough?! His foundation was Bright Yang! To take an Essence Gathering Pill of Veiled Yin and Dry Qi… it is unconscionable!"

The five Essence Gathering Pills from the Azure Pond Sect had gray markings, indicating they were made from demon beasts and treasure medicines. Li Ximing had inspected them himself before allowing the family to use them, but back then, he couldn't discern the differences in their immortal foundations.

Li Zhouwei closed his eyes. He finally understood why his father, Li Chengliao, had failed so quickly after only a few years in seclusion, with barely a celestial phenomenon to mark his passing. He understood why they had all used the Essence Gathering Pill, yet his aunt Li Minggong and An Siwei had passed through with danger but ultimately survived… while his father, whose disposition and cultivation art were the finest among them, had failed.

Li Ximing exhaled slowly, the light in his eyes sharpening. "I still remember… back then, Lord Xuanfeng exchanged for an Essence Gathering Pill from the Azure Pond Sect for Second Uncle Li Yuanjiao. He recognized it was a 'human pill' and refused to use it, giving it to Yuan Huyuan instead. Yuan Huyuan then successfully broke through to the Earth Virtue realm… Thinking back, it must have been an Earth Virtue Essence Gathering Pill. Earth buries Pit Water… what a perfect 'Earth buries Pit Water'…"

He took a moment to process the treachery. "The Chi family is destroyed. Chi Fubo and Ning Hejing are dead, their bones scattered… otherwise, I would have torn them to shreds with my own hands!"

Though he spoke with fury, Li Ximing knew that Si Boxiu must have been aware of the truth. Even Si Yuanli likely understood it perfectly! They simply kept it to themselves.

'After all, given the situation at the time, weakening our family was something the Si clan was happy to see… They had no reason to warn us.'

Seeing Li Zhouwei's head bowed in silence, Li Ximing didn't know what to say. He could only sigh. "Among the three cartloads of spiritual items from the Xiao family, there were two Pit Water treasure medicines. Bring them to me for alchemy. Once this pill is refined, I will enter seclusion to work on my divine abilities… A great enemy is approaching."

When he finished, Li Zhouwei had already composed himself. He nodded and withdrew. "Leave the family's affairs to me, Daoist Master. Do not worry."

…

On the lake, spring turned to autumn, and time slipped by. For a Purple Mansion cultivator, a year was little more than a single session of seclusion. Though Li Ximing had mastered his divine ability, his proficiency with its associated arts was lacking. He started with the simplest one, Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light.

Fortunately, having the divine ability made mastering the arts much faster. He had also studied the technique before, so he made some progress. In the midst of his training, he made a trip to the Profound Wonder Temple.

Sumian was as welcoming as ever, but when Li Ximing inquired about the Secret Diffusion Sects, their conversation drifted to old tales, and he couldn't glean any concrete information. After much consideration, Li Ximing realized he would likely have to ask the Daoist Master Changyun, the power behind the Brahma Cloud Cave.

But before he could set out, as he was passing through the territory of the Profound Peak Gate, he felt a ripple in the Great Void. The spiritual qi of Bound Earth surged. Descending to the ground to inspect the ley lines, he found that a new mountain had risen within the Profound Peak Gate's domain.

'Someone failed their breakthrough and perished!'

This event, while tragic for Changxi, was expected by Li Ximing and the other Purple Mansion cultivators. The repercussions of 'Inward Heart Surging Profundity'—suppressing Earth and inhibiting demons—were no joke. It had already drastically shortened Changxi's own remaining lifespan; it was only a matter of time before it claimed one of his Foundation Establishment cultivators.

'I should return to the mountain. Changxi might come looking for me.'

This was another cultivator who had fallen into the pit that had claimed Li Chengliao and Yuan Huyuan.

Chapter 722: Transforming into a Mountain

Li Ximing returned through the Great Void, materializing on Gardenia Scenery Mountain. He listened to Li Wen's report and inquired about the Profound Peak Gate.

"Reporting to the Daoist Master, there have been tremors in Shanji Prefecture since midnight, and the sky has been overcast. The Profound Peak Gate announced to the public that the Daoist Master was moving a mountain."

The phenomena caused by Earth Virtue cultivators were tied to the earth's meridians, so nothing could be gleaned from the sky. With the Profound Peak Gate's Purple Mansion formation active, Changxi's explanation was plausible—it did seem as if a new mountain had simply appeared. From the Great Void, however, the truth was clear: someone had failed their breakthrough.

Li Ximing asked, "Where is Minghuang, and who is managing the clan's affairs?"

Li Wen replied, "To the Daoist Master, the clan head has gone to the White river Creek. The eldest young master is currently in charge."

Hearing that Li Jiangqian was in charge, Li Ximing continued, "As I emerged from the Great Void, I saw a great deal of activity on the lake. What's happening?"

"Reporting to the Daoist Master," Li Wen answered, "the eldest young master has relocated the declining clans from the island to the lakeside, settling them beneath the six gatehouses. He has also moved direct descendants at the Qi Refining and Foundation Establishment realms onto the island."

Li Ximing nodded. He inquired about Li Zhouwei's sons: the eldest, Li Jiangqian, was managing the clan; the second, Li Jianglong, had gone to the Profound Peak

Gate; the third, Li Jiangxia, was handling affairs on the eastern shore; and the fourth, Jiangliang, had just left home to focus on his cultivation.

"And the youngest son? Is he like his brothers?"

Li Ximing had heard nothing of the fifth son, Li Jiangnian, so he asked. Li Wen responded in a muffled tone, "The youngest master is growing older. His eyes have lost their color, and he lacks the heroic bearing of his brothers."

Li Ximing had never met the fifth son, but for Li Wen to say such a thing implied a problem far more significant than simply being "lacking." He understood and dismissed the man.

He had only been seated for half an hour when Changxi's divine power indeed appeared in the Great Void. Though the Li clan lacked a Purple Mansion formation that would necessitate a formal entry, Changxi still halted his approach as a courtesy and announced himself before entering.

The old Daoist Master had the appearance of a middle-aged man. A jade pendant hung on his chest, and his face was ruddy, his voice resonant. Yet even Li Ximing, who was unskilled in divination and physiognomy, could see that his divine ability was leaking uncontrollably, agitating the earth meridians. The man was on the verge of death.

No one dared to provoke him in this state. Li Ximing spoke gently, "Senior, you've arrived! I heard the earth meridians in the Profound Peak Gate's territory were unstable. Has something happened?"

Changxi sat opposite him, his expression placid. "Fu En has fallen," he replied. "My territory has merely gained a new mountain."

His detached manner left Li Ximing at a loss for words. After a moment, Daoist Master Changxi spoke again. "Zhaojing, I am about to pass on and transform into a mountain. Have you given any thought as to where this mountain should rest?"

Li Ximing immediately understood that Changxi's condition was far worse than he had imagined. Perhaps it was the shock of failure, or perhaps the effects of *Inward Heart Surging Profundity* were reaching their peak. With less than two years to his tribulation, the old man could no longer hold on.

'Thank heavens I wasn't wandering outside, heading for the World's Navel… If he had died suddenly, things would have become very complicated.'

He let out a breath and began to consider Changxi's final arrangements.

'According to him, he'll become a mountain after he dies. A Purple Mansion cultivator's final transformation… that mountain will likely be extraordinary. A treasured land.'

Li Ximing had little interest in holding onto Shanji Prefecture; he wasn't even confident he could protect the Profound Peak Gate's main sect. It would be best if Changxi passed on right here by the lake. His clan would gain a Bound Earth.

'But I can't just say… "Senior, could I trouble you to die on my land?" '

It was an awkward thing to ask. Since Changxi had brought it up, he must have a plan. Li Ximing could only say, "Senior, do you have arrangements? We will follow your wishes."

Changxi glanced at him and nodded. "Even if you don't say it, Zhaojing, I understand. Shanji can't be held, and my own sect's gates may not be defensible. I won't simply hand a prize to the enemy. The Profound Wonder Temple also follows the path of Earth Virtue. Fellow Daoist Sumian has invited me there to discuss the Dao at White sea Creek. I sense my time is near, so I came to invite you to accompany me."

With that, Changxi produced a jade box from his sleeve. Nestled inside was a perfectly round white pearl, emanating fine, colorful rays of light. A carving of a tiger looking over its shoulder adorned its surface, illuminating the room. "Zhaojing, take it," Changxi said.

The mid-grade Bound Earth Dharma Treasure, the *Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger*! After being offered and refused, it had finally landed in Li Ximing's hands.

Li Ximing no longer refused. He reached out and took the box. The white pearl was cold to the touch with the chill of Malevolent Earth Qi, and the carved lines of the tiger were so distinct they were almost sharp. As Changxi voluntarily withdrew his divine power, ceding control of the Dharma Treasure, Li Ximing's own Bright Yang ability began to infuse it.

The *Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger* was a Dharma Treasure, even more powerful than the *Chongming Profound Insight Screen* the Li clan had once refined. If not for Changxi willingly transferring it, the refinement process alone

would have taken an unknown amount of time. As soon as he held it, its abilities naturally unfolded in his mind.

First, it possessed the protective power of Bound Earth. This was an excellent defensive ability that could not only release a *Mountain-Chasing Profound Screen* to envelop the user's body, but also passively grant Li Ximing a *Bound Earth Spiritual Absorption*, reducing the damage he took from all divine abilities except those of the Twelve Qi and Fire Virtue.

Second, the *Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger* had a marvelous earth-burrowing ability called *Sea-Crossing Profound Evasion*. It allowed the user to travel through the earth's meridians like an Earth Virtue cultivator, moving at an incredible speed.

Finally, there was the *Bound Tiger Dao*, which could transform the Dharma Treasure itself into a Bound Tiger to traverse the Great Void. While it had little combat prowess in this form, it possessed a remarkable stealth capability. Unless trapped by a formation in the Great Void, the Bound Tiger would dive deep into the void at the slightest touch of a Purple Mansion divine ability, making it extremely difficult to intercept.

Beyond these, there were numerous minor Earth Virtue abilities. The Dharma Treasure itself was a Purple Mansion-level symbol of Bound Earth. If Li Ximing's own cultivation deepened, he could even use it to cast spells freely. It was just as when Sumian had borrowed the power of Li Ximing and Changxi to heal Ding Weizeng; if Changxi hadn't been present, placing the *Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger* nearby would have achieved the same effect.

'A fine Dharma Treasure… Changxi may not have had a great reputation in his life, but he certainly had some impressive items tucked away. This treasure is truly useful.'

Despite the growing pressure, Li Ximing was quite pleased with the *Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger*.

He sent someone to inform Li Zhouwei, then rose to leave with Changxi. As they entered the Great Void, the old man said, "Zhaojing, although the *Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger* is more compatible with my and Sumian's abilities, it doesn't offer anything truly exceptional for us—its functions overlap with our own. After discussing it, we agreed it would be better for you to have it."

"In any upcoming direct confrontations with Purple Mansion cultivators, we'll be relying on your *Heavenly Audience Gate*."

That was his stated reason, but Li Ximing knew it wasn't just about their abilities. While *Heavenly Audience Gate* was indeed a combat-oriented art, the real issue was that his own position was now fundamentally opposed to Yehui's. "Zhaojing understands," he replied.

Changxi continued, "The *Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger* also shares a common trait of Earth Dharma Treasures—it's essentially a demonic path item. Besides nourishing it with divine power, you can also refine it with blood qi and resentful energy for even greater benefit. Over time, it might undergo even more wondrous transformations."

This gave Li Ximing pause, and a suspicion immediately formed in his mind. The Dharma Treasure was mid-grade; perhaps Changxi had been the one to advance it. But Changxi quickly preempted his thoughts: "I considered refining it that way in the past, but the item is too much of a chicken rib for me. Besides, the amount of material needed is vast. Such resources are scarce within the seas, and I never managed to secure much. I used most of what I had to refine something else."

He pointed to the jade stone on his chest. Li Ximing had been noticing it for some time. "This is the *Qi Stone Demon Embryo*," Changxi said. "I started refining it two hundred years ago, spending most of my life's savings on it. If I weren't bound by the ambiance of *Inward Heart Surging Profundity*, with the waters of the Eastern Sea descending and thunder ascending, I wouldn't have ended up in this state."

Hearing the name, Li Ximing was inwardly shocked, but his expression remained thoughtful. Changxi chuckled. "This art is a secret of my lineage. It harms the heavens' harmony but can extend one's life. It's not good for one's reputation, and it has many drawbacks. Even the ancestors who used it did so in secret."

'Why is he telling me this?'

Li Ximing hesitated for a moment, but Changxi had already turned away. His voice grew deeper. "Actually… the various houses are very wary of the orthodox Earth Virtue path, especially cultivators who walk the demonic path. Other lineages can be ignored, but an Earth Virtue cultivator who is *also* an orthodox demonic cultivator inspires fear in everyone. Though the great houses benefited

from the transformation of the Thunder Palaces, no one wants to see a repeat of that."

Li Ximing actually knew a little about this. Though he didn't know where Changxi was going with this, he seized the opportunity to ask, "I've read about the *Diverse Mansion Unified Furnace Dao*. After the Purple Mansion realm, the difference between it and the Purple Mansion Golden Core path is not that great… When you say orthodox demonic path… do you mean like Tuoba Chongyuan?"

"Something like that," Changxi said leisurely. "The *Diverse Mansion Unified Furnace Dao* and the Purple Mansion Golden Core are one and the same—both are the demonic paths of the current age. But there were demonic cultivators in ancient times as well, otherwise why would Kuaili have been a Demon Monarch? The Tuoba clan is also a branch of the orthodox demonic path."

The old man snorted. "Arts are not taught lightly, so orthodoxies are born. If this side has an orthodoxy, so does that one. Those who attain Fruition don't pass down their own techniques; they bestow lesser arts upon others. By the time it reaches people like us, we use Foundation Establishment texts to control those below us. Isn't it all from the same source? Just as commoners bow their heads to our direct lineages, we too must bow our heads to the orthodox lines. To be another's plaything—is that not the natural order of things?"

He seemed to recall the painful memory of his clan's "one-incense-stick" legacy. He took a couple of deep breaths. On the verge of death, he pushed himself to materialize on a dark mountain cliff. He and Li Ximing descended towards the Profound Wonder Temple. The person who came to greet them, however, was not Qiuxin, but a pale, beardless, middle-aged man: Kong Guxi.

Someone from the Profound Peak Gate had already arrived.

Kong Guxi craned his neck, looking as terrified as a plucked quail. His already large eyes were wide with fear, making his Daoist robes hang loosely from his frame, as if on a coat rack.

He drifted over, was impatiently shoved aside by Changxi, and stumbled into a clumsy kowtow before bursting into tears. Changxi ignored him and looked only at Sumian. The old abbot stood with his hands tucked in his sleeves, his face etched with anxiety.

Changxi asked, "Which courtyard? Have you made the arrangements, Fellow Daoist?"

Sumian quickly led the way to the far end of the cliff. "Fellow Daoist…" he began anxiously, "that thing…"

"Ah!" Changxi took the *Qi Stone Demon Embryo* from his neck and pressed it into Sumian's hand. "No third person knows of this item."

Li Ximing, who had been standing by with a downcast and respectful expression, felt his mind race.

'No third person knows? But you just told me!'

'What is Changxi doing? Is this leverage? A hint? The *Qi Stone Demon Embryo* is bad for one's reputation and has many drawbacks… Is he leaving me a way to force the Profound Wonder Temple's hand in the future?'

Li Ximing's composure held; his expression didn't flicker. Sumian silently accepted the item and replied, "I will do my utmost to protect the Profound Peak Gate."

They had now reached the courtyard. An area a hundred li across had been cleared out, clearly in long anticipation of Changxi's death. It was a barren patch of yellow earth, save for a few frail blades of grass sprouting from the ground, swaying in the spring breeze.

Stones had begun to fall from beneath Changxi's robes, clattering and kicking up dust. He hurried into the courtyard. His robes billowed, but there was no grace in the movement—he looked like a bird throwing itself into a net. He sat cross-legged on the cot.

The Profound Wonder Temple was simple and unadorned, and this courtyard was no exception. As he sat on the cot, he looked so cramped it seemed he couldn't even stretch his limbs.

"Kong Guxi!" Changxi called.

Kong Guxi flew up, then immediately plummeted from the air. He landed nearby, ignoring the indignity of his ancestor sitting forlornly in the courtyard, and stared at him with a terrified, outstretched neck.

Changxi murmured, "Kong Guxi, my Kong clan rose from humble beginnings. We were never fated to have a Purple Mansion cultivator. But a True Monarch

was reincarnated and slaughtered my people, transferring their destiny to me. I was to ascend to the Purple Mansion realm only to be a stepping stone for another…"

At these words, Kong Guxi lowered his head in silence. Li Ximing frowned, and fear flickered in Sumian's eyes. Standing beside Li Ximing, he sighed, "He's grown senile! Such things cannot be spoken…"

As if ignited by the words, Changxi seemed to grow intensely hot. He kicked out his legs and rolled up his sleeves, hesitating before finally saying, "Follow Daoist Master Zhaojing's orders."

Kong Guxi nodded again. Changxi could no longer sit upright. He fell onto the cot, tossing and turning as a deep rumbling began to sound from beneath the earth.

At last, Changxi spoke his final words: "When I die, I will become a mountain, six hundred and twenty-one ren high. To the north, there will be three peaks, a hundred paces apart. To the east and south, nine peaks in total, covered in persimmon trees. The sunny slopes will be rich with red copper, the shaded slopes with white gold. From the true south, a spring will gush forth white jade, flowing south to form a creek that empties into Salt Lake. The waters will teem with vipers and black turtles. The descendants of my Kong clan may pay homage from afar, but they are forbidden to ascend."

"This junior will remember!" Kong Guxi sobbed.

Daoist Master Changxi let out a muffled grunt. "The pain is killing me!"

His cry was like a thunderclap. The earth meridians beneath them swelled as if inflated, and menacing white stones and massive peaks burst from the soil. Mountain peaks shot up like bamboo after a spring rain. Kong Guxi couldn't keep his footing.

His staggering, choked farewell to his ancestor was completely swallowed by the earth-shaking cataclysm, heard by no one. The ground beneath them rose dramatically. Red copper, white gold, and twelve peaks appeared one by one. A spring gushed forth, and trees grew so rapidly they formed a dense canopy, from which the faint sound of cicadas could be heard.

Changxi's words had all come to pass, without the slightest deviation.

The courtyard and the old man were gone, as if they had been an illusion. All that remained before Kong Guxi was a Daoist robe, hanging from a tree branch, swaying silently. The forest was terrifyingly quiet, filled with the shadows of branches.

He carefully pulled it down. After taking a few bewildered steps, he finally heard the cries of alarm and praise from the Profound Wonder Temple cultivators at the foot of the new mountain.

Kong Guxi thought, 'There should be laughter, too, shouldn't there?'

A Note on the Essence Gathering Pills

The Li clan received a total of seven Essence Gathering Pills from the Azure Pond Sect, all of the Veiled Yin and Dry Qi type. The first two came from the Ning family, originally obtained through a trade between the Azure Pond Sect and the Xiao family.

These two were consumed by Li Chengliao and Li Minggong (it was originally meant for Chenghuai, but his cultivation path change caused a delay, so Minggong took it). At that time, the Ning family no longer had a Purple Mansion cultivator, so the decision was effectively Chi Zhiyan's. According to the plot, the Xiao family and the Azure Pond Sect had an ongoing trade relationship in pills. Xiao Chuting was in the Northern Sea at the time, and Chi Zhiyan knew the Li clan did not consume blood-qi pills, so he specifically selected those from the batch traded with the Xiao family.

Another point some readers might not know is that grey-patterned pills can also be refined from demon beasts, with slight differences. Li Ximing can distinguish them. I forgot to clarify this when the next five pills were used.

I was in a rush yesterday, so I'm making detailed corrections today.

Chapter 723: Four Borders

The mountain shot into the sky. Li Ximing, treading on the celestial light, saw Kong Guxi leaning against a tree in the forest, his face a mask of panic. He had none of the bearing expected of the Profound Peak Gate's master.

'They had no successor, so Changxi had no choice but to pick him,' Li Ximing mused. 'An obedient puppet was the best he could hope for, not someone with true grit. Besides, any man would be stunned after watching his clan's Purple Mansion cultivator perish.'

Although Changxi had never truly taken him into his confidence, he was still a senior who had offered much guidance during Li Ximing's early days in the Purple Mansion Realm. Out of respect for the man, if not his schemes, Li Ximing bowed his head in a silent salute.

Below, the people from the Profound Wonder Temple were still exclaiming in awe and praise. Their voices carried clearly enough for even Kong Guxi to hear, let alone cultivators with divine abilities like Li Ximing and Sumian. No matter how tragic his end, Changxi had been a Purple Mansion Daoist Master. Li Ximing simply raised his head and clasped his hands behind his back, remaining silent.

A man of Sumian's perception could tell from a single glance that Li Ximing was displeased. The Profound Wonder Temple had a relaxed, traditional structure without many strict rules, so things had gotten a bit disorderly. He waved a hand, signaling Qiuxin to go down and disperse the crowd.

Kong Guxi had already taken to the air, clutching a set of Daoist robes to his chest, intending to return and arrange a burial. He stopped before Li Ximing and bowed respectfully. "Greetings, Daoist Master. From this day forward, the Profound Peak Gate will follow your lead."

Li Ximing nodded. Once Kong Guxi was steady in the celestial light, he turned to Sumian and finally voiced the question that had been nagging him. "Senior Sumian, where is Daoist Master Xuanyi?"

Li Ximing remembered it all perfectly. Changxi's support hadn't just come from the Profound Wonder Temple; there was also Mount Jingyi overseas. Daoist Master Xuanyi had taken Yuezhou Island and accepted other benefits from Changxi. In fact, Changxi's premature death was partly due to the aid he'd given Mount Jingyi. Yet now that Changxi was dead, Xuanyi was nowhere to be seen!

At Li Ximing's question, Sumian shook his head, no longer bothering to hide the blatant disgust on his face. "Xuanyi is no saint. With Changxi gone, this is clearly a troublesome situation. What overseas Purple Mansion Daoist Master would eagerly jump into this mess?"

He paused before adding, "Xuanyi is on bad terms with the Pure Unity Dao Gate. Guanghou, a Daoist Master from their lineage, has just achieved the Purple Mansion Realm, so Xuanyi's hands are tied. He can't come."

The Pure Unity Dao Gate was another ancient, traditional lineage. Qiuxin had once worked with them to ambush demonic cultivators from Jiangnan, securing the Purple Flame Cauldron for the Li Clan. The relationship between the Profound Wonder Temple and the Pure Unity Dao Gate was clearly a close one, which explained Sumian's dislike for Xuanyi.

Understanding this connection, Li Ximing saw the root of Sumian's animosity. But this wasn't the time to worry about Xuanyi. He needed to clarify the Profound Wonder Temple's position.

He glanced at Kong Guxi, who still seemed lost in a daze, and decided to speak for him. "With Senior Changxi's passing, the celestial phenomena and shifting ley lines have made the news plain for all to see. The White Ye Immortal Sect has long coveted the Shanji region. Senior, you promised to protect the Profound Peak Gate. What are your plans?"

Daoist Master Sumian stroked his beard and replied softly, "Brother Changxi was a friend to our Profound Wonder Temple for many years. We cannot simply stand by. However, the Profound Peak Gate's territory is vast, and covetous wolves lurk on all four of its borders. I fear our two families alone cannot protect it all. We must be prepared to cede some land. The lives of our disciples are what matter most."

The Profound Peak Gate's territory was centered around Shanji and their own mountain sect, with their influence extending to the wilderness around Salt

Lake. Sumian's first instinct was to give up ground. Li Ximing had to ask, "Senior, what exactly are you suggesting?"

Sumian shook his head. "Zhaojing, rest assured. Our Profound Wonder Temple cultivators are already on their way to garrison the Salt Lake area. After all, the lake is part of our heartlands, and we cannot allow turmoil there. As for the wilderness to the west… I'm afraid our reach is too short."

The Li Clan and the Profound Wonder Temple perfectly bracketed the Profound Peak Gate, bordering them at the wilderness and Salt Lake, respectively. The implications of Sumian's words were instantly clear to Li Ximing. 'So that's how it is… The Profound Wonder Temple will absorb the Profound Peak Gate's influence over Salt Lake, and they're leaving the wilderness for my family to handle.'

It seemed like an even split, with each taking a border, but it was anything but! Not only did the Li Clan share a long border with the White Ye, but even a fool like Yehui knew of the Profound Wonder Temple's long-standing neutrality. He would only have to deal with the Li Clan.

'The Profound Wonder Temple's "defense" is just an excuse to swallow up the territory around Salt Lake!'

As a fellow Purple Mansion cultivator, how could Li Ximing not see through the ploy? His brow furrowed instantly. But Sumian's tone remained firm as he continued, "Zhaojing, do not worry. I will go and speak with Yehui personally. Out of respect for Brother Changxi, whose body is not yet cold, he won't let things escalate too drastically. If a real crisis occurs, I promise I will not stand idly by."

Sumian's meaning was clear: the Li Clan would face the Immortal Sect alone. The Profound Wonder Temple was unwilling to send its people to offend Yehui. However, if it came to a battle between Purple Mansion cultivators, Sumian was at least willing to mediate. Li Ximing listened in silence as Sumian turned to Kong Guxi. "Your sect's mountain is right next to Salt Lake. If you face any difficulties, or if any of your disciples are injured, send them over at once. The Profound Wonder Temple will not ignore their plight."

"The same goes for Moongaze Lake."

Li Ximing felt a headache coming on. Fortunately, Kong Guxi finally spoke up, his voice respectful. "Daoist Master, before our ancestor passed, he instructed

this junior to follow Daoist Master Zhaojing's arrangements in all matters. We await your command."

Sumian nodded. Li Ximing had long understood the way these Purple Mansion Daoist Masters operated. They might appear benevolent and charitable, but they would never sacrifice their own strength to save another's. They had made grand promises while Changxi was alive, but now that he was dead, they would swallow up their share of the benefits, and any further action would depend entirely on their conscience. In that regard, Sumian was already far better than Xuanyi.

But Li Ximing couldn't afford to linger. Bidding a quick farewell, he tore open the Great Void and pulled Kong Guxi through the rift, traveling at incredible speed. "What are the Profound Peak Gate's defensive arrangements?" he asked as they moved. "Don't leave anyone at Salt Lake. Move all your forces to guard the wilderness."

Kong Guxi had managed to regain some composure. "Daoist Master, our ancestor gave instructions for our defenses before he passed. We currently have three early-stage, one mid-stage, and one late-stage Foundation Establishment cultivator from our direct lineage, along with nine guest elders, all stationed on the riverbank in the wilderness. Salt Lake has been left completely undefended."

'Changxi really had planned ahead,' Li Ximing thought, relieved. 'Otherwise, he wouldn't have said what he did to me.' Fourteen Foundation Establishment cultivators, while lacking any truly exceptional individuals, represented the core strength of an entire immortal clan. They wouldn't be broken through easily. He then asked about the Profound Peak Gate's single most capable warrior: "Where is Fuyuezi?"

"Guarding the wilderness," Kong Guxi replied.

The Li Clan's main force was stationed on the eastern coast, perfectly positioned to reinforce the wilderness to the northeast or Funan to the northwest. And just a few days prior, Li Xizhi had secretly recalled Li Wushao and Li Qiyun, who were now both on the eastern coast as well.

In the time it took to exchange a few sentences, they arrived at the border of the wilderness. Li Ximing prepared to drop him off, giving one last order. "The Purple Mansion Daoist Master of Mount Jingyi is indisposed, but he must have disciples. Doesn't your clan have someone studying under him? Have that person invite a few of his martial brothers to lend their aid!"

Kong Guxi nodded hastily. "I will prepare generous gifts at once and send someone to Mount Jingyi. I'll have my cousin ask for assistance."

...

White river Creek.

For the past year and a half, the Midong region could only be described as superficially stable. The prominent local clans were well-informed and knew something of the Kong family's situation, leading to widespread unease. They showed little interest in the stipends offered by the Li Clan, merely going through the motions.

On Hongfu Peak, lights burned brightly as cultivators hurried in and out. A young man with eyes like polished lacquer sat in the main seat, six tokens floating at his waist. Old Man Qu bustled in from below. "My lord, the Northern Brocade River King's messenger has arrived. He reports movement in the White Ye territory."

Among the Li Clan's Foundation Establishment cultivators, Li Chenghui was the most cautious. He had arranged for the Northern Brocade River King's men to stay on a side peak, changing out their communication jades monthly to ensure the timely delivery of news. After all, it only took the messenger a half-hour to fly over, and in a rebellious region like this, relying on a tiered notification system was just asking for trouble.

The moment the message arrived, Li Chenghui shot to his feet. He had just received word of geological shifts in the Profound Peak Gate's territory when Ying Hebai's news came in. His voice was grim. "Daoist Master Changxi has fallen. Get Ding Weizeng. All Foundation Establishment cultivators are to pull back immediately. Do not retreat via Hongfu Peak."

Since no word had come from Li Zhouwei, and no reinforcements were coming from the clan, Hongfu Peak was indefensible. Midong had never been a true strategic priority for the Li Clan; besides the land itself, it held little of value. Everything that could be moved had already been transferred to Funan over the last two years.

And besides the land and the local clans, what was the most valuable thing in Midong?

The Grand Celestial Cloud-Gathering Array on Hongfu Peak, of course!

Li Chenghui had focused on three tasks over the years. First, he moved Midong's commoners—those unaffiliated with the powerful clans—to populate Funan, never touching the cultivators. Second, he appointed cultivators from the local clans to high positions, generously distributing the spirit fields that Wenhu of Midong had painstakingly converted from private to public ownership.

In less than two years, Midong had not only seen a portion of its population drain away, but the consolidation of spirit fields had reached an unprecedented level, and the Li Clan had profited handsomely from the resales.

His third task had been to map the region's spiritual veins, ley lines, and waterways, working overtime to copy the platform of the Grand Celestial Cloud-Gathering Array. Now, by taking the priceless array plate and destroying the formation, he would leave Hongfu Mountain defenseless—a paradise for rogue cultivators and local clans to fight over.

Without pausing, he walked outside, continuing his orders, "We don't have time to deal with them. These clans and rogue cultivators, who so righteously want to drive our Li Clan out, won't pass up this opportunity. Let them fight over it. When the Immortal Sect's forces arrive, they'll surely have to leave a few people behind to suppress them."

Qu Bushi followed him out and whispered, "The spiritual energy in Jiangbei is flourishing. We could excavate the ley lines and sever the spiritual veins… we could also fill in the waterways…"

Li Chenghui retrieved the array plate from its stone pedestal in the main hall. It was an incredibly complex disk, covered in patterns like woven silk. Hearing Qu Bushi's words, Li Chenghui immediately shot the idea down. "Are you trying to get yourself killed? This is Jiangbei, not the Eastern Sea. No one touches the land in Jiangbei. Not even a Purple Mansion Daoist Master would dare!"

Qu Bushi froze, realizing his mistake. He fell silent and retreated. The two made their way off the mountain. Fearing Ding Weizeng and the others hadn't received his orders, Li Chenghui crushed another communication jade as a reminder. Just as they crossed out of Midong's borders, a pillar of fire erupted from Hongfu Mountain. The grand array shattered, its brocaded clouds sinking and scattering like rain.

It was followed by dozens of streaks of spiritual light, all hesitantly ascending toward Hongfu Mountain. The local clans had clearly noticed. Li Chenghui, al-

ready several miles out of Midong, glanced back to the north with a hint of regret.

"Midong is a truly prosperous land. One day… if we have the chance to return, we will set things right and bring these clans to heel."

He sped away on a current of lightning. An incense stick's time later, he crossed into Funan. The contrast with Midong was stark: here, the villages were sparse but orderly, all under the protection of a pristine, glowing array. A woman flew out to meet him.

It was Li Minggong, dressed in red and holding the Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier, riding a plume of fire. Behind her was An Siwei, clad in jade armor and carrying a spear. Worry was etched on Li Minggong's face. "You've arrived just in time," she said. "I just received word. Guan Gongxiao, the head disciple of the Immortal Sect, is leading a force into the wilderness. The clan head has already gone ahead. They've likely engaged the enemy by now."

"Thankfully, you didn't try to defend Hongfu Mountain and have freed up your forces. I am needed to guard this position and cannot leave. Please, hurry and provide reinforcements."

Li Chenghui hadn't expected the enemy to strike so swiftly. "How many cultivators?" he asked grimly.

Li Minggong shook her head, her voice tinged with anxiety. "It's hard to know for sure… Guan Lingdie and Gongsun Bofan have both been spotted, along with several other well-known Foundation Establishment cultivators who were recalled from overseas."

Li Cheng processed the information instantly. "It seems this Guan Gongxiao has sent local turncoats like Song Yunbai and Wang He to attack Jiangbei, while his main force heads for the eastern coast. I'll head over now. Ding Weizeng is right behind me; please brief him when he arrives."

Without another moment's delay, Li Chenghui led his men eastward, vanishing over the horizon at top speed.

Li Minggong, tasked with defending Funan—a vital buffer for Moongaze Lake and arguably more important than the wilderness itself—could only watch him go.

A short while later, before Ding Weizeng's forces had even arrived, she felt a tremor in the ley lines to the east. But then, a golden radiance erupted in the northwest. A wave of dread washed over her. Riding her fire higher, she peered into the distance and saw streaks of light racing across the border, formations shattering, and a torrent of metallic energy surging into the sky.

Li Minggong knew at once that something was wrong. She summoned a Jade Court Guard. "Go to the clan immediately and request aid! Have several Foundation Establishment cultivators reinforce Funan. This is critical—do not delay!"

The guard hurried off. Li Minggong then crushed a communication jade. Her clan's senior had two spirit beasts on the eastern coast; they could arrive in fifteen minutes. Having taken these precautions, she felt a surge of confidence and immediately set off with An Siwei, riding the wind.

An Siwei looked toward the disturbance, his expression instantly tightening with tension. His father, An Zheyan, was stationed near that area. Though he was a good distance away and the old man was sharp, An Siwei couldn't help but surge forward.

'I never should have assigned him to that post!'

An Zheyan was getting on in years, so he'd been given the safest, most relaxed assignment. An Siwei had never anticipated a sudden attack from the northwest, which had now put his father in grave danger.

Fortunately, the old man had accumulated a good number of protective treasures over the years and was stationed slightly behind the border, not directly on it. It seemed he had managed to escape. As the two Foundation Establishment cultivators sped onward, straining their eyes, they saw the old man flying toward them, cloaked in a bloody light.

An Zheyan had always been completely bald, and now his beard and eyebrows were completely white. Back when Li Ximing first reached the Purple Mansion Realm, he had restored the severed limbs of An Zheyan, Li Qiuyang, and several other elders. Now, with all four limbs intact, he looked much healthier, though the lines on his face had deepened with age.

He came to a hurried stop before Li Minggong as the golden energy on the horizon flared even brighter. The old man coughed up a mouthful of blood and cried

out in alarm, “My lady! Situ Mo, the master of the Golden Tang Gate… he’s leading his cultivators… they’ve crossed the mountains!”

Chapter 724: The Battle of the Golden Tang Gate

"The Golden Tang Gate."

The name alone was enough to make An Siwei's expression change drastically. Li Mingguang hesitated for only a moment before taking out her jade pendant again and crushing it. She issued an order for all the Qi Refinement cultivators in the territory to retreat to the main peak of Funan.

"Withdraw everyone and hold the line with the formations," she commanded. "The harvest in Funan is already accounted for. Losing a few years of production is nothing. Situ Mo has powerful backers; he'll be smart enough not to touch the spirit veins."

Li Zhouwei had, in fact, already discussed the Golden Tang Gate with Li Mingguang and Li Chenghui, so this development was not a complete surprise.

Ever since the death of Situ Tang, the Golden Tang Gate had been on a steady decline from its peak as the number one sect in the State of Xu, boasting three Purple Mansion Realm cultivators. When the Li family had first risen to prominence, the reputation of the Golden Tang Gate's young master still carried some weight. But even then, the sect was a hollow shell, its glory fading with each passing day.

After the Lixia Prefecture disaster and the death of Chi Wei, the sect's sole remaining Purple Mansion cultivator, Situ Huo, had managed to provoke Xiao Chuting, a master of the Life Divine Ability. Terrified, he hadn't dared to return to the lands of Jiangnan or Jiangbei. The Golden Tang Gate became a mere stage for the political games of the Azure Pond Sect and the Golden Feather Sect. The subsequent conflict between the north and south had hit them hard. To put it bluntly, the current Golden Tang Gate was weaker than even the Profound Peak Gate.

Their handful of guest elders were no threat, and they only had two newly advanced Foundation Establishment disciples. Their two most presentable cultivators were Situ Ku and Situ Biao, and Li Zhouwei had already captured Situ Ku. The sect could barely fill the seats in its own main hall.

The only one worth any caution was the sect master, Situ Mo.

As Li Mingguang led the retreat, she spoke in a low voice.

"Situ Mo is from the same generation as my great-aunt. He is an incredibly suspicious and treacherous man. Years ago, my ancestor went to their Golden Pocket Island with his bow and killed a beast called the E'wu. The display of power frightened him so badly that he didn't dare leave the island for over twenty years. Only after he was certain my ancestor had left the Eastern Sea did he scurry back to the Golden Tang Gate."

"He never took a single step out of his sect until he heard the news of my ancestor's passing. It's only now that we're hearing from him again… For him to cross the mountains now, he must have found some courage."

At the mention of the name, a nostalgic look appeared on the face of the nearby An Zheyan. He swallowed a medicinal pill and said, "This old man… I discussed him with Elder Xuanxuan once. His uncle is Ji Dengqi, who was quite a figure in his own right."

An Zheyan spoke with authority. As the former head of the An family, he had not only spoken with the old Ji family master but had also participated in the siege against Ji Dengqi. Li Mingguang, however, was unfamiliar with this history.

"Situ Mo was stuck at the peak of the Foundation Establishment Realm for decades," she said. "It's possible he cultivated some secret art. And the Golden Tang Gate's *Heavenly Beard Polished Metal Sutra* is a renowned Geng Metal cultivation method. The few of us will have a hard time holding him off. I've already sent a message requesting aid."

Just as her words fell, a brilliant, dark-red illusory light flashed from the main mountain of Funan. A tall man flew into the formation. His heroic eyebrows arched upwards as he cupped his hands and announced in a deep voice, "Weizeng pays his respects to you, my lady!"

"You're just in time!" Li Mingguang's face lit up with joy.

But as she beckoned him over, a golden aura was already speeding toward them from the horizon. An Siwei frowned. "They're here already."

Ding Weizeng glanced over and, to everyone's surprise, recognized the newcomers. He pulled a bright red staff from his storage pouch and planted it on the ground. A layer of fine, intricate runes spread out from beneath his crimson armor, crawling up his arms to his palms. The runes in his pupils grew denser.

"It's the Situ family!" he declared.

It wasn't strange that Ding Weizeng recognized Situ Mo. His Ding family had once been a powerful clan in the Funan territory, and Fu Dou had frequent dealings with the Golden Tang Gate. As a capable general, Ding Weizeng had even been acquainted with Situ Ku.

He raised his staff. In the sky, a middle-aged man appeared, a golden ring in his hand. He had a longish face and thin eyebrows, and his feather-adorned robes were embroidered with rhombus patterns and hung with glittering golden hooks and rings. He stood before their formation with his hands behind his back.

This was undoubtedly Situ Mo. Behind him stood his Foundation Establishment guest elders, and beside him was the elderly Situ Biao, who bore a slight resemblance to the Situ Ku held in their dungeon. Without a single word of prelude, Situ Mo gave a simple command.

"Attack!"

In an instant, a torrent of spiritual light rained down, hammering against the grand formation with a deafening clang. The faces of the Qi Refinement cultivators on the formation platform turned pale. An Siwei, holding the formation disc, staggered back a step, his own expression grim.

The formation on Funan's main mountain was top-tier for Qi Refinement cultivators, but it could never withstand an assault from multiple Foundation Establishment masters. If not for the fact that nearly every Qi Refinement cultivator in the Funan territory was present to share the burden, the formation would have shattered from that first blow.

But numbers alone were not enough to guarantee a defense—otherwise, there would be no need for Foundation Establishment-level formations. Even with ample spiritual qi, the array would break after two more hits. Ding Weizeng hurriedly flew out on the wind to buy time.

"Sect Master Situ," he called out, "why do you attack our Funan territory?"

Situ Mo raised an eyebrow and looked at him, drawing a golden blade from his waist. A sharp, golden aura immediately erupted, swirling around him like a white wave. "So, it's Weizeng," Situ Mo said in a placid tone. "You are also a cultivator of Funan. We are here to conquer this land. Why don't you surrender to my Golden Tang Gate? I can recommend you to the White Ye for further cultivation. Your contributions will be noted, and you'll have nothing to worry about. There is no need to die here."

Of course, the Golden Tang Gate wouldn't dare to recruit Ding Weizeng on its own; he had to use the name of the White Ye Immortal Sect. But Ding Weizeng knew where his loyalties lay—not only were his family members still on the lake, but he also remembered the immense kindness Li Ximing had shown him by seeking out four Daoist Masters just to heal a single injury. He refused, but as he did, he noticed Situ Mo's hands.

Situ Mo rested one hand on his blade while the other formed a complex seal within his robes. His ring finger crossed behind his middle finger to hook his index finger, while the others pressed together. A smile touched his lips as he whispered, "Go!"

A blade of golden light, sharp as a dagger, shot out from his sleeve. A piercing shriek filled the air as the golden aura descended. Ding Weizeng's reaction was swift. Gritting his teeth, he let out a great shout.

"Hah!"

The shout transformed mid-air into a tiger's roar that shook the forest, momentarily halting the golden blade. Ding Weizeng stared straight at Situ Mo. The sect master found his gaze locked, unable to look away. A powerful force slammed into him, making him stumble back a step, his vision filled with stars.

His retreat caused the golden blade in the air to slow for a fraction of a second, just enough for Ding Weizeng to dodge. But behind Situ Mo, the elderly Situ Biao, who knew his master's temperament well, was already attacking, swinging a golden hammer straight at him.

Instantly, all the golden aura in the sky converged on Ding Weizeng. Fortunately, a sheet of True Fire surged up from below. Li Mingguang's Six-Pointed

Crimson Flame Brazier had arrived. Countless red and white plumes of Pure Feather Li-Fire erupted with the flames, soaring into the sky to shield him.

"The Golden Tang Gate attacks our territory without provocation!" Li Mingguang shouted. "Do you wish to challenge the might of a Purple Mansion cultivator?"

Situ Mo and the Li family were long-standing enemies. He knew that the Li Clan would never let him off, regardless of whether he attacked or not. He was secretly hoping for a war to break out between the Li and the White Ye Immortal Sect so he could find a secure backer. Though inwardly delighted, his words were cautious. "You young woman! My Golden Tang Gate is acting on the orders of a Daoist Master from the White Ye Immortal Sect to take control of the Funan territory! What do you mean, 'attack'?"

As they spoke, the True Fire and the golden aura had already collided.

True Fire, one of the Fire Virtues, was the ultimate refiner of all things metal—it was precisely why Li Zhouwei had assigned Li Mingguang to defend this location. Amplified by the Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier, the fire, though weaker in terms of raw spiritual qi than the golden aura, was able to whittle it down continuously. The remaining golden aura that struck Ding Weizeng only produced a series of metallic clinks against his protective spiritual arts.

Situ Mo had already recovered. Drawing his blade, he commanded coldly, "Capture him, quickly!"

Led by Situ Biao, the six Foundation Establishment cultivators immediately surrounded Ding Weizeng, with one peeling off to intercept An Siwei. Situ Biao even produced a golden token that shone down, trapping Ding Weizeng in its light.

Though a skilled warrior, Ding Weizeng was only at the mid-stage of Foundation Establishment. He was no match for six opponents, especially with Situ Biao being his equal in cultivation. He immediately fell into a disadvantage, gritting his teeth and blocking desperately.

With Ding Weizeng in peril, Li Mingguang was also having a hard time against Situ Mo. His blade techniques suppressed her, and the corrosive golden aura he emitted spread like a mist, chilling her to the bone.

How could Li Mingguang, who had only been a Foundation Establishment cultivator for a few years, be a match for a veteran like Situ Mo? Fortunately, her True

Fire countered his metal element. Relying on the flames from her Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier, she managed to dissolve the golden aura, but she was forced to block Situ Mo's blade qi with the artifact itself, which rang out with loud clangs under the assault.

'The Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier was a gift from the Golden Feather Sect… it's sturdy enough… It shouldn't break right away…'

Li Mingguang had no time to worry about damaging her artifact. The golden blade that had missed Ding Weizeng had already circled back and was stabbing toward her back.

Before the blade arrived, a cold dread prickled her skin. Li Mingguang spat a stream of fire from her lips, barely forcing back the blade in front of her, and spun her brazier around to block the incoming attack.

Clang!

A soft chime echoed as a shower of sparks exploded in mid-air. The golden light retreated at high speed. Li Mingguang let out a muffled grunt; a wound so deep it revealed bone had been carved into her arm.

The Golden Tang Gate might be lacking in talent, but their techniques were formidable. This Golden Radiance Blade technique was simply too fast. Even though she had turned her artifact to block, its edge had only barely caught the blade, deflecting it to slice her arm.

A cold, metallic poison immediately tried to invade her meridians, but Li Mingguang's True Fire foundation surged, easily dissolving it. She looked up to see Situ Mo forming another seal, a brilliant golden light gathering in his hands.

'He's no ordinary cultivator…'

She had been injured after just a few exchanges. If not for her True Fire's advantage over metal, her condition would be far worse. Realizing the gap between herself and these veterans, she quickly retreated, activating several protective talismans.

But in the space of a breath, Situ Mo's spell was complete. He made a throwing motion, and countless golden needles flew from his hand, so dense they hurt the eyes. They swarmed toward her like a flock of birds returning to the forest, aiming for every part of her body.

'I can't hold back anymore…'

Li Mingguang knew she was outmatched. Her cultivation and techniques were far inferior to these old masters. The incoming needles were lethal. She had no choice but to take an object from her sleeve and toss it into the air.

An eight-paneled folding screen materialized in the sky, each panel depicting a different scene. A cyan light flickered across its surface, and a dark, cyan radiance flowed out, falling like rain.

The Chongming Profound Insight Screen!

The screen was imbued with the heritage of the Green Pine Dao Lineage, making it highly effective against the sects of Jiangnan. Coincidentally, the White Ye Immortal Sect was not of that lineage, so Li Zhouwei had not taken it with him.

He had left it with Li Mingguang for one specific reason: the screen's 'Heavy Abyssal Gale' ability—the power of the Deep Abyss—was the perfect counter to the Golden Tang Gate!

The ancient artifact unleashed its might. As the dark cyan radiance washed down, the thousands of golden needles seemed to be caught by the throat, freezing motionless in mid-air.

The cyan light rippled outwards, and incredibly, it forced two more hidden, squirming golden blades out of thin air nearby. They struggled fiercely, but were held fast. Li Mingguang stared for a second, a cold sweat breaking out on her brow.

'There was another one! If I didn't have this artifact, the blades would have struck one after another. I would have been killed!'

She had only reached the Foundation Establishment Realm a few years ago and lacked combat experience; otherwise, she wouldn't have found herself in such a difficult position. Having saved her life with the artifact, she saw that Situ Mo's expression had finally turned sour. He glanced at the screen.

"The Great Wind of Abyss? What a domineering artifact…"

While Situ Mo and Li Mingguang's clash had paused, Ding Weizeng was having a much harder time. Dark red spiritual qi surged around him as his long staff parried two golden spears. His eyes had turned blood-red. The gaze of the Palace-Yang Tiger was a potent weapon; none of his opponents dared to meet his eyes, resorting to bombarding him with ranged attacks instead.

With just his spiritual body, he was holding back six people. Situ Biao had taken a blow from the staff earlier, and his face was still pale. Situ Mo narrowed his eyes.

"What a fine Palace-Yang Tiger."

Seeing Ding Weizeng's desperate situation, Li Mingguang immediately activated the screen's 'Dao Metal' protective power. She broke free from the cloud of golden needles and rushed to his aid.

Li Mingguang and Ding Weizeng together, True Fire and the Hengzhu Rite, plus an ancient artifact that specifically countered the Golden Tang Gate—this was no laughing matter! Situ Mo was the first to react, drawing his blade to block her. "Don't let them join forces!" he shouted coldly.

His reaction was lightning fast, intercepting Li Mingguang just in time. At his shout, Ding Weizeng also began to move. The Golden Tang Gate's guest elders exchanged a look and shouted in unison.

"Bind him!"

Several streams of golden light erupted from their hands. Situ Biao once again used his golden token, releasing a restrictive light. In an instant, Ding Weizeng was assailed by restraining forces from above, below, and all sides.

"Hahahahaha!"

This only made Ding Weizeng laugh. His dark red eyes shifted. He held one hand out in front of him and chanted:

"The crimson tiger flees, the monarch leaves his court, fasting in repentance, and granting amnesty to all under heaven!"

His figure dissolved into a dark red gust of wind, howling out from the surrounding barriers as if they didn't exist. The wind circled once in the sky before landing beside Li Mingguang, reforming into Ding Weizeng.

For a moment, everyone from the Golden Tang Gate was stunned. It had happened too fast. Even Situ Mo was momentarily dazed. Then, he and Li Mingguang understood at the same time.

'The Palace-Yang Tiger excels at combat, escaping confinement, shattering cages, overcoming adversity, and striking foes with its gaze.'

The encirclement by Situ Biao and the others had created the very concept of a 'cage,' and their combined efforts to stop him formed a 'confinement.' For the Palace-Yang Tiger, which overcame adversity, this was the perfect catalyst for its immortal foundation's divine ability to activate.

The situation had reversed dramatically. Situ Biao's face turned white as a sheet. Ding Weizeng's laughter continued, but Li Mingguang's expression suddenly changed. She desperately recalled the Chongming Profound Insight Screen.

'Siwei!'

While the main battle had raged in the sky, An Siwei was still fighting alone against a single guest elder from the Golden Tang Gate!

She was a step too late. Situ Mo's reactions were terrifyingly fast. He was already stepping on a current of golden qi, appearing beside An Siwei. Before the Chongming Profound Insight Screen could arrive, he struck An Siwei with his palm, sending him flying and spitting blood toward the Golden Tang Gate's group. With time to spare, Situ Mo even turned to block the incoming artifact, his eyes cold and defiant.

An Siwei's immortal foundation was ordinary, and his cultivation methods were average. He had been completely focused on his opponent. How could he have possibly reacted? In the blink of an eye, he was caught in the six-man encirclement, completely immobilized.

Chapter 725: Battle in the Wilderness

Situ Mo was indeed no ordinary opponent. Suppressed by True Fire and targeted by the Chongming Profound Insight Screen, he still managed to seize a fleeting opportunity when Ding Weizeng escaped, turning the tide of the battle. Li Minggong and his companion couldn't rush to the rescue in time. An Siwei only fought back three moves before he was severely wounded and captured. The next moment, Situ Mo's cold voice emerged.

"Attack the mountain!" he commanded.

Situ Mo unfastened a seal from his waist and tossed it into the air. It transformed into a stone mountain that pressed down upon the Chongming Profound Insight Screen. Li Minggong only needed a single glance to recognize the familiar mountain; it was likely a gift from the Profound Peak Gate to the Golden Tang Gate during a period of close relations. This Dharma Artifact was of a high grade. The moment it pressed down, Li Minggong's spiritual qi consumption doubled. Situ Mo stood before the two of them with his blade drawn, while five people behind him descended on the wind to attack the main peak of Funan.

Situ Mo's combat experience was far superior to his opponents. Although he couldn't defeat them, the mountain beneath their feet couldn't escape either. He held his ground, defending rather than attacking, and used his Dharma Artifact to fight the two opponents at once, holding back Li Minggong and Ding Weizeng. A great crash echoed.

"BOOM!"

The great formation beneath their feet shattered in just two rounds. The Li Clan cultivators were exposed like shivering sheep before the Foundation Establishment cultivators. Li Minggong's pupils widened slightly. Situ Mo had already captured the severely wounded An Siwei and, striking while the iron was hot,

shouted, "Li Minggong! The Floating Cloud Territory cannot be held! I will release this man. Lead your people and retreat across the river! I swear I will not pursue!"

Li Minggong remained unshaken, her Dharma Artifact's brilliance intensifying. An Siwei, however, gritted his teeth, his face flushing crimson, causing Ding Weizeng and Situ Mo to change their expressions simultaneously.

"He's throwing his life away!"

Situ Mo, from a prestigious lineage, instantly saw that An Siwei was preparing a desperate attack. A golden flash of light burst from his eyes, hitting An Siwei's forehead, and he quickly dispersed his spiritual qi. But in that single instant of delay, Situ Mo felt a powerful force. His robes lit up on their own, and he felt as if he had been struck by something, his vision spinning. He was rapidly thrown backward, almost spitting up a mouthful of blood. Yet his will was tougher than an ordinary person's. Despite this sudden, unexpected attack, he did not release his hold on his technique. He pulled An Siwei to a halt and looked closer, seeing that another person had appeared in his original spot.

This was a young man in a multi-colored feathered robe. His face was slightly round, and his eyes were clear, but the dense orange feathers at his temples revealed him to be a demon.

"Dawn Rayfish?" he muttered, slightly stunned.

Several figures appeared on Funan's main peak. His own people had been forced back and were gathering around him. Situ Mo tossed the captured person to a subordinate, then suddenly leaned backward, and a dark shadow became visible, sweeping past his chin and leaving a dark red trail of blood.

"You shameless bastard with no father or mother!"

The Hooked Serpent's vertical pupil emerged from the shadow. Li Wushao, holding two black swords, was already lunging at his sides. Situ Mo's feathered robes shook, and he drifted back a few steps, evading the attack. Golden energy surged throughout his body, flowing from his robes and into his limbs, making his long blade glow brightly.

Beneath them, the enormous white ape in its true form and the elusive Li Chenghuai were battling with the Golden Tang Gate cultivators. In the Floating Cloud Territory, spiritual energy fluctuated as True Fire and Geng Metal

clashed, disturbing the spiritual aura of the area. The mortals below stumbled into the woods, huddling on the ground and trembling.

In the wilderness, compared to the extreme chaos of the Floating Cloud Territory, the area was more vast and seemed quieter. The golden-eyed man sat imperiously in the Profound Light, in a standoff with several figures on the river before him.

The Capital Immortals Dao cultivators in front of him were shrouded in a faint gray mist. Above their heads floated a brown stone stele, covered in dense, intricate patterns. The person at the head was dressed in a black Daoist robe with a silk sash tied at his waist. The front of his robe was a stark silver-white, and there were black markings painted on both of his cheeks. His attire, while strange, held a peculiar kind of aesthetic beauty. He had high brows and deep-set eyes, and he was none other than Guan Gongxiao, the foremost disciple of the Capital Immortals Dao. He was at the late Foundation Establishment stage. Although he hadn't been in the late stage for long, he was extremely proficient in techniques, and could be called the foremost among his Daoist peers.

The wilderness was long, and it was the home ground of the Profound Peak Gate and the Li Clan. Their communication and defensive capabilities were exceptional. Li Zhouwei had not appeared at the riverside at first, and even the outermost defensive forces were sparse, making the area seem somewhat empty. But Guan Gongxiao was no fool. He didn't rush deep into the territory all at once, but first sent people to attack a few strategic mountain peaks to ensure a means of advance and retreat. So Li Zhouwei came forward to block him, and they held a stalemate at the riverside.

The wilderness was a vast territory, yet Li Zhouwei was unwilling to let the Profound Peak Gate's forces scatter. Most of the territory only had Qi Refining and Embryonic Breathing cultivators, with Foundation Establishment cultivators only stationed at key locations. Here, however, was the Profound Peak Gate's main force: nine of the Kong Clan's fifteen Foundation Establishment cultivators were here, led by Fu Yuezi. The remaining five were led by Li Zhouwei and included Cui Jueyin, Li Wen, Qu Bushi, and Miaoshui. Adding the people from the Kong Clan and the still-unarrived Li Chenghui, there were fifteen in total.

Both sides had sufficient numbers. The Capital Immortals Dao side, with Guan Gongxiao, Gongsun Bofan, and others, had even more, a total of eighteen. It could be called the largest battle since the North-South conflict.

Li Zhouwei was waiting for Li Chenghui, and Guan Gongxiao was waiting for the Golden Tang Gate. After a brief stalemate, the aura in the east shifted, and baleful energy soared into the sky. Kong Guxi's expression changed dramatically.

Li Zhouwei didn't even need to ask; he knew the Profound Peak Gate's outlying areas had fallen. The Capital Immortals Dao wouldn't have put all their people here, so a considerable number of guest cultivators must have infiltrated from various directions.

'The wilderness is a vast and permeable territory. My clan alone cannot possibly defend it all. We should retreat and focus on defending against the main force.'

The tension was growing more intense. The jade pendant on Li Zhouwei's waist grew warm, letting him know that Li Chenghui was just a few breaths away. The Profound Light in his brow flashed. The Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light surged forth, piercing across the river. The Capital Immortals Dao immediately sent a stone stele flying to block the radiant light.

Without a single unnecessary word, the static scene erupted into motion. Spiritual qi and brilliant light rose everywhere. Li Zhouwei charged forward with his halberd. The first to meet him was none other than the straw-cloaked Gongsun Bofan!

With a resolute look in his eyes, he drew his blade. In contrast, Guan Lingdie stepped back, unwilling to engage him, and instead went after the "soft target," Qu Bushi. It was clear that their past clashes had left a significant impression on her. Now, with the possibility of life-or-death peril in the great battle, she immediately retreated.

Gongsun Bofan wanted to meet the charge, but Cui Jueyin didn't give him the chance. The elegant, scholarly man scoffed, and Steps of Radiance appeared beneath his feet, pulling Gongsun Bofan into them.

With Gongsun Bofan blocked, Guan Gongxiao's gaze shot over like an arrow. The Daoist book in his hand flipped open on its own, facing the incoming hal-

berd. A vast expanse of river water surged from the book, swirling and dancing at his feet.

Li Zhouwei's Profound Light shone down, piercing into Guan Gongxiao's eyes. The latter only saw a man with golden pupils and nothing particularly extraordinary, and a cold smirk appeared on his face.

"Let's see just how mighty this White Qilin really is!"

Chapter 726: The Halberd's First Display of Might

Guan Gongxiao was Yehui's personal disciple, and he cultivated the foundation his master was most proud of: Sorrowful Southern Water. He seemed more aligned with the Water Virtue than the Capital Guard. Standing in the gray, murky water, he faced the celestial light descending from above and flicked his hand through a series of seals.

"Go."

He was clearly prepared. A bronze mirror flew from his sleeve and swallowed the celestial light whole. With his other hand, he unleashed a sheet of talismans.

The talismans shimmered with white shadows, accompanied by the profound, mystical sound of chanting sutras. A gust of wind and sand then swept from Guan Gongxiao's sleeve, merging with the white shadows as it rushed forward.

Though the sandstorm appeared unremarkable, it cut through the Bright Yang celestial light with unstoppable momentum. Li Zhouwei recognized it at a glance as a technique from the Dry Qi lineage, specifically designed to counter his own. He immediately formed a new seal.

"Celestial Art Unleashed, Yang-Li Execution Fire!"

Five different flames—ochre, pale yellow, bright gold, crimson, and vermilion—roared downward in a towering inferno, instantly suppressing the sandstorm. In the next moment, Li Zhouwei had already charged to the front lines, his halberd swinging in a wide arc.

Celestial light blazed upon Li Zhouwei's halberd, wreathed in swirling umbral shadows. The technique he cultivated was the Cyclic Soul-Refining Halberd Arts, an art that used the destruction of sects and clans to temper the halberd

itself. He had first gained an elementary mastery of it during his Embryonic Breathing phase when he annihilated the royal court of the Mountain Yue—a minor power composed of Qi Refining cultivators. Later, after he reached Foundation Establishment and wiped out the Dense Cloud Cave, a major power in Jiangbei, his mastery of the Cyclic Soul-Refining Halberd Arts had soared.

Now, umbral shadows leaped from the weapon, filled with the phantom cries of battle. Before the halberd even arrived, the force of its swing sent the waters of the White Waterfall River churning violently. Guan Gongxiao was a pure arcanist, and his years of fighting in the Eastern Sea had taught him never to let a martial cultivator get close. He pressed two fingers to his lips and blew hard.

His breath instantly formed a solid barrier of white light. The halberd swept past, gently pushed aside by the flexible ward. Guan Gongxiao had used this spell to deal with countless cultivators and thought little of it, but a sudden chill ran down his spine. He caught a glimpse of a dark, flickering flame that had appeared on Li Zhouwei's hand.

Clang!

He had no time to ponder it. Li Zhouwei's next attack was faster and fiercer, a thrust aimed directly at his face. Guan Gongxiao had no choice but to block with another spell. As he pushed the attack away, a second umbral flame ignited around Li Zhouwei. A sense of dread washed over him.

As a personal disciple of a Purple Mansion master, Guan Gongxiao had witnessed a vast array of techniques. Seeing Li Zhouwei's umbral flames, he guessed they were some kind of stacking self-enhancement spell. He knew he couldn't allow his opponent to keep building momentum.

He immediately activated his artifact. A black bell materialized behind him and chimed, then turned to project a gray screen that surged forward. Li Zhouwei countered by unleashing a torrent of Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light from between his brows.

Although the black bell looked strange, it was a genuine Capital Guard artifact. Unlike the flimsy equipment of the cultivators Li Zhouwei had faced before, it didn't shatter on impact. The bell let out a mournful cry as Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light slammed into it, but it held firm.

Guan Gongxiao seized the opportunity to retreat. He took two steps back and activated his Sorrowful Southern Water immortal foundation, his body

dissolving into magical water that merged with the gray torrent pouring from the Daoist scripture in his hand. He reappeared a short distance away.

Having created some distance, Guan Gongxiao began forming a new seal while covertly studying the umbral flames on his opponent. They hadn't vanished; they continued to burn brightly. He frowned.

'I don't know what kind of art this is.'

The unknown was always the most terrifying. His retreat gave Li Zhouwei an opening. With a flick of his fingers, Li Zhouwei launched a beam of solar light, which erupted outward with a torrent of Radiant Fire.

The Sun's Resonant Radiance Art!

This technique was fluid and adaptable, with no fixed form. Li Zhouwei used it to pin his opponent down while a small banner embroidered with a crimson sparrow flew up from the red and yellow flames at his feet, diving toward the gray water.

It was the Yang-Li Crimson Sparrow Banner! Guan Gongxiao's sandstorm had just been a spell, a rootless creation. And though Radiant Fire held no intrinsic advantage over Dry Qi, it was quickly worn down and the banner now flew free.

Li Zhouwei timed it perfectly. His body transformed into a streak of celestial light, and he reappeared before Guan Gongxiao, his halberd thrusting forward to smash against the gray screen with a sharp crack.

Clang!

Guan Gongxiao's face paled. The feedback from the black bell told him just how immense the force behind that attack was. Previously, his spells had blunted the impact, but now, taking a direct hit, his spiritual energy plummeted. A chill crept into his heart.

'That halberd of his must be an ancient artifact…'

His gaze swept across the battlefield. His side had a clear advantage. The only competent fighters on the Li Clan and Profound Peak side were Fu Yuezi with his golden axe and that scholar-like figure. The rest were collapsing like scarecrows, many of them already wounded. He felt a wave of relief.

'I just need to stall him!'

In the brief moment that thought crossed his mind, his gray screen was struck three more times. Another umbral flame ignited on Li Zhouwei's body. Unaware of the shift in his own mentality, Guan Gongxiao began casting again.

Li Zhouwei saw the state of the battlefield as well. He glanced around, then pulled his halberd back. To Guan Gongxiao's shock, he ignored him completely and turned to strike at Gongsun Bofan.

Gongsun Bofan was a skilled bladesman, but as a rogue cultivator, he was no match for Cui Jueyin, a direct disciple from Chongzhou Island. Cui Jueyin was silently weaving around him with his Eternal Brightness Steps, casting spell after spell that left Gongsun Bofan disoriented and unable to advance or retreat.

Li Zhouwei's sudden attack made the bladesman's face drain of color. Ignoring the backlash of spiritual energy that made him cough up blood, he spun around to defend himself, only for the gleaming halberd to swerve, causing his desperate parry to meet empty air. The awkward movement threw him further off balance, and Li Zhouwei easily pulled him into his attack range.

"He intends to fight us both!"

How could Guan Gongxiao not understand? Fury rose in his heart at the sheer audacity. The spell in his hands grew faster, more vicious. Cui Jueyin, however, read the situation and wisely retreated to help the beleaguered Profound Peak cultivators.

Gongsun Bofan lacked the backing of a powerful lineage. He clashed with Li Zhouwei, his long blade meeting the halberd several times. He saw the umbral flames growing more intense and felt a sense of unease. Guan Gongxiao, still in the middle of casting, had no time to warn him and could only manage a sharp shout.

"Halt!"

A burst of crimson light shot from his mouth. A solemn expression appeared on Li Zhouwei's face. He forcefully pulled his halberd back, silently channeling the Sun's Resonant Radiance Art to form a celestial screen before him.

The crimson light was incredibly sharp. It paused for a fraction of a second against the celestial screen before shattering it. As Li Zhouwei blocked the attack with his halberd, he had a sudden realization.

'This crimson light is a profound technique from the Capital Guard Dao, and he'd been charging it for a while. I cast my Sun's Resonant Radiance Art in an instant… yet it was able to slow it down. It seems the Supreme Yang Dao has a slight advantage over the Capital Guard Dao!'

He had used the Yang-Li Crimson Sparrow Banner before, and he knew the Capital Guard Dao was not weak against Radiant Fire. Therefore, the advantage must come from the solar aspect of his power. Li Zhouwei felt a surge of delight.

'This is a major discovery!'

Li Zhouwei had always been at a disadvantage when fighting cultivators from the Capital Immortals Dao. The reputation of his Bright Yang Dao was so great that any cultivator with a decent heritage knew that Dry Qi countered it. Guan Gongxiao had come prepared with his sandstorm and likely had other tricks up his sleeve.

The Capital Guard Dao, however, was ancient and obscure. Few cultivators even knew it existed, let alone its weaknesses. Now that he knew this, he had a way to fight back, whether with artifacts or spells.

As these thoughts flashed through his mind, a dull thud echoed. The Grand Ascension Halberd was sent flying high into the air. Li Zhouwei finally spat out a mouthful of blood, but the scales of the Yuane Armor on his chest flared with a brilliant light.

The Yuane Armor had been commissioned by Li Xuanfeng, forged by the full might of the Azure Pond Sect. Its first ability was to assist Li Zhouwei in teleporting with celestial light, enhancing his footwork to a phantom-like speed. His earlier teleportation was accomplished through a combination of the Flowing Sun Refraction art and the Yuane Armor.

Its second ability was to reinforce his spiritual energy and defend against spells. Except for techniques from the Dry Qi lineage, all other incoming arts were evenly distributed across the armor's 6,200 scales, giving him extraordinary survivability.

This armor had been instrumental in his repeated escapes from Fu Dou.

Now, even after taking a direct hit from Guan Gongxiao's spell, he was only forced to cough up a mouthful of blood. The white blood transformed into a mist in mid-air, releasing the strange fragrance of peonies. Guan Gongxiao felt

a secret relief seeing him injured, but then his eyes widened as a massive, dark mountain peak materialized in the sky.

"Someone from Profound Peak has fallen!"

Li Zhouwei realized it even faster, and he knew the situation was far worse than a single death. Two of their guest elders had been gravely wounded and forced to retreat. Their forces were down to twelve, and every single one was injured. Fu Yuezi and Cui Jueyin were each desperately holding off four opponents, barely maintaining the line.

Meanwhile, not a single cultivator from the Capital Immortals Dao had suffered any serious injuries.

Just then, the sky crackled with thunder and silver lightning. Li Chenghui descended, locked in battle with two other cultivators, fighting as he advanced. Cui Jueyin glanced up and finally understood why he had been so late.

"The Capital Immortals Dao had an ambush waiting!"

The two cultivators Li Chenghui was fighting were direct disciples, not mere guest elders. The pressure on him was immense; it was clear he couldn't break away to help. Li Zhouwei took in the scene with a sweep of his gaze, blocked incoming attacks from Guan Gongxiao and Gongsun Bofan, and sent his Yang-Li Crimson Sparrow Banner streaking toward Guan Lingdie.

Seeing the aggressive flames bearing down on her, Guan Lingdie let out a scornful laugh. After a moment's hesitation, she turned to the people beside her.

"You, and you. Go stop him!"

The two direct disciples at her side were reluctant to face Li Zhouwei. As they hesitated, an old man named Guan Kan moved past them, intercepting Cui Jueyin to block the banner himself. Li Zhouwei watched this and shook his head.

'The Capital Immortals Dao is an Eastern Sea power. Their people are strong, but their command structure is a chaotic mess.'

Guan Kan was a late-stage Foundation Establishment cultivator. With him joining the fight, they finally managed to pin Li Zhouwei down. He rode a current of water as he sped forward, pulling a dozen interlinked rings of cold iron from his sleeve. The old man squinted, then lightly tossed the artifact. Taking advantage

of the moment Li Zhouwei was blinded by Guan Gongxiao's Dry Qi sandstorm, he chanted in a loud, clear voice:

"Light embraces ten thousand leagues, a verdant river topples a thousand peaks. By the power of Pit Water, bind all tribulations."

His immortal foundation, Grieving River Departure, activated at full power, resonating with the iron rings in the air. Beams of watery light converged within the dozen rings, which then unleashed chains of rushing river water that snaked toward Li Zhouwei.

Li Zhouwei retreated on a beam of celestial light, but the iron rings were no ordinary artifact. The water chains they produced were incredibly fast, wrapping themselves around his weapon.

'This old man is not simple… he must be an elder in the Capital Immortals Dao.'

The water chains dispersed and reformed, impossible to shake off. Empowered by the spiritual energy of a late-stage Foundation Establishment cultivator and his immortal foundation, they had become his most difficult problem. With his Yuane Armor and the Sun's Resonant Radiance Art, Li Zhouwei wasn't overly threatened by Guan Gongxiao or Gongsun Bofan, but he feared a soft power that could counter his hard strength.

He urgently pushed his spiritual energy, recalling the Yang-Li Crimson Sparrow Banner to fight Pit Water with Radiant Fire. Guan Gongxiao reacted instantly, his black bell about to fly out and intercept it, when a deep shout echoed through the air.

"Descend!"

'Another artifact?'

Guan Gongxiao was stunned for a second. A brilliant light shot into the sky, revealing billowing, colorful clouds. As the clouds parted, a celestial gate descended from the heavens, its corner towers looming high. The sight was so bright it made Guan Gongxiao's eyes ache. He cursed under his breath.

"I forgot about the Li Clan's suppressive immortal foundation!"

His own Capital Immortals Dao had a similar foundation, Eastern Feather Mountain. Ultimately, it was just a specialized divine ability, but such foundations were incredibly powerful during the Foundation Establishment stage,

providing a significant advantage. The two white corners of the gate slammed down squarely on his black bell artifact, which he had nurtured for years. The impact was so jarring it made him spit out a mouthful of blood.

Heavenly Audience Gate!

Li Zhouwei had achieved this through the Radiant Essence Scripture. In the past, he had thought his foundation was the Radiant Origin Pass and that it was quite different from Li Ximing's. It was only after Li Ximing reached the Purple Mansion realm that he understood the true name and power of his immortal foundation.

Li Zhouwei's figure materialized atop the celestial gate. Guan Kan's iron rings were also pinned down beneath it. The old man finally nodded, shook out his sleeves, and descended from the sky to fight with talismans instead.

Although Heavenly Audience Gate was of an extremely high grade, it was fundamentally a suppressive foundation. Li Zhouwei's combat experience far surpassed that of the Li Ximing; he hadn't played his trump card at the start, keeping it hidden until the perfect moment.

Now, having suppressed his enemies' two most powerful artifacts in a single move, he recalled the freed Yang-Li Crimson Sparrow Banner. Fighting under the brilliant light of the celestial gate, his own power resonating with his immortal foundation, he managed to hold his ground, though the battle remained perilous.

With Guan Kan's entry, he was now facing two late-stage Foundation Establishment cultivators and one mid-stage cultivator. Both late-stage cultivators were direct disciples of their sect. In terms of opponent quality, it was a fight comparable to the one Tuoba Chongyuan had faced years ago.

However, Guan Kan was a step below the Li Xizhi of that time, while Guan Gongxiao was far stronger than Yu Wei had been, and Gongsun Bofan was leagues ahead of Quan Yi. Unfortunately, Li Zhouwei's cultivation was also a step below Tuoba Chongyuan's. While Tuoba had been able to suppress his three opponents, Li Zhouwei found himself fighting for his life, occasionally spitting out more of the white, fragrant blood.

But Foundation Establishment cultivators with true ability were not so easily killed. Those with powerful physical bodies or deep reserves of spiritual energy could fight against superior numbers for a short time. The trio could only

force Li Zhouwei onto the defensive, slowly grinding him down. Yet, despite the seemingly inevitable outcome, Guan Gongxiao's brow furrowed deeper and deeper.

The reason was simple: the umbral flames surrounding Li Zhouwei were now soaring into the heavens.

"Don't meet his halberd head-on!"

Guan Gongxiao shouted sternly. Gongsun Bofan knew the warning was for him; he had been responsible for provoking half of those flames. But he was a bladesman—how else was he supposed to fight? He couldn't just let his opponent cut him down.

Gritting his teeth, he parried a few more blows, intending to fall back and let someone else take over. But Li Zhouwei pressed his attack, ignoring the other two to focus entirely on him. Finally, the umbral flames surged like a flowing river. A smile touched Li Zhouwei's blood-flecked lips. He took a light breath, and all the umbral flames streamed into his mouth and nose.

The Cyclic Soul-Refining Halberd Arts!

The unease in Guan Gongxiao's heart finally came to pass. Li Zhouwei pulled his halberd back. Then, from between lips stained with his own white blood, he exhaled the umbral energy. The moment it left his mouth, it expanded rapidly, showering the air with tiny sparks.

BOOM!

A dense torrent of umbral, shadowy flame erupted. Li Zhouwei turned his head, and his slightly savage eyes locked onto Guan Gongxiao, sending a chill deeper than any cold gaze ever could.

"He…"

In Guan Gongxiao's dark pupils, the reflection of Li Zhouwei's raging umbral flames danced. Two new arms, forged from the same shadowy fire, burst from Li Zhouwei's ribs, their hazy umbral light reaching for the sky.

The flames he had exhaled coalesced into two new halberds, which fell into the grasp of the shadowy arms. The arms slowly straightened, angling the halberds toward the ground. Guan Gongxiao's throat felt bone dry.

"What demonic art is this? … Isn't his clan supposed to be on the righteous path? … I thought *we* were the rogue cultivators from the Eastern Sea!"

Chapter 727: Shouted to Death

Guan Gongxiao's Capital Immortals Dao was an orthodox lineage from the Eastern Sea, and he had read more demonic cultivation arts than the Li family had ever laid eyes on. He knew that the Cyclic Soul-Refining Halberd Arts that Li Zhouwei practiced originated from the Liang Dynasty, and in truth, it was not far from a demonic art.

Just as the thought crossed his mind, a torrent of umbral flames rained down before him. The Grand Ascension Halberd lunged forward, and though the Profound Light radiating from its tip was blocked by his small mirror artifact, the surging black shadows were clearly not to be underestimated. He hastily formed a hand seal, releasing a sheet of white light.

This technique was called the Art of the Evening White Dispersion, designed specifically to counter cultivators who excelled in weapon arts. It could dissolve sharpness and repel Dharma artifacts. Guan Gongxiao had found it unfailingly effective in his past duels, and it had helped him fend off the halberd just moments before.

But this time, when the white light unfurled before the halberd, a plume of black flame erupted from the weapon's shaft. The white light withered as if deflating. The Grand Ascension Halberd not only broke through but its Profound Light also escaped the mirror's suppression, flaring with brilliant intensity.

Clang!

Caught off guard, Guan Gongxiao could only pull his Daoist tome closer. Its pages fluttered without a breeze, spewing forth streams of Pure Qi that barely managed to hold the halberd at bay. Guan Kan and Gongsun Bofan broke out in a cold sweat and rushed to his aid.

But Li Zhouwei had fought hard for this advantage and had no intention of relinquishing it. He pushed the Yang-Li Crimson Sparrow Banner to its limit, pressing down with five kinds of Radiant Fire. This, combined with the Profound

Light streaming from his Celestial Gate, was enough to keep Guan Kan occupied.

Meanwhile, Gongsun Bofan, a master of the blade, had barely taken a step forward when a shadowy halberd materialized out of thin air and struck his weapon. The rain-cloaked swordsman exchanged more than a dozen blows in a heartbeat. He glanced up just in time to see the man wreathed in black flames press Guan Gongxiao so hard that his face turned crimson, nearly sending him tumbling from the sky.

Gongsun Bofan was arguably the pinnacle of what a rogue cultivator could achieve; even ordinary Foundation Establishment cultivators from prominent clans were no match for him. Yet, he suffered from the common flaw of his kind—a lack of knowledge in spiritual arts and a shallow Daoist foundation. He had climbed to where he was on the strength of his blade alone. He could hold his own against anyone for a time, but he lacked any means to truly turn the tide of battle.

Perhaps after fifty or sixty years as a guest elder in the Capital Immortals Dao, he might undergo a complete transformation and soar like a great roc. But for now, he was still just a rogue cultivator.

Seeing the state of the battlefield, Gongsun Bofan knew that even if he made it back, he would face severe reprimand. If anything happened to Guan Gongxiao, the consequences would be dire. Guan Kan would be fine, but what backing did he, Gongsun Bofan, have? He had to risk it all.

Without hesitation, he slapped his storage bag. Three crimson pills flew out and into his mouth. He bit his tongue and spat a mouthful of essence blood onto his blade, causing talismanic scripts to light up across its surface.

In that brief instant, Li Zhouwei's eyes narrowed slightly. He chuckled.

"So it's just an surplus artifact."

Guan Gongxiao had always displayed that Daoist tome, making his opponents naturally wary of it as a hidden trump card. But Li Zhouwei's surprise attack had pushed him to the brink, revealing the tome for what it was: a mere tool for assisting with casting and creating a water domain.

'That Black Bell must be his true primary artifact! And it's already been sealed at the pass!'

With a twist and a flick, his halberd tore through the protection of the Daoist tome and drove straight onward. Profound Light surged from the Grand Ascension Halberd, so hot that it caused flames to erupt on Guan Gongxiao's face with a sizzling sound.

'This is bad!'

Guan Kan was the most surprised of all. The old man had clearly not expected that the young master, in whom he had placed such high hopes, would be brought to the brink of death by a single halberd strike. He had still been observing, preparing a spell. Now, his eyes sharpened with horror as he began to channel his magic.

Buzz!

At that critical moment, a white halo burst from Guan Gongxiao's body. A talisman on his chest flared to life, repelling the Profound Light and flames from his face and, with a resonant clang, blocking the Grand Ascension Halberd.

Li Zhouwei was not the least bit surprised. How could someone of Guan Gongxiao's stature not possess life-saving treasures? He himself had three such items.

But he would not leave empty-handed. In a motion too swift to follow, the halberd slid upward and clamped down on the mirror artifact with a sharp clang. Though the talisman had saved Guan Gongxiao from injury, his Qi and blood were in turmoil, leaving him no chance to react.

The artifact struggled for a moment before the Grand Ascension Halberd ripped it away, slamming it down beneath the Celestial Gate, pinning it securely. Before Li Zhouwei could press his attack, he had to spin his halberd around to meet Gongsun Bofan, who had broken free from the shadow weapon and was charging in with murderous intent.

A deafening crash echoed as Li Zhouwei took a step back, slightly surprised. He knew this man was giving it his all. He met the long blade head-on with his halberd as two shadow weapons blurred into existence, striking from the flanks. Bolstered by the pills, Gongsun Bofan was fearless. Three shadows of water flood dragons surged from his back, each intercepting a shadow halberd. He roared, "Elder!"

Heeding the call, Guan Kan knew this was his chance. He unleashed the spell he had been gathering, which transformed in mid-air into a stream of the Essence

of Pit Water that swam toward its target. But Li Zhouwei's brow pulsed with Profound Light. The hairs on Gongsun Bofan's body stood on end. Instead of blocking the Essence of Pit Water, Li Zhouwei was aiming his Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light at him!

"He—!"

Gongsun Bofan was fighting for his life to avoid a cold glare from Yehui, not to throw his life away! He immediately fell back, raising his blade to defend. And just as he did, Li Zhouwei's Grand Ascension Halberd disengaged, smoothly and deliberately, moving to intercept the Essence of Pit Water.

'Why do something so convoluted?'

Gongsun Bofan's blade was struck by the Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light. An immense force slammed into him. If not for his mastery of the blade and his defensive specialty, the blow would have knocked him from the sky. As it was, the back of his blade grew searing hot, and he almost coughed up blood. But his mind was filled with confusion.

The next moment, both he and Guan Kan understood.

As the Essence of Pit Water collided with the black flames on Li Zhouwei's halberd, white steam billowed out. The stream of water instantly broke apart, retreated, and then dissipated further, scattering aimlessly toward the south. Guan Kan's carefully prepared spell had vanished like snow under a blazing sun.

"How is that possible?"

Gongsun Bofan stared, dumbfounded. Guan Kan's expression, however, had turned to one of utter horror. Guan Gongxiao, having just recovered, shouted, "Those black flames are the Profound Essence art from the Great Liang!"

The realization dawned on Guan Kan. He looked at Li Zhouwei, who was wreathed in churning black flames, and a deep sense of dread filled him.

'Profound Essence transforms Pit Water and negates Radiant Fire. After the era of Emperor Wu of Liang, it was refined to also subdue Converging Water and suppress Mansion Water… this is going to be difficult!'

Li Zhouwei himself was surprised by the power of his attack. The Cyclic Soul-Refining Halberd Arts he cultivated contained a latent law-breaking power,

which was how he had caught Guan Gongxiao off guard and forced out his trump card. Now, he understood more.

'I only meant to use this art's law-breaking properties, but the Profound Essence can actually destroy Pit Water. Excellent!'

Seizing this massive advantage, he immediately pulled his halberd back and, ignoring the crimson light Guan Gongxiao desperately shot at him, lunged toward Gongsun Bofan.

Everyone on the battlefield now understood what was happening—everyone except Gongsun Bofan, who was still lost in a fog of confusion. His shock at seeing Guan Kan's spell inexplicably shattered had not yet faded when he saw the Grand Ascension Halberd coming for him. His shock turned to terror.

But Li Zhouwei was relentless. The Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light at his brow intensified, coalescing into a solid pillar of white light that locked Gongsun Bofan in place. If he tried to flee, the beam would undoubtedly blast his head apart.

With a sickening crunch, the Qi Refining-level, self-made rain-cape on Gongsun Bofan's body tore like cloth. He spat a mouthful of blood that evaporated in mid-air. The three flood dragons were simultaneously severed by the halberd and then annihilated by the Profound Light, sending Gongsun Bofan plummeting from the sky like a bird with broken wings.

Umbral flames leaped from his falling body. Guan Kan's eyelids twitched as he watched.

'That swordsman cultivates the path of the Jing Dragon King, which is also a Pit Water path. That one strike… he's done for!'

Li Zhouwei had taken Guan Gongxiao's spell head-on to incapacitate the other man. A muffled grunt escaped his lips, and his scales bristled. He pulled back his blood-streaked halberd, and his gaze swept over the battlefield. Guan Kan felt a chill run down his spine.

'He's coming for me!'

Gongsun Bofan was as good as dead on the ground below. Now that Li Zhouwei knew his Cyclic Soul-Refining Halberd Arts countered Pit Water, he was naturally pressing his advantage. Swallowing the blood in his throat, he strode forward on a path of Profound Light, terrifying Guan Kan into abandoning the em-

battled Yang-Li Crimson Sparrow Banner. With a flick of his sleeve, he cast out several dark shadows.

The shadows writhed and shifted before him, but Li Zhouwei didn't even give them a second look. Activating his Great Fissure Golden Pupils, he saw through the illusion with a single glance and took a step through the void, closing the distance instantly.

In this moment of crisis, Guan Gongxiao finally managed to catch up. His body, transformed into gray water, materialized within the currents summoned by Guan Kan. He produced a bronze coin from his sleeve and flicked it.

"Geng Metal grants its defense, protect my body!"

Though Guan Gongxiao was no match for Li Zhouwei, his reactions were swift. From their brief exchange, he had guessed that Li Zhouwei possessed a law-breaking ability. He didn't even bother with a spell this time, instead opting for a Metal-virtue Dharma artifact.

A large golden shield instantly materialized in the air. It took the full force of the flame-wreathed halberd, letting out a massive boom as its light dimmed, but the two men had managed to steady themselves.

Seeing the Metal-virtue artifact, Li Zhouwei immediately urged his Yang-Li Crimson Sparrow Banner to descend. Radiant Fire rained down, seeking to smelt the metal, while he swept his halberd horizontally to dispel any incoming spells. The two direct disciples of the Capital Immortals Dao found themselves in a bind.

The reason was simple: their primary artifacts were pinned beneath the Celestial Gate of the Radiant Pass, unable to be used, and Li Zhouwei's halberd possessed the power to shatter their spells. Guan Gongxiao could still manage, but Guan Kan was finding it agonizingly difficult.

After a dozen more exchanges, the Metal-virtue artifact was already glowing cherry-red and sizzling, on the verge of collapse. Guan Gongxiao finally grit his teeth and said, "This demonic disciple specifically prepared a Profound Essence art to counter us. With Gongsun Bofan being so useless, we've ended up in this state. What should we do now?"

The Capital Immortals Dao's forces were far superior to the Li clan's. Even without Elder Guan Kan, they still held a significant advantage on the overall battlefield. Guan Gongxiao's only goal was to tie Li Zhouwei down; he was certain

victory would eventually be theirs. He had absolutely no desire to call for more reinforcements.

Hearing this, Guan Kan understood the young master's meaning. The life-or-death struggle was for him, the elder, to undertake, not Guan Gongxiao. In a solemn voice, he said, "Rest assured, Young Master. This old man still has strength to spare."

The old man drew several talismans from his sleeve, applying them to his ribs and cheeks. He bit his tongue and spat essence blood into his palm. Li Zhouwei, having just shattered the golden shield, fixed his golden eyes on him.

These old cultivators all had their own methods. Like Yu Yuwei and Jiang Huzi, they had little lifespan left and were not concerned about depleting their vitality or ruining their chances of reaching the Purple Mansion Realm. They could not be underestimated. Li Zhouwei immediately moved his halberd, stabbing toward the spell forming in the elder's hands.

Guan Gongxiao's Daoist tome flipped open. He channeled his Sorrowful Southern Water technique, unleashing a barrage of spells with all his might, hoping to slow the black-flamed weapon. As dharma power surged wildly, Guan Kan spat out a glob of the Essence of Pit Water and roared, "Four-Directional Pit-Metal Water Chains, bind him!"

Streams of light gray, watery chains erupted from his sleeves. They were soft and serpentine, and they shot forward with incredible speed, slithering up the halberd's shaft and wrapping around Li Zhouwei's arms. Li Zhouwei spun his weapon, shattering the chains, but they instantly reformed. Though their glow was slightly dimmer, they were quickly restored by the full force of Guan Kan's spiritual qi.

"This isn't a pure Pit Water technique…"

In a single breath, Guan Kan's face grew haggard. Fueled by a desperate infusion of his life force, the water chains were both flexible and tenacious, binding the Grand Ascension Halberd tightly. Guan Gongxiao was overjoyed. His spells finally had an opening. He gathered his power and struck at Li Zhouwei's back.

Clang!

Li Zhouwei struggled fiercely, causing Guan Kan's face to turn deathly pale. The blow landed squarely on his back, making him stagger. The water chains immediately slithered up the halberd, first ensnaring his two surplus arms.

The scene was spectacular: an old man, burning away his life essence, giving his all to bind a ferocious, flame-wreathed youth, while a robed young master suppressed him with spells from the side.

The Capital Immortals Dao's spells were not only powerful but also inflicted excruciating pain. After just a few exchanges, Li Zhouwei's momentum began to wane, while Guan Kan had become visibly emaciated.

Finding Li Zhouwei's armor incredibly tough, Guan Gongxiao changed tactics and began aiming for his face. While Li Zhouwei's Dharma robes protected his whole body, his face was less covered. A strike split his forehead open, revealing the bone beneath. The old man cried out, "Just force his Immortal Foundation to defend him!"

If this dragged on any longer, he, Guan Kan, would be the first to die.

Their goal was never to kill Li Zhouwei, but to hold him in place. Once their two artifacts, the Pit-Metal Encircling Chain and the Capital Immortals Dao Bell, were free, containing him would be no problem at all.

But as the old man spoke, his concentration wavered for a fraction of a second. Li Zhouwei, who had been silent all this time, suddenly erupted. His two arms strained, pulling the water chains taut. Guan Kan instinctively tried to pull back, but Li Zhouwei pulled and then released, lunging forward with shocking speed.

'No!'

With that one lunge, Li Zhouwei not only dodged Guan Gongxiao's crimson light but also appeared directly in front of Guan Kan. The old man saw a ghastly face of exposed bone and interwoven blood vessels fill his vision. Reacting with incredible speed, he threw up two water shields to block Li Zhouwei's hands.

For a moment, everything seemed to slow down. He watched, eyes wide, as a dense layer of glittering white scales emerged on Li Zhouwei's neck. Those golden eyes were shot with blood from the extreme pain, and his two hands, pressed against the shields, made a creaking, groaning sound.

A final thought surfaced in Guan Kan's mind.

"Is Li Zhouwei truly the reincarnation of a White Qilin!?"

The next instant, Li Zhouwei bared his teeth and let out a roar, as savage and violent as a beast's.

"RAWR!"

Guan Kan didn't even have time to close his eyes. The skin on his face was ripped away in shreds that flew off and vanished. Sinews, blood vessels, and cartilage were torn from his visage. In an instant, all the flesh on the old man's head was stripped away, flying in every direction.

Only a bare, white skull remained on his neck.

It was only then that a white protective shield sprang to life from his body. Guan Gongxiao, deafened and bleeding from his ears from the force of the roar, saw the skull glowing under the protective shield. He finally cast aside all pretense of dignity and shrieked, "Reinforcements! We need reinforcements now!"

Chapter 728: A Scene of Devastation

The roar echoed like thunder, a low rumble that promised a storm. On the river, the battling cultivators paused almost as one.

The first to look up was Cui Jueyin.

He cultivated the Eternal Brightness Steps, the only art in the Bright Yang lineage capable of binding and restraining. Hailing from the main line of the Chongzhou Cui clan, who had studied the nature of Profound Light for centuries, his mastery of it surpassed even Li Zhouwei's.

Brilliant light radiated from his sleeves—blinding, searing, pushing, and pulling. He had the four cultivators before him spinning in circles, unable to even touch the hem of his robes. He was the only member of the Li contingent who remained unscathed.

Cui Jueyin's expression had been as placid as still water, but the roar struck him like a bolt from the blue. His control over the Profound Light nearly slipped. He shot his gaze upward, just in time to see the white scales bristling on Li Zhouwei's neck.

'What?'

A complex look washed over his face. He took an involuntary step forward, hesitating in mid-air. In that brief instant, his hold on the Profound Light loosened, and an enemy guest elder seized the opening. The man swept aside the light and lunged. Cui Jueyin reacted instantly, sidestepping to nullify the attack, but the fight had become much tighter, and he was once more locked in a bitter struggle.

Guan Kan's skull-headed Dharma Body faced forward as the earth beneath it split open. The river surged forth, its shallow, black Pit Water churning. Li Zhouwei's eyes lingered on the body for a fraction of a second, and his scaled neck performed an unnervingly human-like swallowing motion.

In the next instant, he vanished. Ripples of Profound Light spread as he reappeared before Guan Gongxiao. The blood-red veins in his eyes and the white scales on his neck were gone, leaving only a face covered in jagged wounds.

Guan Gongxiao, however, was desperately channeling his arts. Crimson light flared as his cry for help continued to echo across the battlefield.

"Reinforcements! We need reinforcements now!!"

His plea threw the aggressive formation of the Capital Immortals Dao into disarray. Cultivators from all directions—guest elders, clan elders, and core disciples alike—broke from their fights to rush to his aid. Li Zhouwei simply thrust his halberd, pouring all his energy into shattering the crimson light spewing from Guan Gongxiao. Just then, a deep voice boomed from the heavens:

"Where Yang culminates, the Six Thunders are born!"

It was Li Chenghui.

Li Chenghui was by no means weak, and his cultivation was substantial. He had broken through to the Foundation Establishment Realm before Li Ximing's seclusion and, after a decade, was ready to challenge the mid-stage. But a breakthrough required years of seclusion, and he had spent that time following Li Zhouwei, putting out fires all over their territory. There had been no time for himself.

Years before Li Ximing emerged, Li Chenghui was already on the verge of advancing. But as the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion pressed harder, he had funneled all his energy into mastering the Dao of Thunder.

The Capital Immortals Dao, being a sect from the Eastern Sea, had clearly planned for him. The two disciples sent to intercept him cultivated the Dao of Pit Water and the Dao of True Fire, respectively—both highly resistant to lightning.

But now, silver-white lightning exploded with a searing radiance. Struck by the full force of his attack, his two opponents were forced to retreat.

Li Chenghui's grasp of battlefield timing was sharp. Seizing the moment of distraction Li Zhouwei's shout had created, he fully unleashed his Six Thunder Profound Punishment Talisman. His figure shot out from the ensuing cascade of lightning, riding the thunder to appear before Guan Gongxiao in a flash.

The moment the thunder cracked, Li Zhouwei had already looked up. A beam of Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light shot from between his brows. Guan Gongxiao had no time to worry about Li Chenghui; he brandished a talisman in one hand while forming a seal with the other. The sandstorm of Dry Qi swirled up once more to meet the incoming beam.

Guan Gongxiao's sandstorm was no match for Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light, but it was enough to block it for a moment. What more could he ask for when his element was countered?

Though he had averted the immediate crisis, he had no time to relax. The space beside him warped as Li Chenghui opened his mouth and spat out a brilliant white pinpoint of light.

The Secret Art of the Purple Talisman's Primal Light!

The point of light expanded in an instant. Guan Gongxiao barely had time to throw his head back and activate the talisman in his other hand when a massive explosion rocked the air.

BOOM!

A circular wave of white light pulsed outward, sweeping across the river. The water churned violently, and boulders tumbled from the cliffs. The white light swelled into a cascading waterfall of violet lightning that poured down from the sky.

Guan Gongxiao's protective shield evaporated into nothingness under the deluge. The young master of the Capital Immortals Dao was truly laden with treasures; he was only grazed by the stray bolts. But a halberd wreathed in roaring black flames was already upon him.

Gritting his teeth, Guan Gongxiao tore himself free from the lightning's embrace. He activated his Sorrowful Southern Water art, dissolving into a spray of gray water that weaved through the currents of his own technique.

But he didn't escape unscathed. The halberd clipped him, and a searing heat spread across his back, his Daoist robe sizzling. Knowing Li Zhouwei's eye technique would see through his escape, he materialized by the riverbank and dashed toward the nearest person.

That person was a square-faced, large-nosed guest elder from the Capital Immortals Dao, who was rushing to his aid. He held what looked to be a Wood

Virtue art in his hands. Before he could reach his young master, a black-flamed halberd flew toward him.

The guest elder didn't dare to receive the blow. His spell vanished as he took a step back, leaving Guan Gongxiao to face the attack alone. The young master was so furious he could have spit blood. Fortunately, Guan Lingdie, having fought Li Zhouwei before, was already watching. A white dart flew from her hand, striking the halberd with a clang and knocking its tip upward. Guan Gongxiao seized the chance to unleash his sandstorm, dispelling the Profound Light and allowing him to escape through the water.

Li Zhouwei finally retracted his halberd. Li Chenghui, meanwhile, drove back the two cultivators who had come to entangle him. At last, the chaotic battle on the river came to a standstill as the two sides gradually separated.

Guan Gongxiao, his face pale, materialized on the opposite bank. The Capital Immortals Dao cultivators disengaged one by one and gathered by his side. They had the upper hand in numbers, so retreating was easy enough.

Killing Guan Gongxiao was impossible. With both Yehui and Li Ximing observing from the Great Void, neither side would dare to kill the other's successor unless the conflict escalated to the Purple Mansion Realm.

The Li family had absolutely no desire for that to happen. Li Zhouwei had broken free from a three-man assault, crippled Gongsun Bofan, and killed Guan Kan, all while having strength to spare. The outcome of this battle was already sealed.

Though the Li family was outnumbered and in a precarious position, the Capital Immortals Dao had no one left who could stop Li Zhouwei. A direct descendant of a Purple Mansion cultivator like him was a tiger among a flock of sheep when fighting guest elders; his presence could single-handedly turn the tide.

'And that scholar of the Bright Yang Dao… he's no simple character either… It seems our Dao wasn't the only one paying a high price these past few years. The Li Clan has been preparing in secret…'

With the immediate danger past, Guan Gongxiao's mind settled. He swept his gaze over Li Zhouwei and the others, then felt the jade bead bracelet in his sleeve. Only three of the ten beads had shattered. A sliver of comfort returned to him.

'At the very least, Shanji Prefecture and the Profound Peak Gate are out of the Li Clan's hands now. We've secured seven locations, and our forces in the wilderness have crossed the river and established several footholds. It wasn't a total loss.'

As he consoled himself, the battlefield fell utterly silent. Li Zhouwei stood with his halberd, his gaze fixed on him as the wound on his forehead slowly sealed itself. Li Chenghui and Cui Jueyin stood at his flanks. Guan Gongxiao felt a surge of pressure.

"You are truly skilled, Fellow Daoist," he said, his voice tight.

With that final remark, he turned and rode a current of water away. The three Dharma Artifacts still pinned beneath the bright tower were beyond saving. He could only abandon them. Li Zhouwei watched him go, the wound on his forehead now completely gone.

Guan Gongxiao fled in disarray. The wind whistled past his ears, but the silence from his retinue was deafening. No one dared to speak. It was only after they were deep within their own territory that Guan Lingdie approached, her voice soft and consoling.

"Li Zhouwei is a man like Tu Longjian or Guo Shentong," she murmured. "Favored by the heavens. It's a cosmic injustice that only a Divine Ability can match. Don't take it to heart, brother."

"I understand," Guan Gongxiao replied. Though he had lost both men and face, he was not discouraged. "Someone else will deal with him. We need only do our best."

Funan Territory.

A golden mist of True Fire permeated the sky.

Li Minggong held the Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier aloft, its pillar of fire holding the golden mist at bay. Beside her, the Chongming Profound Insight Screen shimmered with an iridescent green light, capturing the golden rays one by one.

The battle in the Funan Territory was nearing its end. Situ Mo, Master of the Golden Tang Gate, hovered high in the air, his diamond-patterned golden

feather robe dancing in the wind. One hand was locked around Ding Weizeng's longstaff. Golden Qi streamed down his cheeks, giving him a terrifying appearance.

His opponent, Ding Weizeng, was in a far more wretched state. His Dharma Body was covered in wounds from which dark red blood flowed freely. A massive gash on his abdomen revealed his internal organs, which pulsed with the faint light of Dharma Treasures.

Situ Mo glared at him, his eyes darting from side to side. That damned, foul-mouthed Hooked Serpent was still lurking somewhere nearby.

'Time is running out…'

Situ Mo had lived up to his reputation; his methods were even more formidable than the Li family had anticipated. He had single-handedly fought both Ding Weizeng and the Hooked Serpent, steadily inflicting heavier and heavier wounds on Ding Weizeng… and that was with the Chongming Profound Insight Screen in the sky, a perfect counter to his flying swords and needles.

Although Ding Weizeng had been injured earlier while fighting six opponents, Situ Mo's performance was still astonishing. Li Wushao, the Hooked Serpent, was no common demon; the two venomous stingers on his tail were enough to make anyone shudder.

And it was because of those stingers that Situ Mo was in his current predicament. Caught off guard earlier, he had been grazed on the chin. An icy chill had immediately spread down to his chest, and several pills had only temporarily suppressed it. One of his own idiots, unaware of the Hooked Serpent's potency, had been struck and nearly fell from the sky.

'Use your pig brain for once!' Situ Mo fumed internally. 'The Li family is a Purple Mansion Immortal Clan! The common Hooked Serpents from the sea floor… the white ones are alright, but the black ones are pathetic cowards. Even dragons find them unpalatable… Why would the Li family value one? This black serpent must be something else entirely!'

Having spent years in the Eastern Sea, Situ Mo was an expert on its creatures. He didn't dare get hit again, which forced him to fight cautiously. With his favorite techniques countered, he found himself in a stalemate.

As for the other members of the Golden Tang Gate, Situ Biao was tied up with Li Minggong. Though he had the upper hand, Li Wushao's occasional support

strikes made him hesitant. Elder White Ape and Li Chenghuai were each engaged with their own opponents.

It was the Dawn Rayfish that proved to be the most surprisingly effective. Its noble lineage was apparent as it darted back and forth, single-handedly pinning down three cultivators. Its attacks weren't life-threatening, but they were fast and vicious. It must have learned some advanced arts from Li Xizhi, as it was now capable of creating illusionary clones. The sky was filled with its phantoms, making it impossible to tell real from illusion.

As the battle dragged on, Situ Mo saw no sign of reinforcements from the Capital Immortals Dao. He was beginning to grow anxious when he finally spotted several streaks of light approaching from the east. The cultivators from the Midong territory had arrived.

The leader was a round-faced woman. Li Minggong recognized her as Song Yunbai, and her heart sank.

'This is trouble!'

Her forces were already stretched to their limit against the Golden Tang Gate. Below, a guest elder poisoned by the serpent was running rampant, sowing chaos and making a desperate situation even worse. If more enemies arrived, they would have no choice but to retreat.

As the woman drew closer, Situ Mo recognized her as well. While he was reverent toward the Capital Immortals Dao and superficially polite to the Li family, he had no such courtesy for Song Yunbai.

"You girl!" he boomed. "What took the Midong forces so long?"

"What took so long?" Song Yunbai was not intimidated. Her tone was laced with sarcasm. "It's not as if we could just march right in like you, Gate Master! Li Chenghui broke the grand array on Hongfu Mountain… the entire mountain is crawling with rogue cultivators and noble clans. The Daoist Master himself said to secure it, so we couldn't afford to be careless."

She smiled as she approached him. "If the Gate Master is dissatisfied… perhaps your clan's Purple Mansion Realm cultivator might be so kind as to ask our Daoist Master about it?"

It wasn't a great secret that the Golden Tang Gate's Purple Mansion cultivator was a wanderer. Her words were polite and technically flawless, but the insult was sharp. Situ Mo's face darkened, but now was not the time for an outburst.

"Then get over here and help!" he snarled.

Song Yunbai, however, simply bowed. "You misunderstand, Gate Master. Our Young Master used a secret talisman to retreat from the wilderness. I received the message and came to inform you."

As soon as she spoke, the morale of the Li Clan's cultivators surged. Song Yunbai flicked her sleeves, ignoring Situ Mo's cold, ugly expression. After making a token gesture to cover his withdrawal, she prepared to ride the wind and depart. A knot of fury tightened in Situ Mo's chest.

"Withdraw!" he finally choked out.

He instantly retracted his art, dodged a pair of stingers that shot out from nowhere, and retreated abruptly. On the battlefield, everyone was wounded; no one on the Li side dared to give chase.

After all, Li Minggong had been worn down by both Situ Mo and Situ Biao. She had consumed her elixirs and played all her trump cards. If either the Chongming Profound Insight Screen or the Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier had been even a fraction weaker, she would have been incinerated into True Fire long ago. Pursuit was out of the question.

Ding Weizeng was the most severely injured, though his Dharma Body made his condition appear less dire. Elder White Ape and the Dawn Rayfish had sustained minor injuries. Li Wushao, the sneaky serpent, had been highly effective and had only suffered a few sword cuts.

Li Chenghuai, who had little combat ability, had faced a mid-stage Foundation Establishment cultivator. But he was equipped with the Supreme Feather Nightrobe and a Night Ghost Secret Talisman from his parents. His opponent couldn't even touch him and was instead harassed relentlessly by the night ghost. As a result, Li Chenghuai was in the best condition, having barely expended any spiritual energy.

The tension finally broke, and Li Minggong nearly collapsed. She waved Li Chenghuai over to handle the aftermath.

"They captured Elder Siwei…" she murmured, her voice filled with anguish. "I have no face to see the Old Master!"

Li Chenghuai offered a word of comfort and had Elder White Ape help her away. Below them, fires raged and black smoke billowed. The Funan territory, which had just begun to recover, was once again a scene of devastation, with the arrays on most of its mountain peaks shattered. It was a ruin.

Chapter 729: News from Mount Jingyi

The battle in the wilderness had subsided.

Li Zhouwei was not lightly injured. After taking some medicine, he made a gentle gesture. The towering gatehouse in the sky vanished, transforming into a stream of light that flew back to him. Immediately, three streaks of light shot up from below in a desperate attempt to flee.

But if they could not escape during the height of battle, what chance did they have now that they had fallen into the hands of the Li Clan? Several cultivators closed in, seizing the three Dharma Artifacts and delivering them into Li Zhouwei's hands.

He stored them away and, enduring the pain, descended on a beam of light.

The Li Clan's foundation in the wilderness was shallow, with few garrisons to speak of. The Kong Clan, however, had been cultivating their presence here for a century. With the surge in spiritual Qi over the last decade, they had tightened their control and built numerous palaces.

They landed at the nearest one. Li Chenghui approached, his face etched with concern. Li Zhouwei let out a breath and asked, "How is everyone's condition?"

In the chaos of battle, no one could keep track of every detail unless a cultivator fell. Li Chenghui had already made a quick assessment.

"Only Miaoshui and Li Wen are seriously wounded," he answered concisely.

Everyone on the field was injured to some degree, so for Li Chenghui to single them out meant they were wounded to the point of incapacitation. Li Zhouwei still felt the urge to vomit blood.

"The Profound Peak Gate has a Pristine Water cultivator of the 'Cave Spring's Echo' and a Wood Virtue cultivator of the 'Verdant Grove'," he said urgently. "Get them here to help."

Li Chenghui helped him settle into a hall before nodding.

"I'll go at once. The 'Cave Spring's Echo' cultivator, Elder Bai, was killed in the fighting. Elder Sun of the 'Verdant Grove' is in better shape. I'll bring him."

As Li Chenghui departed, Li Zhouwei gritted his teeth and swallowed blood, forcing himself to sit on the main seat for a quarter of an hour. The stars in his vision slowly faded, and his sight returned to normal. He exhaled a plume of white mist, finally managing to bring his roiling Qi and blood under control. His complexion returned to normal, masking his weakness.

The white mist spread, filling the entire palace with the fragrance of peonies. A moment later, a group of people entered, led by Li Chenghui, to make their report.

Li Chenghui was largely unharmed, having expended nothing more than a Profound Thunder talisman. Behind him, Cui Jueyin stood with a lowered gaze, his expression respectful; he had merely consumed some spiritual qi.

The last of the group, Qu Bushi, had a severed arm and a weary expression, but it wasn't a serious concern. The old man was not much of a fighter, but he excelled at self-preservation. His 'Palace of Concealed Storage' was unique; he could simply find a few corpses to mend his severed arm and would be fine after some rest.

As for Miaoshui, who was not present, her injuries were severe. She had been struck down in the final moments of the battle, her body cut into three pieces as she plummeted from the sky. Qu Bushi had managed to find her and use a Wanling Flower to keep her alive. A moment's delay, and the cultivator from Jiangbei would have perished in the wilderness.

Although Miaoshui was a surrendered general from the Dense Cloud Cave, she had fought valiantly, perhaps in an attempt to atone for her past or to display her loyalty. She had nearly given her life. Li Zhouwei naturally couldn't ignore her sacrifice. "See that she is well cared for," he ordered. "I will ask a Daoist Master to save her."

The final casualty, Li Wen, possessed the Immortal Foundation 'Jade Court General'. Though not of a high grade, it was still a Dharma Body. He had only lost four fingers and suffered shattered bones throughout most of his body. He was immobilized but not in any mortal danger.

After hearing the report on his clan's cultivators, Li Zhouwei's mind began to settle. The Profound Peak Gate had served as the main force in the battle, and their guest elders—willingly or not—had been positioned to shield the Li Clan's own people. As a result, his clan's losses were not substantial.

'But this means nearly all the significant casualties were on the Profound Peak's side,' he mused. 'My family fought with all its strength, but the Profound Peak guest elders were practically used as sacrificial pawns. From a quick glance, I'd say they lost nearly five Foundation Establishment cultivators in that one battle…'

'Forget the guest elders… I imagine even the direct descendants of the Profound Peak Gate are terrified by now…'

After the arduous journey to reach Foundation Establishment, a cultivator could expect to be an honored guest anywhere they went. Who would willingly throw their life away after seeing so many peers perish in a single fight? The "Profound Peak" name wasn't a magic charm that inspired suicidal loyalty. The only reason they hadn't scattered at the start was the immense pressure from their own Purple Mansion Realm masters.

Knowing this full well, he deliberately inquired about the Profound Peak Gate.

The cultivator from the Profound Peak Gate, Elder Sun of the 'Verdant Grove', wore coarse hemp clothes and had an aged, desolate air about him. "To answer the Clan Head," he began, "we lost two early-stage and one mid-stage Foundation Establishment cultivators. An early-stage direct descendant was crippled… We also killed one of the Capital Immortals Dao's mid-stage elders and an early-stage cultivator, and… and…"

He seemed to find the next words difficult to say. "Two of our retainers were captured. One of them… surrendered before he was even out of our territory…"

It was a matter of shame, and it was unlikely the other captured retainer would hold out. Elder Sun fell silent.

Li Chenghui spoke up. "The remaining direct descendants are Kong Qiuyan and Kong Xiaxiang at the early Foundation Establishment realm, Kong Guli at the mid-stage, and the Gate Master Kong Guxi at the late-stage. Among the guest elders, we have Elder Sun Bo here at mid-stage and Fu Yuezi at late-stage. The other two guest elders… are incapacitated."

Li Zhouwei noted the presence of the Kong Clan members but didn't see Kong Guxi. The Profound Peak Gate Master had fought the hardest and was likely half-dead himself. He cut straight to the point. "How much of Shanji Prefecture did you manage to hold?"

Sun Bo looked startled for a moment, then replied in a low voice, "We secured about sixty percent. We only have the twenty-seven towns in the south. We've lost the mountains and the market. The main gate of the sect remains intact… The young master is cultivating within the sect and is unharmed."

The "young master" was, of course, Li Jianglong. With Changxi dead, the people of the Profound Peak Gate were desperate to see Li Jianglong return to the Li Clan safely. They would never allow him to come to harm. Li Zhouwei wasn't concerned about him, but he sighed inwardly. 'Without outside help, it will be difficult for them to even hold their current territory, let alone control Shanji Prefecture. They should have ceded it to the Purple Smoke Gate earlier in exchange for assistance.'

With no word yet from his own Daoist Master, Li Zhouwei dared not make any rash moves. He dismissed the group and waited. A short while later, the news he had been waiting for finally arrived from the west. Elder White Ape's figure appeared before the hall. Li Zhouwei hurried to greet him. "What is the situation in Funan?"

Elder White Ape reported everything. Li Zhouwei let out a breath of relief, but when he heard that An Siwei had been captured, he froze for a second before his expression hardened. "Immediately send someone with Situ Ku and try to exchange him for Elder Siwei! Once the Capital Immortals Dao takes him away… it will be a completely different matter!"

If the Li Clan offered to trade Situ Ku for An Siwei, Situ Mo would surely agree with both hands raised. But once An Siwei was taken away by Guan Gongxiao's people, the situation would change entirely.

Guan Gongxiao wouldn't give Situ Ku a second glance.

Elder White Ape immediately clasped his fist and withdrew. An Siwei's strength was not outstanding, but his loyalty was unwavering and his contributions were significant. Li Zhouwei did not want anything to happen to him.

He paced the hall for a few steps, feeling the hope for this plan was slim. Furthermore, Li Ximing was still entangled with Daoist Master Yehui in the Great Void. An Siwei's chances of returning were pitifully small.

'Guan Gongxiao is no fool. Although Elder Siwei is not a powerful combatant, as an elder of my clan, he surely possesses valuable information. Guan Gongxiao knows this. He'll demand An Siwei from Situ Mo… and Situ Mo has no grounds to refuse!'

On the riverbank, the spiritual Qi in the air still vibrated from the recent battle. The grass and trees on the ground were wilted. Cultivators were dispatched to tend to the spirit veins scarred by True Fire and Geng Metal, but the ruins themselves were bustling with activity.

Although both sides coveted the territory of the wilderness and had tried to keep the fighting in the sky, collateral damage was unavoidable. Fortunately, an enemy cultivator had died on the spot, invigorating the water veins and preventing a major loss of spiritual Qi.

Kong Guxi descended from the sky and lifted his robes. The flesh on his legs looked as if it had been chewed by dogs, with chunks missing here and there, exposing translucent flesh and tender white cartilage.

'The Capital Immortals Dao's Dharma Artifacts are truly formidable. This won't be easy to heal.'

His spiritual qi was depleted, preventing any self-healing. Worse, the wounds were infused with the enemy's lingering power. He quickly swallowed two pills and covered his legs, then addressed a disciple who had come to greet him. "Several of the Peak Lords are grievously injured. I saw that Elder Sun and Elder Wu were still in fair condition. Where have they gone?"

The disciple stammered for a moment. "Reporting to the Gate Master, the two lords have gone to Lord Chenghui's hall to make their report."

Kong Guxi paused, then nodded quickly. "Good… good… I've been too slow. I'll head over right now."

He glanced around. Not a single guest elder was in sight. Only his own kinswoman, Kong Qiuyan, was in the camp, tending to the wounded. Most

of the other Foundation Establishment cultivators were down, and those still standing had rushed to greet the Li Clan.

Looking closer, Kong Guxi noticed that even the sect disciples they had brought were few and far between. There were only a handful left, with a dozen or so lying on the ground, groaning in pain.

He couldn't help but ask, "The disciples of the Seventeen Peaks… why are there so few left?"

The great battle had not involved many Qi Refining or Embryonic Breathing cultivators. While the Foundation Establishment masters fought in the sky, the Profound Peak disciples on the ground had mostly faced the gentry clans from across the river—hardly formidable opponents. Although the enemy had more Foundation Establishment cultivators and there were accidental killings, the losses shouldn't have been this catastrophic.

The disciple hesitated, unsure how to explain. Some things were apparent to him, a mere disciple, that might not be to the lofty Gate Master. He lowered his voice. "Reporting to the Gate Master… the brothers fought a retreating battle along the river. Perhaps they flew too far and lost their way. They should return after a short while."

"Lost their way?!"

Kong Guxi had not been in charge for long, but he was no fool. Hearing those words and seeing the disciple's expression, understanding dawned on him. He pursed his lips and said bitterly, "Oh… let them go… it's for the best."

The Profound Peak Gate had not been built from nothing. Most of its disciples came from the gentry clans of Salt Lake and Shanji Prefecture. With those lands now in enemy hands, their own families were in peril. It was only natural for the disciples to flee. Though a cold sorrow filled his heart, Kong Guxi understood.

'Once Shanji is completely lost, another wave will leave.'

Wincing in pain, Kong Guxi took to the air. A man in ochre armor with a black-patterned mask flew over to him, holding a spear and an axe, his body covered in blood. He bowed before Kong Guxi, his voice hoarse. "Fu Yuezi has just tended to his wounds and comes at once to pay respects to the Gate Master."

Fu Yuezi had fought one against four, and two of his ribs had been shattered, exposing the stark white bone beneath. Kong Guxi hurried to help him up, patting his shoulder. "Go and see Lord Chenghui. Why are you wasting time seeing me?"

Fu Yuezi stubbornly refused to move. Kong Guxi, severely injured himself, lacked the strength to push him and sighed, taking a step back. Just then, another old man hurried over, stopping hesitantly nearby. His hair was disheveled, his crown askew, his eyes red and bloodshot—a picture of utter misery.

The moment Kong Guxi saw him, it was as if a hole had been smashed in a frozen lake, and an icy chill shot to his heels. The heel on his left foot had been sheared off, and a phantom pain flared through the empty space. "Old brother… what is the meaning of this?" he asked.

This old man was the messenger Kong Guxi had sent to Mount Jingyi as soon as Changxi had fallen. He had crushed a jade talisman, signaling for the messenger to request aid. Now, he had returned in this pathetic state. The old man dropped to his knees with a thud, weeping and lamenting as he spoke. "The people stationed at the market near Mount Jingyi said… said Daoist Master Xuanyi is not on the mountain… That disciple was so arrogant, he wouldn't even deign to look me in the eye!"

"I asked for news of our seventeenth brother, but they said he refused to see me. The family sent eight letters before… he never answered a single one… And now… now! I went to Yuezhou Island, and they drove me away!"

"What!"

The breath caught in Kong Guxi's lungs. He was so stunned he could hardly breathe. Several moments passed before he could recover, his voice filled with disbelief. "Didn't he ask the sect for resources just before the new year?"

"He did…"

Understanding crashed down on Kong Guxi, and he nearly collapsed. The man who had not shed a single tear while his flesh was torn apart in battle now broke down into sobs. He let out two choked cries before stifling them, like a rooster being strangled.

"Alas… it's over… How will I ever explain this to Daoist Master Zhaojing!"

He wiped his tears. With his brother and Daoist Master Xuanyi proving unreliable, Kong Guxi feared the Li Clan would decide to retreat, sealing their doom.

Beside him, Kong Qiuyan was equally terrified. She glanced at her Gate Master and asked helplessly, "What can we do… He's climbed ashore and refuses to touch a sinking ship…"

A heavy silence fell over them. Kong Guxi's elder brother, the messenger, looked around with a miserable expression. "Where is everyone?" he asked.

Those two words struck them like a hammer blow. Seeing their faces, the old man understood. He went limp as if his bones had been removed. "The Profound Wonder Temple watches from the sidelines, Mount Jingyi slams the door in our face… Our family is in dire straits. It would be better to abandon the sect and find a place to live on the sea… At least there would be a chance of survival!"

Kong Qiuyan silently closed her eyes. "Who would go with you to some godforsaken place? Sun Bo? Which of the guest elders? And what random island could possibly support several Foundation Establishment cultivators?"

At their side, Fu Yuezi dropped to his knees again, his voice thick with emotion. "Wherever the Gate Master goes, Fu Yuezi will follow, even unto death!"

Kong Guxi listened in abject terror, his soul nearly flying from his body. "What nonsense are you spouting!" he roared. "We will follow the Daoist Master's arrangements! Who gave you the audacity to make such suggestions!"

Leave the mainland?

Never mind how important the Profound Peak Mountain was, or that their own elders were in seclusion there, even if the mountain fell, Kong Guxi would never dare to entertain the thought of leaving. It was madness!

'What is this? This is a slap in the face to the Li Clan… If we do that… where in this vast world could we possibly hide?'

A wave of dread washed up his spine, pulling him from his grief and rage. His face flushed crimson as he shouted, "You will all remember this! Even if the Kong Clan must die, we will die in Jiangnan! We will die fighting the Capital Immortals Dao! As long as the Daoist Master allows it, even if there is only a single plot of land for us to stand on, as long as we can look up and see the spirit mountains of the north, we are not going anywhere!"

"Brother, if you speak such words again, do not blame my sword for being merciless!"

Chapter 730: First Encounter

Kong Guxi's words made the other members of the Kong clan lower their heads. Kong Qiuyan assented, her face a mask of regret as she shook her head.

"First Uncle was merely careless, I beg the Sect Master's forgiveness… If our other uncles hadn't been killed at sea by the Changxiao Gate, we wouldn't be in such a desperate situation… We have troubled the Sect Master."

Before Kong Guxi could reply, a streak of purple lightning descended nearby, transforming into a man in silver armor. Kong Guxi hurried to greet him, clasping his hands in a respectful bow.

"Brother Chenghui… I've sustained some injuries… and I was busy organizing the disciples, so I didn't have a chance to pay my respects…"

"Sect Master Kong, there's no need for such formalities."

Li Chenghui quickly moved to help him up. Kong Guxi was technically of Li Ximing's generation, making him a senior. He couldn't let the man bow. "My clan head wishes to see you!" he announced, his tone serious.

As expected, Kong Guxi straightened up and hurried after him. Understanding the gravity of the Profound Peak Gate's losses, Li Chenghui offered some comforting words.

"I heard that several of your guest elders were wounded, mostly while covering our clan's cultivators. On behalf of my clan, I thank you."

"Please, it was our duty," Kong Guxi replied, doing his best to maintain his composure despite the throbbing pain in his legs, which he suppressed with his spiritual energy. "Without Moongaze Lake, the Profound Peak Gate's lineage would not survive. You are too kind, Brother Cheng. Though Guest Elder Bai of the Cave Spring's Echo lineage has fallen, Sun Bo, who is more skilled in healing arts, is still with us. Our injuries are manageable."

When they arrived at the main hall, Li Zhouwei was conferring with Sun Bo about the cultivators' conditions. Upon seeing Kong Guxi, Sun Bo immediately stepped aside, bowing his head and retreating with a clear understanding of his place.

As a guest elder of the Profound Peak Gate, it was a breach of protocol for Sun Bo to bypass his own sect master and report directly to Li Zhouwei. But power dictates its own etiquette. In these times, only Fu Yuezi remained aloof from the Li clan. Kong Guxi didn't even bother to take offense.

In his youth, Kong Guxi had his share of arrogance. He had been a profligate son of a powerful clan, and he knew exactly what fueled such pride. Now, without a Purple Mansion realm patron, he was no better than a dog scrounging for bones under the table. Even he had to approach with deference, bowing deeply.

"Greetings, Clan Head!"

"Senior, you mustn't."

Li Zhouwei offered a token protest as two attendants moved to help Kong Guxi up. But Kong Guxi remained bowed, his voice firm.

"The Clan Head turned the tide and saved my Profound Peak Gate's lineage. You deserve this bow!"

He completed the full set of ceremonial thanks. Li Zhouwei waited patiently, and after a few polite refusals, he cut to the heart of the matter.

"Senior, what are your plans for your people?"

Hearing this, Kong Guxi knew he couldn't suggest returning to the Profound Peak mountain gate. He was well aware that large swaths of Shanji Prefecture had fallen. If his people retreated to the safety of their sect's Purple Mansion formation, who would be left to defend the wilderness? The Li clan alone?

The Sect Master of Profound Peak immediately prostrated himself, his expression a mixture of fear and humility.

"Reporting to the Clan Head, the defenses of Shanji Prefecture have been breached, and the borders are fraught with danger. I fear any attempt to travel would be intercepted by Guan Gongxiao… I humbly request a place for my people to garrison in the wilderness. We will wait for the situation to stabilize before returning to our mountain."

A hush fell over the hall. Outside the doors, Sun Bo couldn't help but turn his head, a pang of guilt on his face. Even Li Zhouwei gave Kong Guxi a second look.

Regardless of whether Shanji Prefecture could be held, Li Zhouwei had already planned to station the Profound Peak Gate's Foundation Establishment cultivators and disciples in the wilderness. The Li clan's own members were stretched thin covering their duties, and there was no one to spare. He couldn't just let Kong Guxi and his people retreat to their sect to rest and recuperate. Who, then, would guard the wildlands?

As for allowing them to enter the inner territories of the Prefecture, Li Zhouwei had never considered it. The Li clan had no intention of annexing the Profound Peak Gate. The name had to be preserved. He wasn't even interested in poaching their guest elders.

'Only this Sun Bo is of some use…' Li Zhouwei mused. 'He's of the Verdant Grove Dao, after all, and most of its abilities are focused on healing. We were looking for someone from the Cave Spring's Echo lineage before, but this Wood Virtue foundation is far superior to a half-baked practitioner of that art.'

Visibly, Li Zhouwei nodded. "Sect Master, you are too formal. The wilderness is your clan's territory to begin with, so there is no need to speak of making space. I too was concerned that the Profound Peak mountain gate is far away on the shores of Salt Lake, making travel and reinforcements difficult."

"Since we are of one mind, please select a suitable mountain range in the wilderness as your base of operations!"

Kong Guxi quickly agreed. He also needed to move a portion of his sect's treasures out of the mountain gate. If the situation became truly unsalvageable and they lost their home, this would give the Profound Peak Gate a glimmer of hope for the future.

He waited with bated breath for a few moments, and then Li Zhouwei finally asked the question he had been dreading.

"Do you have any news regarding the matter of Mount Jingyi?"

Kong Guxi dropped to his knees with a thud and lowered his head as he explained the situation. Li Zhouwei listened with a tightening frown. When Kong Guxi finished, his brow relaxed, and he shook his head.

"Sect Master, this clan member of yours… is he truly unwilling to see you?"

He stared intently into Kong Guxi's eyes, which were filled with a mixture of misery and terror that seemed genuine. The beleaguered sect master then presented a letter written by his own brother. After reading it, Li Zhouwei offered some counsel.

"Overseas sects can't be trusted. Having left the clan at a young age, it's unlikely he feels any loyalty to the Kong clan. Let it be."

He dismissed Kong Guxi, but then added a probing reminder. "However, my word is not final on this. You will have to speak with the Daoist Master about it. When he returns, I will send someone to fetch you."

At these words, the half-eased heart of Kong Guxi leaped back into his throat. He sighed and retreated to find Sun Bo for treatment. Li Chenghui escorted him out, then returned to Li Zhouwei's side, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Daoist Master Changxi chose well," Li Chenghui remarked with a sigh. "Kong Guxi may lack strategic brilliance, but he knows when to let go, acts decisively, and is willing to lower his head. Those qualities alone… are enough to save the Profound Peak Gate!"

Li Zhouwei nodded in agreement. "He may be a mediocre leader in times of peace, but in a crisis, he is a pillar of strength, a fine steed for a collapsing dynasty. He sees the situation clearly and can swallow his pride. You say 'those qualities alone,' but how many can truly do the same? When ruin is at hand and life and death are decided in a few choices, how many could match him?"

Li Chenghui concurred, but then his tone turned worried. "But with the Daoist Master yet to return and the situation with Mount Jingyi in flux, the road ahead will be even more difficult."

Li Zhouwei remained noncommittal. "The worst that can happen is we give up Shanji Prefecture and the Profound Peak mountain gate. It's not as if we'll gain nothing. The Profound Peak cultivators are the ones on the front lines anyway. Setting aside the Capital Immortals Dao, who were our enemies from the start, as long as our clan is careful, this is a venture with guaranteed returns."

"But we can't just abandon Shanji and the Profound Peak Gate from the outset, especially since we've never even set foot inside… a hasty retreat would damage our reputation. It's better to defend and retreat step by step than to have never possessed it at all."

In truth, aside from the loss of An Siwei, the Li clan had suffered no substantial damage in the great battle—just some minor territorial setbacks and injuries. With a Purple Mansion realm cultivator backing them, as long as their people were safe, nothing else was a major issue. He paused, his thoughts lingering on An Siwei's fate for a moment, before his eyes fell upon the letter from Mount Jingyi. After a moment of contemplation, he spoke again.

"You say the situation with Mount Jingyi is in flux. I'm not so sure."

Li Chenghui looked up as Li Zhouwei continued. "It's hard to say if Daoist Master Xuanyi is truly being held up by the Pure Unity Dao, but this Kong Gumo of Mount Jingyi… his refusal to help may not be a complete disregard for the Kong clan."

"If I were Changxi, I would certainly want to leave behind a few bloodlines as a contingency. Kong Gumo might be Changxi's final arrangement. What if my Li clan went back on our word? What if we didn't shelter the Kong clan, but instead took their treasures and carved up their territory with the Capital Immortals Dao? Or worse, what if we tried to curry favor with the mid-stage Purple Mansion cultivator Yehui and threw the Kong clan to the wolves?"

"In that case, the Kong clan within the seas would be annihilated, without even a direct heir remaining. Kong Gumo, the son who severed all ties, would be the true last ember of the Kong clan. As the disciple of a Purple Mansion Daoist Master, he is guaranteed to reach Foundation Establishment… and by refusing to aid his family, he appears to be a completely ungrateful wretch. The other Purple Mansion Daoist Masters would not be so quick to kill him in front of Daoist Master Xuanyi."

Li Zhouwei spoke as he searched through some books. Li Chenghui immediately grasped his meaning.

"Clan Head, you're suggesting… Daoist Master Xuanyi received a favor from Changxi, and the condition wasn't to save the Profound Peak Gate, but rather to stay out of the conflict and protect Kong Gumo?"

"Not necessarily," Li Zhouwei said, picking up a brush. "Changxi was a clever man, and clever men don't make trouble for themselves. Since he told our clan that Mount Jingyi would be an ally, the agreement likely included helping the Profound Peak Gate, but the terms were probably flexible—major or minor aid, mandatory or best-effort, at his discretion. He could fulfill the letter of the

agreement by skirting the edges. That way, he'd have an explanation ready when our Daoist Master comes calling."

"This matter isn't settled yet. We shouldn't place too much importance on Mount Jingyi. In the affairs within these seas, for the most part, we can only rely on ourselves."

Li Zhouwei paused, his brush hovering over the paper. A genuine look of worry finally creased his features.

"All of this is secondary. My greatest concern is that the Daoist Master has yet to return."

No matter how dire the Profound Peak Gate's situation became, it was ultimately their problem. The Li clan could withdraw. Li Zhouwei was confident he could handle any new development. The only one who could not afford to have a mishap was Li Ximing. If something happened to him, not only would the Li clan and the Profound Peak Gate be finished in an instant, but Li Zhouwei himself would become a fugitive, forced to flee overseas.

The Great Void.

In an expanse of empty darkness, Li Ximing sat silently upon the Jewel Steps, cloaked in Profound Light.

Above him, a Celestial Gate towered into the blackness. Dragon banners and phoenix chariots drifted through it in a silent procession. Golden-armored and golden-robed figures stood frozen upon the gate like statues in various poses.

Only the platinum-gold canopies stirred gently, shedding streams of Profound Light that fell like countless golden threads.

Three Jewel Steps, each several feet high, led up to the gate. Li Ximing sat cross-legged on the highest one, his body wreathed in surging purple flames, his hands forming a seal in silent meditation.

Beyond the gate, a thick, dark-purple radiance pulsed like a fog, encroaching and receding, nearly blending with the blackness of the Great Void. Every so often, the Profound Light would disperse a cluster of it, revealing an even denser concentration of divine power that had the entire Celestial Gate locked down.

Yehui hadn't spoken a single word. He had simply brought his divine ability to bear within the Great Void, forcing Li Ximing to sit and counter it. A suffocating silence hung between them.

Li Ximing could even sense that his opponent had no desire for a full-blown battle; he merely wanted to contain him here.

Although he possessed the Profound Peak Gate's great treasure, the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger, which would allow him to escape and rush to Li Zhouwei's aid in a crisis, he knew Yehui also had his own methods. Li Ximing didn't want to truly fight him. He sat quietly, though the feeling of being constrained was far from pleasant.

Yehui was undoubtedly stronger. Li Ximing could feel that his opponent's divine ability was perfectly calibrated, blanketing the Great Void. Shrouded by the Sorrowful Southern Water, he couldn't even gauge the dimensions of the space around him. All he could see was the small patch of ground beneath his feet, which faced the wilderness below.

Seeing Guan Gongxiao and the others being forced to retreat brought him a measure of relief.

'The dead are all Profound Peak cultivators, so it's no loss to us,' he calculated. 'As for the territory we've secured in Shanji Prefecture… our clan won't be guarding it. I wonder if the Purple Smoke Gate would be willing to take it…'

Even though the Li clan had repelled the Capital Immortals Dao, Li Ximing knew they couldn't possibly hold all the newly acquired land. The border was simply too long, and it would become less defensible over time. After such a major battle, both sides had withdrawn to rest. This victory only meant that the Li clan now had the right to dispose of the remaining territory in Shanji Prefecture.

'If not, I can ask Sumian of the Profound Wonder Temple and Lingmei of the Sword Gate. Both of their territories border it… better to let them have it than the Capital Immortals Dao!'

These were matters to be dealt with upon his return. Li Ximing cleared his thoughts. The purple light before him showed no signs of weakening. In one hand, he held a gold-patterned profound pearl, ready to flee.

But then a second thought gave him pause.

'The Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger is a rare and powerful spiritual artifact. Although it belonged to Daoist Master Changxi and has been seen before, Yehui only arrived in Jiangnan a little over a decade ago. It's very likely he isn't familiar with it. If I use it to escape now, I'll reveal a powerful tool for nothing. He'll be wary of it in the future, and I'll lose a valuable element of surprise.'

Acting on the principle of keeping a trump card hidden if possible, Li Ximing remained still. After a quarter of an hour, Yehui still hadn't spoken. Li Ximing sighed softly and called out in a clear voice, "Friend Daoist, what guidance do you have for me?"

He waited a few breaths before Yehui's figure emerged from the depths of the Great Void. The man looked up, his eyes gazing at him from beneath his brow. "Fellow Daoist Zhaojing," he began, "are you now willing to discuss the matter of the Profound Peak Gate?"

'To hell with your Profound Peak Gate. Just drop this wretched divine ability of yours and let me go…'

Li Ximing paused for a moment before replying, "Senior Changxi entrusted the Profound Peak Gate to myself and Daoist Master Sumian. It is my duty to ensure the sect's stability. Since Friend Daoist Yehui is willing to talk, I am willing to listen."

Yehui cradled the ceremonial-looking Dharma sword in his arms, his expression calm. "I've heard," he said suddenly, "that the Bright Yang lineage is not skilled in evasion arts. If I were to engage you in a discussion of the Dao and keep you here for, say, three to five years, I imagine it would be rather unpleasant for you, no?"

Li Ximing frowned. It was true that he was not skilled in evasion arts, and his Heavenly Audience Gate had no such related abilities. Yehui, with his powerful divine ability, was more than capable of suppressing him. However, he had the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger to compensate for this weakness. Whether he could actually escape was an open question.

But he didn't know the full extent of Yehui's abilities, and he had never truly fought a Purple Mansion cultivator before, let alone a mid-stage one. After some consideration, he decided to hear the man out. "What is it you propose, Friend Daoist?"

Yehui's tone suddenly softened. "There is a cultivator in the Profound Peak mountain gate named Kong Haiying. If you could take care of him, our two clans could sit down and talk about dividing the Profound Peak Gate's territory…"

The man raised an eyebrow, a smile playing on his lips. "I know your clan values its reputation. We can put on a show of fighting. When we reach the border we've agreed upon, we can stop. The Profound Peak cultivators will be eternally grateful and serve you like dogs, and I will have eliminated a major threat. Wouldn't that be a win-win?"

Chapter 731: Traversing the Great Void

'So he wants to kill Kong Haiying.'

Li Ximing scoffed inwardly. In truth, there was no irreconcilable conflict between the Capital Immortals Dao and the Li family. But he didn't believe for a second that Yehui's goal was merely Kong Haiying.

'If all your moves were aimed at Kong Haiying, why give my family such a sour look earlier?'

Since Yehui was putting on an act, Li Ximing decided to play along. A look of surprise flickered across his face.

"Daoist Yehui, didn't Kong Haiying fall some time ago? The disturbance in the Profound Peak's earth meridian before Senior Changxi's death—that was the omen of his passing!"

Yehui was momentarily stumped by the blatant lie. He stared grimly at Li Ximing. The man was supposed to be Fu En, but if he was actually Kong Haiying, it would make sense for Changxi to have deliberately misidentified him. He paused.

True or not, Li Ximing's words had completely disrupted his prepared script. Yehui's voice turned cold. "Oh? Is that… true or not… No matter. Let me witness your Bright Yang divine abilities."

As he spoke, the Great Void trembled. A vast expanse of dark purple iridescence above and below began to hum with a solemn, heavy resonance as a damp, watery vapor began to rise.

The next moment, a multicolored fish the size of a calf emerged from the iridescent light. Its scales were ethereal, shifting between deep and light shades of purple. But its head was a skeletal human skull with two hollow, quiet dark eye sockets.

The purple fish arched in the air, and countless more of its kind swarmed out of the purple haze. They converged into a torrential river beneath the Celestial Gate and surged upward. Seeing that Yehui was serious, Li Ximing's Profound Light flared from between his brows, and the Celestial Gate behind him rumbled in response.

A battle cry shook the heavens. The countless figures in golden armor and robes on the Celestial Gate suddenly came to life. They descended with spears and swords in hand to meet the charge, clashing with the purple river and holding it back.

But with another deafening roar, Yehui exhaled a puff of white qi. This qi seemed to weigh a thousand tons, sinking instantly and causing the Great Void to congeal. Li Ximing and his entire Heavenly Audience Gate were caught as if in a quagmire, sinking slowly, finding it difficult to advance or retreat.

'No wonder Changxi didn't dare fight him. Just with this Eastern Feather Mountain… this old fox has considerable control over the battlefield in the Great Void.'

Li Ximing knew this was Yehui's second divine ability, Eastern Feather Mountain. He was thankful that the Bright Yang lineage was formidable in combat. Intending to test his own capabilities without resorting to a Dharma Artifact, he opened his mouth and unleashed a torrent of Bright Yang Purple Fire.

This purple fire, normally nurtured in the Juque Palace, now poured out in an unending stream. It was no ordinary flame. The brilliant blaze pulsed with the power of imperial union and generation, crashing against the solidified Great Void.

Li Ximing didn't need to fight the suppression of Eastern Feather Mountain head-on. He focused the entirety of his purple fire onto a single point. No matter how powerful the opposing divine ability was, it couldn't withstand such a focused assault and a pinprick-sized hole was easily burned through the barrier.

A single point was all he needed.

In the Great Void, a point could be a plane, or it could be a doorway. Li Ximing, along with the Celestial Gate behind him, vanished, effortlessly breaking free

from the lockdown of Sorrowful Southern Water and Eastern Feather Mountain. He reappeared in another section of the Great Void and transformed into a streak of Profound Light to flee.

And so, Yehui, a dignified mid-stage Purple Mansion cultivator, had failed to put any real pressure on a newly advanced cultivator in two exchanges, allowing him to escape.

'So this is the Great Void…'

Li Ximing finally understood just how difficult it was for Purple Mansion cultivators to kill one another. The Great Void was a net riddled with holes. Every cultivator could be as massive as a mountain or as small as a speck of dust. How could one possibly lock down another's escape?

Yehui was not surprised. His own divine ability activated, and his figure reappeared at the edge of the purple light. He brought the entire expanse of light with him, once again enveloping Li Ximing. The suppressing pressure of Eastern Feather Mountain descended anew, bringing back the feeling of being trapped in a mire.

But this time, Yehui's hands formed a seal. The instant Eastern Feather Mountain manifested, the Great Void beneath Li Ximing twisted and hollowed out, causing him to misstep and fail to shift away. Li Ximing remained fearless. With flames held in his mouth, he spat them directly at the ritual sword in Yehui's hands.

The sword momentarily blocked the flames, but an incredibly sharp aura rose from within the Great Void. Li Ximing knew it was his opponent's Dharma Artifact. Forcing down the impulse to draw his own, the Profound Light between his brows pulsed as he shouted, "Hah!"

Flickering Profound Light illuminated the entire expanse of the Great Void, finally revealing a brilliant golden glint. The Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light erupted from between Li Ximing's brows and smashed into the weapon.

Li Ximing hadn't cultivated Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light for very long, but with the foundation of his Purple Mansion cultivation and the synergy with his innate Profound Light divine ability, the combined power was actually enough to stall the Dharma Artifact for a moment.

'I can't beat you head-on, but I can certainly leave.'

Familiarity bred confidence. Purple flames surged before Li Ximing, and he slipped away once more. But Yehui took another step, reappearing right behind him, ritual sword stabbing forward. Li Ximing immediately raised his Celestial Gate to block with his divine ability. He felt a chill as a streak of purple light shot up the back of his hand.

The blow was blocked without serious injury. Li Ximing used the opportunity to pull away. After flying for several breaths, his opponent closed the distance again. Having learned his lesson, Li Ximing simply spat a mouthful of purple fire at the sword. This move countered Eastern Feather Mountain and the weapon simultaneously, allowing him to escape unscathed.

But as he shifted sideways this time, he felt the Great Void suddenly grow steeper and more difficult to navigate. A sweep of his spiritual sense revealed the distinct presence of a Pit Water formation. Glancing down at the physical world, he saw towering mountains encircled by a stream below. It was Mount Xianyou.

Li Ximing had no intention of asking the Xiao family for help; they had simply stumbled into the Great Void above Mount Xianyou during their fight. The Great Void here was like a vast mountain range, difficult to traverse. It wasn't because of a technique or a formation, but a matter of spiritual qi. Mount Xianyou was the primary spiritual hub of Lixia Prefecture, which made the local Great Void exceedingly steep.

Yehui had obviously noticed this as well. With his Sorrowful Southern Water divine ability and the aid of that crow spirit technique, he was much faster here. He closed the distance in an instant. Li Ximing blocked with a blast of purple fire and vanished, reappearing in the physical world.

'If it's hard to move in the Great Void, why can't I just travel through the physical world?'

He burst through, leaving his opponent to grasp at empty air. His eyes lit up. Below him were several spirit mountains belonging to a small family. A few cultivators were battling in the sky. Li Ximing's divine ability flared, and in a flash, he recognized the emblem on their robes.

'The Wu family of southern Lixia. So I've already reached the southern part of the prefecture.'

The Wu family cultivators appeared to be locked in a desperate struggle with some demonic cultivators. The moment Li Ximing stepped out, the sky instantly changed from a light drizzle to a bright, clear spring day. The raindrops hanging in the air never hit the ground as the heavens filled with radiant light and colorful clouds.

'A Purple Mansion…? Huh?'

The sudden appearance of a Purple Mansion cultivator overhead froze every cultivator on the battlefield like statues. The demonic cultivator in the lead felt his mind might just explode. A single thought echoed in the blank void of his brain:

"Huh? It was just a batch of spirit rice… Was this really necessary?"

The pitched battle instantly descended into a farce. One man swinging his sword sent it flying into the sky. Another casting a spell nearly bit off his tongue. The demonic cultivator, who had half-raised his shield, didn't dare complete the motion, letting a sword chop into his head. His opponent from the Wu family was in no better state, having lost all mind for fighting and nearly plummeting from the sky.

Xiao Chuting was likely not here, and Li Ximing couldn't care less about them. He didn't pause for a moment. The Profound Light at his feet flashed, and he vanished, flying toward the distant horizon.

Yet even as he passed at a considerable distance, the demonic cultivator was caught off guard by the after-effect of Li Ximing's escape light. He felt a surge of purple flame and brilliant light wash over him. A stuffiness filled his chest, and in an instant, his hair and beard were incinerated. With a *whoosh*, his robes burst into flames.

Had he been an ordinary cultivator, it might have been better. But as a demonic cultivator, his very flesh began to burn along with his robes. The surrounding fighters watched, dumbfounded and too terrified to flee.

Fortunately, Li Ximing had only been there for a split second and had paid him no mind. He was already miles away, but the demonic cultivator's agonizing screams continued as his Dharma robes burned to ash.

Before anyone could feel relieved, the Great Void tore open once more. The sky, which had just cleared, was instantly filled with dark, heavy clouds. A solemn,

prayer-like hum filled the air as Yehui's figure appeared. The Daoist Master, dressed in deep blue robes, swept his sharp, intelligent eyes over the area.

At this moment, Yehui's Sorrowful Southern Water was operating at full power, nearly half his body dissolved into a purple halo, and he was still augmented by Eastern Feather Mountain. That single glance was like a thunderbolt from a clear sky. The next moment, Yehui too had vanished. Only then did the six cultivators react, crying out in pain as they fell from the sky, trailing streaks of purple light.

Li Ximing hadn't even left the vicinity of Mount Xianyou. The moment the spiritual qi felt a little less oppressive, he ducked back into the Great Void. Yehui's purple light immediately followed. The speed of Sorrowful Southern Water was indeed impressive. Li Ximing was forced to take another hit as he saw the gates of the Profound Peak Mountain up ahead.

Yehui arrived at the same time.

He held his ritual sword, and every one of its deep blue runes was glowing. After the long chase, Yehui's face was grim. He formed a seal and chanted, and another wisp of white qi leaped from his lips.

As the white qi flew out, Li Ximing not only felt his feet grow heavy, but the very Great Void before him changed. The glow of the Profound Peak Gate's Bound Earth formation was instantly extinguished, veiled by a hazy white light. Even the fabric of the Great Void became uneven and distorted.

'Eastern Feather Mountain has this kind of power?!'

Li Ximing's spiritual sense swept out. The Great Void around the Profound Peak Gate was deathly still, and the entrance to the Purple Mansion formation had become indistinct, shifting from near to far. He knew Eastern Feather Mountain could influence the Great Void, but he never realized it had such a wondrous application.

He spat fire, broke out of the Great Void, and entered the physical world of the Profound Peak Mountain. He saw a layer of purple light, like smoke and mist, covering the vast mountain. It drew the gazes of cultivators from all over Shanji Prefecture. Yehui was seated upon it, mounted on his dark crow.

"No wonder Yehui was confident he could tie me up for three to five years… If he keeps pestering me like this, it will be truly difficult to get away. Even if he can't

kill me, he could definitely wear me down to a lightly injured state over three or five years."

Li Ximing couldn't enter the gate, but he wasn't discouraged. As long as Yehui was determined to entangle him, entering the gate would just mean being trapped in a different location. This simply meant continuing the fight outside.

But he had already planned his escape route. He hadn't come all this way just to be blocked at the door. He watched coolly as the purple light circled above the Profound Peak Gate.

'But… can Daoist Master Sumian really sit still for this?'

With a cold laugh, he plunged back into the Great Void. Though he couldn't enter the gate, he led Yehui on a chase, circling again and again around the perimeter. He took a few hits from divine abilities, but after a full half-incense stick of time, the purple aura still hung over the Profound Peak Gate.

Li Ximing knew Sumian cared for his reputation, so he deliberately prolonged the stalemate with Yehui. As more and more cultivators gathered in the vicinity, Li Ximing entered the Great Void one last time and finally saw Daoist Master Sumian appear in the distance.

The old Daoist Master sighed. "Daoist Yehui… please stay your hand! This old man… promised Daoist Changxi I would protect the Profound Peak. I cannot sit by and do nothing…"

Daoist Master Changxi had died at Sumian's Profound Wonder Temple—his body had been delivered to its very doorstep. Was there any cultivator in the north or south who didn't know? Salt Lake might be under the Profound Wonder Temple's protection only because the Capital Immortals Dao hadn't bothered to attack it. But now Yehui was fighting right at the mountain gate, and while Li Ximing fought back, Sumian was nowhere to be seen. This was the kind of thing that would get him scorned…

Sumian had cultivated his reputation for centuries, much of it with an eye toward his own legacy. He couldn't afford to lose it. Forced to intervene, he simply stood in the Great Void, and Yehui finally stopped.

"So it is the venerable Daoist Master Qi."

Yehui chuckled. "I was merely sparring with Daoist Master Zhaojing. I didn't expect to cause such a commotion and disturb you, venerable master. In that case, we shall stop here."

He seemed to be on decent terms with Sumian. He gave Li Ximing a deep look, then turned with a smile to Sumian. "May I ask for how long the venerable master promised Changxi his protection? I plan to visit you in a few days, precisely to discuss the matter of the Profound Peak!"

"If conflict can be turned into friendship, that is naturally for the best," Sumian replied.

Li Ximing, ignoring Yehui, calmly brushed the enemy's lingering power from his wrist and spoke directly. "I recall the Daoist Master said he would treat the wounded of the Profound Peak Gate. One of the Kong family was crippled, three others were maimed. I will have them sent to you later. I'll have to trouble you, Daoist Master."

Li Ximing couldn't be bothered with pleasantries. Since Sumian had appeared, it meant the man valued his reputation and wouldn't go back on his word. With the Profound Peak members heavily injured, why should he handle it himself when he could trouble someone else?

Sumian simply nodded as he watched Li Ximing give a perfunctory salute and depart. Yehui flicked his sleeves and left as well. The old master suddenly felt a massive headache coming on.

'I have to find a way to resolve this. There's less and less time, and I need to focus my energy on that demonic embryo. I don't have time to babysit these two…'

Sumian sighed and headed back toward the Profound Wonder Temple, his mind already racing.

'I must find a way to open the Xiaoshi Mountain treasury and settle this matter quickly. Better than having these two idle masters drawing all eyes this way, catching me in the crossfire and tying my hands…'

Chapter 732: Changxiao and Yehui

Yehui traveled through the Great Void for a time before returning to his own White Ye Mountain. Guan Gongxiao was kneeling before the monument at the summit, his forehead pressed firmly to the ground.

"Greetings, Daoist Master," Guan Gongxiao said respectfully. "Your disciple has failed. We suffered heavy casualties and lost our Dharma Artifacts. I await your punishment!"

"Enough," Yehui said, silencing him with a wave. His brow furrowed. "This wasn't your fault. Our objectives were met, and the Profound Peak Gate sustained significant losses. We've reclaimed the territory we were due. What does it matter if we lost three Dharma Artifacts? It's not as if they were ancient relics."

Guan Gongxiao kowtowed again, about to say more, but with another flick of his hand, Yehui sent him away, leaving not even a shadow behind.

'A pity about Guan Kan,' Yehui mused to himself. 'He was an old hand, yet Li Zhouwei managed to kill him. Still, he served his purpose. It wasn't a total loss.'

Yehui poured a cup of tea at a stone table and waited. Within a quarter of an hour, a figure stepped out of the Great Void.

The Daoist Master wore a robe adorned with cloud patterns. His face was kind and gentle, giving him the air of a benevolent clan elder, though his eyes were a bit narrow. He sat down at the table, clearly in high spirits.

'After all that scheming, the old scoundrel finally got what he wanted.'

Despite his cynical thoughts, Yehui smiled warmly. "Greetings, Fellow Daoist Changxiao!"

This was none other than Chang Xiaozi, the master of the Changxiao Gate, a renowned figure who had carved a path to the Purple Mansion realm by fighting his way through the Three Sects and Seven Gates.

Changxiao smiled back. "Greetings, my friend. And how fares your third divine ability? The trials of the Purple Mansion are perilous. You must be careful."

Yehui simply smiled without answering. Instead, he asked, "It has been many years since I last saw Fellow Daoist Chengyan. I wonder how he is doing?"

Yehui was a relative newcomer to Jiangbei and hadn't been involved in the Anhuai Heaven incident, but he had heard the stories. He had no personal grudge against Chengyan; he just despised incompetence and enjoyed twisting the knife.

Changxiao understood his meaning perfectly. "Oh, him?" he replied casually. "He found a promising disciple a few years back and seems to think he's on the verge of a breakthrough. He hasn't been willing to leave the sect since, just waiting to perfect his second divine ability."

After a moment's hesitation, Yehui guided the conversation to the real issue. "We expended a great deal of effort, and my sect made significant sacrifices to achieve this. Did you see what you needed to?"

"I saw it clearly." A strange, excited light gleamed in Changxiao's eyes. "Li Zhouwei is indeed tied to a destiny of Metallic Essence. I observed from the side with my Life Divine Ability—it took the form of a White Qilin. My years of suspicion were not unfounded. At last, I have a lead!"

Yehui seemed uninterested in Changxiao's affairs. He chose his words carefully. "To help you confirm this, I provoked the Li Clan for no reason, lost an elder, and suffered a blow to my reputation. I also failed to sow discord within the Profound Peak Gate, allowing the situation to change… The price was steep."

"You have my sincerest thanks, Yehui!" Changxiao, still in a fine mood, laughed and cupped his hands. "Si Boxiu is always watching me, and the other clans around the lake resent my presence. Without your righteous assistance, I truly could not have investigated this matter on my own!"

Growing impatient with the pleasantries, Yehui offered a polite smile. "Fellow Daoist Changxiao, surely you can give me the Crimson-Headed Profound Soul now!"

"Ah, not so hasty!" Changxiao chuckled. "This matter isn't concluded yet. Besides, your third divine ability is still incomplete. Do you forget how difficult the path forward is?"

He paused, then shifted his tone. "The Soul-Summoning Lore is a Life Divine Ability. There are plenty of lineages in Jiangnan that teach such arts, yet you've never pursued them. You must look down on them, meaning you have something better in your hands—something so formidable that it requires a treasure like the Crimson-Headed Profound Soul. I imagine it's no easy task. It will likely take you forty or fifty years. Why the sudden urgency?"

"Once this business is properly settled," he concluded, "I will naturally hand the item over to you."

'Empty promises, you old fox.'

Though frustration simmered within him, Yehui merely nodded in agreement. "You may not be aware, Fellow Daoist, but I've received word that the Dragon King of the Beihai Sea has been inactive for years. The thunder is about to fall, and the situation then will be far more complex. We should resolve this now, while we still can. In a few years, we can retreat into seclusion."

As a cultivator from the Eastern Sea, how could Yehui not know this? "That's hardly news," he said flatly.

Changxiao, well aware of his companion's prickly nature, simply continued, "But I do have a piece of good news for you."

He smiled. "Xuanyi and the Pure Unity Dao Gate got into a massive brawl. The fighting was so intense it roiled the seas, and even the Dragon King of the Crimson Reef Island had to intervene. If my information is correct, we won't have to worry about Mount Jingyi for the foreseeable future."

This, at last, earned a nod from Yehui. Xuanyi was a formidable opponent. If cultivators from Mount Jingyi had intervened, his own Capital Immortals Dao might not have been their match. With Xuanyi out of the picture, it was unlikely the core disciples of Mount Jingyi would venture out. How could this not be good news?

After exchanging a few more words, Yehui politely saw Changxiao off. Returning to the table, he stared gloomily in the direction his guest had departed. A long while later, he muttered, "If the Crimson-Headed Profound Soul weren't

so incredibly rare, with that old bastard holding the only one he found in the Encompassing Profundity Grotto-Heaven… I wouldn't be at his mercy."

"A pity about my Capital Immortals Dao lineage… So many of our arts have become useless with the decline of spiritual energy. Otherwise, I wouldn't be in this position. The Encompassing Profundity Grotto-Heaven opens so rarely. Who knows when it will be accessible again? I can't afford to wait."

He let out a sharp breath and rubbed his temples, gritting his teeth.

"That old scoundrel did this on purpose. Now the feud between my sect and the Li Clan has deepened. By the time this all comes out into the open… even if he doesn't give me a thing, I'll be forced to help him deal with them!"

Truthfully, Yehui had no desire to target the Li Clan. They were a useful buffer against the Azure Pond and Golden Feather Sects. But with Changxi constantly stirring up trouble and Changxiao applying pressure, he felt his options dwindling.

"Some things must be done. I'll delay Li Ximing, handle this as delicately as possible. As long as Si Boxiu is still alive… I mustn't push him too far."

The Li Clan was wary of Yehui, but they didn't know that the Purple Mansion Daoist Master of the Capital Immortals Dao was just as wary of them. He hadn't even used his full strength in the recent battle, doing just enough to fulfill his obligation to Changxiao.

"The moment I push Li Ximing into Si Boxiu's arms, the moment I force the Li Clan back to the Azure Pond Sect, I can forget about gaining even the smallest foothold in Jiangnan. Si Boxiu will do everything he can to make the Li Clan dependent on Azure Pond and will interfere directly. Once that man gets involved, I can forget about ever getting my hands on the treasures of Xiaoshi Mountain!"

'Besides… I came to Jiangbei to establish a sect, not to make enemies! Li Ximing is not even a century old. If Li Zhouwei can't handle him… that's even more unsettling.'

After pondering for a long time, Yehui finally set down his jade cup and drew his Dharma sword.

'The only way to deal with Kong Haiying is through the Profound Wonder Temple. Eliminating him will not only remove a future threat but will also drive a

wedge between Profound Wonder and Moongaze. Sumian is the type to appease and de-escalate. This won't be difficult.'

Chapter 733: Taking Stock

Li Ximing streaked across the Great Void, his form materializing in the sky above the untamed wilderness. He pushed up a sleeve, revealing the back of his hand where a speck of purple light pulsed with a sullen glow.

During the recent chase and clash, he had exchanged several blows with Yehui, who had managed to leave a wound on him. The injury was trivial, however, having almost no effect on his Dharma Body. He estimated it would take an ordinary Purple Mansion cultivator half a month to heal, but his own Heavenly Audience Gate technique was exceptionally skilled at grinding away foreign dharma power. It would likely take him only two or three days.

He examined it closely, then raised his other hand and swiped it across the back of the first, slicing off the afflicted piece of flesh. He held it up, studying it for a moment with a thoughtful expression before letting it merge back into his hand.

'For a typical Purple Mansion cultivator, if a part of their Dharma Body sustains too much damage, they can simply discard it and mold a new one. It's just a matter of which method is less time-consuming. But since I can suppress and nullify the damage, direct healing is usually faster. Other Purple Mansion cultivators likely have their own methods.'

With that thought, he descended. Below, cultivators moved to and fro. Not wishing to cause a scene with the requisite kneeling and bowing, Li Ximing casually veiled himself with an illusion and walked straight past the crowds.

He arrived before the main hall just as Kong Guxi was stepping out. The man named Fu Yuezi followed dutifully behind him, a golden spear and a golden axe strapped to his back. Of the other guest elders from the Profound Peak Gate, only a man named Sun Bai was willing to walk a few extra steps to offer some courteous words.

"Sect Master, please wait. Allow me to see to your injuries."

Sun Bai formed a hand seal and began to heal Kong Guxi. Li Ximing glanced over them. Among the Profound Peak cultivators, only Fu Yuezi and Sun Bai were truly presentable.

Sun Bai, a cultivator of the Verdant Grove lineage, specialized in healing and restoration. He had been protected as fiercely as any Li clansman during the battle, so his value was self-evident. As for Fu Yuezi, his Immortal Foundation was the Heavenly Gilded Helm, and he possessed considerable skill, enough to be ranked on the same level as Ding Weizeng within the Li clan.

Kong Guxi had performed exceptionally well in the great battle, advancing and retreating with sound judgment, but he had also sustained grievous wounds. Li Ximing naturally had to see him. He let his form become visible. Kong Guxi had been speaking politely with Sun Bai, but when his eyes caught the coalescing celestial light, he was so startled he immediately dropped to his knees.

"Greetings, Daoist Master!"

A wave of kneeling spread through the area. The Jade Court Guards on both sides dropped their polearms and knelt, the weapons clattering crisply on the ground.

"Rise," Li Ximing acknowledged.

The moment Kong Guxi saw him, the anxiety in his heart vanished completely, replaced by a surge of joy. The deep furrows in his brow smoothed out. But joy was swiftly followed by trepidation, and his face settled into an expression of reverence and submission.

Li Ximing had only recently reached the Purple Mansion Realm, while Yehui was at the mid-stage. Although Kong Guxi knew it was difficult for one Purple Mansion cultivator to truly defeat another, he couldn't help but worry. Seeing Li Ximing's calm demeanor brought him more relief than the successful defense of the wilderness. Yet, with the matter of Mount Jingyi still unresolved, he couldn't help but feel a sense of dread.

Li Ximing's spiritual sense swept over him, taking in his condition at a glance. The man's lower body was nothing but a skeleton, an injury inflicted by a Capital Guard Dao lineage that wielded sharp, baleful attacks.

'It must have been the Western Heaven Plateau.'

Kong Guxi himself cultivated the Fool's Mountain Chase, which offered no special resilience to his physical body. Li Ximing waved his sleeve, and the life-giving force of Bright Yang descended upon Kong Guxi. The man felt an itch at his wounds and a warmth spreading through him as his flesh began to regenerate, allowing him to stand firmly on the ground once more.

The power of Bright Yang could restore flesh and blood, but not one's cultivation. Still, it spared Kong Guxi the effort of taking medicine. The Profound Peak's sect master knelt again, his voice filled with gratitude.

"Thank you, Daoist Master!"

Behind him, the wounds on Fu Yuezi also began to close. However, his Immortal Foundation refined his Dharma Body to be ferocious in battle, which also made injuries harder to heal. The momentary recovery was only skin-deep; he would need to reforge the damaged parts later. He lowered his head and knelt alongside Kong Guxi.

'This one is utterly loyal,' Li Ximing noted. He had observed Fu Yuezi earlier. The man fought with true ferocity and had risked his life to save his fellow Profound Peak cultivators.

Li Ximing paused. Though he held out little hope, he still had to ask, "What is the situation at Mount Jingyi?"

Kong Guxi could only recount the news he had received. Li Ximing shook his head, thinking grimly, 'Shanji Prefecture is lost.'

Kong Guxi was still fraught with anxiety. Though the blame couldn't be laid at his feet, he maintained a fearful posture.

"I will make a trip to Mount Jingyi when the opportunity arises," Li Ximing said casually. "In the meantime, I need to borrow your Wood Virtue guest elder for a while."

Sun Bai was competent and his Immortal Foundation was useful. The Li clan's own Funan territory was a wreck, with everyone wounded. It was a request Li Zhouwei might find awkward to make, so Li Ximing made it himself.

His dismissal of the Mount Jingyi matter was a great relief to Kong Guxi. At the request to borrow Sun Bai, Kong Guxi pressed his forehead to the ground. "Daoist Master jests," he said respectfully. "Before his passing, our patriarch instructed that we are to obey all of your commands. Never mind Guest Elder Sun,

all of the Profound Peak Gate's affairs are subject to the Daoist Master's will. This junior has no right to object and no desire to overstep. I only await your immortal command."

Li Ximing had long known the man was obedient and easy to manage, so he wasn't surprised. His gaze swept over the crowd. "The battle is over for now. All of you, go to the Profound Wonder Temple. Don't be shy with Sumian."

He transformed into a ray of celestial light and vanished, leaving the members of the Kong clan staring at each other. Kong Guxi, who was laughed at during Changxi's death, had no real desire to go to the Profound Wonder Temple. But his people's injuries were truly severe, so he had no choice but to lead them there on the wind.

Meanwhile, Li Ximing phased into the main hall. Li Zhouwei's eyes lit up, and he stepped down from the main seat. Before he could speak, Li Ximing laughed heartily. "Such a magnificent display of power."

Li Zhouwei knew he was referring to the matter with Guan Kan. He chuckled in response and summoned an attendant. "Bring Miaoshui here."

Only then did he turn back to Li Ximing. "As expected, that Yehui was no match for you, Daoist Master. The old master sent me three consecutive letters. I can finally give him a proper reply."

Li Xuanxuan was back at the lake, but his thoughts were still on the riverfront battles. Li Ximing nodded with a smile. Li Zhouwei hadn't brought the matter up for no reason. He immediately followed up with a sigh. "Unfortunately… Elder Siwei was captured. I sent men to intercept them, but once Situ Mo left our territory, he retreated into his mountain gate and hasn't moved since. We sent messengers to inquire, but the Golden Tang Gate has given no response…"

"The master mentioned this repeatedly in his letters. I don't know how I should answer him."

'An Siwei captured…'

Li Ximing felt a headache coming on. Though An Siwei's strength was lacking and he had no special Dao lineage, he was a loyal retainer who had served for many years. The An family had intermarried with the Li for a century. In truth, An Siwei's status was no different from that of a Foundation Establishment cultivator with the surname Li.

He understood Li Zhouwei's meaning and said gravely, "We must first get a clear picture of the situation. If An Siwei is still at the Golden Tang Gate, or if he's been sent west, we might have a chance through the Golden Feather Sect. But if he was sent to the White Ye Immortal Sect… then things will be much more difficult."

Li Zhouwei nodded with a thoughtful look. "When I fought that Guan Kan, I reached a critical moment and a White Qilin phenomenon manifested. It saved me, but it also accidentally killed him. I have no idea what his status is in the Capital Immortals Dao."

Li Ximing hesitated for a moment before Li Zhouwei continued, his expression serious, "Regarding the Profound Peak Gate, while our clan did act out of friendship, from another perspective… for all the powers surrounding them, this was nothing more than a feast to divide the spoils."

"The Capital Immortals Dao came south. Whether they gained much or little, they still profited. The Profound Wonder Temple and our Moongaze Lake, who helped the Profound Peak Gate, were in a sense also encroaching. There were no losers in this great battle. The only thing that happened was that the Profound Peak Gate's centuries-old foundation was served up on a platter…"

He shook his head, a hint of unease on his face. "From Guan Gongxiao's attitude, the battle on the river was about flexing muscles and showing strength, to see who would get a bigger share. But now, a man with the surname Guan is dead. I'm afraid Guan Kan has some important bloodline or background. If this incites a true war between our two sides, that would be real trouble."

Hearing Li Zhouwei's analysis, Li Ximing nodded slightly. He had sensed something similar from Yehui's attitude. 'Compared to his callousness toward Changxi, Yehui seemed to maintain an ambiguous attitude of not wanting to completely fall out with me from start to finish… It seems that to these Purple Mansion cultivators… the lives of certain Foundation Establishment cultivators aren't worth a frown.'

The two conferred for a moment, and Li Zhouwei set the matter aside. "Besides," he added, "I revealed my phenomenon. I fear it has been noticed by those with ill intentions, which is not a good thing."

Li Ximing nodded and sighed. "Now I understand why these Purple Mansion cultivators need to raise capable Foundation Establishment subordinates. If we

had one or two more skilled players, you wouldn't have had to enter the fray yourself! How are your injuries?"

"They are severe, but not debilitating."

Li Zhouwei's wounds were not light, but they didn't affect his daily functions.

"Have Sun Bai come see you," Li Ximing instructed. "Tomorrow, I'll take a trip to the Eastern Sea. I'll hunt some demons and refine their essences with the clan's treasure medicines. I'll have you healed in no time. Once you've recovered, take the Talisman Pill and enter seclusion. Your priority is to break through to the late stage of Foundation Establishment."

After settling these matters, Li Ximing looked around to ensure no one was listening in the Great Void, then spoke via a secret voice transmission technique.

"Regarding the Talisman Qi conferment, what are Minghuang's thoughts?"

Li Zhouwei had been wanting to ask about this. He seized the opportunity and replied, "Daoist Master, now that you've reached the Purple Mansion Realm, has there been any change in your Talisman Qi?"

Li Ximing paused for a moment, then shook his head. "None. It's the same as always. It can manipulate fire and draw in Qi to refine my dharma power. Before reaching the Purple Mansion Realm, I rarely fought, so I was the least skilled among my brothers at using the Talisman Qi. Furthermore, my Heavenly Audience Gate technique can already command fire, so for the moment, I can't discern its full capabilities."

Li Zhouwei pondered for a moment. "This junior's thoughts are as follows… First, the clan's Purple Mansion grand array has not yet been constructed. The ritual to request the Talisman Qi is a major event that will attract a lot of attention. Many Purple Mansion cultivators are watching our clan because of me, so it's best to be cautious. If we absolutely must do it, it should at least be performed at the Profound Peak Gate's mountain."

"There is another point…" Li Zhouwei hesitated, then continued in a low voice, transmitting his words with dharma power. "Since this junior is about to reach the late stage of Foundation Establishment anyway, wouldn't the ability of the Talisman Qi to enhance cultivation be wasted? Why not wait until… this junior also breaks through to the Purple Mansion Realm. With two Daoist Masters in our clan, plus our immortal artifact, could we not plan a trip to the Southern Borderlands or the Four Seas to bring back a Purple Mansion demon…"

"At that time, we could also observe the differences in its various mystical properties… Perhaps this method could even aid in cultivating divine abilities… Used unexpectedly, it could even become a trump card."

"A Purple Mansion demon?!"

Li Ximing had never considered such a possibility. He was genuinely stunned. Having reached the Purple Mansion Realm himself, he knew how difficult it was to corner and kill a cultivator of that level. But as he thought it through, he realized that while difficult, it wasn't a reason to dismiss Li Zhouwei's idea. After all, the Talisman Qi for a Foundation Establishment cultivator could still advance one's cultivation. It would be better to use it to advance a divine ability than waste it on the final push to the late stage…

"Good…" he nodded repeatedly. The two of them reined in their thoughts just as Qu Bushi requested permission and entered from outside the hall.

"Greetings, Clan Head, Daoist Master," he knelt. "I have brought the Daoist Miaoshui."

Behind him was a sturdy-looking stone coffin. The old man opened the lid, revealing a woman lying within. Her body was severed into three parts at the neck and waist. Her abdomen was empty, with nothing but a shriveled heart left in her thoracic cavity.

"Daoist Miaoshui was cut into three pieces. Although we managed to neutralize the dharma power at the wounds in time and gave her a Wanling Flower, her life was still hanging by a thread. The Clan Head had Guest Elder Sun piece her back together… and with the secrets of my Palace of Concealed Storage art, we barely managed to preserve her."

The old man, though cunning and better at fleeing than fighting, possessed a compassionate heart. He frowned at Miaoshui's state and pleaded, "I have gotten to know her over the years because of matters related to the water veins. Though she had a rough past in the Eastern Sea and her dharma power isn't perfectly pure, she's a good child and has always been well-behaved…"

Li Ximing glanced at Miaoshui and nodded. "As long as she is not dead."

He took a pill from his sleeve and placed it in Miaoshui's abdomen. A ray of celestial light shone down from between his brows, and the life-giving force of Bright Yang bloomed. Miaoshui's complexion immediately turned rosy. She gasped, then suddenly sat bolt upright, her eyes looking around in a daze.

After a few breaths, she climbed out of the coffin, her clear eyes welling with tears. She kowtowed. "Thank you, Daoist Master!"

Li Ximing gave a slight nod, a hint of surprise in his eyes. Having hovered at the edge of life and death, Miaoshui's gaze seemed clearer, her entire disposition transformed. As tears streamed down her face, Li Ximing said, "Your injuries were too severe. Your Juque Palace was damaged, so you will be unable to cultivate any related techniques or spells. Breaking through to the Purple Mansion Realm is now impossible. Wait for some time. If an opportunity arises, I will help you heal your Juque."

Miaoshui wept uncontrollably. Having been hacked into three pieces, she had experienced the slow process of her own death, a torment and shock others could not comprehend. She simply kowtowed again. "Thank you, Daoist Master, for saving my life. I no longer hope for divine abilities, nor do I have any wondrous arts to cultivate. To be given a new lease on life is a fortune beyond words. All else is meaningless. I only wish to return to my mountain and see my parents, to embrace them and weep."

Li Ximing's expression was complicated. Li Zhouwei nodded and dismissed the two of them.

"Weizeng was a pillar of strength at Funan," Li Zhouwei said. "He fought many opponents at once and retreated with grace. If not for him and the Chongming Profound Insight Screen, we might have had to abandon Funan for a time. He is now severely injured."

He swept a hand across the tabletop, and three Dharma Artifacts materialized. All of them shimmered with brilliant light, their edges smooth and their inscriptions complex. They were clearly items of the highest quality among Dharma Artifacts.

Li Ximing nodded in approval. "The Capital Immortals Dao has operated in the Eastern Sea for so many years and took a hefty prize from the northern bank of the river. They're truly swimming in wealth," he chuckled. "With these three Dharma Artifacts… our losses at Funan and in the wilderness are practically negligible!"

He was being conservative. The life of a single Foundation Establishment rogue cultivator from the Eastern Sea might not even be worth one of these items. The Profound Peak guest elders who died at the hands of the Capital Immortals Dao were certainly not as valuable as these artifacts!

Li Zhouwei smiled. "It is precisely because these Dharma Artifacts are so powerful that they will take a long time to refine… at least a month or two for each."

"That's simple." Li Ximing raised an eyebrow. He gathered his divine power and dharma power in his mouth and blew gently. A bright light washed over the three items, and his divine ability instantly refined them. The celestial light lifted each one into the air.

The string of small, cold iron rings that Guan Kan had used was the first to react. There were eighteen silver rings in total, each no bigger than a fist and inscribed with the pattern of Pit Water. "This is the Pit-Metal Encircling Chain," Li Ximing said casually. "A high-grade Pit Water Dharma Artifact, primarily for binding and entanglement. It cannot compare to the Profound Punishment Talisman or the Profound Insight Screen, but it's on par with Minggong's Crimson Flame Brazier."

Chapter 734: A Claim from the Sword Gate

Li Zhouwei had been ensnared by the Pit-Metal Encircling Chain before. Fortunately, he had managed to suppress it with his immortal foundation in a surprise move, otherwise, he would have been in for a world of trouble.

"This artifact may not have much destructive power, but its ability to restrain is exceptional," he said. "It would be particularly effective against cultivators with potent Dharma Bodies. One or two people might be enough to trap such an expert."

Li Ximing nodded. While these items were of little use to him, they were treasures for a Foundation Establishment cultivator. "Its primary function is binding, which makes it quite useful," he replied. "However, our clan has no cultivators who have reached Foundation Establishment through the Pit Water virtue. The only one even remotely close is Miaoshui."

"Although she contributed greatly in the battle, many others were injured. The Pit-Metal Encircling Chain is a valuable artifact, and to award it so casually would be poor stewardship. Let's store it for now and bring it out when it's needed in a future conflict."

Li Zhouwei put the artifact away and picked up the dark, unassuming Capital Immortals Dao Bell. As his spiritual sense swept over it, a hint of surprise crossed his face. "It's imbued with Pure Qi."

Pure Qi was one of the most common Daoist lineages among rogue cultivators, especially in Jiangnan. Eight out of ten of them followed the path of the Lesser Pure Spirit Qi. Most of these cultivators never advanced beyond Embryonic Breathing, and it was common for a single Dharma Artifact to be passed down through three generations. Consequently, there was an abundance of Pure Qi artifacts for those at the Embryonic Breathing stage.

While Pure Qi cultivators were numerous at the lower levels, their numbers dwindled significantly at the Foundation Establishment realm, though they still represented a notable portion. Li Ximing, however, had never even heard of a Purple Mansion Daoist Master from the Pure Qi lineage. Foundation Establishment artifacts of this path were equally scarce, and the few he had seen were crudely made. This was the first time he had encountered one of such high quality.

He turned the black bell over, examining it closely. The materials, the refining techniques, the array patterns etched upon its surface—all were of a contemporary style. Li Ximing frowned. "How strange. Guan Gongxiao, the esteemed young master of the Capital Immortals Dao, goes to the trouble of refining and nurturing a Dharma Artifact, yet he chooses to use Pure Qi instead of his own sect's Capital Guard…"

He exchanged a look with Li Zhouwei. "It seems there's some connection between the Capital Guard and Pure Qi. Interesting."

The Pure Qi lineage had no significant strengths or weaknesses against other paths, but this Capital Immortals Dao Bell was of a higher grade than the Pit-Metal Encircling Chain, nearly rivaling the Yang-Li Crimson Sparrow Banner. Li Ximing let Li Zhouwei keep it for his own use before finally turning his attention to the small mirror.

The mirror was only the size of a palm, with an ancient bronze hue. Its twin-ringed frame was intricately carved with depictions of various beasts in motion. Though it was the most ornate of the three items, its quality was the lowest, and the craftsmanship was not particularly skilled. Li Ximing gave it a glance and said, "A Dharma Artifact, the Bronze-Winged Brightwhite. The frame is made from Virtue-Edict Bronze, and the mirrored surface is White Crane Lapis, a material from the True Qi lineage. The artifact isn't very old. It must have been specially prepared for our family's Profound Light users."

Li Zhouwei had little interest in this item and planned to pass it down to Ding Weizeng, so he tucked it into his sleeve for the time being.

"That old fox Yehui…" Li Ximing finally mused. "I wonder what game he's playing. I should deal with the matter of Shanji Prefecture quickly. Then there's the issue of Xiaoshi Mountain… I ought to pay a visit to the Revering Radiance Gate."

He mounted his Profound Light and vanished into the Great Void, leaving Li Zhouwei alone in the hall. After a moment of contemplation, Li Wen came to report, his face still pale. He entered the hall and knelt.

"Patriarch, a messenger has come from the Old Master to ask if there has been any progress regarding An Siwei's situation. The Old Master says that Elder An returned to the lake without a word, and we cannot let his heart grow cold."

An Siwei had been captured by the Golden Tang Gate, and that coward Situ Mo was holed up and refusing to show his face. Unless a Purple Mansion Daoist Master personally made the trip, there was little Li Zhouwei could do. He could only send back a message expressing the Daoist Master's concern and dispatched someone with the news.

He stood with his hands behind his back and asked Li Wen, who was still in the hall, "The Old Master asks about this daily. Such frequency… are the letters coming through the Jade Court?"

Li Wen served in the Jade Court and was the most knowledgeable on this matter. "There is no record of it in the Jade Court's logs," he answered. "It must be that the Old Master sent a personal confidant to the East Shore first."

Li Zhouwei's suspicions were confirmed. The East Shore was currently managed by Li Jiangxia, who was Lady An's son. It was this young man's people who were rushing back and forth. He simply tapped his brush on the desk. "He certainly is anxious."

Li Wen bowed his head, pretending not to hear.

"Send a reply through the Jade Court," Li Zhouwei instructed. "Make it clear to the Old Master that the Golden Tang Gate would not dare harm a clan elder, nor would the Golden Feather Sect. Even if he had fallen into the hands of the Capital Immortals Dao earlier, he might have suffered a bit, but his life would not have been in danger."

"What is a monumental crisis for a Foundation Establishment cultivator is nothing more than a single sentence, a single game piece, to one at the Purple Mansion realm. Tell him not to worry."

After dismissing Li Wen, he finally began to tend to his wounds.

The main injuries Li Zhouwei had sustained in the great battle were to his head. His forehead had been fractured in two places. Though the external flesh had

healed, an injury that affected the bone was not so easily mended. His other wounds were from the water chains he'd endured while taking Guan Kan's life, but those were healing quickly with the help of medicinal elixirs.

Li Zhouwei had only been recuperating in the hall for a dozen days, occasionally pausing to reply to messages, when Kong Guxi and the others unexpectedly returned.

Sumian had kept his word. The Profound Wonder Temple had put forth a genuine effort. The injuries of the Profound Peak Gate cultivators had greatly improved. Those with minor wounds were almost fully recovered, and even the heavily injured would be restored after a year or so of seclusion. Kong Guxi, however, wore a grim expression.

Li Zhouwei summoned Li Chenghui and questioned him in detail. He learned that the Profound Wonder Temple had already constructed a courtyard on the mountain where Changxi had passed away. They had even given it a name. Because it directly faced Salt Lake, it was called Lakeview Peak—the Peak that Wards off the Lake—with the meaning that hardship, like the vast lake, was to be kept outside the temple's gates by this peak.

It was difficult to say whether this was a gesture of goodwill or an assertion of dominance. The Kong Clan was at its most vulnerable and had to rely on the Profound Wonder Temple for healing. Kong Guxi had naturally worn a fawning expression when he went there, but upon returning to the wilderness, he fell silent.

After Li Chenghui finished his report, Li Zhouwei responded, "It's not necessarily a bad thing that he's displeased. It might even be his way of demonstrating loyalty. In any case, send someone to placate him. We will need the Profound Wonder Temple's healing services again in the future, so we can't allow the Profound Peak Gate members to become too resentful."

The Profound Wonder Temple, after all, followed a Treasured Earth Dao lineage and possessed considerable expertise in healing. Neither Li Ximing nor Li Zhouwei would easily let go of such a valuable resource.

Li Cheng acknowledged the order and withdrew. As light and shadow shifted in the hall, Li Zhouwei had just finished healing a patch of skin when Li Ximing tore through the Great Void and descended.

In his hand, he held a horned beast, no larger than a calf, bound tightly by the Profound Light. Despite its size, its aura was ferocious. Though it was immobilized, its eyes glared with untamed fury.

Li Ximing casually tossed the beast to the floor and smiled. "It's truly difficult to find an unaligned demon general these days. I searched along the river, all the way to the State of Wu. I asked a local clan for information and found this creature in the middle of devouring people. It had the misfortune of running into me."

He then produced a jade box from his sleeve and opened it. Inside lay a spirit grass that shimmered like fine jade. Without pausing, Li Ximing knocked the horned beast unconscious. "The Purple Smoke Gate gifted us the *Tome of Adamant Flame Alchemy*," he explained. "The alchemical techniques within are quite beneficial to me. It even includes a Purple Mansion pill recipe called the Profound Adamant Heart-Sutra Pill, which is said to help overcome karmic trials."

"This beast follows the Pure Qi lineage, which is perfect. And with this Jade Lingzhi Clear Orchid from the Shen Clan, one batch should yield six pills—enough for all of you."

It was the first time Li Zhouwei had heard the name of a Purple Mansion-level pill. As he pondered it, Li Ximing shook his head. "This medicine is life-saving for a Foundation Establishment cultivator, but for someone at the Purple Mansion realm, it's merely for healing injuries. It's a common-grade item among Purple Mansion treasures. If it were truly exceptional, they wouldn't have given it to our family."

An ordinary alchemist would take three to five months to refine a batch of healing pills that used treasured herbs. But with his divine ability, Li Ximing could forgo a cauldron for many common elixirs. This particular pill would only take him three to five days. "I can now refine any pill below the Purple Mansion level with my divine ability," he continued. "The Profound Adamant Heart-Sutra Pill isn't much more difficult. I'll have someone deliver it to you in a couple of days."

No matter how common it was, the elixir was still potent enough to heal a Purple Mansion Daoist Master. The Purple Smoke Gate's gift was not a light one. Li

Ximing sighed. "It takes far too long for a demon beast to reach Foundation Establishment, and you can't just catch one whenever you want. It's no wonder the Daoist lineages of Jiangnan favor using humans for their alchemy."

As the two were discussing matters, Li Chenghui returned, entering the hall with a sense of urgency. His expression was somewhat awkward, and he only spoke in a low voice when he drew near. "Patriarch, Daoist Master… someone from the Sword Gate has arrived. They say they've come to the Profound Peak Gate to claim something."

"The Sword Gate? Myriad Radiance?"

This was a development no one had anticipated. Li Zhouwei was genuinely stunned. "Who is it? And what are they claiming?"

Li Cheng shook his head. "I've already arranged for them to be guided to a side hall and have summoned Kong Guxi and the others."

"Let them come up," Li Ximing said.

He immediately withdrew. Li Zhouwei rose from the main seat and moved to the side. The members of the Sword Gate entered the hall, led by the sword cultivator Cheng Jinzhu.

The longsword on his back seemed to hum with sharp intent, and his gaze was piercing. He first bowed to Li Ximing before clasping his hands in a salute. "Greetings, Daoist Master. Since our parting at the sword peak, my own Daoist Master has often spoken of you. He bade me to first extend his well-wishes."

"There's no need for such formality." Li Ximing had a good impression of Lingmei. After their conversation, he had found him to be far from the rigid traditionalists he imagined from the Sword Gate; he was actually quite agreeable.

Cheng Jinzhu did not waste time. After a few polite inquiries about their well-being, he got straight to the point. "This junior has come today on a certain matter… Senior Changxi once borrowed a Wind-Hearing White Stone Mountain from my sect. He pledged that upon his death, he would return the southern shore of Salt Lake, along with the nine eastern towns of Shanji Prefecture. The time has now come for these to be returned."

His words fell into a stunned silence that enveloped the hall.

Though the Myriad Radiance Sword Gate was renowned for its integrity, Cheng Jinzhu's statement left Li Zhouwei, and even Li Ximing, momentarily speechless. A heavy quiet descended upon the hall.

The reason was simple: there had been no news, not even a whisper, of such an agreement. Neither Changxi nor Kong Guxi had ever mentioned it. It was only Myriad Radiance's stellar reputation that gave them pause; had it been any other sect, they would have immediately assumed it was a shameless act of opportunism, kicking a man when he was down.

After a noticeable pause, Li Ximing finally spoke. "Go and bring Kong Guxi up."

A few dozen breaths later, the middle-aged man hurried into the hall. He paid his respects to Li Ximing and the others before noticing Cheng Jinzhu. Kong Guxi's face showed no hint of suspicion, only a desire to curry favor. "Greetings, Daoist Cheng!"

By now, even Cheng Jinzhu looked puzzled. He glanced at Kong Guxi tentatively and said, "Greetings, Sect Master…"

A sense of suspicion grew in Li Zhouwei's heart. He smiled. "Sect Master Kong, this is an old matter concerning your Profound Peak Gate. The Cheng clan has come to retrieve something."

"Ah?"

Kong Guxi was completely lost. Seeing the situation in the hall, he had assumed the Li Clan was handing over Shanji Prefecture to Myriad Radiance and he was just here to witness the outcome. He never expected such a sudden turn of events, and a sense of unease washed over him.

Cheng Jinzhu had no choice but to repeat his statement. Kong Guxi's eyes widened in disbelief. Cheng Jinzhu even added, "The Wind-Hearing White Stone Mountain is a dharma treasure our sect obtained from the Mirrored-Mirage Grotto-Heaven. It is no ordinary item. The sect wishes to make use of it now, so I have come to inquire."

'A dharma treasure!'

A wave of bitter grief crashed over Kong Guxi. He raged internally. 'Fine, just fine! Everyone wants to kick us while we're down. But you, Myriad Radiance Sword Gate, you are a noble lineage of the Green Pine and Supreme Yang Dao!

How could you be so cruel as to throw stones at my family? If you want our territory, just take it! Where would we possibly get a dharma treasure for you?'

But circumstances were stronger than he was. Let alone the Profound Peak Gate's current decline, even at the height of their power, the Kong Clan would not have dared to offend Myriad Radiance. Beads of sweat formed on his brow as he cast a pleading gaze toward Li Zhouwei.

Cheng Jinzhu was not slow to notice. He immediately sensed something was wrong. "Sect Master, can it be that you were unaware of this matter?"

'What does it matter if I was or not? If the Daoist Master says it exists, then it exists…' Kong Guxi saw that the members of the Li Clan remained silent and could only stammer, "Perhaps… perhaps there was such an arrangement… This territory is to be yielded to the Sword Gate…"

An odd expression flickered across Cheng Jinzhu's face. "Sect Master Kong, where is the dharma treasure?"

With the conversation at this point, Li Ximing had to intervene. "This involves a dharma treasure, a matter of great importance," he said. "The Sword Gate may take possession of the pledged territory for now. As for the Wind-Hearing White Stone Mountain, I have not yet seen it. Let us set the matter aside for the moment. The Profound Peak Gate can cede a few more towns as payment to continue leasing the dharma treasure. If you have an urgent need for it, I will discuss the matter in detail with Senior Lingmei."

Whatever Myriad Radiance's motives were, and whether this agreement was real or not, having someone take over a portion of Shanji Prefecture was a good thing. Li Ximing decided to lock it in. Cheng Jinzhu was in no position to negotiate with Li Ximing, but fortunately, his master had given him instructions beforehand. He spoke with a serious tone, "Since the Daoist Master has spoken, this matter will be arranged by Moongaze Lake. My Sword Gate understands that the Profound Peak Gate is at a critical juncture. The Wind-Hearing White Stone Mountain may be of extreme importance to your esteemed sect. We are not a lineage that preys on the vulnerable. My master said long ago that if it is a matter of the Profound Peak Gate's survival, its return is not absolutely necessary."

Li Zhouwei, however, recalled something. "Your esteemed sect may send men to take control of Shanji Prefecture, but Salt Lake is now in the hands of the Pro-

found Wonder Temple. To cede the southern shore, you will have to speak with Daoist Master Sumian."

"Clan Head," Cheng Jinzhu replied with a steady smile, shaking his head. "My master sent a letter yesterday. The Profound Wonder Temple has already complied. In fact, Daoist Master Sumian came to our sword peak to offer his apologies to my master, but he was not present. He was received by Daoist Master Qi and sent back."

The statement revealed the staggering status of the Myriad Radiance Sword Gate. Yet, both Kong Guxi and Cheng Jinzhu seemed to take it as a matter of course. Li Ximing's eyes narrowed slightly as understanding dawned.

'Is it because of Lingmei's supreme strength and unparalleled swordsmanship, or is it that the status of the Green Pine Dao lineage… is far more revered than we imagined?'

'In the Yue State, whether it's the Three Sects and Ten Gates or the subsequent Seven Gates, these powers rise and fall. Yet the six Dao lineages of the Chongming Palace have endured without fail. How could that be a coincidence?'

Chapter 735: The Profound Peak Gate

The thought was a fleeting spark in Li Ximing's mind, yet it ignited a deep well of questions.

'If that's true… the kinship between the two major sects and the four minor gates might be far closer than I imagined. If Jiangnan's entire Dao lineage truly originates from Green Pine Island, what does that signify? My breakthrough to the Purple Mansion Realm was met with obligatory congratulations and the custom of visiting the three great families. Are these traditions merely the rules and restraints of Jiangnan… or are they a form of power, a privilege exclusive to the region's dominant forces?'

After a moment of contemplation, he gave a slight nod. In that instant, the eastern territories of Shanji Prefecture, the heartland of the Profound Peak Gate, were ceded. Kong Guxi could only feel a sense of relief that Li Ximing had agreed at all.

Though Cheng Jinzhu was privately bewildered, he was content that his mission for the gate was complete. He knew better than to prattle on in the presence of a Daoist Master. "The dharma treasure was borrowed by the former sect master, Kong Tingyun, when she accompanied the Daoist Master," he explained. "It seems the current sect master is unaware of the details. It's possible some arrangements were never formally passed down."

Li Zhouwei's ears perked at the mention of Kong Tingyun's name. He raised an eyebrow. "And what miraculous properties does this dharma treasure possess?"

Cheng Jinzhu considered this for a moment. "I have never seen the dharma treasure itself," he admitted. "I only heard that within the Mirrored-Mirage Grotto-Heaven, it was used as a decoration at the foot of a mountain. When it reveals its true form, it is said to be as vast as a mountain itself, snow-white and translucent. It can awaken spiritual potential, clarify the mind, and calm the spirit."

Li Ximing committed this to memory and exchanged a look with Li Zhouwei before changing the subject. "I once spoke with Daoist Master Lingmei about array formations. Do you have any news on that front?"

Several of the Purple Mansion cultivators Li Ximing had visited had mentioned this matter, so Cheng Jinzhu was prepared. "Daoist Master Lingmei has already sent a letter to an old friend at sea," he replied. "But the response was that his friend is in seclusion and won't be available for the foreseeable future."

He paused briefly. After Li Zhouwei dismissed Kong Guxi, Cheng Jinzhu continued in a lower voice, "There is also Daoist Master Tinglan of the Purple Smoke Gate. Their lineage excels in array formations. While she may not be able to lay down a new Purple Mansion array from scratch, she is skilled at adapting what already exists. She could move and modify a pre-existing grand array… its power might shift, but it would remain at the Purple Mansion level."

The implication was immediately clear to everyone present.

'He's talking about the Profound Peak Gate's grand array!'

Li Ximing signaled his understanding, and Cheng Jinzhu took his leave. Once the hall was empty, Li Ximing spoke. "Minghuang, the story from the Myriad Radiance Sword Gate doesn't sound like a lie. I've met Lingmei. Although his ideals clash with those of the Myriad Radiance elders and he yearns for reform, he doesn't seem like the type to resort to such schemes."

Li Zhouwei nodded in agreement. "This affair has little to do with our family, but it should be investigated swiftly. Regardless of whether the claim is true or false, the Sword Gate must not be allowed to lay the blame at our door."

After all, the Li family currently had no dharma treasure to offer as compensation.

Li Ximing let out a breath. "That old fox Changxi… he wouldn't speak the whole truth even on his deathbed. I'll make a trip to the Profound Peak Gate. The description of that dharma treasure sounds like it possesses an Earth Virtue. It might be aiding Kong Tingyun in her breakthrough."

Li Zhouwei's earlier question about Kong Tingyun had hinted at this very possibility. Seeing that Li Ximing had caught his meaning, he nodded and saw him off, watching as his figure rode a beam of Profound Light and vanished into the Great Void.

On Gardenia Scenery Mountain, the cauldron before Li Ximing trembled softly as a current of Pure Qi ascended. With a slight shudder of the lid, six dark yellow pills shot out.

He caught them in his palm. Each Profound Adamant Heart-Sutra Pill was the size of a longan, smooth and without any distinct markings. A refreshing fragrance wafted from them as Li Ximing carefully placed them into a jade bottle.

Petals rained down from the trees on the mountain, carried by the wind, creating a carpet of shimmering white on the ground. He admired the sight for a moment before his form reappeared on the southern face of the mountain.

In a depression on the mountainside, what was once a small pond had transformed into a Malevolent Earth spring. Dark red baleful energy surged forth, purple flames dancing upon its surface, all contained within the pond by a white array formation that circled its edge, causing the energy to pool like water.

Li Ximing beckoned lightly with his hand.

Splash!

The surface of the pool stirred. The liquid condensed from Malevolent Earth and purple fire rippled violently, and a palm-sized vase flew out from its depths.

The vase was a fiery reddish-purple, its surface covered in patterns like fire-forged glass. As it landed in Li Ximing's hand, he immediately sensed its state.

'This vase has been tempered by my Bright Yang Purple Fire and has absorbed a great deal of Radiant Fire. It's nearing saturation.'

This pool was a Malevolent Earth fire meridian born from his ascension to the Purple Mansion Realm, dominated by Bright Yang Fire, Radiant Fire, and Malevolent Earth. While potent, the overwhelming baleful energy made it unsuitable for alchemy. The Profound Pattern Vase, however, could absorb the Bright Yang Fire and Radiant Fire from the meridian and refine them. Every six months, Li Ximing would retrieve it for this purpose.

Ignoring the amount of flame stored within, he circulated his arts and his Bright Yang divine ability. In less than an hour, he had completely refined the flames inside. A quick inspection revealed their power was already considerable, even among Foundation Establishment cultivators.

'What a peculiar artifact.'

To this day, Li Ximaging could not identify which Dao lineage the vase belonged to. His own tempering with Bright Yang and Radiant Fire was still far from reaching its limit, clearly indicating the vase had much greater potential.

'I wonder if it can be refined into a spirit embryo. It would be a shame to waste it. I'll keep tempering it for now and use other materials for my projects.'

While Li Zhouwei and the others stood guard in the wilderness, Moongaze Lake was a hive of activity. Li Jiangqian had mobilized the entire workforce around the lake to construct a high platform next to the Inherited Clarity Gate, one of the six gates surrounding the lake.

This was no ordinary platform; it was a grand sacrificial altar required for the technique known as *Viewing the Pavilion's Divine Ability, Forged in Fire*. A quick glance told Li Ximing it was already more than half complete.

'Once this is settled, I'll visit the Profound Peak Gate first, then take a trip to the Revering Radiance Gate. They're our neighbors, after all. It's been long enough. I can also try asking about Xiaoshi Mountain.'

Tossing the Profound Pattern Vase back into the pool, Li Ximing slipped into the Great Void and departed without delay, materializing in the wilderness outpost.

Li Zhouwei was not in the main hall. Instead, Li Chenghui and Kong Guxi were discussing something. Li Ximing tossed the bottle of pills to Li Chenghui, then grabbed Kong Guxi by the collar and vanished.

The poor man was terrified, but fortunately, Changxi had taken him through the Great Void before. He managed to steady himself within the beam of Profound Light, his heart still pounding. He cupped his hands. "Daoist Master…"

Before he could continue, a nod from Li Ximing silenced him. Moments later, they dropped back into the physical world, arriving at the Profound Peak Gate in Shanji Prefecture.

Night had fallen, but the gate was still marked by a white halo of light shimmering in the sky, faintly outlining the peaks within. But unlike the bustling hub it once was, the entire mountain range was now utterly still. It was like a dead mountain, with not a single streak of light rising or falling.

A bitter taste filled Kong Guxi's mouth as he heard Li Ximing's command.

"Open the array."

"Yes!"

He untied the token from his waist and aimed it at the barrier. Forming a seal with his hands, he projected a brownish-yellow light. After a slight delay, the grand array parted, revealing a narrow opening. Through it, they could glimpse a jade-like gate and the warm glow of yellow lanterns.

The instant the gateway appeared, Kong Guxi felt the ground vanish beneath him. Below, dark mountain ranges twisted and undulated, dotted with shimmering lights. A few solitary figures moved about, their escape lights streaking across the sky like shooting stars.

He had seen this view countless times. They were now above his own sect. Li Ximing's back was to him, the newly ascended Daoist Master staring intently at the immortal pavilions below, filling Kong Guxi with a sense of bone-chilling dread.

He shrank back, tucking his hands into his sleeves as he followed Li Ximing on a tour of the grounds. He heard the Daoist Master's voice, filled with admiration.

"Your gate possesses a profound foundation and excels at moving mountains and reshaping the land. This entire area is brimming with potent spiritual energy, home to many unique spiritual mountains… It contains five of the Twelve Qi and eight of the Five Virtues, including three types of Earth Virtue. Remarkable… truly remarkable!"

The Profound Peak Gate might have lagged behind other immortal sects in some respects, but its collection of spiritual mountains was second to none. For centuries, Changxi had worked as diligently as a mole preparing for winter, relocating one mountain after another to this place. The resulting domain was incredibly tempting.

'No wonder Yehui covets this mountain gate so fiercely. His White Ye Immortal Sect was only recently established. Acquiring a foundation like this would save him centuries of effort!'

Li Ximing completed his circuit. The gate was nearly empty of disciples. Only the main hall showed some signs of life, where his own junior, Li Jianglong, was engrossed in a jade slip, surrounded by stacks of books taller than he was.

Li Ximing nodded slightly but decided not to reveal himself. After touring the entire area and inspecting its various secret realms, he found nothing that remotely resembled the Wind-Hearing White Stone Mountain.

He finally came to a halt before the Profound Peak treasury. He paused, then turned, hands clasped behind his back. "Sect Master… are you certain the Wind-Hearing White Stone Mountain is not within?"

Kong Guxi, who had already guessed his purpose, fell to his knees. "I have never known of any Wind-Hearing White Stone Mountain! If I am concealing even a shred of the truth, may I be struck down and my Dao perish this instant!"

Li Ximing hadn't really expected Daoist Master Changxi to leave a dharma treasure of that magnitude sitting in the treasury; there would have been no need for secrecy if that were the case. "Take me to the seclusion grotto," he said.

The color drained from Kong Guxi's face, but he bowed his head respectfully. "Which… which Daoist Master do you wish to see?" he asked in a low voice.

"Kong Tingyun," Li Ximing replied casually.

Kong Guxi simply nodded. He led the way, weaving through the mountains and deactivating illusion arrays with his token. After a series of twists and turns, they entered a spiritual mountain from below and passed through another illusion array, finally arriving at a grotto.

Standing on a stone platform inside, Kong Guxi used his token to activate the final mechanism. A tightly sealed stone door materialized on the grotto wall. Without another word, he collapsed to the floor, curling into a ball.

Li Ximing understood his meaning perfectly. If he insisted on searching for the Wind-Hearing White Stone Mountain, the sealed chamber would have to be opened. And once that door was unsealed, Kong Tingyun's life would be forfeit.

He didn't enter. Instead, a puzzled expression crossed his face as he considered the situation.

'Cheng Jinzhu said that when the Wind-Hearing White Stone Mountain is activated, it's as large as a mountain. It's highly unlikely it could be hidden in a small secret chamber… and even if it could, I would have sensed it easily.'

He paced back out of the grotto. Behind him, Kong Guxi kowtowed repeatedly. After they had left the area, Li Ximing was still unable to solve the puzzle.

Evidently, the Wind-Hearing White Stone Mountain was not within the Profound Peak Gate. Daoist Master Changxi had used some unknown means to secret it away as a contingency. Since he hadn't told Li Ximing about it, finding it now would be exceedingly difficult.

'He promised the Myriad Radiance Sword Gate the southern shore of Salt Lake and the eastern lands of Shanji… The intention couldn't be more obvious. It was Changxi's way of setting up his legacy. That being the case, the old fox surely had a plan for where to leave the associated Wind-Hearing White Stone Mountain.'

Li Ximing could only depart with regret, making a mental note of the situation.

'Daoist Master Lingmei specifically mentioned that this matter wasn't urgent. Changxi lived for over four hundred years; he wouldn't have pinned all his hopes on me. I'll wait and see how things develop.'

He also held the secret of the demon embryo obtained from Sumian. These were matters that required careful investigation and could not be acted upon rashly, lest they backfire.

'No matter how much of a gentleman Sumian appears to be now, he's still a veteran Purple Mansion cultivator. If I push him too far, he'll become a threat every bit as dangerous as Yehui.'

As he exited the mountain gate, Kong Guxi followed behind, dazed and lost in thought. Li Ximing set him down at the edge of the wilderness. "Send a few people back to search," he instructed. "If you can't find that dharma treasure, you'll have a hard time explaining things to the Myriad Radiance Sword Gate."

Kong Guxi could only nod meekly. His appearance was a reflection of his spirit; in just over a month, his hair had rapidly turned gray. Where once he had the

look of a young man, he now looked thoroughly middle-aged, even showing signs of frailty.

Li Ximing gave him a second glance. It suddenly struck him how uncannily similar he looked to Li Xuanxuan during the years he was plagued by his inner demon. They were two completely different people, yet their expressions of despair made them appear almost the same.

'Every family has its own troubles… when times are hard, no one's burden is lighter than another's.'

He withdrew his gaze and journeyed north through the Great Void. As he approached the borders of the Chengshui Marsh, the fabric of the Great Void became noticeably more turbulent.

'Such incredible fortune,' Li Ximing mused. 'The most vital part of all Jiangbei is the Chengshui Marsh, and he has devoured it all for himself.'

Breaking back into the real world, Li Ximing saw a vast, shimmering marshland spread out before him. From the sky, countless dark cypress trees stood tall within the waters. A gentle breeze rustled through their leaves with a soft, whispering sound.

"Chengshui Marsh…"

A complex look entered Li Ximing's eyes. This place was a famous great marsh, its depths hiding the bones of countless cultivators from both the north and the south. He swept the area with his spiritual sense.

'The Chengshui Marsh was once a land of Converging Water, yet the Wood Qi here is so vigorous that all these cypress trees managed to grow despite the flooding. Compared to Moongaze Lake… this is more akin to a true marshland. Perhaps in another hundred years, it will evolve into a treasured land of Mansion Water.'

All things in the world were in a constant state of flux; nothing remained unchanged. Moongaze Lake was deeper, and the main body of the lake was elementally aligned with Pit Water, making it very stable. Otherwise, the remnants of the Tomb ravine Gate would not have chosen it as their refuge back then. The shores around Moongaze Lake were closer to Mansion Water marshlands, with water levels similar to Chengshui Marsh, though their spiritual energy was far inferior.

Li Ximing streaked across the sky, materializing above a bustling marketplace in the Chengshui Marsh.

The Li family also had an outpost here. Years ago, his junior Li Quewan had needed elemental spiritual energy for her Qi Refining, which was gathered from the marsh. They had used a shop in the marketplace as a cover, and the family still maintained a presence here.

'I believe the He family is in charge of this place.'

Li Ximing formed a hand seal. The array protecting the marketplace was practically nonexistent to him. He passed through it via the Great Void and landed inside.

After all, not even the Golden Feather Sect, let alone the Revering Radiance Gate, was extravagant enough to protect a marketplace with a Purple Mansion grand array. To a Purple Mansion cultivator, more than ninety percent of the markets in Jiangnan were completely undefended. Li Ximing looked down at the bustling, lively crowd below.

He swept his spiritual sense across the area, and the cacophony of voices became crystal clear in his mind.

'Minghui Lianmin of the Lotus Temple is leading her fellow monks… to debate the Dao with the Daoist Master of Revering Radiance here in the Chengshui Marsh?'

Chapter 736: The Bait

'Minghui… the name sounds so familiar…'

When the name reached Li Ximing's ears, a flicker of recollection crossed his face. For a Purple Mansion cultivator, even the faintest memory could be instantly recalled. Realization dawned.

"Ah, he was with Murong Xia!"

Years ago, when Murong Xia had traveled south to seek his Dao, he had avoided the path through the Sword Gate and Xiukui territory, likely fearing he would provoke the Daoist Master of the Spirit Pine. He also steered clear of the Profound Peak and Purple Smoke Gates, probably to avoid being struck down by Daoist Master Zipei. Instead, he took the route through the Azure Pond Sect, which led him straight to the Li clan's domain after crossing the river.

A minor conflict had erupted between Murong Xia and the Li clan. Li Tongya had made a move, only to be intercepted by a master monk from Lotus Temple. That monk's name was Minghui—undoubtedly the same person from the rumors.

'We've had our disagreements, and my clan's enmity with the Buddhist cultivators has only deepened since. It's best if I avoid him.'

He was about to step into the Great Void when a figure rose from the market below. The man was white-haired and dressed in black robes, giving him a rather sinister appearance, though his expression was respectful. He flew forward and bowed.

"By order of my ancestor, I have been waiting for you, Daoist Master. He has been at the Yebai Pavilion for some time. Please, follow me."

Li Ximing glanced at the man, a strange thought crossing his mind.

'A mere Foundation Establishment cultivator can see me? Changyun must have guided him… I wonder what wondrous art he used to grant him this sight.'

'But I've never heard of Daoist Master Changyun possessing any skill in the art of calculation… How could he have known I was coming? Even if he couldn't divine the exact movements of a Purple Mansion master, he must have at least foreseen an arrival related to me. His divination skills are astonishing.'

He withdrew his gaze, letting it rest on the black-robed elder for a moment before asking, "Fellow Daoist Changyun's calculation arts are truly impressive. He knew I would be the one to visit."

The elder, still visibly nervous, hurried to respond. "To answer the Daoist Master, my ancestor only passed down an order that a certain Daoist Master would be visiting today. He did not specify who it would be…"

That sounded far more plausible to Li Ximing. Since Changyun had already sent someone, he saw no point in turning back. "Lead the way," he said simply.

The black-robed elder bowed immediately and began to lead the way. Li Ximing watched him for a moment, the Profound Light between his brows pulsing faintly. He spoke, as if in passing, "I see that Chengshui Marsh is rich with spiritual Qi and abundant in spiritual resources. It seems like a fine place to nurture talent. I imagine many notable figures have emerged in recent years!"

The elder dared not neglect a Daoist Master's question. "Indeed, Daoist Master," he said quickly. "Several cultivator clans have risen in Jiangbei in recent years, and many rogue cultivators have successfully established their immortal foundations before scattering to the north and south. Some of the northern orthodoxies have even sent people to Chengshui Marsh to gather Qi."

"Oh?" Li Ximing's interest was piqued. "Since the spiritual Qi is so abundant and the land is teeming with talent, I assume the blood-based arts from the Eastern Sea are no longer in use?"

The elder nodded vigorously. "Precisely. The sect master and the Daoist Master issued a decree long ago. We are no longer the sect we were in the Eastern Sea; we are a thoroughly righteous and orthodox sect now. Not only have all those who practiced blood arts been dispatched to guard the Eastern Sea, but even those whose demonic techniques were less severe have reined them in. Our disciples now venture out to slay demons and subdue evil, and they've purged the area around Chengshui Marsh until it's spotless. Demonic cultivators have been all but eradicated."

"Now, the common people are all migrating to our Chengshui region. We've built quite a reputation in Jiangbei, and our Revering Radiance Gate is the most famous of all for exorcising demons and defending the righteous path!"

A sycophantic smile spread across the elder's face. "Daoist Master, feel free to ask anyone here, whether they are rogue cultivators, clan cultivators, common folk, or our own disciples. They will all tell you that the Revering Radiance Gate is the foremost righteous sect in all of Jiangbei!"

Li Ximing's heart was a tangle of complex emotions. For this man to make such a guarantee in his presence, the conduct of Revering Radiance Gate must truly be impeccable.

But what these rogue cultivators and common people didn't know was that Revering Radiance Gate was a sect founded by a gathering of demonic cultivators. Now, after several decades, a new generation of disciples—talented Qi Refining cultivators from Jiangbei itself—had been trained to solidify their power. And somehow, they had become a beacon of righteousness.

'In another fifty years, who will remember that the ancestors of Revering Radiance Gate were a band of depraved demonic cultivators who fed on human flesh?'

'Their disciples, their descendants, their bloodlines—they will all carry themselves with honor, slaying evil and defending the Dao, never knowing what came before… And what of Revering Radiance Gate itself? Will the demon-slaying Revering Radiance Gate become an irreproachable righteous sect?'

His gaze darkened.

'Who will remember the sins of the ancestors who built their legacy on demonic arts? Who will care? Do the good deeds of their descendants not count as good deeds? And yet, those good deeds are built upon a foundation of their ancestors' slaughter and cannibalism…'

Regardless of his thoughts, Li Ximing understood that with Zhong Qian's influence, Revering Radiance Gate was destined to become the foremost righteous sect of Jiangbei. They would be comparable to the Sword Gate or Hengzhu. The stories of demonic cultivation, of killing people to refine pills from their blood—all of it would be buried beneath the endless mounds of their victims.

'These old demonic masters, who spent their lives devouring humans, can now spend a century absorbing spiritual Qi on their peaks, reinvent themselves as

righteous elders, and who would ever question it? The grateful citizens under their rule? The rogue cultivators they rescued? The descendants of Revering Radiance Gate themselves will forget.'

'The line between good and evil is hopelessly blurred. This is the perfect example.'

Mount Yebai.

Mount Yebai was the highest point in Chengshui Marsh. The marsh had once been the site of the Ning Kingdom's imperial mausoleum, and Mount Yebai was its very center. After occupying the area, the Revering Radiance Gate had built a pavilion on the summit, naming it Yebai Pavilion after the mountain itself.

Though called a pavilion, the structure was expansive, with winding corridors and interconnected halls. The main pavilion was astonishingly large. Seated within was a young man of average appearance, dressed in a long robe of black and white feathers with intricate dark patterns. Beneath it, a soft, high-collared white armor was visible. A saber hung at his waist, and he held a jade gourd in his hand.

Across from him sat a kindly-faced, slightly portly monk in a brownish-yellow robe. He was studying a jade cup with a smile.

"Fellow Daoist Changyun! If my calculations are correct, our fellow Daoist will arrive within the hour."

Daoist Master Changyun's gaze remained fixed on the jade gourd in his hand. After a few moments, as if sensing something, he finally spoke. "Fellow Daoist Minghui's calculation arts are truly remarkable."

The monk, Minghui, let out a chuckle. "Although this old monk failed to attain the rank of Maha, I did not leave empty-handed. I have achieved the state of Non-Retrogression beneath the lotus seat of the Maha's Pure Land. A position is reserved for me above. With a little more time, becoming a Maha is well within my reach!"

Daoist Master Changyun paused slightly before replying, "You are truly blessed with good fortune, my friend. How many master monks could ever hope for such a fate? You are the first disciple of a lotus-rank Maha and an emissary to the

south. Back when the Yue Cultivating Sect marched north and the Shangyuan intervened, the Jinlian Maha swallowed his pride and even sacrificed the lives of other Merciful Ones just to secure you the title of 'Peace-Bringer.' With such support, becoming a Maha is a certainty!"

Minghui smiled. "That's because my master has completed his eighth reincarnation. He is now an eighth-life Maha. The Way of Joyful Bliss is flourishing, and a seat has opened up in the Pure Land. That's the only reason I have this chance…"

"Look at that Master Monk Xuwang from the north-south conflict," the monk continued with a laugh. "The Way of Emptiness had no seat for him, so he stubbornly refused to become a Merciful One. He had to slaughter countless cultivators from the Azure Pond Sect at Mount Bianyan just to achieve the state of Non-Retrogression, and even then, he only reached the Golden Lotus Seat—the same as me…"

"In the end," he concluded, "I have my Maha master's high regard to thank for everything!"

Daoist Master Changyun was inwardly unimpressed. He had little fondness for monks, but Minghui's backer, Jinlian, was an eighth-life Maha, and Minghui himself was destined for the same rank. He couldn't afford to be dismissive. He smiled and nodded just as a voice drifted in from outside the hall.

"Daoist Master, please!"

Both men raised their heads simultaneously to see a figure enter.

He was a young man in a white Daoist robe embroidered with golden patterns. His features were handsome and conveyed a gentle, warm temperament. Between his brows, a point of Profound Light faintly pulsed.

Daoist Master Changyun was taken aback for a moment. Sensing the Bright Yang divine ability emanating from the man, he asked tentatively, "Fellow Daoist Zhaojing?"

Li Ximing clasped his hands in a salute and smiled. "Greetings, Daoist Master Changyun!"

At these words, Changyun immediately rose from the main seat and descended with a smile. "That boy Zhong Qian told me you would be paying a visit. I have been waiting and waiting. Finally, you've arrived!"

Zhong Qian not only had a karmic connection with Li Xuanfeng but was also exceedingly polite to the Li clan. He had shown them great respect during the establishment of their Purple Mansion. Li Ximing was naturally courteous in return, mirroring Changyun's smile. Changyun gestured for him to take a seat at a side table and then indicated Minghui.

"This is Daoist Master Zhaojing of the Moongaze Li clan."

Minghui had merely lifted his head for a cursory glance, remaining seated with a lazy posture. Li Ximing's aura was clearly that of a newly advanced Purple Mansion cultivator; there was no need for excessive courtesy.

'Oh… another immortal clan… Moongaze Li…' he thought dismissively.

"Moongaze Li?!"

The monk's eyes widened in shock.

Changyun had already turned back to Li Ximing to make the next introduction. "This is Minghui, a Merciful One from Lotus Temple. He has achieved Non-Retrogression in the Way of Joyful Bliss and is seated beneath the Golden Lotus. He is destined to become a Maha."

Among the seven Buddhist paths, the Way of Joyful Bliss had the least conflict with the Li clan. Still, Li Ximing felt no goodwill toward any of the northern Buddhists and expected none in return. He managed a polite expression.

Across from him, Minghui fought the overwhelming urge to turn and flee. A terror no one else could comprehend gripped him, and an icy chill shot through his veins.

'By the Merciful Revered One… it's *that* Li clan!'

Years ago, when Minghui had traveled to Moongaze Lake, a single attempt at divination had nearly cost him his life. He had sacrificed his most precious Dharma Treasure to escape, and the backlash had even implicated his master, Jinlian!

Minghui was certain that no one in the world understood the full story better than he did. Jinlian himself had no memory of the event and had only heard Minghui's vague, terrified account, which was horrifying enough. But Minghui had witnessed it firsthand—he had seen how fragile the seventh-life Maha Jinlian had been in that entity's hands, as helpless as a mortal.

The incident had left Minghui with a permanent shadow on his soul and had inflicted a wound on Jinlian so severe that it had derailed their subsequent plans. Ultimately, it had caused Minghui's own attempt to reach the Maha rank to fail.

For a master monk of the Seven Phases, the path forward was twofold: either become a humble Merciful One or take the great leap to become a Maha. The former was already incredibly difficult. If one could curry favor with a Maha, they might have a chance, first attaining the rank of Merciful One under the lowest-ranking Bodhisattva seat. From there, it was a life of fawning and begging, hoping for a sliver of favor from above to slowly elevate one's state of Non-Retrogression and perhaps snatch an empty seat.

The latter was a near-impossible feat. It required the blessing of immense fate, significant contributions to the Buddhist faith, an available seat within one's own Pure Land, and the support of a Maha. Only then could one even attempt the path to Maha.

Jinlian's injury had been to his soul and divine abilities, directly shaking his Maha seat. Fortunately, Minghui's foundation was deep, and Jinlian, within his Pure Land, gave him his full support. Minghui had to settle for second best, first attaining the rank of Merciful One under the highest Golden Lotus seat. If not for that, all his preparations would have been wasted, adding centuries to his cultivation.

Minghui and Jinlian had long ago reached a silent agreement to never speak of the matter. Minghui even had a nagging suspicion that Jinlian's fervent support was partly an attempt to pull an ally onto his sinking ship. Now, facing Li Ximing, he didn't dare be too friendly, nor did he dare be hostile.

Li Ximing had been prepared for a cold reception. To his surprise, the monk before him sat up straight, a beaming, sincere smile on his face.

"So it is Daoist Master Zhaojing! This humble monk is Minghui! I've admired you for a long time!"

Li Ximing raised an eyebrow in surprise. Minghui immediately followed up, "I was not always in the north. I traveled south in my early years and had the honor of crossing paths with one of your esteemed clan elders. I was so moved by his magnificent presence that my admiration for him knows no bounds!"

Li Ximing's expression turned strange. Changyun, finding the exchange amusing, explained, "After the Wrathful Manifestation fell, this Merciful One's Way of Joyful Bliss benefited greatly, and their Pure Land expanded. However, they have some friction with the Way of Emptiness—a dispute left over from the north-south conflict."

Li Ximing understood now. This monk was an enemy of the Way of Wrath and the Way of Emptiness. 'So, while most Buddhist cultivators are utter filth, this one clearly doesn't stink in the same way as the others,' he mused. 'And he's destined to become a Maha. No wonder Changyun is willing to meet with him.'

He gave a slight nod. Minghui smiled and said, "I calculated it long ago. I knew a Fellow Daoist would be visiting Fellow Daoist Changyun today. He was still half in doubt…"

Daoist Master Changyun nodded, clearly wanting to steer the conversation away from his original discussion with Minghui. He interjected smoothly, "I underestimated the Merciful One's calculation arts. But I wonder… is there some matter you wished to discuss with me, Fellow Daoist?"

Li Ximing naturally wanted to ask about Mount Xiaoshi, but he was wary of Minghui learning about it unnecessarily. He chose his words carefully. "It concerns the lineage of the Brahma Cloud Cave."

Minghui, sitting to the side, let out a hearty laugh to bolster his courage. "Ah, so it's about Mount Xiaoshi!"

A smile finally touched Changyun's lips. He poured tea and explained, "Everyone who knows of the Mount Xiaoshi affair is entitled to a share. There are benefits to be had from the formation. Since you, Zhaojing, have mastered the Floating Cloud Cave's lineage, you naturally have a claim. Mount Xiaoshi was breached by the Way of Emptiness, and it was originally a refuge for the Yue Cultivating Sect—a situation we allowed to happen. Therefore… the northern Buddhists are also aware of this."

Understanding began to dawn on Li Ximing. "In that case," he asked, "how is this formation to be opened?"

"Mount Xiaoshi is now a desolate wasteland, its heirs scattered. None of us wish to see that lineage re-established, which is why the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion were created. The key to opening the formation lies within those three sects."

Changyun took a sip of tea. "The secret arts of Mount Xiaoshi are divided into five lineages. Three of them became the current Three Sects of Secret Diffusion: the 'Floating Cloud Body,' the 'Hurricane Ghost Yin,' and the 'Empty Response Dispersion.' If the remaining two lineages can be gathered, the treasures of Mount Xiaoshi can be accessed."

Li Ximing pondered this for a moment before asking pointedly, "Are you saying that many of Mount Xiaoshi's lineages are scattered abroad?"

"Precisely!" Changyun laughed casually, but his next words carried a chilling weight. "Your guess is correct, Zhaojing. The Three Sects of Secret Diffusion are merely hooks. The remaining two lineages of Mount Xiaoshi are scattered to the four winds, their whereabouts unknown, but it is highly likely they are in the Eastern Sea."

"As long as the reputation of these three sects remains in Jiangbei, flying the banner of Mount Xiaoshi's secret arts, the descendants who inherit those lost lineages will eventually return once they achieve success. Whether it's to complete their heritage, find their kin, seek refuge, or simply find backing—for sentiment and for reason, they will have to come back."

"They are the bait we've cast into the river. All we have to do is wait for them to take the hook!"

Chapter 737: A Detailed Account

"I see."

Changyun was the one holding the fishing rod, so of course, he knew the situation best. Hearing his explanation, Li Ximing understood that these Purple Mansion cultivators only answered what they were asked. If he failed to consider every angle, he would have no right to a share of the spoils.

"So, the Hurricane Ghost Yin Dao lineage from Wenhu is in my hands," Li Ximing said. "And you, fellow Daoist, have been cultivating Pingwang Zi in preparation for opening the formation. It seems I'll have to raise one of my own people for this."

Changyun let out a hearty laugh. "That's easily settled. The Wenhu you have… he once searched the Southern Sea for a Secret Diffusion Dao lineage on behalf of the Capital Immortals Dao… This was before the Capital Immortals Dao had even entered Jiangbei, yet their search had already begun! It's clear they've been plotting this for a long time…"

Li Ximing's eyes narrowed slightly. "Oh? And what was the result?" he asked, looking up.

"They found another with the Floating Cloud Body! The Capital Immortals Dao kept it under a thousand layers of secrecy, and very few people know about it. I only learned of it when I overheard another Daoist mention it in passing. In the end, they didn't gain much… but the person who obtained the lineage was thoroughly deceived by Wenhu and ultimately perished, his Dao erased! It's likely every secret art he possessed was tricked out of him!"

Li Ximing knew Wenhu was no simple character. By his calculations, the Floating Cloud Cave had been an ally of the Golden Tang Gate, which meant it was part of the Golden Feather Sect's share. Now that the sect had been annihilated, the matter was complicated.

"These three Dao lineages… how many factions are dividing them?" he asked.

Changyun seemed to see right through his concerns. "The Golden Feather Sect already claimed the Floating Cloud Body lineage; it was one of their own disciples who was cultivating it. The Empty Response Dispersion is Pingwang Zi's technique, so that share is mine… And the Hurricane Ghost Yin belongs to the Capital Immortals Dao, who also possess a Floating Cloud Body. A few other factions have been waiting quietly in the wings, but the situation is now uncertain."

He glanced at Li Ximing and smiled. "It's not as if only one person can claim a share from each lineage. The Xiaoshi Spirit Trove was prepared by the former Secret Diffusion Temple for its descendants. Any Foundation Establishment cultivator who has practiced the lineage can go and try their luck. The size of one's share depends on the individual. A single powerful direct heir is worth more than ten useless fools."

"Fortunately, this opportunity has fallen into our hands," Changyun added. "It benefits our own people and can be considered a money tree."

Clarity dawned in Li Ximing's mind.

'So many opportunities… so many schemes. The Xiaoshi Spirit Trove of Secret Diffusion can only be entered by those who possess its Dao lineages, so it has become a treasure basin for several major powers…'

Having pieced together the cause and effect, Li Ximing finally asked, "I've often heard that the Secret Diffusion Temple had a powerful backer. Do you know which one it was?"

This was apparently not a great secret. "Secret Diffusion is a remnant of the Wanling Upper Sect," Changyun explained. "The Wanling Upper Sect was a power on the level of the Three Sects, and to this day, its Grotto-Heaven remains hidden within the Great Void."

"Ah!" Li Ximing understood immediately. "But given Secret Diffusion's background, won't stirring up such trouble lead to disaster?"

Changyun shook his head gently, but it was Minghui who chuckled. "Daoist Zhaojing! How can you be certain… that this wasn't a method left behind by the Secret Diffusion Temple to ensure its own continuation? Year after year, if one of these cultivators truly reaches the Purple Mansion realm, or if some unforeseen event allows them to escape the control of the Daoist Masters… wouldn't they have a perfectly legitimate claim to monopolize the Secret Diffusion Spirit

Trove on Mount Xiaoshi? With such a golden, profound background, a prestigious banner, and a foundational Dao… would they not desire it after attaining the Purple Mansion? Could they simply ignore the Secret Diffusion Dao lineage?"

Li Ximing grew thoughtful. Changyun also smiled. "Daoist Minghui is correct. Although gathering all five Dao lineages would yield a great harvest, opening the spirit trove is impossible without the Purple Mansion Divine Ability of the Secret Diffusion lineage. We have divided the trove's contents several times and scoured it clean, but the remaining Purple Mansion section requires a much longer-term strategy. It's not something to be taken lightly."

With a clear picture in his mind, Li Ximing began to plan his next steps. After offering his thanks, Daoist Master Changyun said, "There is no need for such formalities! I think very highly of the boy Zhong Qian. He has forged a bond with your esteemed clan through Ning Tiaoxiao, and there will be many opportunities for mutual support in the future."

Li Ximing exchanged a few more pleasantries, listening as the two discussed who had broken through to the Purple Mansion realm and who had accumulated enough merit to become a Merciful One. Just as he was about to take his leave, Minghui spoke with great enthusiasm. "My Lotus Temple is just across the river! If the Daoist Master has any need for anything in the north, you must come find me!"

Changyun, taking this in, sipped his tea and said with a hidden smile, "I say… Daoist Minghui, you are a Merciful One and exceptionally skilled in the arts of calculation. Why not perform a divination for our fellow Daoist and offer him some tangible assistance?"

The words struck Minghui like a blow, and he gritted his teeth, a sharp pain stabbing at his heart.

'Divination? Divination my ass… You want me to risk my life with your constant 'divine this, divine that'… You sure have a lot to say!'

Though he desperately wanted to slap Changyun, he forced a dry laugh. "I cannot simply perform a divination on a fellow Daoist directly, and I fear he would not be at ease allowing me to do so…"

There was some truth to this. Li Ximing harbored no goodwill toward any of them and had already intended to refuse. He followed Minghui's lead and demurred. After several more cups of tea, he grew tired of their polite maneuvering and excused himself.

He had just stepped out of the pavilion when he saw the monk Minghui emerging as well. Unwilling to get entangled, Li Ximing stepped into the Great Void, but Minghui followed him.

"Daoist Zhaojing! Might I be so bold as to say one more thing?" Minghui called out, catching up to him in the void.

Since the other man had pursued him so persistently, Li Ximing felt he couldn't just keep avoiding him. "Great Master Minghui," he replied, "what can I do for you?"

"It is just one matter," Minghui said. "A friend of this humble monk has obtained a Dao lineage and wishes to become a Merciful One. To do so, he must construct a grand temple, a luxurious Dharma Treasure, but he lacks a single ingredient: Soul-Hearing Mulberry Wood, which is produced in the Southern Borderlands of the Azure Pond Sect… Si Boxiu despises Buddhists, making it difficult for me to go there. You, fellow Daoist, have connections in the Azure Pond Sect. If you have the chance, I would be grateful if you could keep an eye out for it…"

Li Ximing, curious to see if the monk could cross the river, traveled alongside him through the Great Void and gave a noncommittal reply.

Minghui continued, "My Lotus Temple is, after all, in the north. I have a Bright Yang Spirit Embryo. If you can acquire the wood, I am willing to trade it."

Li Ximing still did not trust the monk. Even with the mention of a Bright Yang Spirit Embryo, his response remained perfunctory. As they neared the Funan region, Minghui abruptly changed the subject. "I mentioned a divination earlier. It was not my intention to slight you, but I knew you would not permit me to perform one. How about this: instead of a disciple or a blood relative, choose a retainer with no significant connection to you. The divination will be easier and more detailed for me, and it will not put you in too difficult a position!"

Li Ximing glanced down at the land below. The Funan region was densely populated, and all these people were in Jiangbei. Whether he agreed or not, Minghui

could perform a divination on them at will. "If that is the case," he said cautiously, "and you wish to perform a divination yourself, I have no reason to stop you."

He didn't dare let him divine An Siwei, who was currently his highest priority. Instead, he chose the person with the most tenuous connection. "My clan has an old retainer… his name is Qu Bushi."

Minghui's gaze pierced through the Great Void. With just a name, he located the man. He first calculated the man's Dharma artifacts to gauge the karmic consequences of the divination, and only when he was certain it was safe did he proceed to divine the man himself.

"He nurtures his life and preserves his years, growing stronger with age," Minghui said thoughtfully. "His fate is constrained by Pit Water, preventing him from taking a leading role, but he is a useful retainer."

Li Ximing, however, was paying attention to Minghui's position. Just as he'd expected, the monk stopped at the river's edge.

"I will see you this far."

With that, Minghui vanished into the Great Void. Only then did Li Ximing ponder his words.

'That monk was surprisingly courteous. Qu Bushi is ultimately just a retainer. His Art of the Palace of Concealed Storage excels at self-preservation, and he still has many years left to live. In the future, he'll become another elder like An Zheyan.'

Descending from the sky, Li Ximing found himself with a rare moment of leisure. Instead of returning to Gardenia Scenery Mountain, he flew toward the island.

In the center of the island's vast courtyard stood a white flowering tree, over thirty zhang tall. Its leaves were so glossy they appeared transparent, casting no shade beneath. The tree was dotted with palm-sized, five-petaled spirit flowers, their colors a mixture of crimson and white.

The Wanling Flower Tree!

Seated cross-legged beneath the tree was an old ape with snow-white fur, clad in simple stone armor with a staff resting on its knees. As Li Ximing

approached, the White Ape opened its eyes, stood, and bowed respectfully. "Greetings, Daoist Master."

Li Ximing nodded. The White Ape's first task upon joining the Li clan had been to guard the Wanling Flower, a duty he had now performed for over seventy years. After the great battle on the river, he had returned here to recuperate and continue his watch.

Li Ximing gazed at the Wanling Flower Tree. Over the years, his clan had harvested at least eight hundred, if not a thousand, spirit stones from its flowers, not to mention the cultivators whose lives had been saved by it… even Miaoshui had relied on it just a few days ago!

"Even the scraps that fall from the fingers of a Golden Core immortal's descendant have benefited my clan immeasurably!"

On the other side of the courtyard stood another tree, this one the size of an ordinary tree. It was a Spirit Persimmon Tree, suffused with spiritual energy. It had been twisting and swaying in its corner, but the moment it saw Li Ximing looking over, it froze.

This was, of course, the Spirit Persimmon he had dug up from the Quanwu Mountains. Though its roots were ordinary, this Qi Refining-level tree had been blessed with no small amount of fortune. It had already become a spirit, possessing a cultivation base. It would occasionally nibble on spirit herbs and sip spirit water, and had now reached the mid-stage of the Qi Refining realm.

The Li clan also had a Snake-Dragon Fruit Tree, but it was of a lower grade and was kept in the island's spirit garden.

After observing them, Li Ximing retrieved a box from his sleeve and casually opened it. Inside lay a brilliant golden tassel needle of Horn Woodthe Horn Wood Golden Tassel gifted by the Sword Gate!

"This is an excellent item for nourishing spirit plants…"

The moment the box was opened, the Wanling Flower Tree began to stir. The Spirit Persimmon in the corner dropped its pretense and stretched its branches over, not daring to touch Li Ximing, but tugging furtively at the White Ape.

Li Ximing infused his divine ability into the tassel. With a wave of his hand, he broke the Horn Wood Golden Tassel apart, guiding the fragments with the Profound Light to shower down upon the two spirit plants, causing them to rustle with delight.

Li Ximing knew nothing of horticulture. He left the two plants in the White Ape's care and departed.

He landed on Gardenia Scenery Mountain. A short while later, a youth dressed in pleated, dark-red robes descended on a trail of Radiant Fire. He walked up from the mountain path, arrived at the courtyard, and bowed.

"Jiangqian pays his respects to the Daoist Master!"

Li Ximing had rarely seen Li Jiangqian. He beckoned him closer, offering a warm smile to the junior to whom he had bestowed a Talisman Seed. "Jiangqian is here. Why do I not see Que Wan?"

"Reporting to the Daoist Master," Li Jiangqian replied, "my sister has encountered a bottleneck in her arts and has gone to the Northern Yue to collect shamanic techniques. She was unable to come. This junior has come up the mountain to deliver a message on my father's orders."

"Speak."

As Li Ximing poured tea, Li Jiangqian began his report. "The Wu Clan from the south of the Lixia prefecture came to visit a few days ago. Their peak Foundation Establishment patriarch came personally with a gift to thank you, Daoist Master, for eliminating demonic cultivators when you passed by their lands. Father was unaware of this matter and sent me to ask."

Li Ximing knew exactly what had happened. He sipped his tea. "I was fighting Yehui and happened to pass by the Wu Clan's territory. The light of my escape technique probably incinerated one or two of those demonic cultivators. Yehui, who was following behind, likely manifested his own divine ability and crushed a few Wu clansmen in the process. This Wu patriarch certainly knows how to use a bigger banner to his advantage. He's quite shrewd."

Li Jiangqian understood immediately. He showed no fear in the Daoist Master's presence. "I see. We have a Retainer Wu in Profound Peak who is related to the southern Wu Clan. He has been insufferably proud about this…"

"Just explain it clearly to your father."

"The Shanji Prefecture has been attacked several times recently," Li Jiangqian continued. "We were unable to defend the area, and a significant amount of resources were plundered. We also lost a town…"

This did not surprise Li Ximing. The Shanji Prefecture was a burden in their hands. "How is your father handling it?" he asked.

"Father has already begun relocating the people of Shanji to populate the wilderness," Li Jiangqian reported respectfully. "The morale of Profound Peak has not collapsed, and with our clan's support, many prominent families and even aristocratic clans are willing to move. Aside from the Sword Gate's territory, which has been left largely untouched, most of the common folk have begun their journey. Father sees this as a matter of great importance and is personally escorting them…"

"Good." Li Ximing nodded. "It is almost certain that Profound Peak will have to rebuild its foundation in the wilderness. This is a necessary task. Leave it to your father."

He paused for a moment, then asked with a somewhat inscrutable tone, "How is Chengzhi these days?"

His eldest son, Li Chengzhi, was a mortal. Li Ximing had seen him once after reaching the Purple Mansion realm. He had been with his early-stage Qi Refining grandson, Li Zhouming. Both were timid and sweating profusely. Li Chengzhi's hair and beard were completely white, and he hadn't dared to look his father in the eye. He had come up, made a brief circle, and quickly left.

Although Li Zhouming was a cultivator and had been sent to the clan by his father at an early age, Li Ximing's successive periods of seclusion meant they had rarely met. Yet, due to a deeper understanding and fear of the Purple Mansion realm, his behavior had been even worse than his father's.

At Li Ximing's question, Li Jiangqian answered promptly, "Clan Elder Chengzhi is advancing in years and is no longer very active. Clan Uncle Zhouming is currently serving in the Dense Forest Mountains…"

Li Ximing knew there wasn't much good Li Jiangqian could say. Although he was not close to his eldest son, Li Chengzhi was at least thoughtful. His lack of cultivation was his fatal flaw. As for Li Zhouming, Li Ximing had met him himself and knew him to be a truly mediocre child, with a somewhat greedy

nature. The fact that Li Jiangqian didn't speak ill of him was already a show of respect; there was certainly nothing worth praising.

His expression unchanging, Li Ximing lowered his gaze slightly.

"Let them be. Chengzhi is getting old and may not be able to control Zhouming at times. Do not let them think I am paying them special attention, lest it encourages him to do something foolish."

Li Jiangqian had thought Li Ximing's inquiry was a subtle request to look after them, but hearing this, he could only nod in agreement. A realization dawned on him.

'The Daoist Master is not entirely unconcerned with the clan… These few words strike at the very heart of the two elders' situations. It would be impossible to be so precise without paying some attention…'

Li Ximing waved him away, his mind already turning to other calculations.

'There are three urgent matters at hand. First, the Purple Mansion grand formation. I must wait for news and observe the changes. Second, resolve the issue with the Shanji Prefecture and properly garrison Profound Peak… And third… I must settle things with Yehui, to stop him from constantly working against my clan.'

Chapter 738: A Cunning Defense

Although the Capital Immortals Dao had retreated, their southern advance was a matter of when, not if. Li Ximing could not afford to ignore the threat.

Fortunately, the battle on the river had left its mark. While Guan Gongxiao, Guan Lingdie, and the other core disciples were relatively unharmed, figures like Gongsun Bofan had sustained serious injuries. The Capital Immortals Dao's techniques were not known for their healing properties. Bright Yang cultivators at least possessed some regenerative abilities, but Yehui's path was likely even less suited for recovery, his only advantage lying in his formidable vital energy.

'They won't be making any major moves in the short term,' Li Ximing mused. 'Once Shanji Prefecture is dealt with… the conflict in the wilderness will become a prolonged war of attrition. As for what other schemes Yehui is plotting, I'll have to investigate further.'

'And then there's the matter of Wenhu's Dao lineage…'

Now that he knew the Secret Diffusion Temple had a hidden spiritual repository on Mount Xiaoshi, Li Ximing had no intention of letting the opportunity pass him by.

"Bring Wenhu to me," he commanded.

At his word, Li Chenghuai descended the mountain on a gust of wind and returned moments later, dragging a dishevelled man by the chains that bound him. The prisoner's hair was a tangled mess, and the iron links clanked with every step, leaving a trail of blood on the ground.

Wenhu had not been subjected to excessive torture in the dungeons, but his cultivation had been sealed, preventing the wounds he sustained over a year ago from ever fully healing. Despite the Li family's rudimentary medical treatment, the gashes would still weep blood from time to time.

The man was a master of calculation. He had intentionally allowed the Li family to take Hongfu Mountain, a decision that had directly contributed to their ability to defend the Funan territory with minimal casualties. In a stroke of genius, he had managed to avoid earning any deep-seated enmity from the Li clan, lowering his presence to a minimum and surviving comfortably until today. If not for the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion lineage he possessed, Li Ximing might have forgotten him entirely, letting him languish in the dungeons indefinitely.

Looking at him now, Li Ximing could only think that the man's luck had finally run out. An idea flickered in his mind.

'After I extract the Dao lineages from him, perhaps I could offer him to Yehui in exchange for An Siwei. Given that this involves Mount Xiaoshi, Yehui might actually agree. Hah…'

His gaze fell upon Wenhu, whose cultivation was sealed and whose lips were bound to prevent him from casting any incantations. Li Ximing illuminated him with the Profound Light from between his brows, then silently dismissed the thought.

'This man is no fool. And with his connection to the Secret Diffusion secrets of Mount Xiaoshi, handing him over to the White Ye Capital Immortals Dao could create a significant threat down the line. Still… better to kill him.'

With a flick of his hand, Li Ximing released the seal on Wenhu's mouth. He remained seated in the position of authority, watching impassively as the man writhed on the floor before struggling to his feet.

"This sinner, Wenhu, pays his respects to the Daoist Master!" he rasped.

Wenhu's supposed crime was merely "deceiving" a Purple Mansion cultivator—that is, for the absence of Daoist Chidu of the Capital Immortals Dao. As the one who had made the promise, the blame had fallen squarely on him. Wenhu had never once proclaimed his innocence, accepting his fate in silence.

Li Ximing said nothing, his gaze fixed on the prisoner.

Deep down, he felt a flicker of appreciation for the man's talents. Wenhu was undeniably cunning and resourceful. But this was a conflict between Purple Mansion masters, a game far beyond what Wenhu could hope to influence.

To a Purple Mansion cultivator, most Foundation Establishment disciples were mere pawns. What truly mattered was face and reputation. Wenhu had been one of Yehui's men; in Li Ximing's hands, he was a bargaining chip, but he could never be a chess piece.

If Li Ximing were to brazenly take him in, it would create a true blood feud. Not only that, it would be a breach of unspoken rules. The moment Wenhu reappeared in public, Yehui would be justified in personally tearing through the Great Void to retrieve him.

But that single glance from Li Ximing was enough. Wenhu immediately understood his predicament. The executioner's blade was already at his neck.

"This lowly one pays his respects to Daoist Master Zhaojing," he said, bowing his head. "The Secret Diffusion lineage never intended any disrespect. I was merely relaying a message under the guidance of a predecessor. I never imagined it would lead to this."

Even as he spoke the words, a bitter taste filled his mouth. He had clearly taken a stand for the White Ye Capital Immortals Dao. No matter how he tried to excuse his actions by blaming his lineage or the Floating Cloud Cave, it would be nearly impossible to win Li Ximing's trust.

As expected, when he shifted the blame to the Floating Cloud Cave, Li Ximing's expression remained unchanged.

"Where is the lineage of the Dense Cloud Cave?" the Daoist Master asked flatly.

Wenhu's heart pounded in his chest. He knew his end was near. Sweat beaded on his brow and streamed down his back. But what power did he have against a Purple Mansion master? His only chance, his only breath, came from the fact that this particular cultivator was conservative, perhaps hesitant to damage his own karma by immediately resorting to soul-searching.

But the specific mention of the *Dense Cloud* lineage sent a shiver of terror through him. A thousand thoughts raced through his mind.

"In reply to the Daoist Master," he stammered, "I can transcribe the Dense Cloud lineage for you this instant. And not just that lineage… Wenhu has also found traces of the other Secret Diffusion lineages of Mount Xiaoshi."

Li Ximing's expression turned strange. He had an inkling of what Wenhu was about to say, but he frowned at the cultivator's sharp-wittedness. Unseen, the killing intent in his heart grew heavier.

"Oh?" Li Ximing smiled faintly. "And which lineage might that be?"

"Reporting to the Daoist Master," Wenhu answered with utmost respect, "while cultivating in the Southern Sea under Daoist Chidu's orders, I was tasked with searching for traces of the Secret Diffusion lineages. I found something near Danrong Wuluo… but I concealed my discovery. No one knows of it."

Suspicion bloomed in Li Ximing's heart. He could already see the outlines of Wenhu's desperate ploy, but he played along. "And why did you not report this to Daoist Chidu?"

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Wenhu replied, "Daoist Master, having received a Secret Diffusion lineage myself, I am not entirely ignorant of the great masters' schemes. Therefore, I communicated privately with my fellow disciples and was reluctant to report back to Daoist Chidu…"

"The Dense Cloud lineage," Li Ximing interrupted softly.

Li Chenghuai immediately produced a jade slip. Wenhu had no choice but to take it and begin engraving with frantic speed. A quarter of an hour later, a text titled *The Xiaoshi Manual of Guiding the Netherwind* was complete.

As Wenhu continued to carve into another slip, Li Ximing casually took the first one, his spiritual sense sweeping over its contents. The Profound Light between his brows pulsed faintly.

'*The Xiaoshi Manual of Guiding the Netherwind*. It leads to the fourth-grade Foundation Establishment, Hurricane Ghost Yin.'

With his current level of spiritual attainment, Li Ximing could easily discern the authenticity of a cultivation manual. He waited as Wenhu finished a second text, this one titled *The Xiaoshi Art of Clearing the Heavens and Scattering Clouds*. This must have been the one Changyun said was obtained through murder.

'*The Xiaoshi Art of Clearing the Heavens and Scattering Clouds*… Fourth-grade Foundation Establishment, Floating Cloud Body.'

Li Ximing asked pointedly, "Where did this one come from?"

Wenhu, still sweating, wore a mask of pure terror. "I obtained it from Fu Dou," he said respectfully. "I used certain methods to make him talk quickly…"

A faint smile touched Li Ximing's lips. "I heard you took the mountain in less than a quarter of an hour. Your methods must be impressive indeed."

The man's blood ran cold. He presented the jade slip and began to write again. After the time it takes for an incense stick to burn, he presented another.

"*The Feathered Adept's Chant*."

This finally piqued Li Ximing's interest. It was half of a secret art, and it appeared to be quite profound.

Wenhu prostrated himself, his words flowing with practiced ease. "This was passed down to me by my master just before he died. He said a predecessor obtained it from the body of a fallen direct disciple of the Wanling Upper Sect. It is meant to be a powerful defensive art that allows one to weave feathers into a protective robe…"

"As the Daoist Master can surely see, this is likely a Purple Mansion-level technique, somewhere between the fifth and sixth grades. This is only half of it. The rest…"

He looked up, a calculated gleam in his eyes. "Through my own secret investigations, I believe the other half is in the possession of that Secret Diffusion direct disciple in the Southern Sea!"

Li Ximing shot him a look, tucking the jade slip away. He watched Wenhu, who was now trembling in a full kowtow on the floor. His voice was light, almost conversational, but to Wenhu, it was a thunderclap that threatened to shatter his very soul.

"You dare to lie to me," Li Ximing said with an air of profound amusement.

Chapter 739: Arranging Affairs (Part 1)

"You dare lie to me."

The moment Li Ximing spoke, a purple flame erupted across the mountain, its celestial light illuminating everything. Bathed in the searing blaze, the stone bricks grew scorching hot. Wenhu, his face already pressed to the ground, didn't dare to lift his head as his skin began to sizzle.

The consequences of deceiving a Purple Mansion cultivator were one thing, but to be questioned so calmly by one was a psychological torment of an entirely different order.

Whatever Wenhu was thinking, Li Chenghuai, standing beside him, felt a chill shoot up his spine and into his skull. Even though he wasn't the one lying, fear gripped him.

'Uncle already possesses the aura of a Daoist Master!'

Li Ximing looked down at Wenhu, feeling more amusement than anger. The man's lie had been cleverly constructed, a mixture of truth and falsehood. The Secret Diffusion direct lineage disciple he mentioned was most likely the one who had been lured away by the Capital Immortals Dao and tricked to his death by Wenhu himself. This matter involved the Purple Mansion realm and was highly secretive. If not for a passing mention from Chang Yun, Li Ximing would have had no way to confirm it.

Wenhu had based his lie on a real person he had actually been in contact with. This not only guarded against Li Ximing using divination but also ensured the details were accurate—after all, Wenhu knew too little about other Secret Diffusion Dao lineages to invent such a person from thin air.

Had Li Ximing lacked concrete information, Wenhu could have continued his fabrication. But the Li family had Fu Dou's head and had used advanced shamanic arts to determine he was killed in a sneak attack. The revelation of

The Xiaoshi Art of Clearing the Heavens and Scattering Clouds was the final piece of evidence that sealed Wenhu's fate.

'In the span of a single breath, he concocted a complete story,' Li Ximing mused. 'If he hadn't been so desperate to prove his worth and offered up *The Xiaoshi Art of Clearing the Heavens and Scattering Clouds*, he might have left fewer loose ends.'

Li Ximing sipped his tea. Wenhu finally lifted his face, a scorched and blackened mess. It was impossible to tell if he was crying. Following a glance from Li Ximing, Li Chenghuai stepped forward, grabbed Wenhu's chains, and said, "If you had just told the truth, the Daoist Master would have decided your fate. Why go to such lengths?"

Wenhu's eyes opened. They had been burned in their earlier fight and were now completely white. He looked up. "I've spent my life scheming and fighting in the Southern Sea. When I encounter a problem, I plot. If I succeed, it's my victory. If I fail, it's my loss. I have never been one to sit idly by and wait for a 'Daoist Master's judgment.' "

Li Ximing set down his jade cup. "Well said."

The word had barely left his lips when a torrent of celestial light wrapped in purple flames swept over Wenhu. His flesh and bone were torn away and incinerated, turning to ash in an instant. The chains and iron clasps etched with array patterns all melted away, leaving no trace. A moment ago, a Foundation Establishment cultivator had been kneeling there; now, he was gone, dispersed like smoke on the wind.

A faint clatter echoed as a few twisted, scorched pieces of metal—remnants of his shackles—fell to the ground. Wenhu had cultivated the art of Hurricane Ghost Yin, a technique completely suppressed by Bright Yang. The blast had not only killed him but had also erased his cultivation so thoroughly that not even a hint of a spiritual phenomenon remained.

Li Chenghuai, standing to the side, let out a silent breath. Li Ximing placed three jade slips on the table, rubbing his temples. "Chenghuai," he asked, "one art is Hurricane Ghost Yin, the other is Floating Cloud Body. Both are fourth-grade techniques and will be a great benefit to the clan's foundation. See if anyone in the family is interested in cultivating them."

Li Chenghuai considered this. "I will check which of the children are about to begin Qi Refining."

Li Ximing left the arrangements to him, though he knew that no matter which clan member was chosen, they would be too late for the spiritual trove of Xiaoshi Mountain. "The territories of Funan and Midong were taken over after we eliminated their sects and seized leverage over their great families," he said. "We brought some people back. Are there any promising talents from the same cave-heaven who cultivates a compatible Qi?"

"I will look into it, ancestor," Li Chenghuai replied.

He immediately sent someone to fetch the records. A court guard returned shortly with a jade slip, which Li Chenghuai began to read. The benefits of his meticulous administration were now clear; he had obviously kept careful track of these matters. After a quick scan, he reported, "There is one with the surname Wang who cultivates a compatible Qi for Floating Cloud Body; he is in the late stage of Qi Refining. There is also a Guest Elder Huang who cultivates the same art. We have no one with a compatible Qi for Hurricane Ghost Yin."

Li Ximing responded casually, "The Wang clan is a major lineage in Jiangbei, and Wang He still holds a position in the Capital Immortals Dao… It's difficult to manage them in Secret Diffusion territory. Since this young man is already in the late stage of Qi Refining, we should support him. It would be best if he could achieve Foundation Establishment. This will also help stabilize the people who migrated from the Funan region."

As he gave the order, he had a premonition. 'It seems we won't be getting much from this spiritual trove. We'll have to treat this as a trial run. It's not a one-time opportunity, so we can plan more carefully once the younger generation rises.'

Li Chenghuai understood and bowed to take his leave. But then he saw the white-robed, gold-patterned Daoist Master close his eyes and exhale slowly.

"Chenghuai," Li Ximing said suddenly, "destiny, talent, and temperament are three things rarely found together. We often believe cultivation and cunning are paramount, but one must also worry… for when luck runs dry, the Purple Mansion is unattainable, and when fate is shallow, Divine Abilities remain a distant dream."

"This junior is enlightened," Li Chenghuai said, knowing his uncle was referring to Wenhu.

"Have the members of the Zhou generation come here," Li Ximing instructed. "And… invite the old patriarch as well."

Mount Qingdu.

These days, Mount Qingdu was bustling with newly constructed pavilions. Much of the forest had been cleared, transforming the once-secluded residence of a few Foundation Establishment cultivators and direct descendants into the busy peak of the Court of Justice. Streaks of light constantly rose and fell as figures hurried about their duties. Li Quewan's own light descended, landing softly on the mountainside.

The silver-white pendant around her neck gleamed faintly. She wore a thoughtful expression. Now at the seventh level of Qi Refining, she was considered a core member of the Li family. She had just returned from a fruitless trip to the northern Yue mountains, feeling slightly dejected.

'This Shamanic Talisman Dao is truly difficult…'

The *Shamanic Talisman Dao* was a shamanic art she had obtained from a Talisman Seed. To call it an art was an understatement; it was a comprehensive encyclopedia of shamanism, filled with an astonishing number of techniques focused on three paths: transformation, shamanic talismans, and soul manipulation. Yet, for all its complexity, the tome was organized into just three sprawling chapters, with no clear progression, as if it had been haphazardly bound together.

'It's an ancient cultivation method, I suppose. They valued simplicity…'

Li Quewan dedicated nearly all her energy outside of her primary cultivation to the *Shamanic Talisman Dao*, yet she had barely scratched the surface. On Li Jiangqian's advice, she focused on the transformation techniques for self-preservation, learning little else besides a few divination methods.

The opening line of the text was daunting enough: "Only when the profound is first achieved may one begin the study of shamanic arts." As she had discovered, "first achieving the profound" meant reaching the Purple Mansion Realm.

"In ancient times, you weren't even considered accomplished without a Divine Ability," she sighed. "How I envy them."

Pushing these thoughts aside, Li Quewan focused on her surroundings. She had only visited Mount Qingdu a handful of times, but she held the place in deep reverence.

The Court of Justice on Mount Qingdu had originally managed the mortal affairs of the direct lineage. As more descendants became cultivators and the mortal bloodlines dispersed into the branch families, its staff was expanded to oversee cultivators. Later, as intermarriage with outside families and guest elders grew more common, and the Jade Court began transferring its prisoners to Mount Qingdu for judgment, its authority swelled. The Jade Court still conducted investigations, but its jurisdiction for sentencing and punishment was now limited to the lower-level cultivators of the sixteen prefectures, two peaks, and one mountain. It had gradually become subordinate to Mount Qingdu.

When Li Chenghuai broke through to the Foundation Establishment realm and mastered the art of Untraceable Presence, he gained the ability to discern truth from falsehood among low-grade Qi Refining cultivators. While this had little impact on the family's upper echelons, it was a monumental event for the entire administrative system, helping to root out corruption. He even uncovered wrongdoing among three direct-lineage clan elders, who were subsequently sent to the island under house arrest. This cemented Mount Qingdu's paramount status.

Yet, at the height of its power, one of Mount Qingdu's side peaks remained lush with trees, without a single new pavilion. It was quiet and rarely visited. Li Quewan was respectful as she approached a middle-aged man at the door.

"Please inform the old patriarch," she said politely, "that the Daoist Master has requested his presence."

The man was her own brother. He nodded quickly and hurried inside. Moments later, an old man descended the stairs. His cheeks were sunken, making his face appear thin and gaunt, but it did not diminish his kind expression. His eyes, bright and black, were nestled in a web of smiling wrinkles. His mouth was slightly open, and seeing him made Li Quewan want to smile herself.

"Is the old patriarch in good health?" she asked softly.

"Fine, just fine!" Li Xuanxuan came forward quickly. Li Quewan reached out to support him, but he waved her hand away, looking around eagerly. "Ximing is back? Let's go, let's go! We'll head over right now!"

Today, Li Xuanxuan was likely the only person who dared to call Daoist Master Zhaojing by his given name. Li Quewan rose into the air with him.

"A few months ago… that He Jiumen died of old age," Li Xuanxuan lamented. "He used too much of his vital blood in artifact refinement and only lived to be one hundred and fifty. Such a pity… And his legacy, he couldn't pass it all on to Queyi and the others. The old man didn't even get to die satisfied!"

He Jiumen was an old cultivator from the west bank who had grown close to Li Xuanxuan in recent years. This was the first Li Quewan had heard of his passing. Before she could respond, Li Xuanxuan continued, "Donghe has been silent as a stone at the Jade Court all these years, and An Zheyan is away on a mission. Qiuyang, on the other hand, has let everything go to pilot a boat on the lake. I'm all alone on this mountain with no one to talk to. The few who do come to visit are just trying to use my influence. It's all so insincere…"

After Li Qinghong, Li Xuanxuan was the first elder Li Quewan had followed. Hearing his complaints, she felt a pang of guilt.

"An Zheyan only has a few years left," Li Xuanxuan said, his tone turning indignant, "and they sent him to the north! And after what happened to An Siewen… what's the meaning of this? I'm going to have a good talk with the Daoist Master about it."

In the middle of his words, they descended upon Gardenia Scenery Mountain. At the foot of the mountain, a man and a woman were waiting.

The man was handsome, dressed in pleated robes that shimmered with a golden light like wheat, branching into six streams that moved with the grace of sparrows. The woman was of plain appearance, without makeup, wearing a simple dress with a sword on her back.

"Uncle Zhouluo, Aunt Xinghan!" Li Quewan greeted them.

The two quickly bowed to Li Xuanxuan, their ancestor. He hurried to help them up, giving Li Xinghan a surprised look. "Zhouluo visits me often on Mount Qingdu, so I see him a lot. But Xinghan, I don't believe I've seen you much. Where are you cultivating these days?"

Li Xinghan cupped her hands. "Replying to the patriarch, Xinghan cultivates on the northern shore of Moongaze Lake. The cliffs there are steep and excellent for practicing swordsmanship."

Though her appearance was unremarkable, her voice was as crisp and clear as melting snow, quite captivating. Hearing the word "swordsmanship," Li Xuanxuan's eyes lit up. "Have you cultivated sword Qi?"

"Replying to the patriarch, I have."

As they approached the Daoist Master's residence, they lowered their voices. Li Xuanxuan didn't press them further. They reached the summit, where fallen gardenia petals blanketed the ground like a layer of white frost. A few broken jade pillars lay amidst the sea of flowers, with faint wisps of purple flame flickering between them.

The Daoist Master, dressed in white robes with gold patterns, was reading a jade slip. Seeing Li Xuanxuan, he immediately rose to welcome him, helping the old man to a seat and pouring him tea. Only then did the younger clan members dare to move, standing respectfully to the side.

Li Zhouluo glanced over and saw his father, Li Chenghuai, standing silently nearby. His heart began to pound. 'What is happening…?'

With the juniors present, Li Xuanxuan held his tongue, simply responding to Li Ximing's questions about his well-being. Finally, Li Chenghuai spoke. "Reporting to the Daoist Master, Zhoufang and Zhouyang of the First Branch are in the wilderness and have not yet returned."

Li Ximing nodded and turned his gaze to Li Zhouluo and Li Xinghan, a look of satisfaction on his face. His eyes lingered on the sword on Li Xinghan's back. "Our family was founded on the sword," he said, "but besides my two brothers, few in the younger generation have taken to it. It is good that you two, one cultivating Geng Metal and the other Jade True, both practice the way of the sword."

Li Zhouluo was the first in the family to cultivate the *Gleaming Gold Spirit-Searching Art*. Li Xinghan was a special case; she cultivated the Yu family's Dao lineage, the *Jade Dao Unity True Art*.

This technique had been recovered from the Yu family's secret vaults. Although it was ungraded, it was a rare and complete inheritance. However, almost no

one in the Li family had cultivated it over the years due to the difficulty of gathering its unique Qi.

The *Jade Dao Unity True Art* required a cultivator to hold a jade plate and chant scriptures day in and day out to gather the initial strand of Qi. The process took five or six years—not an eternity, but far more demanding than the one or two hours a day other methods required. It was a significant delay in one's cultivation. Moreover, the Qi had to be gathered by the same person without interruption. The original scriptures had been scattered when the Yu family fell, making it even more challenging. Li Xinghan's father, though a direct descendant, was unremarkable in talent and ability and could never have acquired such a treasure for her.

But fortune and misfortune are intertwined. Because of his poor cultivation, her father was not qualified to participate in the great river battle. With only his status as a direct descendant, he had married a woman with ties to the Yu family. Li Xinghan's maternal uncle had once been a Yu family guest elder who knew the scriptures. Doting on his niece, he personally spent five years gathering the Qi for her.

Her mother's family's efforts had not been in vain. As Li Ximing looked at her, his eyes truly lit up.

A family's Dao lineages should be as diverse as possible to prevent them from being suppressed by a single type of magical artifact or spiritual aura. The family's direct lineage was lacking a Jade True cultivator. Li Ximing was pleased.

"Your immortal foundation has the intent of comprehension and unity, and you have appeared when the Jade True is prominent in the world," he said with a smile. "In ancient times, the Jade True Six-Nine Unified Void True Monarch was also a sword immortal. When he attained Fruition… it's possible that this Jade True is an excellent lineage for sword practice, no worse than Geng Metal. Continue to train well."

Li Ximing needed to make no promises. For a Daoist Master of his stature to say these words in front of the clan's old patriarch and the Foundation Establishment head of Mount Qingdu was a clear sign that Li Xinghan had caught his eye. The young woman, though not one for complex thoughts, understood the weight of his words and immediately bowed low.

"Thank you, Daoist Master!"

Chapter 740: Arranging Affairs, (Part 2)

Li Xinghan offered his thanks, earning a nod of approval from Li Xuanxuan.

"Do you have a Dharma Sword?" he asked.

The question made it obvious that a gift was forthcoming. Li Xinghan answered respectfully, "I have a lower-grade Qi Refining sword called the 'Northern Jade.' It was from my uncle's collection, originally a Dharma Artifact of the Yu family. It's quite old, likely forged back when the Jiang Clan was prominent, but it serves me well."

"The Yu family," Li Ximing remarked, raising an eyebrow. Since Li Xuanxuan had brought it up, it was only natural for him, the Daoist Master, to bestow the gift. "Back then… Yu Mujian had a sword named 'Bronze Hoard.' Your Uncle Xijun shattered it, but the remains are still in the treasury. It was forged from the bronze of Yan Mountain and the Water of the Drifting Nether. The craftsmanship was average, but the materials are of exceptional quality."

Everyone listened intently as Li Ximing continued, "Once you master the 'Flowing Light of the Triple Moon,' come up the mountain. I will personally find a smith to forge a new sword for you using the Bronze Hoard as the core material."

Li Xinghan bowed deeply in thanks, a genuine smile gracing her face. The promise of this new sword seemed to excite her even more than the Daoist Master's personal guidance.

Li Ximing then turned, his gaze sweeping over Li Zhouluo. The young man already wore a Foundation Establishment-grade sword at his waist, one cast in a brownish-yellow hue. It looked familiar to Li Ximing; it was likely the standard-issue 'Xushi Sword' his elder brother, Li Xizhi, had once used. Though made

from Foundation Establishment materials, its quality was merely adequate, making it a suitable weapon for Zhouluo.

In recent years, Li Chenghuai had grown closer to Li Xizhi and his wife, so the family didn't need to worry about Li Zhouluo's cultivation resources or artifacts. His grandfather provided for almost everything, ensuring his supplies were on par with, if not better than, the direct descendants of the Azure Pond Sect. Within the Li family, he was in a class of his own. Thus, Li Ximing only asked a few questions about his cultivation before dismissing the two juniors, keeping only Li Quewan behind.

"You and Jiangqian wait for me down the mountain," he instructed.

Once the younger generation had departed, Li Xuanxuan finally spoke. He didn't ask about An Siwei, instead choosing a different topic. "Those two are promising children. And then there are Zhoufang and Zhouyang… Your younger brother once remarked that the only noteworthy thing about those two was their honesty. Yet now, aside from Zhouwei, Zhouluo, and Xinghan, they're the only presentable ones of the 'Zhou' generation…"

His tone held no anger, only a trace of melancholy. "Of the dozen or so others… the ones who are half-hearted, foolish, or incompetent are the better of the lot. Then there are those who lock themselves away, indulging in their own pleasures, secretly lost to wine and women… As long as they don't harm the common folk, Mount Qingdu can't punish them too severely. We can only let them be. As for the last one or two… they're still locked in a cell!"

At these words, Li Chenghuai quickly bowed his head in apology. "It is our failure as elders… My brothers and I have been negligent in their education…"

"Your Chengming generation is either cultivating or fighting. There are hardly any of you left. This blame doesn't fall on your shoulders…" Li Xuanxuan waved his hand dismissively. "It's that boy Zhouming's wretched nature… that is the real trouble."

Hearing his own grandson's name, Li Ximing understood at once. He glanced at Li Chenghuai and said, "Grandfather, you're blaming me… What foolishness has Zhouming committed now?"

Given that Li Ximing had just mentioned Li Zhouming, any misdeed that failed to reach his ears would be Li Chenghuai's responsibility. But Li Chenghuai was

just as clueless; he had no idea what this person had done wrong! The last person who had deceived a Daoist Master had been reduced to ash. That single glance from Li Ximing, even coming from his own elder, was enough to make him freeze.

Fortunately, Li Xuanxuan's age had granted him sharp insight. A single look between the two was all he needed to grasp the situation. "This matter isn't under Mount Qingdu's jurisdiction, so the blame should fall on me."

Li Xuanxuan lowered his voice. "A few years ago, while you were in seclusion, Zhouming's cultivation was lagging. I thought to help him, so I had Jiangqian arrange a position for him. But he refused to go, and the matter was dropped. No one else in the family knew."

"Later, when Chenghuai came out of seclusion, he assigned him a task directly. He went, albeit reluctantly. I worried his cultivation level wouldn't command respect, so I secretly gave him a spiritual item to aid his practice… But… when I checked on him a few days ago… his cultivation showed no change."

Li Ximing sat up straight and poured Li Xuanxuan a cup of tea. "This junior has been lax in his upbringing."

Li Xuanxuan shook his head. "A direct descendant of a Daoist Master being supported by the family is one thing. We don't lack for one more mouth to feed… whether it's shameful or not is another matter. But I want what's best for him, so I have to say a few more words."

Silence fell upon the mountain. Fearing he had angered Li Ximing, Li Xuanxuan added, "I'm not saying he's completely useless. Among the juniors, Zhouwei is exceptional, of course, but the only others who have truly amounted to anything are Fang, Yang, Luo, and Han. Zhouming at least listens to his father a little. Compared to his brothers, he isn't the worst."

Li Ximing understood his grandfather's meaning. "Just give him an idle post. I never expected him to achieve anything great. We only need to manage the few who have ambition. Does Grandfather truly expect the family to prepare resources and send people to supervise his cultivation day and night? Our family has always selected the best based on talent and wit. We cannot break that rule."

Li Xuanxuan could only sigh and change the subject. "Chenghuai, though your Immortal Foundation is formidable, in my opinion… you shouldn't use it for every little thing."

Li Chenghuai looked slightly surprised.

Li Xuanxuan continued, "There are some things you can't perceive. As the saying goes, the water is too clear for fish. In the two years you've overseen Mount Qingdu, both the guest retainers and the family's direct line have grown timid, as if treading on ice. They've started colluding to find ways to evade your scrutiny. On the surface, things appear more peaceful, but in reality, their dealings have become more secretive. This is not a good sign."

"It's one thing if we can see their clandestine actions; a few grievances and injustices are acceptable. What I fear is that their activities become so cautious and hidden that neither of us can see them clearly. Then we'll have to expend twice the effort to investigate. There are countless wondrous arts in this world; they will eventually find a way to understand and bypass your divine ability. If we become too reliant on your Immortal Foundation, we will be the ones deceived and manipulated."

Li Chenghuai bowed his head in thought.

The old man went on, "Secondly, you should be focusing on your cultivation right now, not neglecting the root for the branches. Only involve yourself as a witness in major affairs concerning the direct lineage. After all, this current situation, where every single matter is brought to Mount Qingdu for a final judgment, has also broken the rules."

Li Chenghuai had just finished refining two new Dharma Artifacts and had yet to explore their many wonderful properties. He had been holding his post at Mount Qingdu purely out of a sense of duty. He now sensed the old man had been aware of this for some time and was offering him a way out. He couldn't help but marvel internally.

'The old master says nothing, but he is the one who sees things most clearly in this family… He has been watching over us for more than a century, after all…'

With a newfound sense of respect, he declared, "Chenghuai will obey. I will relinquish my authority at Mount Qingdu as soon as I return!"

Li Xuanxuan stroked his beard and smiled. "In that case, let Zhouluo take charge of Mount Qingdu."

"Old Master!" Li Chenghuai tried to object, but Li Xuanxuan simply waved his hand. Seeing this, he had no choice but to take his leave.

Alone now, the grandfather and grandson sat in silence. Li Xuanxuan glanced at the Daoist Master, who was quietly sipping his tea. "Ming'er, what do you think is the main flaw of the 'Zhou' generation?"

The celestial light between the white-robed, gold-patterned Daoist Master's brows subsided. He took a sip of tea. "They are too good-natured… and I fear they will be deceived."

"Precisely," Li Xuanxuan said with approval.

Li Ximing's voice was low. "Father told me from a young age that Moongaze Lake is a wicked land. He said that a ruler must be the most adept at misdeeds, cunning, and deception to control such people and bring peace to the populace. Zhouluo and Xinghan are talented, but they were born into privilege. Everything has come easily to them. They are fine for cultivation and combat, but if they encounter someone like Wenhu or Chen Yang, I'm afraid they will be easily manipulated."

In truth, Li Ximing was being gentle. Li Zhouluo wasn't a fool, but if he were to truly face Wenhu, he would almost certainly be played for one. This was exactly what worried Li Xuanxuan. "Who can say? People grow with age. When Chengdang was young, he was just a quiet boy among the Chengming generation. No one thought he would amount to much. Let's just wait and see."

Li Xuanxuan had been on the verge of asking about An Siwei several times, but in the end, he held his tongue. He simply stood up. "This old man has spent too long on the peak. It makes me want to meddle in family affairs. Don't mind my rambling."

"Grandfather's guidance is an endless benefit to the family."

Li Ximing saw him off. Down at the foot of the mountain, Li Jiangqian and Li Quewan were waiting, and behind them stood a broad-faced man. Feeling no need to return to the summit, Li Ximing sat down in the pavilion at the mountain's base.

"How are things progressing with the Secret Diffusion lineage?" he asked.

Li Jiangqian answered respectfully, "The Wang family members have arrived. This is Wang Quwan. He's from a different branch than Wang He, but he is still from the direct line of the Jiangbei Wang Clan."

The Wang Clan was a special case. They were an important local power, having migrated from the lands of Qi in the State of Zhao. Their numbers were significant not only in Funan and Midong, but their clan had once stretched all the way to the Tangjin region. Because of this, the Wang family could no longer be treated as ordinary guest retainers.

Li Ximing glanced at Wang Quwan. The man was dressed simply and had an unremarkable appearance. "Jiangbei is in turmoil. Now that the Wang clansmen have newly relocated to Funan, are you facing any difficulties?"

Wang Quwan clasped his hands and bowed, his eyes lowered respectfully toward the ground. "Midong was turbulent and dangerous. It is thanks to the main family that the Wang Clan was able to escape that sea of bitterness. Now we have been granted new lands. Everyone has a spirit field to cultivate and receives a stipend. The common clansmen are living and working in peace. We face no hardships."

His attitude and choice of words made the Daoist Master pause. Li Ximing noted that the man before him was neither young nor old, perhaps nearing fifty. "What arts have you studied? Do you have any skills? What crafts does your clan practice to sustain itself?"

Wang Quwan's gaze remained fixed on the ground, his posture one of ultimate deference. His etiquette was more impeccable than anyone Li Ximing had met. "Reporting to the Daoist Master," he said in a steady voice, "this humble one has practiced the sword since childhood and has achieved some small success, cultivating sword Qi for many years. My elder brother, Wang Qudao, is also nearby in the Funan region. He has some skill in alchemy, which he uses to support his family."

Li Ximing sensed a calm and composed mind, neither servile nor arrogant. This was no ordinary man. His words were precise and measured, which sparked a faint sense of unease in him.

'He's no simple character either… Wenhu, Ding Weizeng, Gongsun Bofan… and now Wang Qudao and Wang Quwan… This land of Jiangbei is truly blessed by the heavens. It's unusual… far too unusual.'

Li Ximing remained silent, and Wang Quwan could only continue to kneel. A strange premonition suddenly struck the Daoist Master.

'How does my family compare to the Xiao Clan of the past? Back then… did the Xiao Clan look upon my ancestor, Tongya, the same way I am looking at Wang Quwan now?'

'Did the Purple Mansion cultivators of that era think the same thing when they looked at my familyfirst there was Wan Huaqian and Yu Yufeng, then came Li Chejing and Yu Muxian, and then there was Li Tongya… This land of Moongaze Lake is truly blessed by the heavens!'

A myriad of thoughts raced through his mind. After a brief pause, he nodded. "Very well. Since you are willing to serve my family, you will be treated with the same consideration as our own clansmen."

Wang Quwan bowed respectfully. Just then, the Daoist Master flicked a finger, and a jade slip landed before him. "My clan has a technique called 'The Xiaoshi Art of Clearing the Heavens and Scattering Clouds.' It is far superior to whatever third-rate manual you're practicing, and it even includes the Foundation Establishment portion. You may begin cultivating it."

A flicker of joy lit up Wang Quwan's eyes. He understood the Daoist Master's intentions almost instantly. The Wang family had Wang He, a cultivator of the Capital Immortals Dao, in Jiangbei. They were also the largest clan by far, with numerous direct branches. To stabilize their rule, the Li family needed a Foundation Establishment cultivator from the Wang Clan. He accepted the jade slip with reverence. "This junior thanks the Daoist Master. The Wang Clan in Jiangbei will serve as loyal vassals to the main family, stabilizing the region for the Daoist Master and the clan head. We would die ten thousand deaths without regret."

Seeing that he had grasped the surface meaning, Li Ximing spoke more freely. "The family's 'Three Perfection Breakthrough Pill' and 'Pill of White Breath and Golden Sprout' will both have a share set aside for you. When you are ready to attempt your breakthrough, make a trip to Gardenia Scenery Mountain."

Wang Quwan expressed his gratitude once more and departed down the mountain. As he watched him leave, Li Ximing turned to Li Jiangqian. "Have you selected the candidates from the clan to cultivate the Secret Diffusion arts?"

Li Jiangqian nodded. "Reporting to the Daoist Master, I have just checked. Unfortunately, the most talented one, my younger sister Queyi, has already broken through, so it's too late for her. There are three members of the Jiangque generation at the fifth and sixth layers of Embryonic Breathing. This technique requires time to gather Qi, but fortunately, the Wang Clan had a stockpile that we've reclaimed. We'll have one of our younger clan brothers start cultivating it first, and then decide on the others."

Having seen Wang Quwan's capable demeanor, Li Ximing felt more at ease. In a few years, once his cultivation was higher, he would surely be a valuable asset. "Wang Quwan is a man of substance. It seems the Secret Diffusion Dao lineage is destined for him, which means his fortune is strong. You must watch him closely. The Wang Clan of Jiangbei is too large to tie down completely, but if we can make good use of Wang Quwan, he will be no less valuable than Ding Weizeng."

"This junior will remember!"

With the matter of the Secret Diffusion lineage settled, Li Ximing retrieved a stone box from his sleeve. Inside was Changxi's final testament. He handed it to Li Jiangqian. "I'm going to the Purple Smoke Gate, and I may have to make a detour to the Profound Wonder Temple to deal with Shanji Prefecture. I want you to inform Cheng'en to gather the people from the Profound Peak Gate. Have them retrieve the item from beneath the seat of the Head of the Hall of Resting Peaks and verify it against this testament."

Without another word, he transformed into a streak of celestial light and departed. Li Jiangqian maintained his bow until the light had vanished over the horizon. Only then did he straighten up and turn to Li Quewan.

"Sister, how has your progress been these past few months?"

"Not much to speak of," Li Quewan replied, her expression tinged with worry. "It seems we can no longer hold Shanji Prefecture. We're about to lose the entire prefecture, and all of the Profound Peak Gate's foundations will be scattered. I wonder how those few from the Kong Clan will react."

At the mention of this, Li Jiangqian said, "How else could they react? Has my Li family not been benevolent enough to them? Look at the Profound Wonder Temple, then look at Mount Jingyi. We are saving their Dao lineage. What cannot be defended must be abandoned, no matter how precious. Do they expect our family to protect it with our own lives?"

Li Quewan sighed. "Brother Qian, what you say is logical, but when you are caught in the middle of it, it's impossible to see clearly. From the Profound Peak Gate's perspective, they may not see this as a rescue. They might see it as something their ancestor earned by trading away spiritual artifacts and treasures, something that wasn't given to any other family... It all depends on whether Kong Guxi can make sense of it. If he can't, his fate will be far worse than Yuan Fuyao's!"

Chapter 741: Dark Night

The wilderness.

Kong Guxi had mostly recovered from his injuries. Draped in a simple Daoist robe, he rode the wind, surveying his new domain. Two disciples trailed behind him, and as far as the eye could see, the land below teemed with a dense sea of people.

His Profound Peak Gate had relocated five hundred thousand people into the wilderness, nearly halving the population of their former territory in Shanji Prefecture. They had abandoned the more remote regions entirely, bringing everything they owned to this new land.

A territory that had lain empty for a century was suddenly bustling. He had established several secure settlements for his people. A good number of his disciples had been saved; he now had over a dozen at the Qi Refining Realm and even more at the Embryonic Breathing stage, all of whom had been dispatched to various locations.

As he tallied the lands in the wilderness now under the Profound Peak Gate's control, Kong Guxi felt a flicker of relief.

'It's not a small territory,' he thought. 'Enough to support our current disciples. The only drawback is the lack of rich spirit veins, which will make cultivation difficult for those at the Foundation Establishment Realm. Thankfully, we can borrow the Li family's spirit mountains.'

The Li family had been more than fair, granting him authority over most of the Profound Peak Gate's original holdings in the wilderness. Though news of raids and pillaging in Shanji Prefecture reached him from time to time, Kong Guxi had little time to mourn the loss.

'All the loyal ones have been moved. From now on, this wilderness is the domain of my Kong Clan. Let them fight over Shanji Prefecture… I was powerless to stop it anyway. Every extra day we held onto it was a blessing.'

Halfway through his patrol, he spotted several of his clan members gathered on a distant mountain peak. Li Chenghui stood among them, spear in hand. The sight made Kong Guxi's eye twitch. He flew over at once, landing softly on the peak.

"Sect Master Kong," Li Chenghui said, his tone serious. "You've returned. We have an urgent matter to discuss."

Kong Guxi's gaze swept over the group. His own people—Kong Qiuyan, Kong Xiaxiang, and even the clan's other pillar of strength, Kong Guli—were all waiting expectantly. He hurried forward. "Please, instruct me!"

"I wouldn't dare instruct you, Sect Master," Li Chenghui replied, his expression grave. "I am merely relaying a message."

"A message I received a while ago. My family's Daoist Master has gone to the Purple Smoke Gate and sent me to inform you that your sect is to retrieve an item."

"What item?" Kong Guxi's heart pounded with fear. He was terrified Li Chenghui would ask for something like Kong Haiying's head. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

But Li Chenghui only said, "An item left behind by Daoist Master Changxi. It is located beneath the primary seat in the Hall of Resting Peaks on your main mountain. Please send someone to retrieve it."

Kong Guxi breathed a silent sigh of relief. He looked around and chose the most dependable person present. "Brother, I must ask you to make the trip."

Kong Guli nodded and departed, leaving Kong Guxi and the others on the mountain, unsure of what to do. Kong Qiuyan glanced from Li Chenghui to her sect master, her mind too preoccupied to focus on anything. She ended up leaning against the doorway to wait. Old Kong Yu, his injuries still unhealed, paced back and forth, wanting to ask questions but not daring to.

The sky had begun to darken by the time a streak of light finally appeared in the distance. Kong Guli landed hastily on the peak, a stone box in his hands. "The seat was protected by a complex secret art," he explained, breathless. "It took some time to bypass!"

Kong Guxi had no mind to reply. He opened the box, and the rest of the Kong clan members crowded around to look, their eyes filled with apprehension. Inside the box lay a piece of cloth, on which was written a single line of text.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures. Shanji Prefecture and the Profound Peak mountain sect are to be placed under the authority of Daoist Master Zhaojing."

The cloth, inscribed by a Daoist Master, had taken on the texture of jade. Its smooth surface reflected their stunned faces. Old Kong Yu read it twice before speaking. "It is the ancestor's decree."

Seeing that there was no issue with the directive, Li Chenghui produced a jade box of his own. From it, he took out a piece of spirit cloth as hard as stone and placed it on the table. The crowd, silent as statues, leaned in once more to read.

'I entrust Daoist Master Zhaojing to watch over the Profound Peak Gate. Should the situation turn dire, he has my permission to cede Shanji Prefecture to another power in exchange for their aid.'

The Kong clan stood in stunned silence.

To them, Shanji Prefecture was what Moongaze Lake was to the Li family. Losing it would be like the Li clan losing their sixteen prefectures and two mountains, left with nothing but Pingya Island. If they lost Shanji, they could never return to their ancestral home. All they could do was remain in the wilderness, serving as a buffer for others. Although they'd had some inkling of this when they migrated so many people, seeing it laid bare in writing left them utterly lost.

Kong Guxi was just as stunned.

In his heart, he had known since the battle on the river that the Profound Peak Gate was outmatched. In a departure from the thinking of nearly every other member of his clan, the sect master had already begun to see Shanji Prefecture as something that no longer belonged to them. That was why, no matter how fiercely the battles raged or how much was plundered, he could grit his teeth and suppress his heartache, pouring all his energy into their former dependency, this new domain in the wilderness.

But Changxi's final command mentioned another place: the mountain sect!

If their very mountain could be bartered away, then what of Kong Haiying and Kong Tingyun, who could not be moved? Kong Guxi could endure any hardship as long as there was a sliver of hope. But without those two, what was the Kong Clan?

Barely a second passed before Kong Guxi dropped to his knees. "The Profound Peak Gate respectfully obeys the Daoist Master's command!" he cried out.

Night had fallen. His voice, amplified by his power, echoed through the mountains on the evening wind. From Kong Guli to Kong Yu, and even to the disciples scattered across the peak, everyone pondered his words.

'Obey which Daoist Master's command?'

'The Profound Peak Gate of Shanji… but if we have no Shanji, no mountain… are we still the Profound Peak Gate?'

But their bodies reacted faster than their thoughts. Like wheat before a scythe, they all fell to their knees, their voices joining in a chorus.

"The Profound Peak Gate respectfully obeys the Daoist Master's command!"

Li Chenghui moved to help him up, but Kong Guxi bowed again. "The Daoist Master helped us relocate our people and gave us a place to shelter. The Profound Peak Gate is eternally grateful! We have no way to repay this debt…"

The others, lost and forlorn, repeated his words amid choked sobs. Only then did Kong Guxi rise, his voice thick with gratitude. "Thank you for making this trip, sir. If there is any news from Shanji, please inform us at once. We will immediately move the few dozen people we left behind, so as not to cause any delays or misunderstandings."

Li Chenghui gave him a complicated look, then nodded and departed on the wind. The moment he was gone, Kong Qiuyan slumped to the ground. Kong Xiaxiang, a young man with reddened eyes, shot to his feet, his face a mask of agitation. He stormed toward the hall and slammed the doors open with a thunderous bang.

Kong Guxi, who had been hunched over, suddenly exploded into motion. He took a single step and seized the young man's robes, yanking him around. The sect master's face was a mask of fury, like that of a raging lion.

"What do you mean by that," he roared, "what do you mean! Speak! What… do you mean!"

His voice was like a thunderclap, extinguishing every magic lamp in the hall and plunging the room into darkness. Faced with his sect master's blazing eyes, Kong Xiaxiang's defiant glare melted away. He gritted his teeth. "Reporting to the Sect Master, this junior was going to relay the order."

Only then did Kong Guxi release him, his voice now a hoarse rasp. "It is not safe for you to go out now. Remain on this peak. Do not go anywhere. We will reassess in a few days."

The eldest among them, Kong Guli, had watched the entire exchange without a word. Only Kong Yu, weeping quietly, stumbled out into the night and vanished into the darkness, a man whose nature had always been to pity himself.

After a long while, Kong Guxi stepped out of the hall. The lamps outside had gone out as well. He looked up at the sky.

He realized there was no moon tonight. A bleak wind rustled through the forest, and the entire mountain was steeped in blackness. His disciples stood on either side, their faces swallowed by the night, their features indistinct. It seemed to him that they were all trembling.

Chapter 742: Pills and Formations

Though the night was deep, the Purple Smoke Blessed Land was a realm of perpetual light.

Wisps of purple qi coiled and ascended, creating an ethereal, immortal atmosphere. The qi ebbed and flowed like a tide, revealing and concealing a landscape of countless peaks in its thick, violet clouds. The glow of magical formations shot into the sky, bathing the entire domain in a brilliant radiance.

At the very center, pavilions and galleries floated upon the purple qi, a breathtaking sight. A Daoist Master in a white robe with gold trim descended on a beam of light, followed by a younger man with the air of a scholar. The purple qi parted before them, revealing a long, translucent staircase of purple jade.

The Purple Smoke Gate disciples they passed along the way bowed their heads in respect, whether they recognized the Daoist Master or not, only rising after he had passed. Li Ximing noted this with a silent nod of approval.

'The Purple Smoke Gate has a long and venerable history,' he thought. 'Their etiquette is quite strict.'

This visit was not solely about the Profound Peak Gate. The two families had much to discuss, and Li Ximing had never intended to come alone. However, the core members of his clan were either in seclusion or recovering from injuries, and the few who remained were busy managing critical affairs. After careful consideration, he had chosen to bring Cui Jueyin.

'Those other guest elders would be an embarrassment,' he mused. 'Ding Weizeng is qualified, but he's nursing a minor injury. Besides, he lacks polish and has never seen the wider world. Cui Jueyin, a direct descendant from Chongzhou, is the most suitable choice.'

A female cultivator descended on a cloud to greet them. She wore a pale yellow feathered robe, a brightly colored sash fluttering at her waist.

"Greetings, Daoist Master Zhaojing!"

The woman bowed. The Daoist Master in the white and gold robe returned the courtesy. "Is Daoist Master Tinglan present?" he asked.

Li Ximing had corresponded with the Purple Smoke Gate some time ago and only made the trip after confirming Tinglan had returned to the sect. His question was merely a formality. The woman in yellow replied, "My master returned to the Blessed Land half a year ago. She had planned to leave on the twenty-second, but after receiving your letter, she stayed a few extra days and sent me to wait for you here."

She led the way, the purple qi swirling around them. Li Ximing turned his head slightly and spoke in a low voice to Cui Jueyin, who followed behind him. "This is the Purple Smoke Immortal Gate, of the Green Pine Supreme Yang Dao Lineage."

The young man maintained a respectful posture, his eyes wide with wonder at the purple qi flowing through the mountains. He acknowledged the information with a soft sound of assent, a sense of ease settling over him.

Cui Jueyin was a stranger in these lands, but even in his year of relative seclusion, he had learned of the Three Sects and Seven Gates. For a Purple Mansion cultivator like Li Ximing to offer such an explanation showed that he was treating him as one of his own juniors. An ordinary Foundation Establishment subordinate would never have received such personal attention.

The three of them proceeded deeper, finally arriving at the palace complex floating on the purple qi. The spiritual energy here was even richer, and a special kind of energy seemed to flow up from the steps beneath their feet, dissipating like smoke.

Though only one of the Seven Gates, the Purple Smoke Gate's foundation was deep. Their mountain sect, known as a Blessed Land, was a place of sublime beauty. Chongzhou Island was a fine place in its own right, but it paled in comparison. Cui Jueyin was filled with awe.

The Purple Qi Dao lineage was exceedingly rare overseas. While one might occasionally encounter a demonic cultivator of that path, an orthodox sect with such an immortal air was unheard of. Cui Jueyin's gaze swept over the drifting purple mists, feeling their profound power.

The woman in yellow led them to the highest point, but here there was no palace. Instead, a smooth, translucent platform of purple jade stretched before them. The purple qi here had taken on a faint, luminous yellow hue, darting back and forth beneath their feet.

A laugh echoed through the air. "Greetings, Daoist Brother Zhaojing!"

Li Ximing looked up to see a woman standing on the platform. Unlike the usual purple attire of the sect's members, she wore a magnificent autumn-yellow satin dress embroidered with butterfly patterns. Her features were delicate, her eyebrows thin. A touch of cyan at the corners of her eyes enhanced her beauty.

'So this is Daoist Master Tinglan,' Li Ximing thought. 'She seems to have a taste for finery.'

Only Li Ximing and Tinglan had the standing to openly appraise one another. Both the Purple Smoke cultivator and Cui Jueyin kept their eyes lowered, not daring to look directly at a Purple Mansion master. Whatever Tinglan thought of him, Li Ximing simply smiled in return. "You are too kind, Daoist Sister. I had heard your title was one of great beauty, and now that I see you in person, I find you are truly a celestial fairy."

Daoist Master Tinglan laughed and thanked him for the compliment. "I am originally a cultivator from the northern land of Qi," she explained. "My style of dress is a bit different from that of the Jiangnan region. I hope you do not find it strange."

Understanding dawned on Li Ximing. 'A cultivator from Qi? It seems she is not from the Kan family. Qi is the Gao family's territory… Surely she isn't a Gao, is she?'

While Li Ximing was still pondering this, Daoist Master Tinglan spoke again, her voice gentle. "My surname is Yi. I was once a loose cultivator and array master from Bolie Prefecture. I received the guidance of my master, Daoist Master Zipei, and achieved my Divine Ability here in the Blessed Land."

Li Ximing nodded. Tinglan continued, "I have been traveling for many years and am not often in the sect. I only saw your letter upon my return. I apologize for making you wait, Daoist Brother."

Li Ximing didn't believe a word of it.

'When Changxi was alive, he visited the Purple Smoke Gate several times and never saw a soul. Even when my family sent inquiries, we received no response. Now that Changxi has fallen and we have proven our strength on the river, you suddenly appear, ready to divide up Shanji Prefecture. How convenient.'

For a loose cultivator to become a direct disciple of Zipei and break through to the Purple Mansion Realm, Tinglan was no simple character. Li Ximing didn't let his thoughts show. Everyone sought to avoid risk and maximize their gains. He simply replied, "It was no trouble. The search for our predecessor's whereabouts is the highest priority."

Daoist Master Tinglan merely smiled and nodded at his words, saying nothing more. With a light sweep of her sleeve, a table and chairs materialized on the jade platform, seemingly formed from the platform itself. A jade pot sat on the table, the tea inside boiling, steam billowing from its spout.

"Please!"

As they took their seats, Tinglan asked, "You sought me out, Daoist Brother. Is it concerning an array for your clan?"

She had provided the perfect opening. This was indeed one of Li Ximing's goals. He nodded. "My family has only recently been elevated to an Immortal Clan, and we are indeed lacking a Purple Mansion-level spiritual array. The Purple Smoke Gate is a great sect of array masters, and you, Daoist Sister, are a grandmaster of the art. I came to ask for your guidance."

Tinglan glanced at him and smiled. "You are no slouch yourself, Daoist Brother."

In truth, Li Ximing had only just broken through to the Purple Mansion Realm and was hardly a master of alchemy. Tinglan, for her part, was not yet capable of setting up a Purple Mansion array on her own. The exchange brought a wry smile to both their faces, and they dropped the pretenses.

Li Ximing's expression turned serious. "Please, instruct me."

Tinglan nodded. "There are three crucial elements to a Purple Mansion Grand Array," she began softly. "First and foremost is the spiritual item at its core. Second is the foundation of the array. Last is the Divine Ability and dharma power of the cultivator setting it up."

"The foundation of the array consists of the spiritual energy, the earth veins, the Great Void, and the array's nodes. Though incredibly expensive, these are often manageable for cultivators like us. The true difficulty lies in finding a suitable spiritual item for the array, and in the fact that not every cultivator's Divine Ability can properly channel the wondrous properties of such objects."

Li Ximing considered her words.

"Your clan must first acquire a Purple Mansion-level spiritual item," Tinglan continued. "Then, I can come and assess it. If we proceed, I have a few friends who can assist. It would take about three to five years before the array is operational."

She paused, clearly thinking of the Profound Peak mountain sect, and poured him a cup of tea. "However, if you have a Purple Mansion array that can be moved, that changes things entirely. I would still need to survey your lake, realign the earth veins, and fill in lakes or level mountains where necessary. It would be a great deal of work upfront, but the setup would be much faster and far less expensive."

The tea was surprisingly good, far better than anything Li Ximing or Daoist Master Changxi could brew. He took a sip, noticing Tinglan's unusual enthusiasm for the matter. "So it takes that long," he said. "I was hoping for your assistance, Daoist Sister, but I didn't realize it would require such a monumental effort…"

Tinglan had been waiting for this. "Do not worry, Daoist Brother. I also require your help. I need you to refine a pill for me."

"Refine a pill?" Li Ximing frowned. "Is it something your own Divine Ability cannot handle?"

For a Purple Mansion cultivator, creating pills was a simple matter of shaping them with a wave of the hand. If it required his intervention, it was surely no ordinary pill.

At his question, Tinglan nodded slowly but did not speak. She turned to the female cultivator in yellow. "Danying, take our young friend on a tour of the Blessed Land."

Cui Jueyin understood immediately. After a nod from Li Ximing, he and the woman departed swiftly. The purple mist closed behind them.

Only then did Tinglan speak. "When cultivators like us use our Divine Abilities for alchemy, we can only manage pills for the Foundation Establishment or Qi Refining realms. We are not like you, who have practiced the Dao of Alchemy from the start. For you, the Shengyang Acupoint pushing into the Great Void is a state of perfect balance between yin and yang. For us, if we put our full power into refining, over time our Divine Ability will inevitably affect our Shengyang residence, throwing our yin and yang out of balance. I even have to rely on Hengxing for decent Essence Gathering Pills. Anything more powerful is simply beyond me."

She took out a jade slip, casually broke the seal with a wave of her hand, and placed it on the table. "Please take a look, Daoist Brother," she said with a smile, "and tell me if it can be done."

This was an unexpected boon. Li Ximing picked up the slip and began to read.

"Heavenly Oneness Essence Extraction Pill"

As expected, it was a Purple Mansion-level pill of considerable complexity. It required an incredibly precious Purple Mansion spiritual item, Immeasurable Water and Fire, as a harmonizing agent. The ingredients had to be refined with Divine Ability sixteen thousand, two hundred times before the Heavenly One Pure Origin could be used as the pill's body.

Li Ximing gritted his teeth. 'You people of the Purple Smoke Gate… so wealthy! Even Tinglan, who isn't a Kan, is this extravagant. Immeasurable Water and Fire, Heavenly One Pure Origin… if I could obtain either one of those, I'd be happy for three days straight…'

The slip didn't list the pill's other primary ingredients, only the secondary ones, the general procedure, and a description of the refining difficulty. There was no mention of the pill's effects, but as an alchemist, Li Ximing understood enough.

"This is a Valley Water spiritual pill for extracting and gathering primal essence… not exactly an orthodox concoction…"

He pondered for a moment.

"I must ask, Daoist Sister, do the primary ingredients include spiritual items of the Veiled Yin or Dry Qi type?"

"Of course not!"

Tinglan's attitude brightened considerably when he didn't immediately refuse. She smiled.

"I anticipated that! It is precisely because of the Valley Water that it clashes with the Hengzhu rites. That is why Daoist Brother Hengxing dared not refine this pill for me. If it contained something like Veiled Yin… I wouldn't dare ask for your help either."

Now Li Ximing understood why she hadn't sought out Daoist Master Hengxing. He weighed his options. 'The difficulty of this pill is unprecedented. Fortunately, the challenge lies in the refining process, not in an insurmountable barrier of Divine Ability. At worst, the yield will be low, and it will take more time. It's not impossible.'

He thought for a moment more, then asked for confirmation. "Do you have the Immeasurable Water and Fire?"

Tinglan nodded and had someone bring a large stone box from the base of the mountain. She opened it with her Divine Ability and took out a small, palm-sized clay pot. Its surface was smooth and covered in intricate gold and white patterns.

The moment the pot was placed on the table, it appeared perfectly ordinary to the naked eye. But in Li Ximing's spiritual sense, a thunderclap exploded. He perceived an intertwining of water and fire around the pot, so intense that the surrounding spiritual energy fled from it as if from a cursed star. In the Great Void, a new peak seemed to rise out of nowhere.

"I have the spiritual item," Tinglan said, her voice filled with hope. "But this Immeasurable Water and Fire repels spiritual energy. Controlling it with one's Divine Ability is incredibly draining. Are you confident, Daoist Brother? If you are to use this fire for alchemy, you might need to prepare some spiritual pills to maintain clarity of mind."

But Li Ximing cared little for Immeasurable Water and Fire. His spiritual sense swept over it, and his Talisman Qi reacted. As long as it was fire, it could not escape the control of his Talisman Qi's Valley Wind Guides the Flame. He never used his spiritual sense to control fire; it cost him nothing. How else could he have single-handedly supplied the Li family's demand for pills while still cultivating?

"As long as the primary ingredient is not a fellow cultivator, and it does not violate my clan's principles, I can attempt it," he said. "However, my skills are not yet perfected. I fear I can produce no more than three pills."

"Excellent!"

The Daoist Master in the autumn-yellow dress was pleasantly surprised by his confidence. 'Bright Yang accompanied by Radiant Fire,' she mused. 'It has control over fire, but is not fire itself. Perhaps that gives him an unusual degree of mastery over Immeasurable Water and Fire…'

Her confidence in him grew. Daoist Master Tinglan smiled and nodded, her expression turning serious. "If you can refine this pill for me, and your clan has a suitable spiritual item, then I will handle the array for Moongaze Lake. If… you intend to move an existing array… I can handle that as well. The value is not equal, of course, so I will compensate you with other things."

Li Ximing had his own Whole Pill Purple Mansion spiritual item, but he had no intention of revealing it just yet. He let out a slow breath and raised an eyebrow. "I do have one question. Daoist Master Chuting of the Lixia Xiao Clan is a far superior alchemist than I. Why did you not seek him out? You might have gotten more pills and not wasted such a precious ingredient as the Heavenly One Pure Origin."

Li Ximing had known of the Heavenly One Pure Origin since he was in the Qi Refining realm. It was a Purple Mansion-level spiritual water, also known as Primal Water, capable of cleansing one's immortal foundation and bringing the dead back to life. Its preciousness was second only to treasures like the Supreme Yin Moon Essence.

There were many life-saving spiritual items, but few that could truly cheat death. Furthermore, the ability to cleanse one's immortal foundation could allow a mediocre cultivator to leap into the ranks of the elite, rivaling the direct descendants of Purple Mansion clans.

Once used in alchemy, the Immeasurable Water and Fire could be recovered, but the Heavenly One Pure Origin would be gone forever. The thought of such a loss made Li Ximing's heart ache.

At his question, Daoist Master Tinglan shook her head. "I did consider seeking out that senior… but I would not be able to get an audience with him. Even if I did, I would not dare trust him. And even if I gritted my teeth and did trust him,

the price would be astronomical. That old man's mind is as deep as an abyss. You, Daoist Brother, are far more approachable."

Li Ximing nodded, a strange feeling creeping over him.

'So, I'm the budget-friendly, more desperate, and easier to manipulate option…'

Daoist Master Tinglan glanced at him slyly and chuckled. "Don't overthink it, Daoist Brother. My Purple Smoke Gate has a great need for refined pills, and several of my friends are also struggling with this. If this venture is successful, there will be many more pills to refine. There are great benefits for both our families in the future."

Li Ximing listened to her empty promises, murmuring his assent. Tinglan pushed the jade slip toward him. "I will leave this with you for now. It contains some notes and insights on alchemy from a predecessor. Perhaps you will find it useful."

Li Ximing was indeed tempted by the Purple Mansion-level insights in the slip, but he didn't move. He finally understood the source of his unease.

'So, Tinglan's real purpose in meeting me was for alchemy. It likely has nothing to do with Shanji Prefecture… Oh, Kong Guxi… you are willing to give up Shanji Prefecture, but she may not even want it! She'll probably make you beg her to take it!'

Chapter 743: The Intent of Purple Smoke

A contemplative Li Ximing set down his teacup, yet he still did not put away the jade slip, sighing as he spoke.

"Daoist Master, how do you see this matter with Profound Peak Gate?"

Tinglan saw that he was in no hurry to put the jade slip away and a hint of a smile appeared on her face. "I've been traveling overseas for years, so I don't know the specifics. Daoist Master Changxi, rising from such a minor clan, has already achieved something quite extraordinary. My master mentioned him once… he was very devoted to his clan."

Li Ximing raised an eyebrow. The woman continued, "After all, we are neighbors. Our Purple Smoke Immortal Gate has been watching. The former Haiying and Haiting, and later Gujun and Tingyun, were all fine supplements. He valued his clan, and that is why he did not act. A cunning rabbit has three burrows, and a Purple Mansion Daoist Master is no less. Now that he has died, Profound Peak Gate may seem to have no way to recover, but in reality, their retreat paths are more numerous than their forward ones. The Immortal Sect might not be saved, but the bloodline and Dao lineage are as steady as a mountain."

"What's more, doesn't the Moongaze Immortal Clan stand with them?"

At this, Li Ximing quickly shook his head.

Though he had not known Changxi for long and had often heard the Daoist Master's name accompanied by disrespectful jokes, he now understood. "Senior Changxi was a man of many thoughts, but he repeatedly mentioned Shanji Prefecture in his final days. He said the million-strong population of the prefecture was the fruit of his life's work and that he had protected them for hundreds of years. Now, unable to continue protecting them, he looked around and saw that only the Purple Smoke Immortal Gate was a legitimate and righteous holy land

of pure cultivation. He could only feel at ease entrusting these people to the hands of the righteous path."

Whatever Tinglan was thinking, hearing such high praise made it impossible to refuse the first statement. "We can only thank the elder for his high regard. But as you also said, our Purple Smoke Immortal Gate belongs to the righteous Dao. It is a holy land of pure cultivation. As for the matters of the Immortal Dao, we naturally burn talismans for a higher purpose, to receive the Immortal Mandate from the Moonlight Origin Mansion, and to focus on self-cultivation by guarding our hearts and understanding our nature."

"The Origin Mansion once allocated several prefectures to our Purple Smoke Immortal Gate, and we have guarded those prefectures. We must not cross that boundary… please forgive us."

'Moonlight Origin Mansion?'

Li Ximing was genuinely stunned by her words. He had considered a thousand reasons for her to refuse, but this was not one of them. This excuse was utterly high-sounding and righteous. It took him a moment to recover before he finally spoke.

"I see… this Zhaojing was presumptuous."

The two azure dots in the corner of Tinglan's eyes flickered, and she gave him another look. "Your clan is a rising star and does not yet understand. In truth, the Xiao Clan and your Li Clan followed precedent to become Immortal Clans, separating themselves from the Azure Pond Sect. This precedent, this rule, was a regulation of the Origin Mansion. Elder Si was simply acting in accordance with the ancient rules."

When she finished, Li Ximing realized that Tinglan's earlier words were not a complete refusal. The Moonlight Origin Mansion had many rules that still operated within Jiangnan. Although they might not always be in effect, a Purple Mansion Daoist Master would not violate them unless there was a significant conflict of interest.

He recalled many things: the conservative names of the Immortal Sects and Immortal Gates, the superficial unity between the Green Pine and Supreme Yang Dao lineages, how the various clans retreated from Green Pine Temple to let the Six Gates reside there, and the immense reverence Profound Wonder Temple showed for Sword Gate…

'Even as these six clans secretly plot against each other, their territories barely ever change. They always hold on to their own small plots of land… and all their conflicts are taken overseas…'

'The Six Clans truly hold a transcendent status. Yue Cultivating Sect is reclusive, and Profound Peak Gate is a sect in name only. The Yue State is now essentially two sects, six gates, and three clans… but one sect and four gates cannot be moved.'

Li Ximing gradually came to a realization. A sudden thought surfaced in his mind.

"Snow Wings Gate has been closed for hundreds of years! It has reached the point where mortals have entered the mountains and no disciples have come out… and yet no one has ever tried to touch it! Could it be for this very reason… because it is tightly surrounded by the Green Pine Dao lineage and its land is barren, it has been able to cling to existence until today?"

Many thoughts passed through his mind, but his expression only showed a sigh. "Daoist Master Tinglan… my family has tried its best, but we can no longer protect the entire Shanji Prefecture. What a pity for the people there!"

Tinglan chuckled in return. "That is not difficult. You only need to invite a Purple Mansion Daoist Master to reside there. No one in Jiangnan dislikes more land, and there are many Purple Mansion cultivators who want to establish a Dao lineage here. They only lack a guarantor. The old ones are too cautious to come, and the young ones are too playful… as long as our two families come to an agreement, and we ask for Sword Gate's approval, the matter will be settled."

This gave Li Ximing pause for thought. The more he considered it, the more his brow furrowed. If there was a friendly Purple Mansion Daoist Master nearby, it would not be a terrible thing. However, with the Profound Peak Dao lineage now in his family's hands, it would not be a popular move. Sending the Kong clan members away would be a bit awkward for his family, and it would be hard to explain to Profound Wonder Temple.

'I can give it a try…'

He turned his thoughts and put away the jade slip. "If we go with this idea, can your Immortal Gate first send people to Shanji to gather the forces there? My

family does not have the energy to watch over it. I'm afraid that by the time we have news, Shanji Prefecture will have been plundered clean."

"That is secondary."

Seeing that he had put the item away, Tinglan frowned. "If we finalize the matter, there are two conditions. One, the Profound Peak Gate's sect location must be given to them. Otherwise, how can a dignified Daoist Master start a sect? If the spiritual essence-rich land is already someone else's, where will they cultivate? That would be a loss of face."

"Second, Kong Haiying must die."

Li Ximing had expected this. He sighed internally, and Tinglan's expression turned serious. "Let me warn you of something here. If Kong Haiying does not die, the conflict between your clan and the Capital Immortals Dao will only worsen day by day, quickly escalating to a point where it is difficult to mediate. Yehui is not an extremist, but he will not tolerate Kong Haiying under any circumstances. Kong Haiying's opportunities are not shallow; he truly has the potential to break through to the next realm!"

"You still have to refine pills for me, after all. If you start a real fight with him, it will likely turn the entire Jiangnan area into a chaotic mess, and I will have no place to refine my pills…"

"It's the same for the Profound Peak Gate's sect location… if it's handed over to someone else, what Daoist Master could tolerate having a few Foundation Establishment Realm cultivators still on the verge of breaking through within their sect? If they succeed in breaking through and coming out of seclusion, who would that sect belong to? Who would Shanji Prefecture belong to?"

"The fact that the Profound Peak lineage is in your family's hands is already a reason for Daoist Masters who wish to move inland to hesitate. Once they occupy Shanji and Profound Peak, the Kong clan members in the Wilderness will be, at best, a remnant clan, and at worst, remnants of an enemy. Your family would at least have to send the Kong clan members to them, forcing them to put on a show of gratitude before a reconciliation can be considered."

Although Li Ximing knew the matter was difficult, he sighed after hearing her explanation and nodded. "I understand… are your pills urgent, Daoist Master? If I can't resolve this matter, I'm afraid it will be difficult to refine them immediately."

"It's fine. I can wait for three to five years. Besides… I'm going to the Northern Sea in a few days, so I won't have time to set up the formation for you right away."

Tinglan clearly didn't expect Li Ximing to be able to refine the pills immediately. The two exchanged a few polite words and settled on the details of their agreement. Tinglan pointed to the clay pot on the table.

"I'll give you the formula for the Heavenly Oneness Essence Extraction Pill to study first. Once you are prepared, you can come to our Purple Smoke Immortal Gate to retrieve the Immeasurable Water and Fire and the Heavenly One Pure Origin."

Li Ximing agreed and took his leave. Tinglan escorted him out. Below the purple jade platform, Cui Jueyin and the Purple Smoke cultivator, Wei Danying, were chatting amiably. Their relationship seemed much warmer than the transactional exchange between the two Daoist Masters.

Although Cui Jueyin's appearance was not outstanding, he was well-read and his demeanor was refined, making conversation with him a pleasant experience. Wei Danying listened with great interest. When the two Daoist Masters appeared, they immediately became respectful and retreated behind them.

"Safe travels, Zhaojing…"

Tinglan escorted him out of the blessed land. Li Ximing flew away, deep in thought. After a long time, he sighed internally.

'My family cannot protect the Profound Peak Gate's sect location and Shanji Prefecture right now.'

Li Ximing had considered the Purple Smoke Immortal Gate's attitude, but he hadn't expected Tinglan to have a single, unwavering word"kill"for Kong Haiying. He found it truly surprising.

When Tinglan had spoken from the perspective of the Purple Smoke Immortal Gate, Li Ximing understood. They had no intention of occupying Shanji, but they were open to the idea of inviting a Purple Mansion Daoist Master as a buffer and doing a favor for a friend… In this regard, his family was somewhat in her way.

But his thoughts did not stop at the Purple Smoke Immortal Gate. The next moment, he thought of another person:

'Yehui!'

If another Purple Mansion Daoist Master appearing in Shanji Prefecture was merely slightly awkward for the Li family, something they wouldn't get much benefit from… for Yehui, as long as he was willing to give up some benefits to lure someone in, it would be the best thing that could happen!

Yehui was a cultivator from the Eastern Sea. If he truly couldn't take over the Profound Peak Gate's sect location, he could heartlessly give up and invite a friendly Purple Mansion Daoist Master into Shanji. His family's situation would instantly become difficult… this new Daoist Master would not only have their sights set on the Profound Peak Gate but would also want to sever the Kong clan's lineage!

If this Purple Mansion Daoist Master was invited by the Purple Smoke Immortal Gate, the Li family would still have the option of sending the Kong clan members back and allowing the Profound Peak lineage to merge with another's power. But if it was a friend of Yehui's, there would be no reason to send them back, and it would only lead to open hostility.

'Yehui would have no more worries. My family would be too busy dealing with the threats from the Wilderness to care about Jiangbei…'

Yehui hadn't done this yet for two reasons. First, he was unwilling to give up the Profound Peak Gate's sect location. Second, he hadn't reached an agreement with the Purple Smoke Immortal Gate and Sword Gate… but that didn't mean it wouldn't happen.

'Has Yehui approached Tinglan? Were Tinglan's words out of goodwill, or a subtle reminder because she hadn't reached an agreement with Ye Hui?'

A chill ran through his heart.

'Regardless, Shanji and the Profound Peak Gate's sect location must be dealt with quickly. But to deal with this sect location, I must deal with the Foundation Establishment Realm cultivators in seclusion from the Kong clan. Even if I want to slightly ease tensions with Capital Immortals Dao to free up my hands for pill refining, I must at least deal with Kong Haiying!'

However, Changxi had said there were three people in seclusion: the guest elder Fu En, his great-grandson Kong Haiying, and the former sect master Kong Tingyun. Li Ximing couldn't be sure that the person who died was Fu En, or even that the few in seclusion were Kong Haiying and the others.

Thinking this far, even Li Ximing, who could understand Changxi's mistrust in his later years, felt a sense of fatigue and quiet anger.

"Hiding things left and right… making it hard even to help. So be it… since Changxi was so calculating, it's impossible that he didn't know that Kong Haiying was a matter of life and death for Profound Peak Gate. I can no longer care about what the others from Profound Peak think… if I don't take over Profound Peak and use the Immortal Mirror to find out the truth, there will be no need to protect it!"

He left the Purple Smoke territory and headed for home, a plan gradually forming in his mind. He appeared on Gardenia Scenery Mountain, and Cui Jueyin descended from the sky, standing quietly beside him.

Li Ximing gave his orders.

"Go and invite the several managers, as well as Quewan and Chenghui. We'll go on a trip together."

…

The Wilderness.

The sky was dawning, and a humid mist filled the mountains.

Several days had passed since the news of Daoist Master Changxi's final wishes, and Kong Guxi still hadn't fully recovered. He had intended to read scriptures until midnight, but in a daze, the sky had already begun to brighten.

He changed his clothes and came out of the hall. The area outside was empty. The stone steps were unswept, covered in fallen leaves, making him wonder if everyone had gone to join other families.

After wandering for a while, he finally found Kong Yu, who was drinking in the mountains with a flushed face. Kong Guxi bowed and asked,

"Great-uncle, where have Qiuyan and the others gone?"

Kong Yu had been drinking all night but could not get drunk. He was still very lucid. "Xiang has been locked up by you. A group of Capital Immortals Dao cultivators arrived in the Wilderness, likely from Shanji Prefecture. I don't know what a mess it has become. Qiuyan has taken people to intercept them."

He paused, emphasizing, "The Li family's people are also there."

Kong Guxi acknowledged this and asked about the whereabouts of Kong Guli.

"Where is my elder brother?"

Kong Yu raised his brows. "Patriarch Chenghui sent someone to ask for our family's soul lamps and life jades. Your elder brother just took him there."

Kong Guxi was speechless. He turned toward the front courtyard, where he heard a commotion on the stone steps. Several large bags were being carried. The sect master of Profound Peak looked up and saw his elder brother, Kong Guli, bringing Fu Yuezi up the mountain.

Kong Guli seemed to have lost his soul, but Fu Yuezi was as composed as ever. He carried his Dharma Artifact and waved at him. Kong Guxi went up to greet him, grasping his elder brother's hands and finding them ice cold. He could only ask,

"I heard Great-uncle say… you just left…"

Kong Guli said forlornly, "I did just leave, but who knew that when the news from a few days ago reached them, the elders on the mountain had already packed the soul lamps and life jades, Dao lineage techniques, and all the other items? They all wanted to run here, so naturally, they came very quickly."

Kong Guxi had no words. He saw streaks of light flying through the air, and the noise on the mountain grew louder. He had only walked a few steps when he saw a group of people descend from the sky. The golden-eyed man leading the group strode with the posture of a dragon. Kong Guxi's heart felt as if it had been gripped by a large hand. He quickly stepped forward.

"Greetings, Patriarch… why have you come?"

Li Zhouwei was as courteous as ever. He nodded and replied,

"My injuries have healed a lot. I have been ordered by the Daoist Master to come and hold the fort in the Wilderness."

Sweat beaded on Kong Guxi's forehead. He nodded repeatedly, but before he could ask for more details, a flash of celestial light appeared before him, and the surroundings suddenly became brilliant. Everyone immediately lowered their heads and bowed.

Above them, a Daoist Master in a white robe with golden patterns was standing, observing them. This sight terrified Kong Guli, who retreated several steps.

Kong Guxi was shocked and immediately knelt down. The rest of the Profound Peak Gate members, whether they had seen him before or not, knew he was a Daoist Master. For a moment, no one on the mountain was standing. Only respectful voices could be heard, one after another.

As he knelt, Kong Guxi glanced up. Li Ximing's expression showed little emotion, but the fact that the Profound Peak Dao lineage had just handed over the command to Shanji and the sect location made Kong Guxi feel a deep, baseless fear.

He knelt properly and then heard the Daoist Master speak, his voice neither hurried nor angry.

"Bring me Kong Haiying's soul lamp."

A cold chill ran from Kong Guxi's heart to the soles of his feet. The sect master could not see too much of the struggle between Purple Mansion Daoist Masters and the big picture, but based on the progression of events, he had already sensed too many unfavorable things. He could only bow respectfully and say,

"This junior obeys."

Chapter 744: Discerning Truth from Falsehood

Below, Guest Elder Wu had already retrieved the items. At Kong Guxi's nod, the guest elder immediately brought a stand forward, upon which sat two neat rows of soul lamps. They rested on a base of some dark, unknown wood, their faint blue flames flickering gently.

The bottom row held only life jades, clearly belonging to disciples and guest elders of little importance. The row above belonged to Kong Qiuyan's generation; their soul lamps were already more than half extinguished. Higher still were the lamps of Kong Guxi's generation, larger and more ornately carved, yet only three of the ten remained lit.

On the next tier, the lamps were almost entirely dark, save for a single flickering flame that Li Ximing recognized as Kong Tingyun's. One level higher, on a gilded base, another solitary lamp burned brightly. This one, he presumed, corresponded to Kong Haiying.

At the very top rested a single, extinguished lamp on a jade throne inlaid with gold and silver patterns—the lamp of Changxi. Its presence alone made the stand astonishingly heavy, but as a Foundation Establishment cultivator, Guest Elder Wu held it steady.

He wore a fawning expression, but the members of the Profound Peak Gate looked away in shame. To see the ancestral soul lamps, which were so revered in the ancestral hall that no one dared even touch them, brought out and presented like a platter of food was a deep humiliation.

But no one paid them any mind. All eyes were fixed on the lamps with a mixture of curiosity and awe. Only a crimson-robed young man standing behind Li Zhouwei kept his gaze fixed on the members of the Profound Peak Gate, his golden eyes sweeping over their faces.

Nearby, Sun Bo was gently patting Kong Guli's sleeve in a comforting gesture, while Kong Qiuyan stood with her head bowed and eyes closed. Only Kong Guxi, the Sect Master of the Profound Peak Gate, stood at the forefront, his posture one of utmost reverence. Sensing the young man's gaze, he lowered his head even further.

Li Jiangqian withdrew his gaze and gave a subtle nod to Li Quewan beside him. The woman, dressed in a long skirt of cloud-like satin, also glanced at Kong Guxi and asked through a secret art, "Is that the Sect Master of the Profound Peak Gate? The Daoist Master wants to investigate, so he had best cooperate."

"Without Kong Guxi, the Profound Peak Gate's lineage would have collapsed long ago. How else could they have held on until today?" Li Jiangqian replied. "I heard Granduncle Chenghui speak of him once. Let's see how he handles this."

The crowd remained silent, though whispers and speculations were already flying through private channels. Li Ximing was aware of this, but simply said, "Sect Master, please, explain."

Kong Guxi hurried to comply. He stepped forward, lifted a sleeve, and pointed to the brightest soul lamp on the gilded base, the one a tier above Kong Tingyun's. "This is the soul lamp of my granduncle, Kong Haiying."

Several people craned their necks to get a better look. Li Ximing remained silent, letting Li Zhouwei speak for him. "Bring forth his portrait."

Before Kong Guxi could even react, someone from below had already produced a scroll. Li Wen took it and unfurled it, revealing the image of a middle-aged man with a broad forehead and a square jaw. Tucked beneath it were at least a dozen other portraits, all depicting the same man with minor variations.

Kong Guxi knew without asking that they had been painted separately by his own disciples and guest elders to ensure accuracy. He simply lowered his head and said nothing. Guest Elder Wu stepped forward, examined the soul lamp, and announced respectfully, "Daoist Master, though Lord Haiying was often in seclusion, he made an appearance just before his breakthrough. I saw him then. The aura on this soul lamp is identical to his. This is without a doubt his soul lamp."

It was an undeniable fact that the aura of a soul lamp was identical to that of its cultivator. Several others, including rogue cultivators who had met Kong Haiying, came forward to corroborate the claim.

Only then did Li Ximing sweep his spiritual sense over the lamp, committing the aura to memory.

He could have used the Immortal Mirror to learn the identity of everyone in seclusion, but such a matter had to be handled with extreme discretion. More importantly, of all the Profound Peak cultivators, he had only ever met Kong Tingyun. This meant that even if the Immortal Mirror revealed the faces of those in seclusion, he wouldn't be able to identify them. Appearances could be easily disguised, and a Purple Mansion cultivator could fundamentally alter their own features. Only one's aura was immutable.

Now that he had the aura from the soul lamp, he also had his people gather information on Fu En—his aura, cultivation level, and physical description. Though Kong Guxi was puzzled by the request, he complied without question. Fu En was rumored to be dead and thus had no soul lamp, but they managed to find a dharma artifact he had refined with his own blood. His portrait depicted a scarred, brutish-looking man whose features were far from flattering.

With this, Li Ximing was confident he could identify the person in seclusion. But this grand, public display was not merely about identifying an aura. It was about creating a justification for his subsequent judgments and actions. Whether he attributed his knowledge to divination or shamanism, it would prevent others from growing suspicious.

Kong Guxi remained kneeling, his posture unwavering. Finally, the Daoist Master on the seat of honor spoke.

"Do you have any of their personal belongings?"

Without a moment's hesitation, Kong Guxi replied respectfully, "After several decades, most have been lost. Apart from Fu En's artifact, which was preserved by chance, most of their other dharma artifacts have changed hands and lost their connection. Fortunately, Lord Haiying has living descendants. As for Lady Tingyun…"

"It matters not. Bring what you can."

Li Ximing nodded. This whole affair was merely for show, so the details were unimportant. The items from Kong Haiying and Fu En would suffice. At his command, someone went to make the arrangements.

The public part of the proceedings was over. The vague request for "personal belongings" had planted a seed, leaving ample room for the various families to speculate. Now, whatever he did next would seem reasonable. Li Ximing waved a hand, dismissing the outsiders, and kept only Kong Guxi behind.

"I paid a visit to the Purple Smoke Gate and spoke with Daoist Master Tinglan," Li Ximing said. "Shanji Prefecture cannot be held, and your sect's mountain will be difficult to protect."

A chilling cold spread through Kong Guxi's heart. But Li Ximing quickly added a word of comfort. "Don't overthink it. The old master foresaw this. It's possible that neither of them is even within the sect. I am currently seeking a Daoist Master skilled in the divinatory arts to determine Kong Haiying's exact location. If they are not on the mountain, we can make other plans."

His words were like a torrent of scalding water, instantly melting the ice in Kong Guxi's heart. His eyes reddened. 'That's right… The Ancestor was meticulous in his planning. He must have anticipated this. I mustn't despair! I mustn't despair!'

Seeing that he understood, Li Ximing vanished into the Great Void. Kong Guxi kowtowed deeply before rising and striding out of the courtyard. Though tear tracks still stained his face, his steps were markedly lighter. Li Chenghui was waiting outside the courtyard and spoke a few perfunctory words about confidentiality, but with so many eyes having witnessed the earlier events, secrecy was merely a pretense—a formality that Kong Guxi nevertheless acknowledged with solemn promises.

Once Li Chenghui departed, the entire mountain fell silent. The clamor of moments before seemed like a gust of wind, arriving and departing with equal swiftness. Feeling a bit faint, Kong Guxi exited the hall and saw that the stand with the soul lamps had been left in the courtyard. Kong Guli was staring at it from the steps, lost in thought.

He started to walk over, but noticed that Kong Qiuyan was gone. In the distance, he saw Kong Yu kneeling just outside the courtyard, kowtowing toward the table of soul lamps. Kong Guxi quickly stopped, not daring to approach or interrupt him. He simply called out, "Great-Granduncle…"

Kong Yu continued to kowtow, the sound of his forehead striking the ground echoing with dull thuds. After a full nine prostrations, the old man fell still, his face pressed to the ground. Kong Guxi waited a moment, but his spiritual sense screamed that something was wrong. His expression changed drastically as he rushed forward, crying out, "Great-Granduncle!"

He lifted Kong Yu and was met with a smear of dark blood that dripped from the old man's nose.

The dark blood trickled like a small stream down the old man's face, following the curve of his nose and neck. The face that was once so often wreathed in cheerful smiles was now dark and fixed in a rigid expression. The old man's eyelids were pulled back to a shocking degree, revealing far too much of the whites of his eyes. His lips were twisted from repeated convulsions into a grotesque, mocking smile, and a look of profound terror was frozen deep within his gaze.

Kong Guxi felt a jolt of pure horror. The old man was dead.

His mind felt as though it had been struck by a hammer, and his vision swam with stars. He was paralyzed by a disbelieving terror, and it was only after two or three breaths that he heard Kong Guli shouting from behind him. "Why?" Kong Guxi asked blankly.

He had been prepared for any hardship, but he had never imagined that Kong Yu would take his own life so abruptly. Though the old man was aged and melancholic, he had never seemed suicidal… The situation had been awkward, yes, but it was nothing compared to the deep despair of the day the Ancestor's last will was revealed. Perhaps this truly signaled the end of their mountain home, but that day had not yet come, had it? Was this necessary?

If it was the work of a divine ability… Li Ximing himself had just been on the mountain. Any such influence would have to have come from the Daoist Master himself. Had someone struck in the few dozen breaths since he left? What benefit was there in harming this old man?

His rational mind was shattered by this incomprehensible turn of events. For a moment, he didn't even think to lower Kong Yu's body, not until Kong Guli rushed over to take it from him. Kong Guli and Kong Yu came from two very close branches of the family, neither of which had been highly regarded in the past, and their bond was deep. He wailed as he took the old man's body into his arms. Kong Guxi stood frozen, his pupils slowly dilating. He soon regained his senses and declared in a mournful voice, "Great-Granduncle could not bear

to witness the destruction of the Profound Peak Gate, and so he took his own life."

At the Profound Peak Gate.

Li Ximing tore through the Great Void and landed before the mountain. With a flick of his finger, a jade pendant flew from his sleeve. As it shone upon the grand array, the Purple Mansion-level formation, the Hundred Mountains Concealed Storage Spirit Array, opened on its own. Li Ximing stepped through with ease.

At this stage, the Li family was already in de facto control of most of the Profound Peak Gate's assets. Only their scripture repository and treasury remained untouched. The grand array was no exception; Li Ximing's authority within the formation now far surpassed Kong Guxi's.

His light flared as he appeared within the array. He connected his spiritual sense to the formation's core, ensuring the Great Void was sealed off. In an instant, every corner of the Profound Peak Gate was laid bare to him. The number of disciples on the mountain was pitifully small; he could scan several peaks before spotting one or two people.

As his thoughts turned, the locations of the various seclusion chambers appeared in his mind. 'Connected to the grand array… there are five active seclusion chambers… and the one Kong Guxi showed me was separated from the array. That means… there are six in total.'

He adopted a thoughtful expression, but inwardly, he was reciting an incantation. 'Li clan disciple, Ximing, respectfully petitions the Immortal Mirror: Patrol the unseen, plumb the subtle, pierce the profound, and illuminate all creation. Seize the ghostly, and expose the divine.'

He felt a chill emanate from his Shengyang Acupoint. The world around him, both in reality and in the Great Void, remained unchanged, but the range of his spiritual sense exploded. The entirety of the Profound Peak Gate, in all its truth and illusion, manifested within his mind.

'As I thought… the chill from the Immortal Mirror doesn't travel through the Great Void… It's truly beyond the detection of gods and ghosts…'

He knew that very few things could function over vast distances. Soul lamps, life jades, arrays, secret arts—all used the Great Void as their medium. That was why a battle between Purple Mansion cultivators in the Great Void could often cause them to malfunction. In theory, one could even inadvertently destroy someone's life jade or cause a small array to suddenly weaken or strengthen… But the chill from the Immortal Mirror, though he knew its source, seemed to appear from nothing, defying all his understanding. The thought sent a shiver down his spine.

He pushed these stray thoughts aside and focused. His spiritual sense found the nearest seclusion chamber and passed through its protective wards as if they weren't there. Inside the pitch-black chamber, a skeleton sat cross-legged on a meditation mat, surrounded by scattered flecks of golden light.

"A failed breakthrough to Foundation Establishment. It's Heavenly Gilded Helm."

This was almost certainly one of the enforcers Changxi had cultivated. He hadn't made it through the trial, and with the Profound Peak Gate in its current, empty state, no one had been around to tend to his body. It had simply been left in the cave.

Li Ximing withdrew his spiritual sense and moved to the next chamber. He found the stone room completely empty, with only the formation operating on its own.

He checked the remaining three chambers one by one. Aside from another corpse, the other two were also empty. Finally, he arrived at the chamber Kong Guxi had pointed out—the one where Kong Tingyun was supposedly in seclusion.

This place was deliberately hidden, not even connected to the grand array. The gate was forged from Profound-Vein Stone, which isolated the inside from the out and was beneficial for cultivators of the Earth Virtue. Li Ximing's spiritual sense passed through the stone and found the interior covered in a thick layer of spirit earth. The spiritual energy was incredibly dense, and within it, a cold, star-like point of profundity glimmered.

The cultivator's physical body seemed to have mostly dissolved into spiritual energy to fuel the breakthrough, and it was shrouded in the dense mist. But the aura was laid bare before him, and in the next moment, Li Ximing recognized it.

"It's Fu En…"

Inside the seclusion chamber meant for Kong Tingyun… was the guest elder, Fu En!

'Such dense spiritual qi. The Profound Peak Gate truly provided him with the best conditions… They even used spirit stones to enrich this place. It's far better than my own setup back on Mount Wu. And this man, though just a guest elder… his cultivation is remarkably solid…'

"But Changxi, oh, Changxi… who was it that died all those years ago?"

With the soul lamps of both Kong Haiying and Kong Tingyun still burning, Changxi's plan became clear. He knew his sect would inevitably be occupied. He had arranged for those two to be somewhere else entirely, leaving only Fu En behind on the mountain!

As for the one who had perished back then… it was most likely a pawn, a substitute meant to die in his place!

"So… when my Li family can no longer withstand the pressure and is forced to abandon the Profound Peak Gate, the only one who dies will be Fu En. As for Kong Tingyun and Kong Haiying… they are somewhere safe, calmly working on their breakthroughs…"

"In that case… I cannot wait any longer…"

If it had been Kong Haiying or Kong Tingyun—direct descendants of the Profound Peak Gate—Li Ximing might have gritted his teeth and tried to find another way, some way to save them. But the person inside was merely Fu En, a guest elder who had no connection to his family. He could not continue to bear the pressure of holding Shanji Prefecture and the Profound Peak Gate for him…

Li Ximing sighed softly. It was a desperate situation for the person in seclusion—to be in the middle of a breakthrough, only to have their sect become someone else's property. He could imagine the despair. But he had never considered himself a saint. He had no obligation to make sacrifices for a stranger and invite disaster upon his own clan. He could only offer what help he could without harming his own interests.

'Since the mountain must be relinquished,' he thought with a quiet sigh, 'I will do my best to negotiate with the Purple Smoke Gate. When they send a Purple Mansion cultivator to take over… perhaps they can be persuaded to leave him here to finish his breakthrough. His chances of success are slim anyway. When he eventually perishes, his essence will only enrich the spiritual qi of this place. And in the one-in-a-million chance that he succeeds… he's still just an outsider… We can discuss it further.'

He organized his thoughts, crafting the narrative he would present.

'Alright… from this moment on, the soul lamps were tampered with by Changxi. The first to die will be Kong Haiying, who is actually Fu En inside the sect. Kong Tingyun will be declared missing. By relinquishing the mountain this way, I can ease tensions with the Capital Immortals Dao and give the Purple Smoke Gate a satisfactory explanation. Whether they believe me or not is a problem for another day.'

Chapter 745: The Jiangque Generation

A pale golden vessel soared through the skies above the untamed wilderness, gliding on currents of cloud. A man in white robes stood at its center, flanked by Li Jiangqian and Li Quewan who waited in silence. At the stern, Li Wen stood guard, his golden melon hammer in hand.

Li Zhouwei had spent a single night at the Profound Peak Gate's outpost before departing. He rarely wore white, but today was the anniversary of his father, Li Chengliao's, passing. He had changed his robes for the occasion and now stood with one hand resting on the vessel's railing, lost in thought.

The Li family possessed few flying artifacts, and vessels like this were seldom used. The main reason was the sheer number of cultivators under their domain across the Eastern and Northern Yue mountains. The clan had so many members that some had to be sent away to forge their own paths, and many of these poorer cultivators could already fly on their own. For most tasks, providing such equipment was simply unnecessary.

As for the direct descendants and talented outsiders within the prefecture, they were kept on a tight leash. Their days were filled with training and duties, and their responsibilities rarely took them more than a hundred li from their posts. Few would bother acquiring a personal flying shuttle, save for a handful of favored children who received them as gifts from their parents.

Li Jiangqian and his brothers certainly wouldn't dare request one. After all, neither Li Ximing nor Li Zhouwei had requisitioned a flying artifact from the clan during their own training. Since these younger brothers weren't being dispatched to the northern frontier or the Eastern Sea, they had even less of a reason to ask.

The vessel they stood upon, named the *Quhe*, was the first flying artifact the Li family had commissioned after becoming an Immortal Clan. It was the final work of the old West Bank cultivator, He Jiumen. Among artifacts for Qi Refining cultivators, it was of high quality. Unfortunately, He Jiumen came from

a humble background and knew nothing of the Dao of Transformations; the spirit vessel could not change its size, making it a far cry from Ning Wan's Ever-Verdant Flowing Cloud Boat. In every other respect, however, it was impressive. And since outsiders wouldn't know of its limitation, it was still a presentable craft.

The vessel cut through the wind, racing toward the Eastern Shore. After Li Zhouwei had stood for some time, Li Wen approached with a dark-colored, handwritten letter. He glanced at it briefly before tucking it into his sleeve.

'Kong Yu has taken his own life…'

Standing behind him, Li Jiangqian noticed no change in his father's expression. The spirit vessel, however, began to slow, coming to a halt in a mountainous region of the Eastern Shore. A moment later, a commotion arose from below as a young man on a black horse with crimson eyes charged forth. Reaching them, he leaped from his steed and onto the vessel.

"Father!" he announced respectfully.

Li Jiangqian recognized him as his third brother, Li Jiangxia, and watched with a faint smile. Their father's voice was gentle enough.

"It has been some time. Your second brother has also returned from the Profound Peak Gate. Come aboard; we'll return to the lake together."

A wide smile spread across Li Jiangxia's face. He bowed to Li Jiangqian and Li Quewan. "It has been too long, Elder Brother. I have missed you dearly."

Li Jiangqian had spent a fair amount of time with his second brother, Li Jianglong, but had only met Li Jiangxia a few times. It truly had been a long while.

He returned the smile. "Third Brother, your cultivation has improved. You must practice diligently during the Qi Refining realm. How are your techniques coming along? Your Dao foundation is paramount, so you should seize the time to master some protective arts. It will be a great benefit when you break through to Foundation Establishment!"

Li Jiangxia raised an eyebrow, his own smile unwavering. "The clan's affairs are numerous, and Elder Brother must be exhausted from managing them, yet you still think of me… Thank you for your concern. I will remember your words."

They left it at that. Li Zhouwei had heard the exchange but said nothing. The vessel sped onward, and soon Moongaze Lake appeared on the horizon. Li Quewan, after much deliberation, finally spoke.

"Patriarch… regarding the scrying for the Profound Peak Gate's direct disciples, I'm afraid it will be quite difficult. My shamanic arts are already stretched to their limits when divining for Foundation Establishment cultivators. For those breaking through to the Purple Mansion realm, the task is harder still…"

Everyone present had understood that Li Ximing's earlier talk of personal effects was related to divination. Li Zhouwei, however, knew the Daoist Master had simply used the Immortal Mirror and was looking for an excuse. "Do not worry," he replied. "A Daoist Master will be asked to handle this. You need not trouble yourself."

Relieved, Li Quewan stepped back. When the spirit vessel landed smoothly within the prefecture, Li Jiangqian followed close behind Li Zhouwei into the main hall. As they walked down a corridor, they saw a man in a black robe standing before the hall's entrance.

The man stood with his head bowed, a string of jade tied at his waist. It took Li Jiangqian a moment to recognize his own brother, Li Jianglong.

In the past two years, he had matured. The last traces of his immaturity had faded, his golden eyes and long brows set in a face that held the magnanimity of the Chen clan. His entire demeanor had changed, making him seem far more docile.

Li Zhouwei took the main seat. Li Jiangqian moved to stand at his left and heard his father command, "Bring Liang'er and Nian'er."

Li Jiangqian continued to observe Li Jianglong, who had retreated to a corner and bowed without a word, his gaze fixed on the floor—a stark contrast to Li Jiangxia's cheerful and forthright manner.

Below, Li Jiangxia was already reporting on matters concerning the Eastern Shore. Since these reports had already been submitted to the prefecture, Li Jiangqian listened with only half an ear. He had to admit, his third brother was quite capable. With the full support Li Jiangqian had provided him, along with the dispatch of several of the Li family's most competent members, the chaotic Eastern Shore had been brought firmly under control. The various families had submitted, and their direct heirs had been sent to the Secret Forest.

Just as he finished his report, Li Jiangliang and Li Jiangnian entered the hall. Li Jiangqian's appraising gaze swept over them. The one in front, Li Jiangliang, had a pair of golden eyes and a handsome, clever face. He fell to his knees before the throne and respectfully called out, "Father."

There was nothing unusual about his brother's appearance, and Li Jiangqian's eyes merely slid past his fourth brother, Li Jiangliang, to land on Li Jiangnian, who followed behind.

The young man's pupils dilated slightly. For the first time, an emotion other than his usual calm assessment—pure astonishment—flickered across his face. He wasn't the only one. With the exception of Li Zhouwei and Li Jiangnian himself, everyone in the hall seemed to stop breathing for a split second.

The boy's eyebrows were faint, his cheekbones alarmingly high, and his chin sharp, with the skin stretched taut across his face. If Li Jianglong, the plainest of the Jiangque generation, could at least be called kindly-featured, it was difficult to find a single redeeming quality in Li Jiangnian's appearance.

But Li Jiangqian was not one to judge by looks. His attention wasn't on his youngest brother's face at all. With a jolt, his gaze locked onto the eyes beneath Li Jiangnian's lashes, his hand clenching and unclenching at his side.

They were a pair of bewildered, gray eyes.

Li Jiangliang's voice was still echoing in the hall as Li Zhouwei asked him a few concerned questions, but no one was paying him any attention. All eyes were fixed on Li Jiangnian. The child seemed slow to react, completely oblivious to the scrutiny as he watched his brother answer their father's questions.

After a few more questions for his fourth son, Li Zhouwei finally turned his attention. "Jiangnian, what is your cultivation level now?"

Li Jiangnian's eyes were slightly uneven in size, giving him a somewhat comical look. Nerves made tears well up instantly, and he choked out, "The… the second layer of Embryonic Breathing."

As he had only just begun his cultivation, this was a bit lower than Li Jiangliang's level, but not terrible. Yet a heavy silence fell over his brothers. Li Jiangliang stood properly at the front, the contrast between them painfully sharp. Li Zhouwei looked away.

"I have summoned you today for two reasons," he began. "First, to inquire about your cultivation and see your progress. Second, as I am about to enter seclusion, I have some instructions for you."

Li Zhouwei's cultivation was already at a level where he could attempt a breakthrough to the late stage of Foundation Establishment. With Li Ximing's new arrangements for the Profound Peak Gate and the confirmation that Shanji Prefecture would be abandoned, there was no longer any reason to wait.

He first looked to Li Jiangqian. "Jiangqian, you are at the eighth layer of Qi Refining and already have the confidence to attempt your breakthrough. For now, continue to polish your cultivation and practice your techniques. You will remain in charge of the prefecture. Your Uncle Chenghuai is shifting his focus to cultivation, and Zhouluo has taken charge of Mount Qingdu. The clan has many affairs to attend to, so you and your uncle must consult with each other often."

Li Jiangqian bowed deeply.

His father continued, "Jianglong, your cultivation has progressed these past two years, and you have studied many of the Profound Peak Gate's techniques. You will go to the Funan territory and take over the positions of Fei Qingyi and Li Anshuo. They will be under your command. You are to report to the elder of Minggong Palace."

At these words, Li Jiangxia let out a quiet sigh of relief. He was currently managing the families of the Eastern Shore under the jurisdiction of the Secret Forest, where he had also established a palace. He was, for all intents and purposes, the forest's superior. His greatest fear had been that Li Jianglong would be given control of the Secret Forest, which would have meant handing over all his hard-won efforts.

Li Jianglong accepted the appointment respectfully, showing no surprise. Li Anshuo's wife was a member of the Chen clan, part of his mother's lineage. He had already dealt with the man and held leverage over him, a fact Li Zhouwei was surely aware of. Since Li Anshuo managed the mundane affairs in Funan, it was only logical that Li Jianglong be sent there.

Having settled the first two, Li Zhouwei's voice grew stern. "Jiangxia will remain in charge of the Eastern Shore. That area borders the wilderness, and its stability is of the utmost importance. Among you brothers, only you have the necessary experience. There is no need for a change."

Li Jiangxia quickly bowed in thanks. By the time he rose, the power within the Li family had been transferred from the Foundation Establishment elders to the younger Qi Refining generation with astonishing speed.

Li Zhouwei surveyed his sons, a faint smile playing on his lips. After a moment's pause, he said, "Zhouluo governs Mount Qingdu, and Li Wen will return to the Jade Court. Only the Secret Forest remains without a master. Do any of you have a candidate in mind?"

Li Jiangqian immediately spoke. "Clan Elder Donghe is worthy of this position."

His words caused little reaction among his brothers. Even Li Jianglong, whose mother was from the Chen clan, remained impassive. The reason was simple: the old man's status was high, and he was impervious to both threats and favors. He was notoriously strict with his own family, to the point that the Chen clansmen feared even mentioning his name, let alone thinking of him as a backer. He would be of no benefit to Li Jianglong.

Li Jianglong, for his part, said, "I have been away for a long time and am unaware of the recent changes in the clan. I dare not make a suggestion. However, this position is crucial. A senior Foundation Establishment cultivator should be appointed to it."

With his refusal, Li Jiangxia did not hesitate. "The position of master of the Secret Forest is too important. It should be held by a family member who is upright and honest. It has long been vacant, and with several elders away, it seems to me that it would be best to leave it empty for now. We could appoint a few respected elders to the palace council. They could handle the affairs of the Eastern Shore. Too many people can lead to disunity, and it would be more convenient for Elder Brother to mediate from the center."

Li Zhouwei was dabbing a vermillion brush in ink, writing out the orders for their appointments. His children's words caused not a single ripple in his composure. He only chuckled softly.

'They each have their own clever schemes.'

Li Jiangqian, in charge of the prefecture, prioritized stability above all else. He didn't want an overly powerful master of the Secret Forest, so a rule-abiding Qi Refining elder like Chen Donghe best suited his interests.

Li Jiangxia's words were pleasant, but his intention was simply to avoid having a direct superior who could interfere with his work. Li Jiangqian was far away at the lake, but the master of the Secret Forest would be right on his doorstep, with power over any personnel sent there. Of course, he preferred the position to remain vacant.

That left Li Jianglong. Stationed far away in Funan, he cared little about the state of the Secret Forest. However, installing a strong Foundation Establishment cultivator would prevent his two brothers from consolidating too much power, which was certainly a good thing for him.

Li Zhouwei saw through them all. "Cui Jueyin is from Chongzhou," he announced, his decision made. "He has a talent for governance, a profound Dao foundation, and is skilled in techniques. The position will be his… Jiangliang, you will also go to the Secret Forest to cultivate. You've spent enough time in the prefecture."

Li Jiangliang quickly bowed. Though clever, he was still young and didn't fully grasp the implications, but he accepted with a smile. Li Zhouwei's gaze then fell upon his youngest, Li Jiangnian, and he let out an almost imperceptible sigh.

"As for Nian'er… he will first cultivate in the prefecture. We can speak of other things when he reaches the Qi Refining realm. You are all dismissed!"

The brothers bowed and retreated. The moment he was outside the hall, Li Jianglong took Li Jiangliang's hand, his face wreathed in a cheerful smile. "Liang'er, you are so bright. That Senior Cui is a direct descendant from Chongzhou. Follow him and learn well."

Azure Pond Sect, Heaven-Probing Pavilion.

A spring rain had just passed, leaving the stone steps gleaming. Li Xizhi, draped in a feathered cloak, sat at a table, pouring tea from a jade pot. The liquid shone a brilliant green in the cup, its fragrance sharp and refreshing.

"This is Hundred-Year Spring, brewed with the rainwater," he said with a smile. "You must try it, my lady."

The woman beside him smiled back, her eyes on him as she picked up the cup and took a delicate sip. She watched as he prepared another tea, setting a new cup to the side.

"This cup," Li Xizhi said, his tone more serious, "is Sobering Warmth. It's a graded spirit item, made from authentic Qi Refining-level ingredients. It may not be as pleasant to drink, but it has the effect of calming the heart, quieting the mind, and stabilizing one's cultivation."

Yang Xiao'er took the cup, her gaze still fixed on him. "You were in seclusion for so long," she said with a smile. "I missed you terribly."

"You…" Li Xizhi began. "For us Foundation Establishment cultivators, a few months in seclusion feel like a mere few hours. And you're already missing me again?"

Yang Xiao'er sipped her tea. "And why not?"

Li Xizhi chuckled, then his expression turned serious again. "Your Immortal Foundation, the Treasured Reservoir, is formidable. Do not underestimate it. In its own way, it is as profound as my family's Radiant Origin Pass. The Yang family went to great lengths to acquire such a thing for you; you must focus on your cultivation."

At the mention of the Yang family, she paused for a moment. Just then, a figure came up the mountain path. Dressed in silver-white robes and a neat jade crown, with a magnificent red brocade cloak draped over his shoulders, was a round-faced young man—his head disciple, Quan Yuduan.

The boy was prone to dramatics. "Master!" he exclaimed, rushing forward. "That Tantai Jin has come, and he's brought Si Tongyi with him! Protector Wushao has gone to greet them. They're already on the mountain!"

Hearing this, Yang Xiao'er immediately rose from her seat. Li Xizhi, however, looked exasperated.

"I thought it was something serious," he said, shaking his head. "Yuduan, your temperament is still lacking… and so is your conduct. You do everything based on your whims. You are not the scion of some great house or the direct heir of a Golden Core Daoist Master. Who gave you so many airs? Your junior brother has already left the mountain for his training. Until the day you change this attitude, you are forbidden from leaving!"

Quan Yuduan's expression immediately sobered. He nodded in acknowledgment. The Heaven-Probing Pavilion was dreadfully boring, and he often longed to go out. "Disciple will remember!" he said quickly.

As he retreated, a man in an ornate headdress ascended the path. His cultivation was at the late stage of Foundation Establishment, and his bearing was elegant and otherworldly. A short sword hung at his waist, and his face was a picture of courtesy.

"Greetings, Pavilion Master!" he said with a smile.

Chapter 746: Selecting the Market Site

Tantai Jin was a direct descendant of the Purple Mansion lineage. With the Si family's own numbers dwindling, and to diminish the appearance of a hostile takeover, Si Yuanli had appointed Tantai Jin to manage the sect's affairs while he was in seclusion. Though it was framed as a merit-based selection, Tantai Jin was, for all intents and purposes, a Si clansman.

Li Xizhi guided him to a seat. Tantai Jin accepted the offered tea, took a sip, and savored it for a moment before smiling.

"Excellent tea."

Now that he was the brother of a Purple Mansion Daoist Master, Li Xizhi had the standing to sit and share tea with a direct descendant like Tantai Jin. Si Tongyi, despite his lesser cultivation, was the most promising of the Si family's younger generation and could have rightfully joined them. However, ever one to humble himself, he stood respectfully to the side in the posture of a junior.

After a brief exchange of pleasantries, Li Xizhi inquired, "Your Excellency has graced my Heaven-Probing Pavilion with your immortal presence. What instructions do you have for me?"

Tantai Jin quickly waved his hand, shaking his head.

"I wouldn't dare say 'instructions'. I merely have a small matter or two to trouble you with, Pavilion Lord."

He set down his teacup, his expression turning serious.

"The Si family has a talented young man who has just begun Qi Refining. His aptitude is remarkable, and his understanding of spiritual arts far surpasses his peers. Tongyi has observed him closely and fears that our own tutelage might tarnish this uncut jade. Thus, we were hoping he might be accepted as your disciple… If you would not be opposed, Xizhi, I ask that you meet him."

The moment Tantai Jin finished speaking, Si Tongyi stepped forward and presented a wooden box with both hands.

"Pavilion Lord, your mastery of spiritual arts is divine," he said. "Our family would not dare ask for your Dao lineage lightly. This is a copy of the Heavenly Glow Dao lineage's 'Five-Colored Sinking Sword Art', a fourth-grade ancient spell that a Daoist Master of our family acquired in the north many years ago. For a century, none have been able to master it. Only the Pavilion Lord is worthy of such a technique."

Si Tongyi's declaration—'Pavilion Lord, your mastery of spiritual arts is divine, our family would not dare ask for your Dao lineage lightly'—left Li Wushao, who was standing nearby, momentarily stunned. He almost missed the words that followed, marveling inwardly.

'Damn, a direct descendant of the Si family... It's amazing how polite they are when a Purple Mansion Daoist Master is involved.'

Li Xizhi, however, found the situation slightly surreal.

'They're actually coming to me, asking to join my sect.'

He had to admit, the "Five-Colored Sinking Sword Art" was incredibly tempting. It wasn't just a sword technique but a true spiritual art, one deeply intertwined with one's sword-related cultivation. The Li family possessed a similar text, the "Cyclic Soul-Refining Halberd Arts," which was even more purely focused on its spiritual art aspects.

Li Xizhi had been searching for such an art for a long time. His own "Rainbow Pierce Skyway" could directly enhance his proficiency with spiritual arts, and his innate talent for the sword was not weak. In his hands, this art could produce truly extraordinary results.

But no matter how tempted he was, he showed no eagerness on his face. Accepting this disciple would undoubtedly strengthen his ties to the Si family, and he was unsure of his brother's stance on the matter. He couldn't agree immediately.

"You are too kind, Tongyi," he replied. "But the matter of accepting a disciple hinges on the affinity between master and student. I cannot risk hindering your clan's prodigy! This isn't something to be settled with a simple nod. We must choose an auspicious day for me to meet and test him..."

Hearing this, Tantai Jin nodded in understanding. He knew Li Xizhi needed to consult Li Ximing first. "What does the Pavilion Lord propose?" he asked.

"Send the boy over first," Li Xizhi answered. "Let me see if we have an affinity. I will select two Daoist texts and test him a little. We shall see if fate wills it."

Both men understood perfectly well what "fate" implied. Having settled the matter, they moved on.

"With the death of Senior Changxi, the Profound Peak region has descended into chaos," Tantai Jin said. "Shanji Prefecture is now beset by enemies on all sides, and the number of demonic cultivators has risen sharply. I hear the heirs of the Profound Peak Gate have gone into the wilderness, leaving the riverside territories without protection. Demonic cultivators from the Eastern Sea can now slip in."

"If Shanji Prefecture falls into disarray, these demonic cultivators and beasts might try to pass through our Azure Pond Sect's territory. We plan to bolster our defenses and will likely send a contingent of disciples there. If any of your own disciples are seeking experience, Xizhi, they are welcome to join them."

Li Xizhi casually agreed. With his business concluded, Tantai Jin finished his tea, and he and Si Tongyi made a motion to depart. A thought suddenly occurred to Li Xizhi, and he asked, "May I know the name, age, and cultivated arts of your clan's young disciple?"

"Ah, how could I forget!" Si Tongyi said with a serious expression. "The boy is of the 'Xun' generation and was given the name 'Hui'. He is just eighteen and cultivates the 'Empty Response Dispersion', an immortal foundation that excels in the practice of spiritual arts. Once he reaches Foundation Establishment, his prowess will soar to new heights."

Li Xizhi nodded thoughtfully and had Li Wushao escort them out. Though the old serpent was of humble bloodline, his status was now considerable. As a late-stage Foundation Establishment cultivator, he commanded respect from everyone, and even Si Tongyi greeted him with a polite smile.

Once outside the Heaven-Probing Pavilion, Tantai Jin sighed. "Tongyi, it seems Li Xizhi wasn't overly moved. We'll have to wait for Daoist Master Zhaojing's reply."

Si Tongyi nodded silently, his expression complex. The dynamic was a far cry from the days when he and Li Xizhi could casually call each other brothers.

"Years ago, when Yuan Tuan visited Moongaze Lake, I had just begun my cultivation at the peak," he reminisced. "I heard the entire Li clan came out to welcome her, and Li Xizhi was a nobody. Back then… even Yuan Tuan had to greet me with a smile."

"Now, with Zhaojing's ascension, I have to be polite to even the most junior members of the Li family… like that Li Jiangqian. It's truly unpredictable…"

Tantai Jin simply shook his head. "Such is the way of the world. Forget Yuan Tuan, how mighty was the Yuan Clan in its day? The great Yanyang Dao Lineage… look what has become of it. Today, Yuan Chengzhao has to live at our beck and call. Do you think he doesn't feel wronged? But what good does it do?"

The two men fell silent and flew away on the wind. "Our Daoist Master had some designs on that part of Shanji Prefecture," Tantai Jin said regretfully. "But Changxi died too suddenly, catching many Daoist Masters off guard. Daoist Master Yehui was the one who reaped the benefits. As it stands now, that land will likely be carved up by the neighboring powers."

Moongaze Lake.

The small hall on the island was brightly decorated, with numerous plum trees planted in the courtyard. The season was not yet right, so their bare branches reached up like lonely fingers, while cultivators bustled about.

A cultivator in a crimson robe strode down from the main hall. He had a powerful build, with a bristling beard and a sharp jaw, and his eyes were particularly captivating. Merely standing there, he possessed a presence that was hard to look away from.

Ding Weizeng's injuries had almost fully healed. He was a figure the Daoist Master had personally mentioned, and he had been given a "Profound Adamant Heart-Sutra Pill." This pill had the ability to help transcend tribulations, which was wonderfully synergistic with Ding Weizeng's "Palace-Yang Tiger" immortal foundation, known for its ability to overcome Yin tribulations. The effects of the pill had been maximized.

As a result, while many others still bore injuries from the battle—even Li Chenghui, who had preserved most of his strength, still needed time

to recuperate—Ding Weizeng, who had been among the most grievously wounded, had left the mountain early, having recovered seventy to eighty percent of his power.

Now, as he sat in the hall, a servant reported, "My lord, Wang Quwan of Funan has come to call."

Ding Weizeng was not surprised. He took his seat at the head of the hall and said, "Show him in."

A moment later, a man with his hair tied back and a sword on his back entered the hall. He bowed respectfully. "This junior, Wang Quwan of the Wang Clan of Funan, pays his respects to you, my lord."

As newcomers to the Li family, the cultivators from the Jiangbei region naturally stuck together. The Funan faction was larger, mostly composed of men who had been trained under Qu Bushi, and they proudly identified with their Funan origins.

The other group consisted of cultivators from Midong—primarily surrendered generals and members of Midong's noble families who had been conscripted into the Milin army. They were led by Miaoshui. They were few in number and their cultivation was not high. Miaoshui had a good relationship with Qu Bushi, so this group often gathered around the Funan cultivators under the broader Jiangbei banner, though they were still considered a step below.

Wang Quwan's Wang Clan was a Jiangbei clan, but technically from Midong. Fortunately, they had relocated to Funan years ago. Ever the opportunist, Wang Quwan had emerged from Gardenia Scenery Mountain a few months prior and immediately began referring to his family as the Wang Clan *of Funan*. He had paid his respects to Qu Bushi first, and Ding Weizeng was his second visit.

Ding Weizeng was fiercely loyal and paid no mind to factions. Yet, his current standing made him the tacitly acknowledged leader of both Jiangbei groups. It was, therefore, no surprise that Wang Quwan had come to see him.

While Wang Quwan had come to be shrewd, Ding Weizeng had already been wanting to meet him.

The reason was simple: the person to whom Ding Weizeng had pledged his life and loyalty was Li Ximing. Wang Quwan had earned Li Ximing's favor, to the point where it was rumored an Essence Gathering Pill was being set aside for him. This naturally gave Ding Weizeng a very positive impression of the man.

"Quwan, there's no need for such formality," Ding Weizeng said. "Have your resources and living quarters been arranged?"

Wang Quwan quickly explained the arrangements. Ding Weizeng listened, noting that he had been given the clan's highest level of treatment. He nodded silently, his belief that Wang Quwan was highly favored now confirmed.

"Has Senior Qu explained the clan's internal affairs to you? Do you understand everything?" he asked.

The old guard from the Lijing clans was in a clear decline. The once-dominant Huayu faction had fallen silent with An Siwei's capture. Meanwhile, the Milin and Nanzhang factions were growing in power. This left the newly arrived Jiangbei faction in a somewhat awkward position, where a misstep could easily cause offense.

Even if Qu Bushi hadn't explained these things, Wang Quwan would have figured them out after a few days of observation. But having it spelled out was better. "Yes, my lord," he said. "I understand completely."

Ding Weizeng nodded but still offered a word of caution. "Though the old ministers of the Lijing clans are not as prominent now, you must still show them respect. As for the matter between the Fei family and the Funan cultivators, you need not get involved. Just focus on your cultivation."

Wang Quwan knew what he was referring to. The Fei family of the North Bank had a bloody history with Funan from the past decade. Many of the Funan cultivators were from smaller North Bank families that had fled to Floating Cloud Cave. Though they now served the same master, the bad blood remained.

But his Wang family was from Midong and had never been part of that conflict, leaving him cleanly detached. After Ding Weizeng's admonition, Wang Quwan replied, "The Young Master and the Patriarch have instructed me not to leave the island until I reach Foundation Establishment."

Ding Weizeng understood immediately.

'Wang Quwan is important for the morale of the Funan people. They're afraid the northerners will harm him!'

Li Jiangqian was indeed afraid that the Capital Immortals Dao would harm Wang Quwan. After all, he was the only one currently available who could be of use regarding the Xiaoshi Mountain affair. If he were killed, there was no

telling how long they would have to wait for another opportunity. Though they had arrived at the same conclusion for different reasons, it seemed perfectly logical to both of them.

They spoke for a while, and Ding Weizeng found himself nodding repeatedly. From the island's interior to its shores, Wang Quwan had already managed everything with a thoroughness that surpassed even what Ding Weizeng himself had considered.

Pleased with the conversation, Ding Weizeng rose to his feet and, ignoring the other's protests, personally escorted Wang Quwan out. "With a patriarch like you, the Wang Clan of Funan has truly received a heaven-sent blessing!" he laughed.

"I am merely fortunate to have earned the Daoist Master's favor!"

As they reached the entrance of the hall, they were surprised to see a young man in a dark red, pleated robe waiting on the steps. Ding Weizeng paused for a second before bowing.

"Greetings, Young Master!"

Li Jiangqian smiled and approached, giving Wang Quwan a polite nod. The man tactfully excused himself and departed. Ding Weizeng quickly invited Li Jiangqian inside, but the young man didn't state his purpose. Instead, he smiled.

"Lord Ding, what is your assessment of Wang Quwan?"

Ding Weizeng's expression turned serious. "That man," he said in a low voice, "is no small fish in a pond."

"Oh?" Li Jiangqian prompted.

"Though he is not young, his cultivation is stable and profound, and his spiritual qi is pure," Ding Weizeng continued. "His clothes are simple, his posture steady. The tassel on his sword is worn, and his palms are calloused from forming hand seals. The ambition of a clear conscience shines between his brows, yet he bows his head without losing his dignity. If he proves decisive in his actions, knowing when to advance and when to retreat, he will surely rise above his peers the moment opportunity strikes."

Li Jiangqian pondered this for a moment. "You think very highly of him, my lord."

On the surface, he looked surprised, but inwardly he had already made his judgment.

'Opportunity? The Xiaoshi Mountain Dao lineage is a guaranteed opportunity. Can it be that destiny is truly at play? I should bind him with resources, treasures, and the favor of the clan's women…'

But as the thought formed, Li Jiangqian was suddenly struck by a realization.

'But how do I know that this very idea to lavish him with favor… isn't just the good fortune brought about by his destiny? Is it fate that shapes a man, or a man who forges his fate?'

He considered this for only a fleeting moment, but it was enough to cement Wang Quwan's importance in his mind. A smile returned to his face as he spoke.

"I came today because there is a matter I must trouble you with, my lord."

"Please give your orders, Young Master!" Ding Weizeng said, bowing his head.

Li Jiangqian's expression became serious. "I was previously ordered by the Daoist Master to construct a pavilion, a Jade Court, and a market. The Jade Court is complete, and the pavilion is nearly so, but the market has yet to be sited."

"The Daoist Master returned for a short while at midnight. I made a special trip to Gardenia Scenery Mountain to ask him about it. He has chosen a location: a place within the old territory of Milin Prefecture, situated between the Milin Mountains and the East Bank. It lies at the confluence of five earth meridians, an ideal spot to establish the market."

"However, the site needs a Foundation Establishment cultivator to oversee it. I have consulted the elders, and at present, only you are available, my lord. I would like you to go there to assume command, coordinate the manpower, and see this market built."

Ding Weizeng immediately bowed. "I will obey the revered Daoist Master's command!"

Li Jiangqian drew several jade slips and a token from his sleeve and handed them to him. "The earth meridians in that area are damaged," he explained. "They have repaired themselves somewhat over the years, but several flaws

remain that must be fixed. Take my token and have the disciples from the Profound Peak Gate see to the repairs."

Damaged earth meridians were a relatively rare problem, and few spiritual arts or Daoist texts recorded methods of repair. Most simply waited for time to heal the wounds. Fortunately, the members of the Profound Peak Gate, who excelled at such matters, were now with the Li family. Ding Weizeng looked slightly confused, so Li Jiangqian elaborated.

"That location was once the site of the Yu family's market. The Yu clan had a good eye; it's the best spot for a market on that entire stretch of the East Bank. During the wars between the great families, the market was destroyed, and the shattering of a Jade True formation damaged the earth meridians, creating the trouble we face today."

He gave a calm smile and added, "I will arrange the necessary manpower for you, my lord, and the formation masters I've hired will arrive on schedule. But once you are on the East Bank, all the cultivators around those five peaks will be under your command. Don't hesitate to go to my younger brother. Tell him it is the Daoist Master's order and show him my token. He will not refuse you."

Ding Weizeng bowed deeply. "This subordinate obeys!"

Chapter 747: A Teacup's Worth of Mountains

At the Profound Wonder Temple, a fine spring rain fell, a gentle, drifting drizzle. Inside the temple, several disciples were busy with their cultivation, their forms like gliding fish as they wove through the downpour, riding streaks of light. In their hands, pale green radiance continuously gathered, coalescing into wisps of flowing energy.

A middle-aged Abbot with a slightly square face and simple clothes walked along the stone steps, his robes hitched up, wooden clogs clattering. His movements were like those of an ordinary person with no cultivation. Upon reaching the front of the courtyard, he pushed the door open and smiled, "Please, come in, Zhaojing!"

A Daoist Master in white robes with gold patterns entered through the doorway. He had a proper, dignified appearance and looked quite young. His eyes held no ferocity, yet his calm gaze was enough to make the disciples on either side lower their heads. Li Ximing followed him past the steps and replied, "This spring rain is a rare sight. I see your temple's disciples are all busy gathering qi. It seems they look forward to this day every year. No wonder I haven't seen Qiuxin."

Sumian merely smiled as he welcomed him, "Qiuxin left a while ago. The matters in the Eastern Sea are truly troublesome, and he must be there to oversee them. As for the spring rain, we gather it every year, but it's never enough. Sometimes, I even have to use my Divine Ability to refine it myself."

He let out a laugh and continued, "Your clan has quite a few cultivators. If you're willing, could you have them help me collect some from the lake as well?"

'That old man is a miser, plucking feathers from every passing goose.' Li Ximing chuckled, "Of course. As long as I can take a look at your Qi-Gathering Art, my clan's cultivators can gather the qi and come to your temple to trade for some spiritual items."

"I'll send it to your clan shortly." Sumian's confidence was unshakeable, not in the least bit concerned about the Qi-Gathering Art being leaked. Li Ximing, however, was not intimidated. The Li clan was short on many things, but cultivators were not one of them. Many had time on their hands, and a small side business would be a good thing.

After speaking, Li Ximing sighed inwardly and said again, "It's only been a few days, and a formation has already been built on the late Senior Changxi's mountain! That old Daoist Master certainly works fast… It seems this spirit mountain is quite useful!"

Sumian smiled without a word. When they reached the courtyard, they saw a woman in a yellow satin robe, her eyes marked with a touch of blue at the corners. It was Daoist Master Tinglan of the Purple Smoke Gate. Li Ximing wasn't surprised. He greeted her and took a seat directly.

Li Ximing had received a message from Sumian earlier, saying they needed to discuss the matter of the Profound Peak Gate. He knew for sure that Sumian would not be the only one at the Profound Wonder Temple. At least one of Tinglan or Lingmei would be there, and perhaps Yehui himself.

Picking up his cup, Li Ximing did not beat around the bush. "Fellow Daoist Sumian, what's your proposal?"

Sumian nodded with a smile and replied, "This matter should have been dealt with a long time ago. We delayed it for a few months to save some face for Profound Peak. Now that Tinglan has come to visit and brought it up with me, I've invited you over."

Li Ximing smiled, "Has Fellow Daoist Yehui already been here?"

Sumian hesitated slightly, but Tinglan took over the conversation. "He came once, clarified his conditions, and then we invited you."

She looked at him more intently and said in a gentle voice, "Enemies are better resolved than created. We are all Purple Mansion cultivators. It's only natural for the cultivators below us to stir up trouble and for you to take notice, to have some thoughts of your own. It's just a matter of preserving your honor. There's no need to truly become enemies… We can play a game of chess, but we don't have to get truly angry."

Regardless of whether the Li clan and Capital Immortals Dao were truly enemies, Tinglan was helping to resolve the matter for her own sake. It was likely

she had orchestrated the entire thing. Li Ximing, of course, understood her good intentions. He still had to show respect to this Daoist Master of the Purple Smoke Gate. He straightened his expression and said, "Fellow Daoist Tinglan is absolutely right. Senior Yehui and I have clashed once or twice, and we've played a round of chess in Jiangnan and Jiangbei, but it hasn't escalated to true enmity. This matter should be simple to resolve."

Sumian's influence was clearly not as great as Tinglan's, but the old Daoist Master didn't care in the slightest. As long as he could persuade these two who were constantly clashing and prevent himself from being dragged into it, it would be a success for him. The old Daoist Master asked, "I heard you went to investigate. Did you find anything?"

Li Ximing nodded. "I asked another Daoist Master to divine the matter. The guest elder in the sect was Fu En, and the one who died earlier was Kong Haiying. The soul lamp had been tampered with by Daoist Master Changxi and was no longer his. As for Kong Tingyun… I don't know where she is making her breakthrough."

Hearing that he had consulted a Daoist Master for a divination, Sumian couldn't help but take a sip of his tea. Tinglan, however, smiled, "Then it's simple. I have a friend who cultivates near the World's Navel. Her name is Zhugong, and she's been thinking about moving into this place. With that, the matter can be settled."

Sumian raised an eyebrow and asked, "Tinglan, if your friend takes this place, isn't she afraid that if Kong Tingyun successfully makes a breakthrough, she will come seeking revenge?"

"Just listen to me," Tinglan said, blinking. This Daoist Master, who hailed from the Qi region, had a beauty that was different from the poised elegance of Jiangnan. She smiled, "I will make it clear to Yehui that Zhaojing is willing to give up Profound Peak and allow him to enter the sect's gate to search on his own. But after he's searched and plundered, and moved any mountains he wishes to, the sect's gate must be returned to me."

"Then, when Yehui brings his people to attack the mountain, Zhaojing can resist a few times, dismantle the Hundred Mountains Concealed Storage Spirit Array, feign defeat, retreat, and hand over the sect gate to him. After leaving some spiritual items behind, Yehui will finish collecting and searching, and I'll have my friend come to seize the mountain and get Yehui to give it up."

She held out her hand and pressed down on each finger one by one. "For you, Moongaze, wouldn't gaining the formation, the Profound Peak Dao lineage, and the support of the people be better than guarding that one piece of land and inviting the covetousness and jealousy of all those around you? Even if, by some miraculous chance, someone successfully makes a breakthrough, Zhaojing's actions would be completely justified… He'd even gain a debt of gratitude!"

"As for Capital Immortals, they'll have plundered the spiritual items and cultivation arts, moved the mountains they wanted, and resolved a deeply-rooted enmity. While they won't get Shanji and Profound Peak, it's enough to save their face! As for where Kong Tingyun might be, that's his problem. Having gone to this extent, is he still afraid of offending Profound Peak?"

She took a slow sip of her tea, her expression serious. "And for Yehui… What's good about Profound Peak is the cluster of spiritual lands within the sect, not its geographical location. If he were to truly devour this place, controlling such a vast territory across a river, he would be stretched too thin. Besides, being so high-profile isn't necessarily a good thing."

"As for Daoist Master Zhugong, she will have righteously gained this mountain from an enemy. She won't have to bear the resentment of Profound Peak, and she can even show favor by accepting and heavily promoting the Profound Peak cultivators… Once she establishes a relationship of gratitude and kinship, even if someone truly makes a breakthrough and returns, what could they say? It might even turn an enemy into a friend!"

"And for me and Old Daoist Master Qi… we won't have to worry about your affairs anymore."

She finished her explanation just as she finished her cup of tea and the game of chess on the board. Each Purple Mansion cultivator had received their share of the spoils. The courtyard fell silent for a moment. Sumian was a little dazed by what he heard. He sighed, "I have long heard that the orthodox path is skilled at chess, and that Purple Mansion cultivators can avoid danger and profit in the invisible… This is truly the case! This grand scheme of yours, Daoist Master, has left this old man in awe!"

While Sumian was showering her with flattery, Tinglan shook her head, a complex look of lingering fear in her eyes. She smiled, "Old Daoist Master, you are too kind. I have only watched a few of the Purple Mansion games over the past few years. It's nothing compared to the methods of Chuting and Qiushui, or

Yuanxiu and Changxiao… It's just a few minor tricks compared to even Tian'an and Chi Wei's schemes!"

Chapter 748: A Commission

After Tinglan and Sumian had spoken, Li Ximing fell silent for a moment. It was clear that neither of them cared whether Fu En or Kong Haiying occupied the mountain; all that mattered was that events proceeded according to their plan. The Profound Peak Gate's fate was sealed.

'Tinglan sees things clearly,' Li Ximing mused. 'The Purple Smoke Gate is in a period of weakness. Simply seizing the Profound Peak Gate's territory would be an overextension. Drawing in a friendly Purple Mansion cultivator is the best possible move, and it aligns perfectly with her long-term ambitions.'

Tinglan was all smiles. The Purple Smoke Gate had merely stepped in to mediate, and with just a few words, they had secured the Profound Peak Gate's mountain for their ally. And Li Ximing was expected to thank her for it.

He understood the situation perfectly. When a Daoist Master from the Purple Smoke Gate personally came to offer a "suggestion," how much room did he truly have to refuse?

Tinglan was a Daoist Master of the Green Pine Temple's Dao lineage. By personally mediating this conflict, she was extending him a significant amount of courtesy, even if it was a calculated move. Sumian, meanwhile, did little more than chime in with praise and nods of agreement, his flattery almost shameless. His stance was blindingly obvious.

Setting the Li family's interests aside, the Purple Smoke Gate was determined to support Daoist Master Zhu Gong. If Li Ximing raised any objections, he would not only offend Tinglan but also stand in the way of her sect. The Profound Wonder Temple, which sought a peaceful resolution, would be displeased, and Yehui would be laughing all the way.

'There aren't many spiritual resources left in the Profound Peak Gate anyway. It's a vague matter of how much my family gets versus how much Yehui gets.

And with Kong Haiying absent, Yehui is the one who truly loses out in this deal. He probably only agreed under pressure…'

Tinglan had dismissed the Capital Immortals Dao with a single, cutting remark: 'We've already given him enough face!' She clearly held them in low regard.

'My family holds the reputation of a righteous clan in Jiangnan. With the Xiao family watching from the side and the Azure Pond Sect as a potential retreat, Tinglan has to show me some respect. But Yehui… even with his higher cultivation, he likely has very little say in the matter.'

Since the Purple Smoke Gate wanted the mountain and Yehui needed to be placated, Fu En's fate was sealed. Li Ximing could only concede.

"That can be arranged," he said. "But what of the Myriad Radiance Sword Gate to the east?"

The Profound Peak Gate bordered their territory, and even though the Sword Gate had already claimed land around Salt Lake—prompting a hurried apology from Sumian—their official stance was still required. Li Ximing's question was expected.

"Do not worry," Tinglan replied smoothly. "Daoist Master Lingmei has already stated that he will no longer interfere in the affairs of the Profound Peak Gate."

With that, Li Ximing had nothing left to say. He took a sip of his tea. "Moving a Purple Mansion array is a troublesome affair. I must ask for your assistance, Daoist Master."

Tinglan knew he had agreed, but she still lowered her head in thought. Li Ximing's request meant she would have to personally enter the Great Void and retrieve the array. To outsiders who didn't know the details of this chess game, it would look as though she were taking advantage of the chaos to steal the Profound Peak Gate's grand array.

Given that Li Ximing had no skill in the Dao of formations, the request was reasonable. 'So be it,' Tinglan thought. 'Those watching from the Great Void are just spectators. With a little thought, they'll understand the situation.'

She nodded, and the matter was settled. Li Ximing produced the secret incantation for the Profound Peak Gate's formation disk, along with the jade pendant, and handed them to her.

"In that case," Tinglan said, "Zhaojing, you should begin making arrangements. The first signs will appear within the next few months. Once this is resolved, I will visit the lake to set up the new array."

She made no mention of alchemy in front of Sumian, speaking only of the formation. The old Daoist Master listened with a smile. "With this matter settled, I can finally enter seclusion. Many of my affairs were delayed because of the Profound Peak Gate."

The spring rain continued its gentle patter outside as the three of them drank tea and conversed in a relaxed atmosphere.

Sumian tilted his chin up. "A friend of mine who cultivates in the Yan Kingdom shared some interesting news. The northern tribes have grown more aggressive in recent years. Several large confederations have emerged, boasting an army of a hundred thousand, and they even have Purple Mansion cultivators among them now."

Tinglan showed no surprise. "Emperor Zhao has lost his authority. He can't even leave his own palace, let alone control his ancestral homeland in the north. After a century, it's no surprise that turmoil has erupted."

"I have another friend who has been struggling to gather a particular type of Qi and needs the conflict of nations to advance," Sumian continued. "When he heard the news a few months ago, he was overjoyed and went there immediately. I hear many ancient ruins have been unearthed as well, leading to speculation that a person of great destiny has appeared."

Li Ximing sipped his tea in silence. 'Right, everyone has friends everywhere… I've only just become a Daoist Master and have hardly left Jiangnan.'

Unaware of his thoughts, Sumian pressed on, his line of questioning clearly intentional. "Since there is a person of destiny, have you gone to see, fellow Daoist? Could it be a reincarnation of a sacred land's Daoist Master?"

His question was a veiled reference to Daoist Master Zipei, a subtle probe. But Tinglan was direct.

"Why would someone like that reincarnate in such a place, only to become a pawn in another's game?" she laughed. "You worry too much, old friend! Besides, my Purple Smoke Gate has an elder at the peak of the Purple Mansion Realm. Although his whereabouts are often unknown, he went to take a look. If it were truly her, he would have brought the person back long ago."

Her tone was smooth and natural, without a hint of hesitation, as if the missing peak Purple Mansion cultivator was exactly as the sect claimed: elusive, but occasionally returning for seclusion. Her words made it sound as if she had just seen him recently.

Sumian nodded repeatedly.

Tinglan continued, "After all, he is old and has his own affairs to arrange. He's so busy that he's almost never seen… Ultimately, these matters fall to us, the younger generation."

Sumian quickly interjected, "I once cultivated in the Eastern Sea and met the Senior near the barbarian isles. We spoke for a time, and his guidance was immensely beneficial. I am forever grateful. If you ever have the chance to see him upon his return to the sect, please send for me so I may pay my respects."

Tinglan's expression remained unchanged as she nodded in agreement. Soon after, she and Li Ximing took their leave. Sumian escorted them all the way out of the Profound Wonder Temple, leaving the courtyard to the quiet, drizzling rain.

After the time it takes for half an incense stick to burn, Sumian tore through the Great Void and returned, a thoughtful look on his face. He sat down on his prayer mat and murmured to himself, "If Senior Wen truly returns to the sect often, he would have heard the news of my own sect's founding and would surely have clarified matters. Tinglan couldn't possibly be unaware of the events on the isles… which means she hasn't seen him in at least sixteen or seventeen years."

He paused. "Whether he has fallen or is simply missing… as long as he's not around, I can use the Qi-Stone Demonic Embryo with more confidence."

After leaving the Profound Wonder Temple's domain, Li Ximing stepped into the Great Void. Tinglan traveled alongside him, clearly having lingered for a private word.

"About the pills…" the woman began with a smile. "I'll have to trouble you."

Li Ximing waved his hand dismissively. "Daoist Master, please don't say that. Zhaojing is incredibly grateful that you took time from your busy schedule to resolve my family's troubles."

Pleasantries cost nothing. After offering a few words of flattery, Li Ximing saw Tinglan get to the point.

"Since we are using the Profound Peak Gate's formation, I should offer you some compensation for helping with the modifications."

The terms of the alchemy had already been decided: any pills produced beyond the first three would belong to Li Ximing. He was confident he could refine more than three, and gaining the services of a Purple Mansion formation master on top of that was a profitable deal no matter how he looked at it. Still, he sighed.

"I dare not accept your payment in advance, fellow Daoist. If I fail to refine the pills, I would be too ashamed to face you again."

Tinglan clearly disliked that possibility. She didn't believe he would waste such a precious portion of primal water, and she forced a smile. "You should still tell me what you need now. I can look for it while I'm traveling. Otherwise, we'll just waste more time, and I'd hate to keep you waiting."

Li Ximing could see that Tinglan was a cultivator who liked to have everything planned and in order. He relented. "It's difficult for me to decide on such short notice. However, I am in need of a high-quality Bright Yang Dharma artifact to serve as a spirit embryo. An ancient one would be best. Do you have any leads?"

"Oh?" Tinglan considered this for a moment, then nodded. "That shouldn't be a problem. I can select a few artifacts from the Purple Smoke Gate's collection for Zhaojing to choose from. As for an ancient artifact… I will have to make some inquiries."

It was a small request, but Li Ximing had his own plans. He wasn't just asking Tinglan; he also intended to write to the Azure Pond Sect, inquire with the Myriad Radiance Sword Gate, and even have Cui Jueyin send a letter back to his own clan.

The reason for such complexity was not just to have a wider selection. Having met so many Purple Mansion cultivators, a seed of caution had taken root in his heart.

'I need a Bright Yang Dharma artifact to forge my spirit embryo, preferably an ancient one. This item will become my personal Purple Mansion Dharma Artifact. How can I let anyone know its form and function so easily? Not even

its abilities from the Foundation Establishment Realm. I must create a smokescreen, make it impossible for anyone to know for sure which artifact I used to forge my spirit embryo.'

As he pondered this, he asked another question. "The Hundred Mountains Concealed Storage Spirit Array is excellent, but when you relocate and rebuild it… could you modify it as much as possible? It can be of similar power, or even slightly weaker. I just ask that it be significantly different."

After all, the array belonged to the Profound Peak Gate. If he took it and set it up on Pingya Island exactly as it was, anyone passing by would recognize it. More importantly, what would the numerous former members of the Profound Peak Gate think when they saw their grand array protecting his island?

The damage to his reputation was one concern; the security risk was another, and a far greater one. The Profound Peak Gate's legacy would now be scattered. The Li family would have a part of it, as would Yehui, Zhu Gong, Sumian, and even Tinglan. What if one of them held a core record of the array's weaknesses? He had no desire to become the next Fei family.

"Oh?"

If his first condition was minor, this second one was rather troublesome. Tinglan hesitated. "A Purple Mansion array… every node is carefully researched and meticulously placed. If you change even one part, corresponding adjustments must be made throughout the entire formation. Adapting it to a new landscape on top of that… it would take an enormous amount of effort…"

Li Ximing smiled. "Refining these pills will take five or six years. That should give you enough time to work on the formation. I'm not asking for a complete overhaul, just enough changes so that it looks completely different on the surface, with a few key components altered."

His tone shifted as he let out a sigh. "With the Profound Peak Gate's legacy scattered, your friend may one day come to my door, and I might have to grudgingly return her people. Those cultivators are intimately familiar with the Hundred Mountains Concealed Storage Spirit Array. My family doesn't want to be left with such a vulnerability."

By mentioning Zhu Gong, he put her on the spot. Tinglan paused. It was true that Li Ximing had been very accommodating, allowing her to arrange everything.

"Very well," she conceded. "Leave it to me. I will set aside the time to modify it over the next few years."

With their agreement settled, they parted ways. Li Ximing tore through the Great Void, flying until he reached his own territory and materialized on Gardenia Scenery Mountain. The rain didn't seem to fall over the lake here; the mountain was perpetually bright and radiant, its slopes carpeted with drifting blossoms.

As was his routine, he first retrieved the Profound Pattern Vase from the Malevolent Earth to refine it. The fire-attribute malevolent qi within the vase had accumulated to a significant degree, making it progressively harder to refine. But with a single activation of his Valley Wind Flame-Guiding Art, the process became effortless.

By now, the malevolent qi in the vase was far too potent for any Foundation Establishment cultivator to handle. Only a Purple Mansion cultivator who had mastered a divine ability could continue the refinement. Li Ximing estimated that in another ten years, even cultivators without a Fire Virtue divine ability would be unable to manage it. But for him, with his unique art, both the speed and difficulty of refinement were trivial.

Li Ximing lifted his sleeve and examined the vase. Wisps of crimson patterns, like rising flames, had begun to appear on its surface. Despite all his efforts, however, its power was still at the Foundation Establishment level and useless against a Purple Mansion cultivator.

'The material of the Profound Pattern Vase is extraordinary, but there's no sign that its refinement is reaching its limit. It only increases in power, not in mystique… The gap between Foundation Establishment and Purple Mansion is too vast. It's not just a matter of whether you can hurt them, but whether you can even hit them. The moment I pull out my artifact, they can just escape into the Great Void. What's the point?'

Still, with the vase in his hands, Li Ximing felt no fear, only a hope that its potential would remain limitless each time he picked it up. He returned the small bottle to the earthen fire and reappeared on the mountain peak.

White flowers covered the ground. The stone table and chairs were clear; the gardenias dared not fall where he usually sat, forming a pristine circle around it. The tea on the table was still warm.

He raised an eyebrow and saw a Jade Court Guard waiting at the foot of the steps. The guard, clad in white armor, was stationed permanently on Gardenia Scenery Mountain. His surname was Dou; he was, technically speaking, a distant cousin. His father, Dou Yi, had been one of his own father's most trusted men. The Dou clan had been in decline in recent years, and Li Zhouwei had sent the young man here as a gesture of goodwill and support.

"What is it?" Li Ximing asked.

The guard, having served for a year, had grown somewhat accustomed to his master's sudden appearances and disappearances, but he still jumped in fright. He quickly bowed. "Reporting to the Daoist Master! The Young Lord came by. He said he has an urgent matter to report."

"Send him up."

Li Ximing sat down and took out the recipe for the Heavenly Oneness Essence Extraction Pill to study it. Li Jiangqian arrived shortly, holding a letter.

"Reporting to the Daoist Master," he said respectfully. "A letter from the Azure Pond Sect."

Li Ximing nodded and took it. Li Jiangqian had reported to him nearly every time he had been away, and they had become familiar with the routine. The young man proceeded to report on the family's various affairs.

Li Jiangqian's management style was clearly different from Li Zhouwei's. His father would handle everything meticulously and rarely disturbed him. This young man, however, came up the mountain more frequently. He would provide a concise, rapid, and accurate overview of the family's operations and progress. Li Ximing would listen casually, gaining a general understanding of the clan's state, and was often asked for his input on various matters.

Li Zhouwei was already the White Qilin of the Li family, one of the few who could consult with Li Ximing as an equal. But Li Jiangqian, as a member of the younger generation, was eager to make an impression on the family's Daoist Master, hoping to strengthen his own authority. Li Ximing saw this clearly and permitted his visits every time.

Chapter 749: Courtly Red Dust

Upon receiving the letter, Li Ximing recognized his brother's handwriting at a glance. As always, Li Xizhi's tone was polite and carefully measured. It was the same courteous manner he had adopted in his letters home when he first became the Master of the Heaven-Probing Pavilion. Back then, it had seemed a sign of humility; now, even after Li Ximing had become a Daoist Master, his brother's tone remained unchanged, a testament that he was not one to ride on another's coattails.

Li Ximing read the letter, his thoughts turning inward.

'Si Xunhui… the Empty Response Dispersion.'

The Empty Response Dispersion was one of the three core Dao lineages of Xiaoshi Mountain. For the Si family to send one of their direct descendants to pursue this path, and to specifically request entry through his family's gate, was a clear signal.

'Daoist Master Yuanxiu's lifespan is running short. By having his own kin trained in a Xiaoshi Mountain lineage, he's likely hoping to stumble upon some opportunity. He wants a hand in their affairs.'

'This move serves two purposes. First, it gives him a way into Xiaoshi Mountain through my family. Second, it's a gesture of goodwill. By having his descendant study under my brother, he's securing an ally for the Si family's future…'

Si Boxiu's overture was not necessarily a bad thing for Li Ximing. The Azure Pond Sect was situated in a critical location, deep within their territory, and stability there was paramount. He considered the situation further.

'Si Xunhui is only at the Qi Refining realm. Wang Quwan is already on the verge of Foundation Establishment, so their paths are unlikely to cross. However, the other two lineages of Xiaoshi Mountain are still unaccounted for. Opportunities could still arise.'

He took out a brush and paper, penned a reply, and handed it to Li Jiangqian to be delivered. "You seem to be in good spirits," he remarked. "Is there good news?"

A smile broke across Li Jiangqian's face. "The Daoist Master's insight is as sharp as ever. The Guanxie Pavilion has been completed and erected at the Inherited Clarity Gate. The Jade Court has also been built at the foot of Mount Yuting. Its palaces stretch on and on, and all the Court Guards have moved in. We have one at the Foundation Establishment realm, nineteen who have attained Qi, eighty-nine at Embryonic Breathing, and over twenty thousand elite mortal soldiers. It is truly a court in name and in fact. More than ninety-six thousand people reside at the foot of the mountain, far exceeding the conditions required for Qi gathering."

"A few days ago," he continued, his voice brimming with excitement, "Protector Li Wen went inside to gather Qi and truly manifested signs of the Courtly Red Dust Qi! The family's *Aged Courtly Path Sutra* can finally be cultivated!"

"Excellent!"

The Guanxie Pavilion was a crucial site for Li Ximing's own plans to refine a Spirit Embryo. He had been paying close attention to it but hadn't pushed for its completion due to the lack of a suitable artifact. He was pleasantly surprised it had been finished so soon.

As for acquiring the Courtly Red Dust Qi, it meant the family now had an additional Purple Mansion Dao lineage. Li Ximing was naturally overjoyed. Moreover, the *Aged Courtly Path Sutra* was an ancient technique practiced by the direct line of the Jiang family, survivors of a fallen Origin Mansion. In this new era where jade was flourishing, its power might be far greater than imagined.

Li Jiangqian bowed respectfully. "I have come to request the Daoist Master's decree. How should we manage this cultivation method?"

Li Ximing tapped his fingers on the jade table. "The Court Guards practice the *Sutra of the Courtly Guardian*, a method designed for rapid progression. While the technique itself is unremarkable, its strength lies in the swift transition from Embryonic Breathing to Qi Refining. We typically select cultivators with lower talent from humble backgrounds to train in it. However, they are inherently suppressed by those who cultivate the *Aged Courtly Path Sutra* and would stand no chance against them. The cultivation of the *Aged Courtly Path Sutra* must be held firmly in our own hands."

There were other reasons the Li family used the *Sutra of the Courtly Guardian*. A critical factor was that gathering Qi for it was astonishingly cheap; one only needed to dig a well, requiring almost no spirit stones.

"When the Jiang family was destroyed, their cultivation method was scattered," Li Ximing recalled. "The surviving members should have all had copies, but they were later wiped out, leaving only the An family branch. I remember my father severed their connection to the technique long ago. Has this been thoroughly investigated and confirmed?"

"Reporting to the Daoist Master, I have looked into it," Li Jiangqian said respectfully. "There are still a few families with outside ties to the Yu family in Nanzhang, but during the rebellion, they failed to breach the Yu family's treasury and never obtained the *Aged Courtly Path Sutra*. However, in reading the Yu family's history, I discovered a small family on the northern part of the eastern shore with the surname Pu. They are descendants of the Jiang family. I made a special request for Granduncle Chenghuai to pay them a visit, and he found that they did indeed possess a hidden copy."

Li Ximing gestured for him to continue.

"I have invited the direct line of the Pu family here," Li Jiangqian explained. "I had the father and son swear a spiritual oath to sever their inheritance of the technique. As compensation, I established a hereditary position for them within the Jade Court to shelter their descendants. This branch will now cultivate within the Jade Court. In time, a newborn from their line will be sent back to the Pu family to inherit their title. After two generations, the technique's lineage will be completely broken."

"Well done. Although we now control the Qi, making the technique useless to others, it is wise to take precautions and prevent outsiders from prying into the secrets of our Dao lineage."

Li Ximing sipped his tea and nodded in approval, though other thoughts were brewing in his mind.

He had long known that Li Zhouwei's children were not close to one another. Over a century had passed since the clan's founding. The three remaining main branches of the family still shared some kinship, but their numbers were dwindling.

Now, more and more of the cultivators in the region were geniuses produced by the sheer numbers of collateral branches, who would then return to the main family line. Having spent time outside, these returning members felt even more distant. With Li Jiangqian managing the mid-to-high levels of the clan's administration, outsiders and members of these returning branches were gradually becoming the majority.

'The blessings of a great man fade after five generations. The Youngest Branch, with my brother's help, at least managed to produce Chenghuai and Zhouluo. But the First Branch has been diluted by its vast mortal population. Though they have many cultivators, no true geniuses have emerged…'

Li Jiangqian had handled the matter beautifully, and Li Ximing offered no further comment. Yet, he understood the underlying politics. The An family held considerable influence in the Jade Court. Li Wen was a lone official with no faction, but this Pu family branch would undoubtedly become Li Jiangqian's people.

He had to view every cultivator in the family not as an individual but as part of a larger web. Li Jiangqian was more than just himself; he represented the Second Branch and, through his mother, the An family. Whether it was Li Jianglong or Li Jiangxia, their innate desire for power was one thing, but the power they gained served not just them but the factions behind them.

Li Jiangqian had his own supporters: the An family, the Second Branch, and a large group of cultivators who upheld the system of primogeniture. From another perspective, wasn't this move also a self-preservation tactic by the An family, an attempt to shore up their waning influence after the loss of An Siwei?

There was nothing inherently wrong with it, so Li Ximing let it be. "This technique is powerful," he said. "Someone from the direct line must cultivate it. I recall Li Jiangliang is only at the Embryonic Breathing realm. By the time he is ready, the Qi will be available for him to harvest. Let him be the one."

"As you command," Li Jiangqian replied, but then added, "However, there was a marriage agreement for Jiangliang with the Profound Peak Gate."

"They wouldn't dare bring it up now," Li Ximing answered dismissively. He hesitated for a moment, however. If the Profound Peak Gate did produce a Purple Mansion cultivator in the next few years, the matter might not be so simple.

He amended his decision. "In that case, let Jiangnian cultivate it. As for Jiangliang… let your father decide his path!"

Li Jiangqian acknowledged the order and withdrew. After a moment of quiet contemplation, Li Ximing's form flickered and vanished into the Great Void.

The Eastern Sea.

Jagged black reefs pierced the sky. Waves crashed against them, not with white foam, but with an inky darkness. The surface of the sea held no reflection. Here, in the far eastern reaches of the Eastern Sea, the spiritual Qi grew thin, and the fabric of the Great Void became placid.

Beneath the surface, the water was a profound, lightless black. Occasionally, a few spirit fish would dart by, but the depths were otherwise empty. In the midst of this deep, silent vista, a young man in a green robe with a golden tassel at his waist sat cross-legged, his eyes shut in meditation.

Before him pulsed a colossal array of interwoven turquoise patterns, like a gigantic agate dome sealing the seabed. The reef below, hardened over millennia to a point where even a Foundation Establishment cultivator would struggle to scratch it, was sliced cleanly apart as if it were tofu, its severed pieces scattered across the ocean floor.

After an unknown amount of time, the young man slowly opened his eyes. His irises were a pale cyan, and the restless Pristine Water swirled around him, forming a faint turquoise halo that stood in stark contrast to the black water of the deep sea.

"Friend! What do you think of my formation?"

The young man's cheerful voice traveled through the water, unimpeded by the crushing pressure, and pierced into the array. A second later, the sea around the formation began to boil violently, and a thunderous shriek echoed out.

"Chi Buzi! Have you lost your mind? When have I ever offended you?!"

Chi Buzi rose from the reef and descended through the water, a smile playing on his lips. "It is precisely because you have never offended me that I can trap you here, is it not? It's only been two years of refining, and I haven't even made my move yet. What's the rush, friend?"

"Besides," he added, "this is the World's Navel, the domain of the True Monarch of Wondrous Transformation. My reverence and admiration for her are boundless. I would naturally not take your life in this place. You can rest assured!"

Chi Buzi's words fell, and the demon inside the array was so incensed it fell silent for three full breaths.

He knew exactly how aggrieved the demon felt. He had laid this trap piece by piece, a late-stage Purple Mansion cultivator with four divine abilities preying on a weaker target. He had fabricated traces of ancient ruins, pretended to enter seclusion nearby, and then simply waited for her to come to him.

She had seen the formation from the Great Void but, assuming it was merely part of a Purple Mansion cultivator's seclusion, had paid it no mind. As she drew closer, she was deceived by Chi Buzi's art of concealment and failed to notice that the array was a full circle larger than it appeared to her spiritual sense.

Even then, the demon had approached cautiously from a distance, remaining beyond the array's reach. Chi Buzi had patiently played along for nearly two years before she finally, inadvertently, stepped before the array and was ensnared by his divine ability.

Once she was trapped, Chi Buzi had used a spiritual artifact to suppress her, reinforcing the array with his arts day after day. He had waited in silence for two years, to the point where the demon almost believed the array was malfunctioning and that he, too, had been fooled.

Now, the truth was out. The demon was on the verge of coughing up blood. Her voice, surprisingly, was that of a charming young woman. "Chi Buzi! Even we beasts know of parents and kin! You, a man with no sect and no clan, who stood by and watched the Azure Pond Sect fall into new hands, you are a truly fickle villain! Not a single word from your mouth can be trusted. My only regret is believing you, never imagining you were just some unhinged madman!"

Chi Buzi laughed. "Only a beast would fail to understand. Sects use secret teachings to coerce and control you. Clans use bloodlines to establish their tyranny. The two are intertwined, a turbid current of filth. How could I allow my enlightened self to be shackled by such vulgar, mortal concerns? And you, a mere beast, can only speak of parents."

Though she was also at the Purple Mansion realm, the demon was no match for Chi Buzi, who had studied the classics since childhood. His words left her

speechless. "I may be a beast," she retorted, "but you are a monster! How can you say such things?"

Chi Buzi no longer deigned to reply. He stepped into the array, and as he did, the surrounding seawater transformed from black to turquoise. It separated into two layers, turbid below and clear above, a change that extended all the way to the surface, where a downpour began to fall from the sky.

As Chi Buzi entered the formation, walking upon the Pristine Water, the Purple Mansion demon was terrified. She had only just broken through to her realm. With the Great Void sealed off, how could she possibly be his opponent? "Chi Buzi," she pleaded, "I have sworn an oath beneath the Tree of One Heart! The Luan-Phoenixes know my name. You should think carefully about what you're doing."

He answered her with a smile. "I chose you precisely for that reason! What does it matter if they know? You swore a single oath. In your current predicament, who will bother to come for you?"

In an instant, the array erupted with power. The might of the Pristine Water surged, and a brilliant Lesser Yin radiance filled the space, coalescing into countless icebergs like fields of white snow. A gloomy aura began to rise but was mercilessly crushed by the Pristine Water.

The demon had the appearance of a beautiful young maiden, clad only in a translucent blue veil. But under the crushing force of the Pristine Water, she could no longer maintain her form and revealed her true self: a spirit sparrow with brilliant blue and white feathers.

Chi Buzi had not even glanced at her human form, as if he were afraid it would dirty his eyes. But her true form made his eyes light up, and he looked her up and down with admiration. "Excellent, excellent," he sighed. "Another feathered-beast, just as the ancient texts described. Lesser Yin transforms into feathers, Bright Yang into carapaces. The latter is often considered a fallacy, but the former is almost always true!"

The spirit sparrow couldn't comprehend why this person was so intent on harming her. Hearing him ramble on about ancient books, she gritted her beak in fury. "Idiot…"

The two clashed, their battle shaking the formation and churning the sea outside. Light and shadow flickered across the surface as the rain continued to

fall, unabated, for more than half a month. Several cultivators passing by were drawn to the phenomenon and stopped to observe from a distance.

"The Pristine Water flows without end. Could there be a treasure emerging here?"

Their cultivation was too low to venture into the deep sea, so their watch was fruitless. Down below, the Purple Mansion demon was nearing her limit. After a long and brutal fight, most of her feathers had been shorn off. Pushing back against the Pristine Water with all her might, she charged toward the edge of the great array.

With a desperate, muffled cry, she slammed her head into the formation's barrier. The impact was made with suicidal force. With a deafening boom, the demon's head exploded into a thick, ghastly white mist that splattered across the array.

A divine ability flared. The great array, already weakened by half a month of attacks, finally wavered under the powerful blow. In the single instant that it faltered, a sliver of the Great Void was exposed. In that instant, the demon vanished.

Chi Buzi remained unhurried. With a casual wave of his hand, the great array shrank and flew back into his sleeve. Bolstered by his own divine abilities and spiritual artifacts, he knew the demon could not have outrun him even at her peak, let alone now that she was grievously injured.

He murmured to himself, "What an obedient little demon. I said she couldn't die at the World's Navel, and she dutifully fled elsewhere to do it!"

Chi Buzi tore open the Great Void and sped through, but it was empty, as if no trace of her remained. He paid it no mind. He extended a hand, hooked his little finger, and touched his thumb to his index finger.

'From where do the clear and turbid arise?' he chanted internally. 'In the radiant pool, I see ice and scorching heat and bitter cold—these are the traces of Lesser Yin.'

His eyes flashed with understanding. He stepped through the Great Void and immediately spotted the spirit sparrow. She was fast, but not fast enough. Halfway through her flight, she gave up on the Great Void and plunged back into the physical world.

The moment the spirit sparrow emerged, she found herself above the sea, right where the group of cultivators was still gathered. There were more than a dozen of them now, scattered about, each warily eyeing the others, all convinced a treasure was about to surface. The injured Purple Mansion demon, without a second thought, devoured them all—ancestors of great families and masters of small temples alike—and flew away without a sound.

Chapter 750: Another Job

Chi Buzi burst from the void close behind her, his green robes fluttering. He caught sight of the carnage, and his voice thundered in rage: "Vile demon! I trapped you with my divine abilities, yet you still dare to devour mortals! You are truly courting your own doom! If I fail to capture you today, I will have failed my cultivation!"

The spirit sparrow sped through the air. His words struck her ears, causing every feather on her body to stand on end as fury flooded her chest. 'You… you! You running dog of the Pristine Water, you shameless demonic cultivator! The Azure Pond Sect kills more people in a year than I have feathers on my body, and you have the audacity to lecture *me* about devouring mortals!'

She had cultivated in the overseas realms for many years. With her celestial bearing, she was treated as a Purple Mansion immortal wherever she went. Since achieving true sentience, she rarely consumed mortal flesh. She had only done so now out of absolute desperation. Chi Buzi's hypocritical scolding left her choking on unspoken bitterness. With no time to even turn and argue, she simply lowered her head and flew desperately onward.

Seeing that she offered no retort, Chi Buzi continued his pursuit, shouting insults as they flew. The two figures flickered in and out of the Great Void, one chasing, one fleeing, until they reached the absolute farthest eastern reaches of the Eastern Sea. The edge of the world was just ahead. The spirit sparrow abruptly wheeled around, tearing back into the Great Void to return the way she came.

Chi Buzi, however, had been patiently herding her eastward this entire time. How could he let her turn back? He shook his head. "Friend, that simply won't do."

He immediately retrieved a cauldron from his sleeve. Tossing it into the air, it instantly swelled to the size of a small house. Chi Buzi chanted an incantation,

swept his sleeve across the vessel, and following a clear chime, he declared: "I petition the Palace of Heavenly Aspect to shift its position. Let there be rain."

The spiritual artifact was intrinsically tied to the Pristine Water lineage. As Chi Buzi channeled his power, he simultaneously activated a divine ability. Heavy Murk manifested as rolling gray qi that spread at terrifying speed, blanketing the sky and sea, casting everything into a gloomy twilight.

The spirit sparrow saw the world ahead of her change abruptly. Rain began to lash the surface of the sea, transforming the world into a boundless expanse of gray. Fear struck her heart, and she immediately fled back into the Great Void.

But Chi Buzi followed close behind. The sparrow flew for some time before he caught up again, forcing her back into the physical world. She blinked, realizing that the Great Void around her had become uniform and placid; she could no longer distinguish any direction or location.

"What kind of spiritual artifact is this!"

She was forced to pick a random spot and return to the physical world. She was met again by the same gray, misty rain. Rolling fog churned below her, obscuring her path and leaving her completely disoriented. Gritting her beak, she plunged into the roiling mist below, only to shoot out an instant later from the rain clouds *above*—colliding directly with Chi Buzi, who waited with his hands clasped behind his back, watching her coldly.

'This spiritual artifact is extraordinary… It's an ancient spirit treasure!'

Chi Buzi's divine ability did not wait. He had been gathering power, and now a torrent of turquoise Pristine Water crashed down. The sparrow had never cultivated a body divine ability, was already injured, and was weaker than him to begin with. She took the blow head-on. It felt as if her bones and feathers were melting, and she let out a piercing, tragic shriek.

This attack struck at her very life force. The spirit sparrow remanifested in another location, flying blindly, her heart filled with despair. 'All of the Azure Pond Sect's spiritual artifacts must have ended up in this bastard's hands! A dignified late-stage Purple Mansion cultivator, armed with three spiritual artifacts and a great array, and he *still* had to resort to ambushes and deception to trap a junior like me…'

But no matter how long she flew, she was caught again, struck by another divine ability. She grew sluggish. Chi Buzi's array had been terrifying enough, and now this ancient spiritual artifact… Her heart turned to ice.

She flew while frantically observing her surroundings. Occasionally, a few small islands would flash past in her vision. This at least proved the spell wasn't forcing her to fly in circles, not as tyrannical as that spiritual artifact belonging to Ning Tiaoxiao…

'But the Eastern Sea is vast! This miraculous artifact, combined with Chi Buzi's deliberate herding, is more than enough to prevent my escape! How can I just wait inside this spiritual artifact's rain-curtain, letting his Pristine Water divine ability slice me apart like death by a thousand cuts?'

She was tormented by her predicament, but Chi Buzi never let his guard down. This spirit sparrow had, after all, attained the Dao through the Lesser Yin lineage as an rogue cultivator. Though he had never heard of her acquiring any great opportunities, one could never be careless when facing a Purple Mansion opponent.

He paused slightly, but the spirit sparrow suddenly wheeled around. She unleashed her Lesser Yin divine ability at full power, converging it into streams of white tassels before her. Chi Buzi didn't recognize the specific technique, but he had investigated her background thoroughly and could guess its nature.

'A Lesser Yin divine ability, □All-Fragrance Sinks□. This power is born from the first blush of splendor and the onset of Yin-cold. It commands cold, yet contains fire; it commands Yin, yet it is dry. Since □All-Fragrance Sinks□ is a spell art divine ability, it must be a fusion of that cold and dryness, manifesting as flame.'

As he analyzed it, the white tassels indeed erupted with an eerie Yin-fire, vaporizing the surrounding rain into mist. Even the gray fog below showed signs of dissipating. Chi Buzi could not allow that; he simply flicked a finger.

□Clear Dusk Rain□!

A torrential downpour descended, temporarily suppressing the flames. The sparrow pushed her power to the limit, causing the fire to flicker erratically in the rain, becoming unstable. A flicker of regret crossed Chi Buzi's mind.

'The Lesser Yin's Sovereign Fire of Cold and Dryness should be suppressed by the Pristine Water's Purging Jewel Dew. It is a perfect counter. If I just had that one

divine ability, capturing this demon would be effortless. But unfortunately, I never managed to acquire the Purging Dew ability!'

The Azure Pond Sect's legacy was incomplete. The Qi-gathering method for the associated technique, the *Art of the Dew-Calamity Splendor*, was unattainable. The Chi family had spent years collecting fragments of the technique, but every attempt at gathering the required Qi failed. Therefore, even he, a direct descendant of the Chi family, had been unable to master Purging Dew.

The Pristine Water lineage was clearly dominant, yet gathering the Qi for Purging Dew always failed. Chi Buzi hadn't dared to overthink it while at the Azure Pond Sect, but out here in the Eastern Sea, the truth was obvious. Who else could it be but the explicit will of their own True Monarch of Pristine Water?

As long as that True Monarch held this intention, all Qi-gathering methods for that specific art were rendered useless. The specific spiritual Qi required by the Chi family's technique had never been found in any ancient ruin. Chi Rui had tried to use a Pristine-Water harmonization method and repeatedly failed. Chi Wei had also failed to achieve Purging Dew and had been forced to use Horn Wood as a substitute to cultivate…

His thoughts were wandering, but the spirit sparrow seized the moment, switching from defense to offense. Her sharp, pale-yellow beak snapped open, revealing rows upon rows of fine, needle-like teeth. A blinding, deep-white brilliance erupted from her throat.

Chi Buzi finally turned serious. His hand seals changed, and the great cauldron burst from the Great Void to shield him. His pupils slowly shifted from pale cyan to a deep, profound turquoise.

Cave Spring's Echo!

This potent ability, both a Life and a Body Divine Ability, activated instantly. His physical form dissolved into the water of the Cave Spring's Echo, merging seamlessly into the great cauldron as the tinkling sound of a bubbling spring filled the air.

A full incense stick of time passed before the sparrow's desperate, life-risking blast of white light finally knocked the great cauldron over with a deafening clang. The spring water was blasted free, but a voice emerged from within the turquoise-gray liquid itself:

"The spring echoes; turbidity rests within the water. Therefore, it neither congeals nor ceases; it neither dries nor halts. Your Sovereign Fire may be strong, but how can it possibly harm me?"

The spring water surged forward, defying the deep-white light, while the great cauldron simultaneously pressed down from above. The brilliance dimmed, and the surrounding gray turbidity thickened once more, sealing her fate.

This single exchange revealed the vast chasm in their Dao attainment. This was a gap the demon could not hope to cross. Despair flooded the spirit sparrow's heart. She had only just broken through to her realm. How could she fight back? Chi Buzi surpassed her in cultivation, possessed stronger divine abilities, used miraculous arrays and spiritual artifacts, and held a far deeper understanding of the Dao. This was utterly hopeless.

"It's Cave Spring's Echo!"

The spirit sparrow recognized it an instant too late. Realizing he must have activated his core Life Divine Ability, she tried to seize the opening, but it was already gone. The turquoise-gray Pristine Water was already descending upon her.

Chi Buzi remained vigilant. Though the sparrow was trapped, she was not incapable of fighting to the death. If she died here, all his years of careful preparation would be for nothing.

Thus, while maintaining the pressure of the Pristine Water, he allowed his form to reappear, a confident smile of absolute victory on his face. "Friend, do not be alarmed," he said. "I went to all this trouble not to end your life."

The demon did not believe him for a second. "Then let us fight to the death! My abilities may be shallow, but if I burn my life, I can certainly injure you!"

Chi Buzi blinked, his expression turning utterly sincere. He looked earnest, almost righteous. "I truly have no intention of killing you. Our Dao lineages are unrelated, and there is no enmity between us. You possess no great spiritual artifacts or treasures, so why would I harm you? I am merely trying to secure an opportunity related to the Lesser Yin lineage, and I was afraid you might try to seize it. That is why I was forced to take these measures."

The demon remained unconvinced. Chi Buzi kept the Pristine Water divine ability active, continuing: "A fight to the death helps neither of us. Friend, why not take a chance?"

Even as he spoke, a silver-white rope hidden within his sleeve began to glow faintly. He maintained his mask of sincerity, staring at her earnestly, while the pressure from the Pristine Water silently, steadily increased.

The World Within the Mirror.

Clouds of mist drifted past bright, translucent white tiles. Several stone lanterns stood in the courtyard, casting a pale yellow light. A young boy with pale-green eyes lay slumped over a stone desk, looking utterly demoralized.

'The *Art of Drumming Profundity Fire Refining*… a True Fire control technique. Let's see… it uses the Path of the Twelve-Storied Pagoda… What ancient era did this technique come from? Gotta fix it…'

Dangjiang listlessly picked up his brush and began making revisions. The pavilion was empty save for two dull-witted, Yellow-Armored Strongmen staring blankly ahead as they carried jade slips upstairs.

Dangjiang had received his promotion, but his workload hadn't lessened, and the number of people he saw had plummeted. Back when he was in the Honored Lord's mansion, near the Son of Heaven, there were at least a few people to talk to. Now he was tossed into this pavilion and couldn't even leave easily. It was misery.

After receiving commendations last year, he had begged and pleaded—not for a transfer, just for a colleague. Immortal Officer Liu finally told him he would be assigned two Strongmen as subordinates. Dangjiang was thrilled to finally be a boss, but when he returned to the pavilion, he discovered the two Strongmen were brainless puppets.

Dangjiang was disappointed, but no matter how stupid they were, at least they were someone to talk to, a way to break the monotony. Besides, there wasn't really anything to move in this place, making the two Strongmen redundant. This made Dangjiang feel a little guilty, so he kept quiet about it.

Still, every time he looked up and saw those same thick-browed, wide-eyed faces, it dampened his spirits. 'Next chance I get,' the boy mused, pausing his work, 'I'm changing their Dharma bodies. Both of them. They're going to be serving maids. Graceful, gorgeous ones. One will hold a green pipa and wear

white robes; the other will carry a jade pot, wear a pink skirt, and the pot will be filled with hot milk… Now *that* would be beautiful…'

He was lost in this fantasy for several moments when he heard a *knock-knock* at the gate.

Dangjiang leaped from his seat in joy, shouting, "My Lord, please enter!"

Sure enough, a white-robed Immortal Officer stepped into the courtyard. His features were plain, but Dangjiang was so happy he looked moved to tears. "Lord Liu!" he cried. "It's been too long!"

Immortal Officer Liu gave a slight nod. "Greetings, fellow Daoist. I have been away. How goes your progress?"

Dangjiang, long accustomed to Liu's cold tone, didn't mind at all. Maintaining his enthusiastic grin, he immediately launched into his work: "I was just reviewing this *Art of Drumming Profundity Fire Refining*! The 'Profundity' here refers to the Profound Marsh, meaning to spread blessings across the Great Wilderness, taking the meaning of 'nothing is beyond its reach.' This fire refining art is ancient, so we must discuss the Twelve-Storied Pagoda…"

He opened his mouth and didn't stop, pulling concepts from the east, mixing them with the west, rambling north and south. He talked, and talked, and talked. Lu Jiangxian's fists clenched, relaxed, and clenched again.

'Why, why did I ask?'

Lu Jiangxian had sent this avatar regarding the Chi Buzi situation. Chi Buzi was about to deliver a Purple Mansion demon, but Lu Jiangxian didn't have many high-value rewards to spare and was reluctant to grant him a Azure Talisman. He would most likely have to reward him with Talisman Pills and White Talismans.

Such a reward wasn't particularly generous, and Chi Buzi was the type who wouldn't release the hawk until he saw the rabbit. He was not easily fooled. Lu Jiangxian needed to ensure Chi Buzi remained a loyal asset, and he also saw this interaction as a trail run for engaging with the Li family.

He was too lazy to manage the interaction personally; he didn't want to have to put on an act every time they met. Chi Buzi was sharp, and no performance Lu Jiangxian mounted could match the genuine, heartfelt belief radiating from an honest soul like Dangjiang. So, he had decided to use Dangjiang.

But he'd been listening to this rambling monologue while, outside the Mirror-World, Chi Buzi had already beaten the demon into submission and was about to capture her. The timing was about to be missed. Lu Jiangxian finally snapped.

"Fellow Daoist, your words are indeed profound!" he interrupted, his voice tight. "Such fascinating speculations… However, I am here today… to bid you farewell!"

"Ah?"

Dangjiang, who had been at the peak of his rant, heard this thunderclap and froze. "This… how can this be! Is this the will of the Great Registrar?"

Immortal Officer Liu nodded grimly.

Dangjiang looked like he was about to burst into tears. "You are the only kindred spirit I have up here! No one else will even talk to me… All my work is submitted through you! If you leave, what am I going to do!"

"I am not descending for reincarnation," Liu said. "It is merely a position transfer. I just won't be able to see you as often. Someone else will come to handle the handovers… Do not worry. When I have the time, I will come and visit."

Dangjiang visibly relaxed. At least he wasn't vanishing forever like some other Immortal Officers. But then Immortal Officer Liu sighed. "However, one matter has been weighing heavily on my heart. I have a favor to ask you… I have thought about it for a long time, and I feel I must ask."

Dangjiang, eager to curry favor, slapped his chest. "My Lord, please speak! I will certainly do my best!"

Immortal Officer Liu hesitated. "With this transfer, my original duties in the mansion are now vacant. We are short-staffed in the heavens, and several other colleagues have descended to the mortal realm. My new post is on the other side of heaven, and traveling back and forth is simply too inconvenient. Therefore, I petitioned the Lord… thinking that I might ask you to cover for me for a time."

Dangjiang's smile froze. His expression warped into one of stunned, mournful disbelief. He raised a trembling hand and pointed at himself.

"My Lord, you mean… your… your work…" he stammered. "Your *job*…"

"I have to do that, TOO?!"

Chapter 751: Suspicion

"That's not how it works! Don't you dare complain about the job."

Immortal Official Liu just smiled.

"Weren't you the one saying day after day how tedious and burdensome this work is? My original post was a real plum assignment. I specifically saved this position for you. The work is novel, you get to hear endless flattery, and you can even observe the situation in the lower realm. Isn't that wonderful?"

He folded his sleeves, feigning disappointment.

"But if you're unwilling, then forget it!"

"My lord, wait!"

Hearing this, Dangjiang had a sudden realization. He wasn't the least bit tired anymore. He scrambled up from the table, forcing a smile.

"This lowly one was just confirming the details! Whatever tasks my lord arranges… I am happy to do them, sweet or bitter. Even the greatest hardship would be sweet as honey. How could I possibly complain? Only now do I realize my lord's kindness. I am truly, deeply moved!"

Lu Jiangxian knew he was a practiced flatterer and just said:

"I am pressed for time and cannot say more. Take my token. Leave this Secret Vault Profound Seven Pavilion of the Saintly Purity Palace and follow the path across the heavens. You will naturally see a treasure pavilion."

"We haven't had contact with the lower realm in years, so the staff in that pavilion has dwindled. Just match the token, ascend the steps, and someone will be there to receive you."

Dangjiang started to ask another question, but Lu Jiangxian cut him off immediately. He continued, mimicking Immortal Official Liu:

"I must depart now. You should have a lower realm sacrificial rite to attend to. If you are free, go and handle it immediately."

After speaking, he quickly took his leave. Dangjiang followed him reluctantly to the edge of the courtyard, hesitating.

"My lord previously said this pavilion must be guarded, which is why I've stayed here day after day. If I leave, this place will be empty. Won't I be charged with dereliction of duty?"

"Relax."

Lu Jiangxian had only given that order previously because he feared Dangjiang would wander off, forcing him to constantly find someone to cover the post. He replied, "As long as you carry my token and are performing official duties—not just idling or wandering aimlessly—it doesn't count as abandoning your post. You can stay securely at either location. Just hurry when traveling between them. Do not dally."

With that, he walked away quickly. Dangjiang couldn't leave the courtyard and could only watch him disappear over the horizon. He looked back at the token left on the table. It was the length of a forearm, pure white, and engraved with ornate, silvery Supreme Yin patterns. A single glance confirmed it was no ordinary item.

He admired it for a moment, glanced at the half-revised cultivation manual on his desk, and mused internally:

'I'll finish writing the last little bit, then go take a look.'

He buried his head in his research, but after only two lines, he couldn't wait any longer.

'I'll go check it out first. A quick look around will be a nice break, then I'll come back.'

He immediately stood up, left the small courtyard beneath the pavilion, and stepped onto the clouds. He took out the token, and just as expected, a faint silver star lit up in the distance. He flew through the streaming clouds, following the light closely.

Before long, the clouds and mist parted, revealing a vast, majestic grand hall. It was guarded by dragons and phoenixes, a scene of infinite, opulent splendor.

Below his feet, a golden lake rippled, spanned by twelve white jade bridges leading to the central palace.

Dangjiang took one look and his eyes stung from the brilliance. He quickly lowered his gaze. He noticed rows upon rows of golden-armored Celestial Soldiers standing beside the white jade bridges, their armor magnificent, their gaze fixed forward.

Naturally, Dangjiang didn't dare strike up a conversation. He figured he wasn't qualified to set foot on those celestial bridges anyway. He looked down at his token; sure enough, it instructed him to circle around the lake. He dutifully lowered his gaze and hurried forward.

This palace complex was terrifyingly large. Even the lakeshore had guards. Dangjiang didn't dare even lift his eyebrows. He wound his way around, following the corridors deeper into the complex, the atmosphere growing more profound. He finally arrived at a palace gate by the lakeside.

Two even more imposing Celestial Soldiers guarded this gate. This time, one of them finally raised an eyebrow to look at him. Dangjiang just held up the token.

He heard one of them say, "Ah, an official from the Supreme Yin Palace. Please, enter."

Dangjiang hurried inside. Once through the palace gate, the decor gradually returned to the style of the Supreme Yin lineage. There was even a faint trace of snow on the ground. This area was also massive, and everything was opulent.

He twisted and turned, never missing an opportunity to observe his surroundings. There were quite a few people in this palace, but every single one seemed impossibly noble. The armor of the celestial generals was mostly just a step below a high decree, and some even looked equal. Celestial maidens drifted by, tassels fluttering. He finally spotted a few immortal officials, but every one of them was silent and frightened, not daring to speak.

Dangjiang was already an over-thinker. This one look was enough for him to understand his new standing. He just shrank his neck and hurried onward until he reached a small courtyard. The serving maids on either side closed the gate behind him, and only then did he let out a sigh of relief.

The small courtyard was perfectly orderly. The ground was paved with spotless white jade bricks, and four white jade lamp pedestals were spaced evenly. In the

very center sat a round, bottomless pool. Other than these things, there was nothing else. It was obviously not a courtyard meant for habitation.

He circled the area, wringing his hands, unsure what to do. Suddenly, the token in his hand lit up. The water in the round pool rapidly turned a shimmering white. He knew it was time to work. He hurried forward and peered into the pool's depths.

He watched the white color in the pool recede, the surface becoming mirror-like. First, it was pitch black, then a faint light flickered. It seemed to be coming from an extremely hidden place. A respectful, prayer-like voice emerged, buzzing like a swarm of bees, gradually becoming clearer:

"...This lowly cultivator, Chi Buzi, having piously prepared this sacrificial offering, respectfully petitions the Supreme Yin, praying to the Celestial Officials to avert disaster and dispel evil, that my immortal path may be vast..."

Dangjiang froze. All his previous nervousness and anxiety vanished, replaced by a wave of smug satisfaction that spread across his face. He lifted his head and laughed.

"I was wondering which esteemed person it might be. So, it's our very own Daoist Master Chi!"

He channeled his spiritual sense into the token, activating the artifact to receive the connection. The light and shadow in the pool grew more and more real. After half a moment, the radiance flowed out and coalesced in the courtyard, forming the shape of a man in green robes.

The man had only just stabilized his footing when he realized his surroundings had abruptly changed. He was standing in a courtyard, shocked and suspicious. He looked up and saw a young immortal official with pale green eyes standing before him. The official's robes were embroidered with Supreme Yin patterns. Although he didn't seem high-ranking, Chi Buzi reacted instantly, bowing immediately.

"This lowly cultivator greets you, my lord!"

Dangjiang was grinning so wide his mouth wouldn't close, his smile practically falling off his face. "Daoist Master Chi! Open your eyes and take a good look... Do you know who I am?"

Chi Buzi paused, then looked up. The man was young, but his mannerisms were oddly old, carrying a strange sense of familiarity. He couldn't help but hesitate…

Chi Buzi had never actually seen Dangjiang's true form. In the conflicts years ago, they were always fighting over control of *his* body. Even when Dangjiang won, it was still Chi Buzi's body, just with a new owner. But he was extremely clever.

'The only person I could possibly know up here… seems to be that damned donkey… This person doesn't look like an idiot, but his tone is *exactly* the same as that idiot's.'

He tested the waters: "Fellow Daoist Dangjiang?"

He didn't even need Dangjiang's answer. One look at the smug grin on that idiot's face told him everything. Chi Buzi raised an eyebrow.

"Yo… the old bastard actually has some status up here?"

Despite being in a position where he clearly had to bow his head, Chi Buzi showed not a shred of fear, instead questioning him with a mocking laugh.

Sure enough, Dangjiang laughed aloud, then feigned anger. "You insolent demonic disciple! How dare you show such disrespect to an esteemed immortal official of The Saintly Palace of the Supreme Yin's Luminous and Primordial Purity?"

The title sounded magnificent, but Chi Buzi wasn't scared. He had a keen grasp of human nature and, after so many years, understood Dangjiang perfectly. With this type of person, acting subservient only emboldens them. The only way was to laugh and curse, showing no fear.

Besides, after all those years of mutual scheming in the Eastern Sea… call it enmity, but with the Immortal Lord overseeing everything, would he really have let Dangjiang perish? Calling it "training" sounded nice, but whether it was hatred or camaraderie depended entirely on Chi Buzi's attitude.

And Chi Buzi was someone personally granted a cultivation art by the Immortal Lord. How could Dangjiang dare to harm him? He immediately laughed.

"Still posturing! Looking at those robes, you're just a minor official up here in the heavens!"

This hit the nail on the head. Dangjiang's breath hitched. He snapped, "One official in the heavens is a hundred times more impressive than a Daoist Master on earth!"

Chi Buzi understood immediately.

'This idiot is having a *really* bad time in whatever heaven this is.'

Chi Buzi naturally assumed this "heaven" was a Grotto-Heaven, just like Anhuai Heaven or Pristine Speech Heaven—the personal domain of the mighty Immortal Lord. And this "Saintly Palace of the Supreme Yin" was just that Immortal Lord's immortal sect or bureau. Having figured out the other's situation in just a few words, he glanced silently toward the courtyard gate, suspicion rising in his heart.

'Why don't I see anyone else… In the Immortal Lord's Grotto-Heaven… the only person I'm dealing with is Dangjiang?'

Aloud, he declared, "Enough nonsense. I am conducting this ritual array according to the Immortal Lord's decree. What right do you have to intercept me?"

This shout terrified Dangjiang. He quickly grabbed Chi Buzi's sleeve and hissed, "What are you yelling about! His lordship granted you a summoning array, and now you think you're really somebody? Outside this gate, it's nothing but immortal officials and celestial generals! If you stir up trouble, I can't protect you!"

Chi Buzi narrowed his eyes slightly, instantly shifting his attitude to align with Dangjiang's. He whispered back, "I'm not familiar with this Grotto-Heaven… From now on, are you the one who will receive me? I managed to acquire a Purple Mansion demon beast. It *is* Purple Mansion level, so it must count as a significant contribution even in a Grotto-Heaven. This benefits both of us. You have to ensure my contribution is reported properly. If you steal my credit, or can't protect it, what's left for us to discuss in the future?"

Dangjiang knew he was smart, but he hadn't expected him to think through so many angles so quickly. He was momentarily stumped.

"According to the feedback from the token, your contribution is indeed recorded. I still have to go to the main hall to report your merit. Do you have any requests for a reward?"

Chi Buzi's eyes lit up immediately. "Yes… yes! It's that immortal-rank inheritance you carried on you all those years ago… do you remember? My Chou-Gui Hidden Form… I only managed to forge that using your item! I only ask for that thing, nothing else!"

Dangjiang didn't know if that item was even available. He frowned. "That thing was also granted by the heavens, and it was related to the Purple Mansion realm to begin with… I have connections in the heavens. I know a high-ranking official in a revered lord's palace. It won't hurt to ask."

"But… I vaguely recall… back then, you had the Foundation Establishment art and the spiritual qi for the Chou-Gui Hidden Form, and you built your immortal foundation. But you didn't have the Purple Mansion chapter. You didn't break through to a divine ability. You relied on sensing that treasure to make the breakthrough…"

As he spoke, Chi Buzi also frowned, clearly realizing the discrepancy. Dangjiang continued:

"But now you are supposed to cultivate 'Purging Dew.' You don't even have the immortal foundation for it. This situation is not the same as before. What if the treasure is wasted… you won't even have a place to cry…"

"True…"

Chi Buzi frowned. Back when he received the cultivation art, he only knew it might restore his path. He knew nothing else. Arriving here was completely unexpected; how could he have thought this far ahead? Now understanding the situation, he reacted instantly.

'That's right. The Purging Dew art is nowhere to be found. Furthermore, Taiqing does *not* want to see me break through… If I don't cultivate the Purging Dew, it's fine. But the moment my fifth divine ability becomes Purging Dew, if I fail to break through again before Taiqing returns… I'll die without a complete corpse.'

He fell silent. Dangjiang whispered, "Why not ask for something else? I manage the cultivation arts. The heavens certainly don't lack spiritual qi. I can first request the Purple Mansion cultivation art and the spiritual qi for Purging Dew. You can cultivate it yourself."

Chi Buzi's mindset had already changed. He shook his head. "No. Even if I got it, I wouldn't dare cultivate it. It's useless."

Although he knew the man before him loved to boast, Chi Buzi could only grit his teeth and reply, "Don't you have connections in the heavens? Ask for me… You understand my strength and my methods. If I successfully cultivate to the Golden Core realm outside the Grotto-Heaven, it would be an excellent outcome for you too. Even if I were just recommended to enter the Grotto-Heaven, it would benefit you greatly."

Dangjiang nodded silently. No matter how luxurious the heavens were, a Golden Core True Monarch still commanded respect. If one visited the heavens on a normal day, even just inviting a celestial general or a minor deity for tea, they would have to give face… He was tempted. "That person *is* a powerful figure. He'll only humor me because he knows me. He can ask for you…"

Chi Buzi nodded, half-convinced, and asked, "But how do I return? And after I go back, how do I see you again? I can't just go hunting a Purple Mansion demon every single time, can I? I'm not a Golden Core True Monarch."

Dangjiang shook his head. "Just jump into the pool and you'll return. I've already recorded your contribution with the token. In the future, if you need to reach this place, just activate the array with your divine ability. You'll be able to arrive with your spiritual sense. You just won't be able to enter with your true body like today; it will only be for transmitting messages."

"That's fine."

Chi Buzi sighed, seemingly ready to leave. He took a step toward the pool's edge. He placed one hand on the white jade lamp pedestal by the pool, feeling its solid, real texture. Then, he touched his storage bag, only to find that it wouldn't open.

The young man's expression suddenly relaxed. His previously brisk pace halted. He turned his head.

"Can I see the scenery outside?"

Dangjiang didn't detect anything wrong. He just sneered, "I'm afraid it would scare you to death!"

He led him to the courtyard gate and pushed it open slightly. Chi Buzi saw a street covered in cold snow, lit by bright moon lanterns. The emblem of the golden osmanthus and crescent moon was everywhere. He could see white-robed cultivators flying through the sky. Further in the distance, the

faint outlines of golden palaces and pavilions hung in the air, along with celestial-spanning white jade bridges.

Chi Buzi squinted, observing, but ultimately did not dare to step out. He just turned back around.

'I can't get out… and there's nothing in this courtyard I can take.'

The young man's green eyes carefully scanned the entire area. He smiled. "Fellow Daoist Dangjiang, those robes of yours are quite magnificent. Why not gift me one?"

Dangjiang looked at him strangely. "Are you insane? Is this something you are qualified to take?"

Chi Buzi just smiled without replying. He took a step, glancing at the white jade moon-lantern pedestal. The lantern was sealed shut; he couldn't see what was inside. The jade bricks beneath his feet were perfectly fitted, with no debris between them.

He put on a sincere smile and said with great formality, "Fellow Daoist Dangjiang, I am a mortal man and do not recognize the treasures of the heavens. I wonder if I might take one small item as a souvenir? I can look at it and admire it in my daily life, and it will remind me that I truly once visited the Grotto-Heaven."

Hearing this, Dangjiang felt his pride swell. He laughed heartily and nodded repeatedly.

"But of course! That is perfectly fine!"

Chapter 752: Shaohui

Dangjiang agreed readily. He felt his sleeves—they were completely empty. Broke as he was, his heart began to pound, but he wouldn't lose face.

"However, the rules in the heavens are extremely strict," he said with a practiced smile. "I cannot simply bring personal items with me to this palace. Fortunately, nothing here is mundane. Wait just a moment."

He walked quickly to the courtyard gate and pushed it open. Two attendants were standing just outside. They were beautiful, both clad in rainbow-like celestial garments. Though their clothes drifted like clouds, they bore no embroidery. One held a white-rimmed, green jade pipa, while the other carried a flower basket piled high with glittering qiong grass.

Dangjiang glanced at the basket. "What spirit grass is this?"

The attendant replied, "Reporting to my lord: Today the Dipper points to the Station of Virtuous Report, Yin crosses the Earthly plane, and the Time Ruler commands: Supreme Yang gathers the Radiant and Plunders Profound Flowers; Supreme Yin clips the Golden Branches of the Moon Laurel. The pivots move as normal, and the Twelve Qi are drawn from the celestial phenomena."

"Moon Laurel Golden Branches."

Dangjiang nodded and said, "May I have a branch?"

The attendant immediately retrieved a white laurel branch. Tiny white blossoms dotted the twig, and the cut end was golden-yellow, revealing spiraling, concentric rings that radiated a subtle chill.

Dangjiang hadn't actually been sure it would work. Seeing her comply so easily, he relaxed inwardly. He took the branch and turned back, only to see Chi Buzi thoughtfully savoring the words he had overheard:

"Supreme Yang gathers the Radiant and Plunders Profound Flowers, Supreme Yin clips the Golden Branches of the Moon Laurel…"

Dangjiang lifted his chin, his voice swelling with pride. "Daoist Master Chi, guard this well! A single Moon Laurel branch from the heavens is an extraordinary treasure down in the mortal world!"

Chi Buzi offered a sincere word of thanks. He took the spirit item, tucked it into his sleeve, and nodded slightly. "Then I shall depart. From now on, I will draw the array annually to contact you. If you find out anything about my path to Golden Core, please send word."

Dangjiang seemed reluctant to see him go. "How about once every three months? I could use the extra trips… at least it's something to do… And you can report to me about happenings in the lower realm."

Chi Buzi still wasn't used to the term "lower realm." He frowned. "Just focus on your work and don't get reprimanded. If that happens, I'll have nowhere to report my contributions…"

Dangjiang could only nod. He suddenly remembered something and said urgently, "I just recalled! There is an immortal official in the heavens, surname Li, who went to the lower realm to reincarnate for his cultivation. If you chance upon him, and if he still remembers his life in the heavens, please ask him something for me. Ask him when he is returning… I cannot take this job for one more day!"

Chi Buzi frowned, committing this to memory. "What exactly is this job of yours?"

"Organizing techniques and correcting Dao lineages," Dangjiang replied, his face a mask of misery.

Chi Buzi's expression instantly turned bizarre. He stared at Dangjiang, his voice laced with the sound of grinding teeth.

Back in the day, Chi Buzi would have practically lived in the Heaven-Probing Pavilion, refusing to waste a single step outside its doors. Now, this was the library of an Immortal Lord's Grotto-Heaven, a place countless Purple Mansion cultivators would shatter their skulls trying to enter! Looking at Dangjiang's miserable face, he could only curse:

"You worthless fool! Blessed with fortune and you don't even know it…"

He flicked his sleeve angrily, stepped into the pool, and his form dissolved like water.

Dangjiang trudged out of the courtyard, his face still long. The moment he pushed the gate open, the attendant stepped forward and bowed respectfully.

"Reporting to the Immortal Official: That Golden branch of the Moon Laurel has already been recorded under the Immortal Official's name. If the remainder is not required, this basket must be presented to the bureau for logging."

"Ah?"

Dangjiang froze. The words struck him like thunder, and his heart sank. Regret washed over him.

'Damn it… This stuff isn't free?!'

He had put on such a brave face for his guest, but now he regretted it to his very core. Dangjiang had only just attained the rank of immortal official. He had used what little merit he had earned to exchange for his attendants; he had no savings left. A chill shot through him.

"This item… how is it calculated… Why was it delivered here…?"

The attendant replied, "The products of the various domains and palaces are always delivered to the different halls. This was established by Immortal Official Liu some time ago. They are kept in regular supply in the courtyards for convenient access."

"Aiya… That dog Chi Buzi has ruined me!"

Dangjiang's face went pale with anguish. He immediately asked, "This item… can it be charged to that Chi Buzi's name? He was the one who took it… it has nothing to do with me!"

The attendant just lowered her gaze. "It was the lord who gave it away. Heaven and Earth witnessed it."

…

The Sea's Cape.

The depths of the ocean were utterly dark. Cold, icy currents flowed beneath the reefs. Spiritual energy here was almost nonexistent; a Purple Mansion cultivator would find no path forward here and would have to revert to flying through the physical world.

Deep within the Cape, the terrain rose, and the seawater cascaded into an endless abyss below, rising back up as mist. This place was extremely close to the beyond, yet cut off from the Great Void. There was no more hidden place between heaven and earth.

Inside a dark karst cave, bright white array patterns glowed faintly. Chi Buzi's vision slowly faded from the brilliance of the heaven back to the gloom. He scanned his surroundings, confirming he was indeed back in the secret cave he had formed using the *Heavy Murk* earth-escape art.

He let out a breath and felt his sleeve. He reached in, turned his palm upward, and a snow-white laurel branch lay in his hand. It emitted a hazy white halo, and the cut section of the stem glowed with golden patterns. It was clearly a treasure of the highest quality.

The young man's gaze lingered on the laurel branch for a long time. The cave began to fill with the chill of the Supreme Yin. He retrieved a jade box from his storage bag and placed the branch inside.

"It truly is a supreme treasure of the Supreme Yin lineage… Items from that place can be brought out… But… I wonder why I couldn't open my storage bag."

Chi Buzi held the jade box, looking down quietly, his mind racing. After a moment, his thoughts settled.

"This spirit item alone, in the current world, is worth no less than that demon beast. If that's the case… the *Ritual of the Celestial Seal and Profound Clarity* is indeed a way to contact a Grotto-Heaven… But the offering… must it be a demon beast?"

Chi Buzi's expression grew contemplative, and understanding dawned.

"Counting every Purple Mansion demon beast in the Eastern Sea, there are few that aren't related to dragon-kind. I certainly can't kill them… But demons… spirit beasts also count as demons… Those Maha of the several northern Ways love to collect spirit beasts. Not only do they have demons who become Merciful Ones, but those long-cultivated Merciful Ones love to merge their lifeforce with their attendant spirit beasts, making the beast equivalent to a Purple Mansion life-pact… Aren't there far more of those than demon beasts?"

The more he thought, the brighter his eyes became.

'Yes, yes, good. Although a Merciful One is hard to kill, there are far more of them, and they are easier to deal with than a true Purple Mansion demon. Their backing is only a Maha. I wonder if they'll count as a full contribution? If not, even half a contribution would be good…'

He couldn't think of a more suitable offering than a Merciful One. A realization struck him:

'It seems this personage also looks down on the Northern Buddhists…'

He paused, sat cross-legged in the cave, and began to admire the Moon Laurel Golden Branch in the jade box. The grade of this spirit item was even higher than Supreme Yin Moonlight Essence; it was utterly rare in the world. Merely placing it before him caused Supreme Yin Qi to emanate.

The young man stared quietly at the clusters of white flowers on the branch, the ambition in his eyes startling. He propped his chin on his other hand, his voice growing softer, his cadence like the chanting of scripture:

"All Fruition Attainments of Yin revere the Supreme Yin, while the Supreme Yang is the first manifestation of the day, which all Yangs follow… The Supreme Yin's Profound Splendor falls upon the waters of Bing-Zi… guiding both the Pristine and the Converging…"

…

The Saintly Palace of the Supreme Yin's Luminous and Primordial Purity.

White snow piled beneath the bright moon lamp pedestals. Lu Jiangxian sat at the table as the various illusions before him slowly faded.

"Chi Buzi… he really is something."

Currently, Lu Jiangxian naturally lacked the ability to pull people into the Immortal Mirror's world and have them take things back out. When Chi Buzi used the array to connect to the Immortal Mirror, his situation was effectively no different from that of Maha Jinlian or Five-Eyes; he was trapped in an illusion.

But the difference was that Chi Buzi had arrived as an intentional visitor, not someone kneeling in terror. He was able to move freely! He could even pick things up and put them down. If Chi Buzi had tried to take something from his storage bag, Lu Jiangxian wasn't incapable of making it manifest… but what then?

'Chi Buzi is cunning. I can't control his storage bag. Even if I manifested the item, the moment he gave it to Dangjiang or set it down, he would just feel his storage bag upon returning, find the item still there, and instantly know the trick.'

The Immortal Mirror did not yet have the ability to move physical objects in and out. This was a fatal flaw. Therefore, Lu Jiangxian had locked his storage bag from the start. But merely by Dangjiang mentioning it, Chi Buzi had still grown suspicious, wondering if the place was an illusion since he couldn't retrieve things. This is why he insisted on taking a souvenir. The moment he left, a simple touch of his sleeve would tell him if it was real or fake.

Lu Jiangxian could certainly have arranged for Dangjiang to stonewall him with various regulations, preventing him from taking anything. But Chi Buzi was not easily fooled. The entire point of letting him "arrive in true body" this time was to dispel the lingering doubts from the previous, dream-like illusion. Using the same trick twice on a Purple Mansion cultivator of his caliber would guarantee deep suspicion.

Thus, he specifically allowed Chi Buzi to 'take' a Supreme Yin spirit item back with him. This item was the only thing Lu Jiangxian could currently condense in the physical world. It was just enough to plug the hole in the illusion.

"But this method only works this one time. I managed to acquire the offering for free, using this extremely precious Supreme Yin spirit item to placate him. But… after this, he can forget about getting any response for future Purple Mansion demon offerings!"

He had only managed to pull this off thanks to having Dangjiang on hand. Dangjiang could drop the formalities with Chi Buzi, analyze the pros and cons, and talk frankly. If Lu Jiangxian had conjured a fake persona to handle it, Chi Buzi never would have spoken so deeply… and he never would have achieved the current effect.

"This, however, presents a new problem. Chi Buzi is sharp. Although he won't ask for cultivation arts again, his focus has shifted to the Golden Core path. If I can't provide sufficient guidance, it will inevitably stir up trouble."

Chi Buzi was a double-edged sword. He was incredibly useful, understood how to read situations, acted with caution, and possessed supreme strength—in Jiangnan, he was second only to Qiushui and Yuanxiu. His death would also be a major problem. For now, Lu Jiangxian still needed him.

That was a problem for later. Lu Jiangxian looked up. A large, blue-and-white-feathered bird was lying on the jade bricks by his feet. It was the size of a writing desk, its pale, gauze-like tail feathers spread in a circle on the ground.

This Lesser Yin demon beast was different from all the demons sacrificed previously. The Li family sacrifice used incense fire as a base, slaying the demon with the ritual blade and sending its soul, blood essence, and immortal foundation flying into the Mirror as a single, mixed lump.

This demon, however, had been sacrificed individually. It had bypassed the incense-fire refining part of the sacrificial rite. Its immortal foundation, blood essence, divine-ability body, and even the Shengyang Mansion within the Great Void had all been sacrificed whole and unharmed.

Even better, the soul of a Purple Mansion cultivator resides in their Shengyang Mansion; upon death, it leaves the body but is not extinguished. Thus, the spirit sparrow's soul was able to fly into the Mirror. It was right here, still possessing consciousness. In a sense, this demon was the first *living being* to ever enter the Mirror!

Lu Jiangxian's gaze was fervent. This was new labor, on par with Dangjiang!

He lifted the soul and scanned it, quickly understanding its history.

'This demon was born in the Northern Sea. Its bloodline was average, but it struck fortune, ate a treasure medicine, and entered the path of cultivation. For the first two hundred years, it ate everything, raising several tribes for food. Gradually, it attained enlightenment in the northern deserts.'

'After gaining intelligence, it read a few books and realized humanity was dominant. It promptly transformed, becoming a protector spirit beast for a tribe, taking the tribe's name as its own, calling itself Fuyu.'

"By the time this demon emerged from seclusion after breaking through to Foundation Establishment, the Fuyu kingdom had long since been conquered. It emerged into territory belonging to the Lou family. It could only wander, yet it managed to acquire quite a few opportunities."

"Its talent for techniques is extremely high. It researched many techniques on its own, and by currying favor with the Luan-birds, it managed to visit Mount Taishi and successfully attained Purple Mansion…"

Lu Jiangxian looked closely. In its several fights with Chi Buzi, most of the techniques the demon used were its own creations. Unfortunately, a demon's Immortal foundation is rarely comparable to a human's. Although its talent for techniques was high, it hadn't read as many Daoist lineages as Chi Buzi, and it had only just broken through to Purple Mansion. Thus, it was no match.

He searched through its memories, finding them sparse. Looking closer, he confirmed someone *had* tampered with its mind. All memories concerning the Luan-birds were gone, and it had even actively forgotten events involving Golden Core matters from centuries ago. Stripped of this complex history, all that remained were a few cultivation arts it had acquired by chance.

It really did look like it had no background, which explained why it fell into Chi Buzi's hands. Lu Jiangxian reviewed it one more time, frowning as understanding settled in.

"This is good… very good… but if I use this soul here, the Azure Talisman side will be short one Purple Mansion soul. The incense fire is currently sufficient, but using this will leave the Azure Talisman lacking."

He thought for a moment and relaxed.

"However, there are still five years until the next sacrifice, and Li Zhouwei is also in seclusion. There is plenty of time. I will wait and see… After all, this creature's talent for techniques is extremely high. Adding such a person to my Mirror is an enormous boon."

He lifted his sleeve, and a bright Supreme Yin radiance appeared in his hand. He picked up the jade pot from the table and flicked a finger.

The spirit sparrow on the ground instantly dissolved into a sky of Lesser Yin splendor, which drilled into the pot. In an instant, the pot was filled to the brim with a blue-white, starry, ocean-like divine ability. Opening the lid revealed a small mansion floating within that ocean—the spirit sparrow's Shengyang Mansion.

A faint, illusory shadow remained on the ground: the demon's soul. Lu Jiangxian flicked his sleeve again, and the soul immediately attached itself to a descending beam of celestial light, glowing brilliantly.

The Mirror was the seat of Lu Jiangxian's own divine abilities. He infused the soul with a wisp of Lesser Yin, condensing it into the form of a woman in tea-white celestial robes. She was petite, yet possessed a clear, otherworldly aura.

She held a pipa, and a stark white circular sigil adorned her brow. Her bearing was extraordinary.

The woman blinked, seemingly confused as to why she was here. As her soul's memories merged, she looked up in a daze. When she saw the person seated above her, the confusion and blankness in her eyes were instantly replaced by terror and awe. She knelt and bowed, her voice soft:

"Lesser Yin Wu-Gui Celestial Attendant, Shaohui, pays respects to the Palace Lord!"

Chapter 753: The Opening

"Shaohui."

Lu Jiangxian studied the Lesser Yin attendant he had manifested. Although the bird demon Fuyu's memories had been washed away, her core Dao lineage of Lesser Yin remained within the celestial attendant's new memory. Her celestial title and even her name were details she had supplied herself based on that inherent lineage, and they certainly sounded appropriate to the Lesser Yin path.

Only her tea-white robes set her apart from the original demon, looking far more dignified. The pipa in her hand was also a treasure, one that would rival any ancient spirit artifact in the outside world. Lu Jiangxian could create as many as he wished, purely according to his preference.

He looked at the celestial attendant, the second true living being within his Mirror. The stone sprites and celestial soldiers he had shaped previously possessed only basic instincts and acted only on orders. While they filled the celestial court and made it look bustling, they were really just extremely advanced puppets.

'The affair with Chi Buzi was a matter of putting out a fire, but I never expected to follow through with it this far. It may not be a bad thing. In the future, whether exploring ancient secrets or recruiting subordinates, I will need to manifest a background sufficiently convincing and impressive to support both the reception rites and the sacrificial arts.'

'Slowly filling this place… it might have greater uses in the future. And at least I won't have to endure the silence in the Mirror alone.'

Seeing the white-robed attendant bowing respectfully in the court, Lu Jiangxian said softly, "The Lesser Yin path has not yet returned to its station or opened its palace. A turn of fate and opportunity allowed you to return to your celestial station early. For now, report to Zhengao, receive your duties, and temporarily follow the orders of the Supreme Yin Palace."

Shaohui bowed deeply. Although the personage above her was not her direct superior, he was clearly among the foremost of the Palace Lords. She naturally obeyed with reverence, clutching her pipa as she withdrew.

She exited the grand hall, descending the white jade steps shrouded in ethereal mist. The immortal officials on both sides bowed their heads in greeting. Although Shaohui was a Lesser Yin attendant, many here were from the Supreme Yin Palace. She nodded, dismissing them, and proceeded by familiar paths to a high platform engraved with bright moon patterns.

The platform was beautiful and pristine, dusted with falling frost-like snow and encircled by flowing spirit water. Several imposing celestial soldiers guarded the banks. She stepped onto the path toward the platform and saw, just as expected, a handsome celestial general reading a book.

"Fellow Daoist Zhengao!" Shaohui called out respectfully.

The handsome man looked up, slightly surprised, and replied, "Long time no see! Has the Fellow Daoist returned from reincarnation? Congratulations, congratulations!"

Although Shaohui's celestial rank was equal to his, she was, firstly, not his equal in the sharpness of her celestial sword or the power she wielded, and secondly, she was essentially a guest in another's palace. She spoke graciously:

"It was not a return through cultivation, but an early arrival. My memories are unclear. It must be due to a shift in the Lesser Yin Wu-Gui path. My own Palace Lord has not returned to his station, so I know even less."

Zhengao nodded, his armor exuding an icy chill. "The Lesser Yin path has not recovered. It seems the Revered One wishes you to serve the Supreme Yin Palace for now."

"Your insight is like a torch. I am here to receive my orders." Shaohui's personality was not reserved, and she smiled brightly.

Zhengao consulted a scroll on his desk and nodded. "You are of the Lesser Yin station, after all. It would be awkward for you in the Supreme Yin Palace. I will not make things difficult. I will select a small tower for you at the edge of the heavens. Your duty will be to revise the Lesser Yin lineages and manage the nearby immortal officials."

Shaohui smiled gratefully and thanked him repeatedly.

"There aren't really any immortal officials nearby to manage," Zhengao clarified. "It's just a nominal position. There is only one minor deity who was promoted from below. You just need to hand off some work to him."

He paused, then added with a hint of exasperation, "The fellow is a silver-tongued chatterbox. Right now, he's sitting in the East Third Prefecture, agonizing over the cost of three branches and two leaves. You might as well retrieve him on your way. It will serve as an introduction."

Shaohui was quite satisfied with this. If she had been assigned actual Supreme Yin officials, their conflicting stations would have made managing them difficult. A promotion from the world below came with no such concerns. She accepted the token and thanked him again.

"Many thanks, Fellow Daoist! In the past, I only heard of your great reputation, but I never knew you were so amicable."

Zhengao pulled a jade box from his desk and smiled. "Don't thank me yet. This box is full of Lesser Yin techniques and cultivation arts. They need you to revise them."

Shaohui readily agreed.

"Only one thing," Zhengao added. "The Heavenly Gate is not open, so you cannot come and go freely. If you travel to the outer heavens, you must return via my Supreme Yin Palace and receive clearance to enter."

She smiled. "The Lesser Yin Palace isn't even open, so I have no desire to wander about. Spending my days in a pavilion reading and writing, increasing my Daoist cultivation, rather than wasting time outside… this is exactly what I would have wished for."

Shaohui was nothing like the flighty Dangjiang. Having settled her affairs, she left the high platform to find him.

She descended to the designated area and, sure enough, saw a young man standing near an attendant, anxiously inquiring about something. When the attendant saw Shaohui descend, she immediately bowed in fearful reverence, not daring to make a sound.

Dangjiang, having reported his merit, had returned to ask about the price of the Moon Laurel Golden Branch. Seeing the attendant drop to the ground, quieter than the dead, he felt a jolt of alarm. He looked up and saw a celestial attendant

in tea-white robes holding a pipa. Her features were still youthful, but judging by her garments, her status was extremely high.

Dangjiang instantly knew he had run into a major figure and hurried to bow with the attendant. "This lowly official pays his respects to the Celestial Lady!"

He was an absolute wreck. Bowing on the ground felt humiliating.

He had casually given away a celestial treasure, and while this was within Lu Jiangxian's calculations, if the fellow wasn't taught a lesson, the first time would lead to a second. If he started grabbing random things to send down—items that were *not* Supreme Yin spirit matter—Lu Jiangxian wouldn't be able to manifest them!

Now, Dangjiang was penniless. He had carelessly gifted the spirit item, and the heavens did not offer credit. As soon as the attendant had reported back to the palace, someone had immediately come looking for him. Dangjiang hadn't even warmed the seat of his new post, and now he was facing dismissal. How could he remain calm?

In her mortal life, Shaohui had been a playful bird demon. Her memories were washed, but her personality remained. She immediately asked, "What is all the noise about? Let me hear it."

Dangjiang quickly recounted the entire affair.

Shaohui laughed. "The Moon Laurel Golden Branch? You really know how to pick them. There are only a few days in the entire year when the Supreme Yin and Lesser Yin treasures are at their most valuable, and you managed to pick one."

Dangjiang grew even more embarrassed.

Then Shaohui said, "Immortal Official Liu is away. From now on, I am your superior. I can't just watch you wringing your hands. Put it on my account for now. When you have the savings, you can pay me back."

Dangjiang froze, stunned, then overcome with gratitude. He kowtowed. "Thank you, my lady! Thank you! May I know my lady's esteemed name?"

Shaohui smiled. "I am not from your Supreme Yin Palace. I hold the Lesser Yin Wu-Gui station. My Daoist name is Shaohui."

Only then did he realize she was a figure on the same level as Zhengao. He scrambled to his feet, still miserable.

'That dog Chi Buzi… hurry up and kill some more Purple Mansion demons! I need a cut of that light! If this keeps up… how many cultivation manuals will I have to write to pay this debt?!'

Dangjiang fell silent, following obediently behind the celestial attendant in tea-white robes. Crushing anxiety and awe for his superior kept his mouth shut for once. His surroundings blurred, and in the next moment, he was dropped back into his own courtyard.

His heart still ached.

'I'm going to pester him in a few months! Definitely!'

…

Moongaze Lake.

White blossoms drifted down from Gardenia Scenery Mountain. The Daoist Master in white and gold robes sat at his table, dense white light flowing like water across the ground, brushing past several jade pillars and pulsing with halos of light.

Li Ximing cultivated quietly. More than half a year passed like flowing water. His cultivation had advanced slightly, and his divine ability had condensed further. His cultivation talent was, after all, quite good; his efforts were not wasted.

The heavenly light was bright, a perfect time for cultivation, yet he suddenly opened his eyes. He took one step forward, manifesting over Moongaze Lake and gazing toward the east.

Over Shanji Prefecture, an ink-like purple qi was gathering, staining the entire sky a gloomy shade. With his Purple Mansion-level sight, he could even see streaks of light rising rapidly at the horizon, speeding toward Moongaze Lake.

'Yehui has made his move.'

Sure enough, a streak of light shot up urgently from below. Li Jiangqian stopped before him, his expression grave. He bowed. "Reporting to the Daoist Master: Daoist Master Yehui has appeared at the Profound Peak mountain gate in Shanji Prefecture. He is suppressing the grand array with his divine ability. The entire

eastern bank is in turmoil, and messengers have arrived from several territories."

Li Cheng arrived a step behind, riding lightning with several others, his expression equally heavy.

Compared to the anxiety and tension of the others at the lake, Li Ximing was perfectly calm. "Were the personnel inside the mountain gate evacuated long ago?"

"Reporting to the Daoist Master: As ordered, they were all withdrawn six months ago. Only a few Profound Peak elders remained, refusing to leave."

Li Ximing had not shared the details of the Profound Wonder Temple affair with his family. Firstly, neither Li Minggong nor Li Chenghui possessed a Talisman Seed; hearing such secrets would only become a liability. Secondly, the matter didn't require much participation from his family cultivators. Some things were calculations left to the Purple Mansion realm, and Li Ximing felt it best to carry the burden alone. If something went wrong later, at least it wouldn't make things too difficult for the Li family.

The horizon was already pulsing with the deep purple brilliance of a divine ability. Li Ximing remained unhurried. The Hundred Mountains Concealed Storage Spirit Array of the Profound Peak Gate was not something Yehui could break in a moment, and the Profound Peak cultivators no longer had the ability to open it anyway.

He only asked, "What of Profound Peak's spiritual resources and supplies?"

Li Jiangqian answered respectfully, "Over the past half-year, Kong Guxi moved three mountains' worth of assets to the wilderness. He only stopped when the earth meridians in that part of the wilderness could no longer bear any more relocation. Most of the treasury has been moved, and the entire inheritance of techniques was transferred. Most of what could be moved was moved. The majority of low-grade supplies required the grand array to remain sealed, and the wilderness is ill-equipped, so they were not moved."

"Good."

Li Ximing understood. The Li family did not lack those spirit grains and herbs. Leaving them at Profound Peak also aligned with the story about the spirit items. As for the losses from the rest of the treasury, they were acceptable. He gave the order:

"Withdraw all personnel from Shanji Prefecture."

The moment the words fell, his figure vanished from the lake. He crossed the Great Void, instantly manifesting over Shanji Prefecture.

Black-purple qi roiled across the prefecture, shrouding the entire region in darkness. Below, Capital Immortals Dao disciples surrounded the mountain base. The mountain range, the life's work of Daoist Master Changxi, was protected by a pale-yellow shield of light. The shield brightened, only to be immediately suppressed by the overwhelming dark purple divine ability.

Li Ximing raised an eyebrow.

Pressed down upon the Profound Peak gate was another, separate mountain peak condensed of pure white qi, soaring into the clouds. It presented a majestic, magnificent posture amidst the swirling darkness. A few fleeing Profound Peak disciples scrambled like ants through the black qi.

He stepped forward, appearing closer. Half the sky above the mountain gate abruptly brightened as radiant clouds surged, pushing back the black qi, drawing a clear line between them. Those disciples, as if seeing a life-saving rope, fled into the heavenly light.

The Capital Immortals Dao cultivators behind them, who had been toying with them like cats with mice, immediately wiped the sneers from their faces, turned, and fled. The few who had been leading the chase respectfully called out "Daoist Master" before bowing and retreating.

Li Ximing didn't spare them a glance. He stood alone, facing the behemoth manifestation of the Eastern Feather Mountain and the assembled Capital Immortals Dao cultivators in the sky, yet his aura lost nothing. Heavenly light illuminated the sky, claiming half of it.

No matter how many Capital Immortals Dao cultivators were present, at this moment, the field belonged only to Yehui and Li Ximing. As disciples of famous sects, how could they not understand this? Every one of them was silent as cicadas in winter, not daring to speak.

Li Ximing looked at Yehui, who stood atop his divine ability, the Eastern Feather Mountain. The Bright Yang Purple Flames rose gently behind him.

"Senior Changxi has only just fallen, and already Fellow Daoist rushes to swallow Profound Peak. This is overly hasty. Have you asked Senior Sumian about this?"

From above, Yehui laughed. "Fellow Daoist misunderstands. I am acquainted with a demonic disciple hidden in these mountains and have come only to eliminate the threat. If I bore any ill will toward the Profound Peak lineage, would it not be easier to go directly to the wilderness? I am not here for the mountain gate. Once the search is complete, I will naturally withdraw."

'A fine excuse…'

Li Ximing knew exactly what was happening, but he hadn't expected Yehui to turn the plot back on him, assuming such a mask of righteousness. He sighed.

"Fellow Daoist is merely here to eliminate a future threat. There is no need for such accusations. I shall accept your challenge!"

"Please!"

Yehui's tone held little anger. The two spoke as calmly as friends catching up. The moment the word fell, both men vanished with their divine abilities, disappearing into the Great Void.

The vast purple qi and radiant clouds that had split the sky instantly vanished. The towering white mountain peak dissipated like smoke. A clear, bright sky returned, causing the trembling, terrified mortals of Shanji Prefecture to kowtow.

It had all happened too fast. All that remained was an empty sky, where only the Capital Immortals Dao cultivators hovered on the wind. Their leader, clad in black Daoist robes with a silk belt and silver trim, was high-browed and deep-eyed: the Capital Immortals Dao Head Disciple, Guan Gongxiao.

His eyelid twitched. He was clearly just as stunned as everyone else. He stood silently before the massive Purple Mansion array. The cultivators on either side looked to him. Guan Gongxiao knew what they were thinking. He, too, was staring blankly at the array.

'They left us? To attack a Purple Mansion Grand Array?'

Yehui and Li Ximing had blithely flown off into the Great Void to fight, apparently giving no thought to the fact that their disciples had come here to attack

a mountain. What could a group of Foundation Establishment cultivators possibly do to a Purple Mansion Grand Array? No matter how weak the Profound Peak array was at offense, if it counter-attacked, few here would dare to receive the blow!

Guan Gongxiao could almost picture Li Zhouwei bursting from the array with a contingent of troops and slaughtering them. He nearly lost his composure but forced himself to state flatly:

"Maintain the perimeter and drain the array! The Daoist Master has a plan!"

He said this aloud, but Yehui always acted on whims. He had brought them here the moment he emerged from seclusion. Not only did Guan Gongxiao know nothing of the plan, but he also had no tools for breaking the array.

'How can one guess the thoughts of a Daoist Master... What is the point of us staying here? Aren't we just revealing our weakness? Surely this grand array isn't just going to unlock its seals and collapse on its own while they fight?'

Chapter 754: One Glyph, One Register

Li Ximing traversed the Great Void. Gloomy, purple-black vapor hung heavy in the air as he raced forward. Ahead, the massive peak of condensed white qi materialized once more. Yehui was perched atop the same scaled, bird-like beast, its massive beak a glaring gold, its pupils a milky white.

From the beast's back, Yehui glanced at Li Ximing, divine power gathering in his hands.

"Daoist Master Zhaojing," he began, "your willingness to take that step back, abandon the Profound Peak mountain gate, and sacrifice Kong Haiying proves you are truly a reasonable man. Yehui acknowledges this favor, and I thank you for it."

Li Ximing watched him, his gaze heavy. The smile on the man's face was polite. When facing Li Ximing, Yehui never resorted to the cold mockery or scathing ridicule he had used against Changxi. Even now, initiating a battle of divine abilities, he maintained an air of civility.

His attitude projected a distinct detachment—whatever the subordinates below did was their own affair. Your chariot takes my cannon; I checkmate your general. It was merely moves on a chessboard. To hold a grudge over it only proved one lacked magnanimity.

It was this attitude, combined with Li Ximing's own caution, that had preserved a sliver of diplomatic room between their two factions at the Purple Mansion level. Now, isolated in the Great Void, Yehui was actually offering thanks.

Li Ximing could only reply, "What is Fellow Daoist saying? Since you intended to move on the Profound Peak mountain gate, I was bound to intervene."

Yehui gave him a deep look, seeming to weigh his options. "Then very well," he replied. "Today, I shall properly test the might of your Bright Yang divine ability."

The instant his voice fell, a violent fluctuation tore through the Great Void.

A vast deluge of purple water descended, filled with leaping, human-headed fish. The peak of white qi surged again, its snowy summit piercing the gloom.

Radiance immediately erupted from Li Ximing's back. Dazzling celestial light surged upward, staining the void as the 'Heavenly Audience Gate' manifested once more. The intricate, bright-white celestial gate rose from the void, dragon banners and luan chariots passing through it, jeweled standards and ceremonial parasols fluttering in an unseen wind as figures in golden armor and robes appeared.

A cacophony of war cries erupted. Golden-armored soldiers charged forth from the gate while the human-headed fish swam through the purple water. As the brilliance of their divine abilities clashed, the white mountain peak slammed down, pressing heavily onto the Celestial Gate. Li Ximing felt the pressure instantly double, his own divine ability shuddering violently.

The human-headed fish, unlike their previous encounter where they scattered on impact, now stubbornly blocked the charge of the golden-armored soldiers, forcing them back inch by inch. The white qi mountain peak was no longer static; it began to swell, inflating as if breathing.

Previously, Yehui had been cautious, uncertain of his opponent's capabilities. Now, having committed to the duel, he unleashed his power without reservation. The purple tide swelled, the colors growing several times richer, forcing Li Ximing's celestial light into a desperate, three-zhang sphere, unable to advance another inch.

Only now did Li Ximing realize that Yehui had been toying with him before. This was his true strength. His own cultivation gains over the past two years had produced negligible improvements to the 'Heavenly Audience Gate,' and he was rapidly forced onto the defensive. He had no choice but to ignite the celestial light at his brow, pushing his divine ability to its limit just to resist the 'Sorrowful Southern Water.'

Yet, the purple tide parted, revealing Yehui floating within. The Daoist Master wore deep blue robes, his features compact, and he cradled the same softly glowing sword. Behind him, however, a pair of treasures had appeared.

To his left floated a flat, palm-sized jade disc, intricately carved like a profound glyph. To his right hung a long, wide register, its black surface etched with flowing white script. Both items pulsed with a brilliant light.

Yehui formed a hand seal and chanted, "By this decree, the wind stills, the waters cease; the Dharma manifests the Primordial."

The glyph and the register vanished. A profound chill shot through Li Ximing. He took a step back as violet flames erupted beneath his feet, celestial light bearing down from above.

'He obtained the Douxuan lineage!' Li Ximing thought, alarmed. 'He truly possesses spiritual artifacts!'

He had barely manifested his flames when a vibration shook his mind. The flat jade glyph appeared, *clanging* as his celestial light instinctively tried to suppress it. The glyph locked onto his face, and a devastating volley of lightning rained down.

The lightning was silver-white and utterly ferocious, blasting his protective violet flames into chaotic waves. Li Ximing fought the urge to summon the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger. Instead, he formed a rapid seal, projecting a ray of Bright Yang light from his hand to intercept the lightning.

But the moment he committed to the seal, the long, black-and-white profound register leaped into existence on his other flank. A discordant sound blurred the air, and a torrent of crimson True Fire, fierce and agile as a falcon, sprayed toward him.

Li Ximing was already strained just blocking the lightning; how could he possibly fend off the fire? Furthermore, his 'Heavenly Audience Gate' was completely pinned by Yehui's two divine abilities, leaving it immobile.

He gritted his teeth. His own Bright Yang nature meant that enduring intense flame, while agonizing, was preferable to taking a direct hit from that destructive lightning. He had to prioritize. He focused his defense on the lightning while the celestial light at his brow flared again, projecting a beam of white 'Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light' to counter the True Fire.

As expected, his hastily cultivated Hidden Light was no match for a dedicated spirit artifact. Although the beam split the fiery torrent and slightly diminished its power, a devastating amount of True Fire still rained down.

This was his Purple Mansion Dharma Body, not mortal flesh. Even so, the impact was excruciating. The searing True Fire split like boiling water, flowing over his Dharma Body as white steam hissed from every point of contact.

Li Ximing took the hit, his entire form blazing, his Dharma Body shimmering with a glazed, ceramic hue under the flames. This was no ordinary lightning, no common flame; it couldn't be extinguished by simple suppression. It was fire from a spiritual artifact, uncontrollable by his own Talisman Qi.

Worse, Yehui had already raised his Dharma sword, the tip aimed directly at Li Ximing's face, and had begun chanting another spell.

Li Ximing no longer cared what nonsense the man was mumbling. He only saw a yellow light flash before him, making his eyes sting, as multiple halos of light—one layered upon the next—began to manifest in the west. Whatever it was, it did not look easy to handle.

'This old fox is getting serious!'

Before Yehui could finish casting, Li Ximing forcibly burned his own vital energy. The 'Heavenly Audience Gate' behind him erupted in a final, dazzling flare of violet flames, momentarily throwing back all the suppressing forces. In that single instant, Li Ximing's figure vanished.

The purple water calmed. The white qi mountain struck empty space. The radiant light that had defied the void disappeared. The halos behind Yehui slowly dimmed. He sighed softly and gave chase through the Great Void.

Li Ximing reappeared a vast distance away, his body still wreathed in stubborn flames. Fortunately, his Bright Yang nature excelled at handling fire, and this True Fire wasn't the dreaded Merging Fire, which grew stronger as it burned. Extinguishing it wasn't his immediate priority. He fled onward, his mind racing.

'Yehui truly intends to fight. This is likely a demonstration of force… but if he sees an opportunity to inflict a serious injury, I doubt he'll pass it up!'

Those two artifacts had genuinely startled him. Now, Yehui pursued him from the west, the sensations of lightning and fire already beginning to manifest on his body again. Li Ximing was forced to continue fleeing east.

But Yehui's speed in the Great Void was greater than his own—significantly faster than before. The 'Sorrowful Southern Water' surged beneath his feet, the

purple water reflecting his burning silhouette. Li Ximing cursed inwardly and hesitated for a fraction of a second.

He was already far from Profound Peak territory. His options for sanctuary were few: the Myriad Radiance Sword Gate, the Profound Wonder Temple, the Xiukui Monastery, or fleeing all the way to the Eastern Sea. The Sword Gate and Xiukui were neutral observers; dragging a fight into their territory, especially one that required traversing the mortal world, would surely antagonize them.

That left the Profound Wonder Temple. Li Ximing didn't hesitate. He banked his light, altering his trajectory directly toward their territory.

'Going to Profound Wonder at least gives me a path of retreat,' he calculated. 'If Yehui really tries to kill me, Sumian is still there. And if Sumian refuses to intervene, I'll drop directly into the mortal world. The Profound Wonder Temple is in Jiangbei. How dare Yehui continue a fight there?'

Dropping into Jiangbei was a desperate, last-ditch maneuver. First, while the region's cultivators would undoubtedly intervene to stop the fight, alarming every Purple Mansion expert in both Jiangnan and Jiangbei was a disastrous way to maintain relationships. Second, this entire affair touched upon the True Monarch's grand design; it was nothing to be trifled with.

He raced onward, alternating between the Great Void and the mortal realm to shake his pursuer. He had just crossed the Snow Wings Gate's territory, his body taking several more licks of flame, when Yehui's calm voice echoed from behind:

"Fellow Daoist Zhaojing! A duel is a duel. Fleeing to Jiangbei is simply tasteless."

'How the hell do I know if you're dueling or trying to murder me!' Li Ximing retorted in his mind.

But just as he formulated the thought, the very fabric of the Great Void ahead of him changed. It twisted, becoming steep and treacherous. Snow began to fall. In the distance, an impossibly vast wind, heavy with frost, roared toward him.

The wind drew near. It was a pale, sickly green, yet it cast a gloomy, gray pall over everything, dimming the celestial light beneath his feet. Snow immediately accumulated, rising half a finger deep on his shoulders. Li Ximing's expression turned cold.

This wind felt familiar. He had seen arts derived from this lineage before—the 'Deep Abyss' aspect of the Chongming Profound Insight Screen came from this exact path.

'A divine ability from the Great Wind of the Deep Abyss lineage!'

He stopped short, realization striking him like a bolt of ice.

'The Capital Guard divine ability: "Western Heaven Plateau"!'

The Western Heaven Plateau—the legendary, desolate expanse west of Long and Shu, the very birthplace of the Great Wind. It was a place of absolute desolation, where spiritual qi was severed and the Great Void itself could not be crossed.

The moment the divine ability manifested, Li Ximing's speed plummeted. The void beneath him warped under the ability's influence, becoming treacherous and rugged. Simultaneously, Yehui spat a plume of white qi as his 'Eastern Feather Mountain' divine ability activated. The white qi seemed to weigh thousands of tons, and the entire stretch of the Great Void around Li Ximing began to solidify.

'Western Heaven Plateau' and 'Eastern Feather Mountain' stacked upon each other. Their combined control over the Great Void instantly reached an apocalyptic new level. Li Ximing was horrified, a dark suspicion blooming in his mind.

'Does Yehui intend to kill me?!' he realized. 'The Capital Guard path… all three of its major divine abilities are lethal… Why have I never heard him use "Western Heaven Plateau" before!'

In the lightning-fast instant he processed the thought, the white qi descended and the void froze, nearly severing his connection to the mortal world. He was trapped. Li Ximing had no choice but to halt and manifest the 'Heavenly Audience Gate' once more.

'Eastern Feather Mountain' was not unfamiliar, nor was it overwhelmingly strong on its own; Li Ximing's own Celestial Gate could achieve a similar void-lock. Yehui had used it in their very first confrontation, and Li Ximing had broken the lock with purple fire to escape.

But that was then. Now, the glyph and the register hovered menacingly nearby. Lightning and True Fire were already descending. The white qi mountain peak

was crashing down, and the 'Sorrowful Southern Water' surged from below. With his purple flames occupied, how could he possibly counter everything?

Li Ximing saw only two choices. He could use his purple flames to fight the lightning and fire, and the Celestial Gate to hold back the mountain and water, effectively trapping himself here to wait for an opening. Or, he could tank the artifacts' attacks directly and use his purple flames to blast open the void lock and flee to the mortal world.

'The mortal world below is the Snow Wings Gate's territory,' he analyzed frantically. 'Yehui will chase. I'll still have to cross Salt Lake. If I'm injured, my speed will be even slower. Taking the damage doesn't even guarantee my escape…'

'Use the Mountain-Chasing Tiger? With divine abilities pressing me from every side and a sword at my neck, the Tiger can't teleport me instantly. I'd just be wasting its defensive charge for nothing.'

In that split second, the 'Heavenly Audience Gate' roared to life, rising to meet the white mountain and purple water. The purple flames in his mouth clashed with the descending lightning. Once again, Li Ximing used his Hidden Light and his own Dharma Body to endure the True Fire.

The sound of sizzling crackled through the void. This time, the True Fire scorched his Dharma Body far more severely. Though the glazed hue remained, faint but undeniable scorch marks now marred its surface.

Li Ximing suddenly threw up a hand. The recently learned 'Sun's Resonant Radiance Art' activated, swatting the black-and-white register away, while his other hand blurred into a different seal.

'Should I use it?'

He knew the 'Bound Tiger Dao' aspect of his divine ability could get him out of the lockdown. However, the Bound Tiger Dao excelled at stealth, concealment, and bypassing seals; it did nothing to augment his escape velocity or aid in traversing the void. Speed was not its strength.

Most critically, the True Fire still burning on his body made him as conspicuous as a lantern. He was too close to Yehui; he wouldn't get far. It would be a complete waste of the ability.

He committed. Divine ability blocked mountain and water. Purple flames blocked lightning. The Resonant Parting Art and Hidden Light blocked the

True Fire. With no capacity left to counter Yehui's chanting, Li Ximing slapped his storage bag.

A stone box flew out. This was the container Li Zhouwei had brought back, filled to the brim with Serpent Origin Spirit Water. It was the largest supply of high-grade spirit water the Li family possessed. In this crisis, it was the only water he had in sufficient quantity. There was no time to worry about the waste.

Fortunately, Yehui seemed unaware that Li Ximing needed to extinguish the fire to utilize a stealth escape; the Daoist Master was only chanting faster.

Li Ximing slammed his palm onto the stone box. A sheet of crystal-clear spirit water burst forth, dousing his Dharma Body as he pushed his other abilities to their absolute limit.

Psssssht!

The stubborn artifact-flames flickered wildly, sputtered, and finally, reluctantly, extinguished.

Before Li Ximing could feel a whisper of relief, a hazy yellow brilliance manifested behind Yehui. The Daoist Master completed his chant:

"Profound Light of the Three Xu Abandoning Purity… Go!"

Having just doused the fire, Li Ximing wasn't waiting around for the attack to land. Yehui had barely spat out the first word of the ability's name when Li Ximing sacrificed a white pearl, engraved with a tiger looking over its shoulder, from his Shengyang Acupoint.

Rainbow light flashed. In an instant, the pearl transformed into a spirit tiger that looked carved from gray-black stone, its eyes glittering with uncanny intelligence.

Li Ximing mounted the tiger. Immediately, the brownish-yellow 'Mountain-Chasing Profound Screen' shimmered into existence, wrapping around him like silken threads. He slammed his divine ability against the enclosing water and mountain, felt the void-lock shudder and loosen, and instantly tore through the opening, vanishing into the Great Void.

The 'Profound Light of the Three Xu Abandoning Purity' flashed and dissipated into the empty space he had just occupied.

Yehui was left standing alone, sword in hand, the purple river flowing quietly at his feet. He let out a long breath, clearly having expended significant energy. He made no move to chase. He simply stood motionless, allowing his divine abilities to recede.

As the white mountain and purple water faded away, Yehui stared into the vast emptiness where Li Ximing had vanished, a look of hesitation on his face. After a long moment, he composed himself, stepped back onto his flow of purple water, and departed.

Chapter 755: Suspicion

Salt Lake, which connected to the Eastern Sea, was technically seawater. It sparkled under the midday sun while a few demon-soldier crab-generals patrolled the surface. Their numbers were far greater than in previous years; clearly, the war between Capital Immortals Dao and Profound Peak had put all nearby demons on high alert.

Into this fragile peace, the Great Void tore open.

Immense violet flames erupted, instantly vaporizing the shimmering lake, causing it to cave in under a cloud of steam. Yellow-white salt crystals flash-formed on the reefs just before the rock itself melted away. From within the flames, the Daoist Master in white-gold robes burst forth, riding his tiger.

He had only just touched the lake's surface when the Great Void directly north of him tore open again, spitting out three streaks of yellow light. Li Ximing had no choice but to forcibly wrench his direction south, fleeing toward the coast.

He had just reached the estuary where Salt Lake meets the sea when the three yellow streaks arrived. Li Ximing felt a chill shoot up his spine, sighing inwardly.

'What *is* this technique!'

In the distant Great Void, thunder boomed and True Fire flared. He could vaguely feel the oppressive, sealing power of the 'Western Heaven Plateau' closing in again from the west. Yehui was definitely approaching. Li Ximing had no time to deal with the yellow technique and veered sharply away.

'Good thing I dispelled that True Fire… I left no traces in the Great Void,' he thought frantically. 'Unfortunately, this *Profound Light of the Triple Purity Release* has locked onto my aura. Yehui probably doesn't know the fire is gone… which means… if I can just evade this technique, I can escape completely!'

The *Profound Light of the Triple Purity Release* was impossibly fast. In the span of that single thought, it was upon him. Li Ximing paused for only an instant, shuttling into the Great Void. He took several long strides through the void before the three streaks of light arrived at the spot he had just vacated.

'Just as I thought! It's only a technique. Its ability to traverse the Great Void cannot compare to me riding the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger. It's a step too slow!'

Riding the spirit tiger, he flickered in and out of existence, weaving repeatedly between the Great Void and the mortal world. Although the chasing technique could also traverse the void—and possessed a raw speed greater than his own—it completely lacked his flexibility. The constant spatial weaving forced it to slow down.

Li Ximing didn't know if Yehui could still sense his position. He focused only on maximizing the distance, racing over the open sea for the better part of fifteen minutes. Yehui himself never appeared. Only this relentless technique pursued him.

Finally, seeing his chance, Li Ximing turned and spat a concentrated gout of purple flame, fixing the yellow light in place.

He was just about to follow up with a divine ability to destroy it when the *Profound Light of the Triple Purity Release* simply dissolved like sand in the wind, leaving only a hazy yellow mist. From within it, Yehui's voice echoed:

"I was merely acting on arrangements from Purple Smoke to spar with Fellow Daoist. I meant no actual harm. My apologies for the offense; please do not hold it against me! I gained much insight from this duel. If there is a chance in the future, we should certainly spar more often!"

The voice reverberated through the Great Void. Li Ximing scanned his surroundings. Yehui was truly gone.

The flames in his hand slowly dissipated. The wounds on his Dharma Body, scorched by the artifact-fire, flared with a dull, throbbing pain.

'What in the hell is that old fox playing at?'

'Wounds from that True Fire are notoriously difficult to heal… thankfully, the injury isn't severe. It shouldn't take *too* many years to recover…'

He stared heavily at the patch of dissipated mist, silently backing away. The Bound Tiger beneath him plunged back into the Great Void, heading deeper out to sea.

He had only taken two steps when his expression suddenly tensed, his face flooding with deep suspicion and outright alarm.

'Wrong. This is wrong.'

A spar? Impossible!

'Yehui's goal was absolutely not a friendly duel! Something is deeply wrong here!'

'Yehui must have only recently perfected "Western Heaven Plateau." It was clearly the first time he had ever displayed it to anyone; otherwise, I would have heard of it. The only reason I ended up in such a sorry state was because of that surprise ability. If it were just "Eastern Feather Mountain," how could he possibly have pushed me that hard?'

'The Capital Immortals Dao lineage has been isolated for years; it's mysterious and unpredictable. What does revealing a completely unknown, top-tier divine ability represent? Surely Yehui knows the implications!'

'An ability that domineering, used as a surprise attack, could cause another Purple Mansion cultivator to suffer a massive loss, securing enormous benefits for him. Why would he waste it on a mere "duel" with me? Now that he's revealed it to me, its strategic value as an ambush weapon is gone!'

For Yehui to expend such effort to design this entire confrontation… it could never be just a spar.

"Someone wants to force me out into the Eastern Sea! Someone wants to harm my family…"

But the instant that terrifying thought flooded his mind, Li Ximing stopped dead.

"No… no. If they wanted to harm my family, they must first deal with me. Whether I realized their plot or not, I would absolutely return home. Therefore, they must have set up an array or an ambush along my route back…"

"In fact, it's *better* for them if I realize the plot. I would rush back anxiously, distraught and careless… But it's better for me to stay out here. As long as I am free

and not trapped in an array, I can ensure the family's core survival… As for the rest… sacrifices will have to be made."

Li Ximing abruptly spun the Bound Tiger around. He poured his divine ability and Dharma power frantically into the spirit artifact, pushing its concealment and escape powers to their absolute limit. He plunged headlong back into the Great Void, intending to race toward the deepest depths of the Eastern Sea.

Yet, only an instant later, his paranoia hit another agonizing peak. He stopped again.

'Wrong. I am not an ordinary Purple Mansion cultivator. Any array on the path back… I can detect it with the Immortal Mirror! I *can* go back. They cannot ambush me.'

His body reacted faster than his mind. He wrenched the Bound Tiger to a halt and spun around again, flying back west toward the continent. His power circulation was so violent that the tiger's eyes blazed with an intense white light. The Dharma patterns of the Bound Tiger Dao swirled rapidly across its stone body, dragging a long, white afterimage through the void.

Li Ximing pointed himself west. Halfway through the mental prayer for protection, he stopped dead.

The light faded completely from the Bound Tiger. It froze in place, standing utterly alone in the pitch-black Great Void.

Far ahead, a figure was striding toward him.

The man walked as if strolling through a peaceful courtyard, yet his speed through the Great Void was even faster than Yehui's. Everywhere he passed, the oppressive darkness brightened. He was a moving source of illumination. In the single instant Li Ximing had stopped, the figure vanished from the distance and reappeared directly before him.

Li Ximing felt that tyrannical, overwhelming aura flood the void. It felt like cold snow being pressed directly against his heart, and he shivered.

'West or east… it doesn't matter anymore,' he thought, despair settling in. 'He came to take it himself. What a way to come and take it.'

He looked up.

The man wore a yellow-white feather cloak. Each individual feather was etched with small, circular patterns, making them look almost like scales. Beneath it, he wore a bright white robe. A sword was strapped to his back.

His visible fingers were pale, holding a twelve-sided, glass-bodied, copper-based lantern. It emitted a soft, pale-yellow light that illuminated the surroundings.

The Daoist Master's features were, on the surface, kind and gentle. He had a high-bridged nose and broad cheeks, projecting an aura of scholarly refinement. But he also possessed a pair of willow-leaf eyes, and these added a chilling majesty that struck cold fear deep into the heart.

He raised an eyebrow, looking over at Li Ximing with that same mild warmth.

Li Ximing, however, felt the chill rush from his heart straight to his brain. The agonizing pain from his scorched Dharma Body flared anew. He forced his expression to remain neutral.

"A late-stage Purple Mansion Grand Cultivator. Changxiao!"

Chapter 756: Desperate Flight to the Eastern Sea

Changxiao's reputation was immense. He and Guo Shentong had once shocked all of Jiangnan when they escaped a Grotto-Heaven with priceless treasures, right under the nose of a Purple Mansion cultivator's grand scheme. After achieving the Purple Mansion realm himself and founding his own Dao lineage, the Daoist Master became known as one of the foremost experts in manipulating the strings of fate.

Yet, his face was genuinely gentle and sincere. If not for the shrewdness in his eyes, he might have even appeared simple and honest. He held the lantern with a delicate touch, and his voice was deep and resonant.

"Fellow Daoist Zhaojing! It has been too long!"

A chill crept through Li Ximing's heart, but his voice betrayed nothing.

"Greetings, Senior Changxiao. I was just sparring with Fellow Daoist Yehui and was on my way back. I did not expect to run into you, Senior. Is there something I can help you with?"

Changxiao lifted the lantern slightly, maintaining a careful distance from Li Ximing and securely blocking the path west through the Great Void. He watched him quietly before speaking.

"I had a grand-disciple. His worldly name was Wang Fu, and his Daoist title was Yu Fuzi. He was stationed in the Eastern Sea in his early years. He was a bit of a libertine, but his talent was undeniable… A pity… he was later killed by a cultivator of the Hengzhu Immortal Dao."

"At first, I didn't know the reason why. Only later did I learn that you, Fellow Daoist, desired the Bright Radiant Sky Stone. You conspired with the Hengzhu, and it cost him his life… Heaven and earth bore witness to this matter. The traces remain in the Eastern Sea. Surely Zhaojing hasn't forgotten?"

His expression was placid, his eyes fixed on Li Ximing, searching for any flicker of emotion.

The man before him kept his head slightly bowed in an attitude of reverence. Changxiao studied him carefully. This Li Ximing seemed to lack any remarkable presence. His robes were conventional, and his expression was a mix of guilt and fear. Changxiao frowned slightly.

'Li Ximing…'

In the instant Changxiao paused to think, a dazzling radiance erupted from Li Ximing. Profound Light illuminated the void as the vibrant splendor of Bright Yang burst forth. A celestial gate rose from nothing, adorned with dragon banners, luan-drawn chariots, and jeweled standards.

The illusory colors of the Supreme Yang and the glow of Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light converged, climbing the ornate, bright-white celestial gate. Billowing clouds of iridescent light surged directly toward Changxiao's face.

Facing the rushing Bright Yang divine ability, Changxiao simply lifted his sleeve, revealing his arm. He formed a hand seal.

"Fall!" he commanded.

Behind him, a field of brilliant white dots materialized, dense and dazzling against the pitch-black of the Great Void. With that single word, the Bright Yang divine ability at his feet shattered. Countless streams of radiant light scattered in every direction.

Li Ximing was already gone.

The moment Changxiao had spoken, Li Ximing knew his guess was right. The man had come with ill intent. Fearing some hidden trick, he didn't bother to reply. He poured all his accumulated divine ability and Dharma power into the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger, transforming into a streak of light and vanishing into the void.

'The matter with Wang Fu… What nonsense! That Bright Radiant Sky Stone was bait, a hint pointing toward Tu Longjian, but the fact that my family ended up with it was the result of a gamble. How can he possibly place the blame on my family's head!'

Li Ximing had been present when Wang Fu died. The man's last words had been clear.

'He hates Jinlian… so he wants me dead!'

It was obvious that Wang Fu had been nothing more than a disposable pawn. Changxiao was just using his death as a convenient excuse!

As Li Ximing fled at maximum speed, Changxiao remained unhurried. He took a leisurely stroll through the Great Void, pinching his fingers together in a divination three separate times. Only then did he vanish, a streak of light tearing through the void in hot pursuit.

"Fellow Daoist Zhaojing… you took a spirit item from my Purple Mansion. Because of this tribulation, you have come to the Eastern Sea. Who here can possibly help you?"

Li Ximing's attack had been a diversion. He had summoned *Heavenly Audience Gate* only to vanish an instant later. Now, riding the tiger in his desperate escape, he pushed its concealment abilities to their limit. But he found that the profound blackness of the Great Void around him was slowly lightening, shifting to a deep gray.

'He's already caught up.'

Changxiao was approaching from the south at an incredible speed. Li Ximing had bought himself only a moment's lead, and his only option was to flee east. Changing direction now would be foolishly closing the distance between them. The wondrous power of the Bound Tiger Dao began to activate, his form growing increasingly faint.

Compared to Li Ximing's life-or-death flight, Changxiao had barely quickened his pace. Holding his lantern, he watched Li Ximing's form fade into the distance. Suddenly, he spoke, his voice ethereal, rustling like wind through leaves as it crossed the void to Li Ximing's side.

"So the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger truly is in your hands. That old man from Profound Peak is a clever one, knowing that preserving your life was paramount… But it's not enough."

The lantern in Changxiao's hand brightened. Flames no larger than a thumb ignited on each of its twelve silver-and-gold-inlaid corners. The flames themselves did not give chase, but an intense wave of True Fire erupted from the lamplight. Li Ximing's fading figure instantly snapped back into sharp focus, and the surging power of the True Fire bore down on him, illuminating his back.

Li Ximing felt a searing heat on his back, but he could still bear it. However, the lantern's power clearly grew with proximity. As the seconds ticked by, the roasting sensation intensified.

'True Fire again!' he thought.

This wasn't surprising. Changxiao had entered the Encompassing Profundity Grotto-Heaven as a pawn of a Purple Mansion cultivator, so the Dao lineage and spiritual artifacts he obtained would naturally hail from there. Yehui's own lineage had been seized from Zhang Lingshu, also a product of the Encompassing Profundity Grotto-Heaven. That Grotto-Heaven's fame was widespread and its arts diverse, but their spiritual artifacts were almost certainly of a similar nature.

'Yehui… Changxiao… their Dao lineages come from the same source. Yehui's great offense against my family long ago was nothing more than a declaration of his stance… which means this plot began even earlier… it must have started when the Three Sects of Secret Diffusion first moved against us!'

'Whatever Changxiao is plotting against my family… he began laying the groundwork long ago. It's even possible that my breakthrough to the Purple Mansion realm disrupted his plans to some extent… leading to the current situation…'

'And Yehui was always hesitant, unwilling to burn his bridges completely. Even at the end, he withdrew his technique. He probably wasn't truly on the same side as Changxiao, but Changxiao must have some hold over him! That would explain his inconsistent actions, his constant restraint. He might have even been hoping I could escape Changxiao's grasp!'

His spiritual sense spread through the Great Void, evading the True Fire. He saw Changxiao's willow-leaf eyes, and a realization struck him like a thunderbolt.

'And Changxiao used precisely that… Why force a reluctant Yehui to participate? That reluctance, that restraint, was the key to his entire scheme!'

Changxi had left him the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger as a trump card. The only way to ensure Li Ximing would engage in a prolonged, traceable fight all the way to the Eastern Sea was to have Yehui—who, under Purple Smoke's authority, had no desire to make a true enemy of the Li family—be the one to make the move. This double, or even triple, layer of assurance was what made Li

Ximing confident enough to fight without immediately hiding his trump card and fleeing back to Moongaze Lake on his spiritual artifact.

How much of this scheme Yehui understood was unclear, but it was his half-hearted obedience to Changxiao, his constant attempts to mediate, that had become a tool in Changxiao's plot.

A lone Purple Mansion cultivator could travel silently through the Great Void, but a battle between two was far more conspicuous. Once their fight reached the Eastern Sea and promptly ended, the watching cultivators—perhaps even Sumian and Tinglan—would disperse. Changxiao could then emerge at his leisure, cornering him in the isolated waters of the Eastern Sea.

'I can't fathom his entire plan… but that, at least, is part of it…'

The True Fire at his back, while different from before, felt familiar, lending credence to his theory. Li Ximing exhaled to calm himself. He stopped thinking about whether Tinglan and the others were complicit or if he had simply unraveled the plot ahead of time. Staying alive was all that mattered now.

'Since Changxiao also follows the Encompassing Profundity Daoist tradition… he might have techniques related to thunder. I must be careful!' he silently warned himself. 'Thank goodness my foundation is Bright Yang… If it were anything else… either the True Fire or the Profound Thunder would have been a perfect counter to me!'

With the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger's concealment nullified, Li Ximing stopped trying to hide and simply focused on speed, streaking through the Great Void. Changxiao, lantern in hand, steadily closed the distance.

"Fellow Daoist Zhaojing, we were merely discussing old times. Why leave without a word? It is rather impolite!" he called out softly.

"Senior Changxiao! If we are to discuss the past, why block my path home? Once I return to the mainland and find a place to heal, I will naturally send an invitation for you, Senior, so we can discuss things in detail. There is no need for such hostility, chasing me through the Great Void!"

Hearing this, Changxiao chuckled. He continued his inexorable approach, the scorching True Fire searing Li Ximing's back. Li Ximing's voice was grim.

"Rise!"

In an instant, the ornate, bright-white celestial gate materialized from the void. The intense Profound Light held Changxiao back for only a moment before the terrifying True Fire crashed down like a river of crimson, spilling over the sides of the gate and incinerating everything in its path.

Li Ximing's face turned a ghastly shade of pale, clearly injured by the backlash. He had only managed to open a sliver of distance before he heard Changxiao finish casting a spell.

"*Treasured Vase Merging Profundity Art*, strike!"

Li Ximing immediately sensed a small, silver-bright vase flying toward him from behind. It moved with incredible speed, appearing as solid as a real object despite being a spell. He flicked his wrist, sending a jet of purple flame to intercept it.

"Hmph!"

But before the purple flame could connect, Changxiao snorted. A silver, circular disk flew out from behind him, engraved with golden osmanthus patterns. It shone upon the purple flame, and a burst of cold moonlight erupted, completely extinguishing it.

Employing the same trick as before, Li Ximing dove out of the Great Void. He emerged into a world of churning waves and dark, rolling clouds. He was met instantly by a flash of white light that had clearly been waiting for him in the physical world, and it shot straight into his eyes.

'A divine ability from Changxiao!'

He felt as if a spike had been driven into his skull. His vision swam, and his mind filled with a gray fog. The divine ability he had been half-forming nearly dissipated.

Fortunately, a cool sensation rushed into his mind, soothing the chaos. As his senses returned, he caught a glimpse of Changxiao emerging nearby and immediately plunged back into the Great Void.

But having broken through to the Purple Mansion realm only a few years ago, how could he possibly be a match for Changxiao? His mastery of the Great Void was far inferior. He had only just pierced through the veil when he was met head-on by the silver vase, which tilted and slammed down on him. The blow was staggering. Stars exploded behind his eyes, his chest seized, and he

gasped for breath. Relying on that thread of coolness to maintain his posture, he spurred the tiger onward.

A moment later, Changxiao tore into the Great Void just as Li Ximing was pulling away. But this time, Changxiao didn't attack immediately. Instead, he watched with a look of surprise.

"Something's wrong…"

Changxiao had been a Purple Mansion cultivator for many years. He knew exactly what effect his divine abilities and arts should have, with only minor variations depending on his opponent's own powers. This was completely unexpected.

"To take a direct hit from my divine ability, followed by the *Treasured Vase Merging Profundity Art*, and still be able to control a spiritual artifact… there must be something else at play. Either his soul is unusual and his destiny different, or he possesses some treasure that can keep his spiritual sense clear."

The next moment, he broke through into the physical world in pursuit. A torrential downpour lashed the surface of the sea, and the world was plunged into darkness. But mere rain could not impede the vision of a Purple Mansion cultivator. He stepped onto the wind and gave chase.

The Treasured Vase had left Li Ximing dizzy and disoriented. The circulation of his Dharma Body was sluggish, and even his divine abilities felt clumsy. Changxiao caught up to him twice. Forming a seal, a brutally intense, multi-colored beam of profound light, as thick as a fist, shot from between Changxiao's brows.

Li Ximing felt a mortal chill crawl up his spine. He immediately tore open his own chest, his organs shifting and rearranging to create a large cavity through his torso.

Boom!

The profound light shot straight through the hole. But a Purple Mansion cultivator's attack was not so easily thwarted. The beam was composed of two intertwining strands that rapidly expanded, cutting both up and down. Li Ximing, now at the end of his rope, was forced to act. His body split with a sickening tear, the two halves diverging to evade the attack.

Changxiao's brow-light swept through the world, leaving two trails of white vapor that boiled the sea and sent fish and shrimp tumbling through the air. His eyes watched, devoid of emotion, as Li Ximing's body reformed and continued its desperate flight.

"*Heavenly Audience Gate* is said to be an art divine ability, but it has traces of a body divine ability. I miscalculated."

He spoke of miscalculation, but it was Li Ximing who was suffering. Splitting his body had allowed the *Treasured Vase Merging Profundity Art* to seep deeper, its effects growing more severe. And yet, his mind was now completely free of distracting thoughts, replaced by a crystalline clarity filled with fierce resolve.

'I am no match for him, but even Changxiao must have his own concerns. I will drag this out for as long as I can… a moment, a day… Unless my Shengyang Manor is utterly annihilated, if I can just escape far enough… I will show this old bastard something he'll never forget!'

Though they had only just reached the edge of the Converging Heaven Sea, still a great distance from the far eastern reaches of the sea or the World's Cape, Li Ximing swallowed his own blood and pushed himself faster. He drove his divine abilities without regard for the cost, a bloody light beginning to glow around his body.

The influence of the *Treasured Vase Merging Profundity Art* was immense, but fortunately, Li Ximing's spiritual sense remained lucid. No matter how great the interference, he could use his sheer willpower to compensate. He suddenly looked back, raising the *Heavenly Audience Gate* to defend himself, only to see a cloud of gray smoke gathering in Changxiao's hands.

The Daoist Master smiled.

"The Converging Heaven Sea is far enough from Mount Luoxia, and this is dragon territory, where Luoxia's authority doesn't reach… We've been at this for the better part of a day, and there's been no reaction from the upper sect…"

Li Ximing ignored him, speeding further away, his urgency mounting.

'I've reached the edge of the Converging Heaven Sea. This is unequivocally dragon territory. I cannot use the Supreme Yin Profound Light here… I have to get beyond this sea. Disappearing into the east is my best bet. The World's

Navel is out of reach… but I must at least get to the far eastern edge of the sea, out of the dragons' sight.'

His grip tightened on his spiritual artifact.

'Even if I have to detonate the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger, even if I have to sacrifice my Dharma Body… as long as a single sliver of my Shengyang can escape to the east… I can survive!'

He flew onward with his head down, only to see a cloud of gray smoke drift in from high above, starkly visible against the dark storm clouds. Blinding flashes of lightning brewed within the smoke, mirroring the storm in the heavens. Changxiao's voice, amplified by the Profound Thunder in his spiritual artifact, echoed across the sky.

"Your family's Bright Yang truly isn't a front for Mount Luoxia! In that case, I won't let you run any longer!"

Chapter 757: Profound Arts

'Mount Luoxia… He's even dragging Mount Luoxia into this…'

Dense gray smoke spread across the sea surface, threatening to close in. Before the thunder could fall, Li Ximing had no time to think and plunged directly into the Great Void. But the Great Void itself was already unstable, its spiritual energies roiled by the thunder fluctuations, causing the void to heave like a stormy sea, erupting in chaotic peaks and troughs.

Changxiao's thunderous voice echoed all around. Li Ximing clearly felt the pulling sensation of the gray smoke. Whether it was a divine ability or a spiritual artifact, the smoke possessed a sealing power, though perhaps not its primary function. The Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger struggled, tore free, and fled.

Changxiao's figure tore through the void moments later. Li Ximing spurred his spiritual artifact onward, simultaneously retrieving a Profound Adamant Heart-Sutra Pill and consuming it. As his Dharma Body began to circulate the medicine, the debilitating effects of the *Treasured Vase Merging Profundity Art* finally lessened. But Changxiao merely raised the silver disk in his hand, shining it directly at him.

'Another spiritual artifact, without a doubt!'

Changxiao had inherited the Encompassing Profundity Daoist tradition and was a Purple Mansion cultivator of immense experience. The lantern, the silver disk, and the gray smoke outside—these powerful spiritual artifacts were overwhelming. Li Ximing's heart went cold.

'Do I flee the Great Void, or do I resist this head-on? Fleeing means facing that thunder array. It's just a choice between the Supreme Yin and the Profound Thunder!'

'But the Great Void offers a huge advantage right now! We're at the edge of the Converging Heaven Sea. Further east, the spiritual qi of the world thins out, unlike the abundant qi of the coastal waters. Flying in the Great Void becomes far more efficient out there—perhaps five or even ten times faster!'

Li Ximing wavered. Ultimately, he raised *Audience with the Celestial Gate*. This time, it wasn't a feint or an attack; he used it to reinforce his own position. An ornate, bright-white celestial gate materialized above him, bathing him in Profound Light.

The clear, bright radiance from the silver disk shone down, but before it struck the gate, a thick, brownish-yellow light screen erupted first. It was the Mountain-Chasing Profound Screen.

The Supreme Yin light poured down but was temporarily held back by the screen. Li Ximing felt a moment of relief. 'Thank goodness it works!'

But his realization struck a second later. 'Changxiao isn't Yehui. I absolutely cannot keep jumping between the Great Void and the physical world. Instead of delaying him, I'll just be falling right into his traps!'

What was Changxiao famous for? Manipulating the strings of fate and mastering divination! Li Ximing knew his own combat experience was lacking. His previous tactic of weaving between the two realms had been read perfectly. A master of calculations like Changxiao could easily predict his emergence points and simply wait on the other side with attacks prepared.

He had already fallen for it twice—the blinding white light and the *Treasured Vase Merging Profundity Art* had both struck him head-on the instant he transitioned, leaving no time to defend. If any ordinary Purple Mansion cultivator had taken those two hits directly, they would be utterly incapacitated by now.

'If I'm going to transition, it has to be sudden and unexpected, not just a reaction when his arts are already descending. Otherwise, he'll predict it every time—especially someone who excels at calculation like him.'

For now, he was holding back the silver disk, but the Supreme Yin light was intensifying. Li Ximing had learned his lesson. Even if the Mountain-Chasing Profound Screen started to fail, he absolutely would not jump back to the physical world just to interrupt the spell.

'I don't even need to think about it. That Profound Thunder array is definitely tracking me out there. The instant I emerge, it will blast me in the chest! There's no room for error!'

His mind raced. He unleashed rays of Supreme Yang light and Bright Yang purple flame, sending them surging into the Great Void to intercept the small, exquisite jade vase flying toward him.

Boom!

Although the two lights were brilliant, they visibly faltered, pressed down by the vase and sliding backward. Still, it was far better than having the attack appear suddenly in his face.

But Changxiao's next divine ability was already manifesting. Layers of white qi surged up, turning the surrounding void into a viscous swamp. The qi crawled up the structure of *Audience with the Celestial Gate*, attempting to lock the divine ability in place.

Li Ximing's only goal was to delay; he couldn't afford to be pinned down. He immediately sent *Audience with the Celestial Gate* flying upward to block the descending Supreme Yin light, while the Mountain-Chasing Profound Screen plunged down to counter the encroaching white qi.

Audience with the Celestial Gate held steady against the silver disk, but the Mountain-Chasing Profound Screen was clearly no match for the swamp-like divine ability. After a brief stalemate, Li Ximing knew he couldn't afford to be trapped. Forced to choose between the incoming *Treasured Vase Merging Profundity Art* and the oppressive Supreme Yin light, he unhesitatingly prioritized the latter. *Audience with the Celestial Gate* suddenly flared with intense brilliance.

The Supreme Yang light and purple flames blocking the vase detonated, momentarily blasting the artifact back. Li Ximing then sent *Audience with the Celestial Gate* soaring, smashing it directly toward Changxiao's face as a diversion. Ignoring the vase, Li Ximing spurred the tiger onward, bracing himself against the raw Supreme Yin light as he resumed his desperate flight east.

With *Audience with the Celestial Gate* occupied, the Supreme Yin light streaked toward him like a silver fish. Li Ximing pushed the tiger to its limits. His spiritual sense flared, and a dim yellow halo erupted from his body.

Geng Mountain Spiritual Absorption!

This was another innate wonder of the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger. Li Ximing hadn't used it until now for one simple reason: the ability reduced damage from attacks outside the Twelve Qi and the Fire Virtues. Since he had previously faced only True Fire or been caught off guard by surprise attacks, it had been useless.

Now, the dim yellow halo wrapped his Dharma Body in silken threads. When the Supreme Yin light struck it, the attack was instantly weakened by several degrees. Though it still detonated against his body and blasted numerous holes through him—an injury roughly comparable to the True Fire burns Yehui had inflicted—Li Ximing seized the opportunity. For the first time, he actually pulled away, opening up a real distance between them.

'He learns fast,' Changxiao thought, frowning slightly as the celestial gate rushed him. His cultivation was profound; he instantly recognized the Geng Earth light protecting Li Ximing. With a simple gesture, he recalled the twelve-cornered lantern from the physical world, tearing it back through the void into his hand. He would simply switch back to True Fire.

The sight sent a profound shock through Li Ximing. 'So it wasn't just thunder waiting for me in the physical world! He had this True Fire lantern positioned out there as well! If my realization had come even a moment later, if I had made that mistake one more time, it would have been fatal!'

But Changxiao's expression turned solemn. He raised his hand, and white flames began to surge in the Great Void. Before he could even finish casting the spell, Li Ximing vanished, slipping back into the physical world like a nimble fish.

The logic was simple: Changxiao had just recalled his True Fire lantern. All that remained in the physical world was the thunder. Since *Geng Mountain Spiritual Absorption* was highly effective against thunder, if he didn't escape now, when would he?

The moment Li Ximing emerged, countless silver-white thunderbolts materialized and crashed down. The *Geng Mountain Spiritual Absorption* flared brightly, venting the electricity away from him. Although the ability was far more effective against thunder than Supreme Yin, this electrical storm had been accumulating power for a long time. Li Ximing's Dharma Body was blasted until black smoke rolled off him, yet he endured, pushing forward at extreme speed. The

damage wasn't even as severe as that single hit from the *Treasured Vase Merging Profundity Art*!

He waited for Changxiao to follow him back to the physical world, planning to dive back into the Great Void at the opportune moment, but Changxiao never appeared. As Li Ximing sped through the torrential downpour, his heart began to pound with dread.

Li Ximing had learned from his two painful lessons and adapted, but Changxiao was a man of deep calculations. He was a cultivator who, much like Tu Longjian, had clawed his way to the top against numerous Purple Mansion experts. How could such a man willingly serve as a whetstone for his opponent to sharpen his skills?

He felt a sudden chill crawl up his spine as a voice exploded in his ears, vaguely articulating a chant:

"*The Sangyu Merging Nine Profundities Art.*"

A stream of deep black light tore out of the Great Void, moving with incredible speed. Li Ximing refused to stop, pushing his own escape light forward. He knew he couldn't dive back into the Great Void to dodge this; gritting his teeth, he flew onward, but the black light drew closer and closer.

'If I hadn't taken those debilitating hits earlier, I wouldn't be in such a wretched state now!'

After a long chase through the relentless storm, the air ahead of him warped. Three silver vases tore through the rain—the *Treasured Vase Merging Profundity Art* again. Having already suffered from it, Li Ximing didn't bother looking for Changxiao; he activated his *Geng Mountain Spiritual Absorption* and simultaneously summoned *Audience with the Celestial Gate*, the massive white gate rising from the storm, its power pressing down to suppress the incoming spells.

He used his full strength, barely managing to pin the three vases, only for his pupils to reflect an endless sea of True Fire. The twelve-cornered lantern had just torn through the Great Void to manifest before him.

'*Geng Mountain Spiritual Absorption* can't block True Fire!'

Li Ximing had no choice but to divert his power, unleashing Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light and Bright Yang Purple Flame to counter the lantern. In

that instant of vulnerability, the jet-black *Sangyu Merging Nine Profundities Art* slammed into his body, exploding in a dark flash.

A second later, his body vanished from the physical world, having fled back into the Great Void.

Changxiao, however, smiled.

'The great matter is settled.'

Both the *Sangyu Merging Nine Profundities Art* and the *Treasured Vase Merging Profundity Art* were profound arts from his Encompassing Profundity, but the *Sangyu* art was far older. It wasn't an attack of light or spiritual energy, but something derived from ancient immortal arts. Its effectiveness relied on three conditions: being seen by the target, being heard by the target, and landing on the target.

Just now, Li Ximing had clearly seen the black light, distinctly heard the name of the art, and had finally been struck by it. He had taken the full force of its conditions. This was not something the *Treasured Vase Merging Profundity Art* could even compare to.

Chasing him from the coastal waters all the way to the Converging Heaven Sea, Changxiao had never been completely certain he could capture or kill him. Li Ximing, though wretched, had not suffered a fundamental injury, and his reactions were quick, even managing to create opportunities to counter. If the chase dragged on much longer, the Hengzhu lineage would absolutely intervene.

But Changxiao had schemed for this outcome, first testing Mount Luoxia's attitude, then the attitude of the dragon clans, ensuring no one would interfere. Now that his masterpiece, the *Sangyu Merging Nine Profundities Art*, had landed, the matter was finally guaranteed.

'Mount Luoxia has no intention of protecting him, and the dragon clans clearly don't care either. Li Zhouwei may have been invited by a Dragon Prince in the past, but that alliance was clearly only with him as an individual. The Li family is not on the list of those the dragon clans will intervene to save.'

'And even if the dragon clans *did* want to protect him, the only ones in the Eastern Sea who could intercept me are the demon cultivators. Letting him escape would cause me little loss, but Mount Luoxia would no longer just watch from above. That action would be all the proof they needed that the dragon clans are attempting to seize the Bright Yang Dao!'

Changxiao never acted without calculating every angle. He pushed the gray smoke forward, letting the thunder roll, intentionally shaking the surroundings. He sensed several other cultivators—Demon clan experts and masters of the Eastern Sea—stepping through the Great Void to observe from a distance. This set his mind further at ease.

'Even in the one-in-ten-thousand chance that Li Zhouwei was secretly a pawn left by the Bright Splendor Imperial Monarch, that entity wouldn't dare save him now. With so many Purple Mansion experts watching, wouldn't that just expose to the world that the ancestor Li Qianyuan still retains his private consciousness?'

'I've made a huge commotion, and Purple Smoke Gate and the Hengzhu clan will certainly rush here immediately. But it is already far too late!'

The Daoist Master listened intently. He tossed the lantern back into the Great Void, letting the spiritual artifact continue the pursuit on its own, while he himself crossed into the physical world. He flew through the rain for a moment, then stopped and began pinching his fingers, calculating.

Li Zhouwei's connection to Mount Luoxia, and perhaps even Li Qianyuan, was a strong possibility. And Li Ximing himself, though seemingly ordinary, had shown abnormalities—that treasure protecting his spiritual sense, perhaps even some hidden link to the Wei Emperor. Changxiao would not give his quarry any chance whatsoever to turn the tables.

Bypassing calculations aimed directly at Li Ximing's fate—which might be shielded—he focused only on the fluctuations in the Great Void. Sure enough, he pinpointed where Li Ximing, clad in his white-gold robes, would emerge nearby. Changxiao formed a hand seal. The silver disk behind him leaped into the air, and the gray smoke rolled with thunder. He raised an eyebrow.

Boom!

The rain poured as thunder shook heaven and earth. Far away, the Great Void rippled, and Li Ximing burst forth. His Dharma Body was now wreathed in the black qi of the curse, and the Bound Tiger beneath him had slowed considerably.

Li Ximing was suffering under the *Sangyu Merging Nine Profundities Art*. The black qi wrapping his Dharma Body had erupted into dark flames, burning him with an audible crackle. A sharp pain radiated from his Juque Palace, as if the

black fire was erupting from within it. Fortunately, his *Audience with the Celestial Gate* was nurtured within that very palace, and his own Bright Yang Purple Flame was suppressing the curse. For the moment, it wasn't debilitating. Li Ximing clutched his spiritual artifact tightly and plunged headlong into the darkness of the storm.

Daoist Master Changxiao recalled his lantern and took a step to follow, only to freeze.

His actions ceased. He stopped the pursuit. Instead, he lifted his head and looked toward the heavens.

The rain poured, and monstrous waves clawed toward the sky. Thunder writhed like dragons, and silver cracks spiderwebbed the pitch-black night.

But the thunder in the sky no longer obeyed Changxiao's command. Instead, it converged resolutely before him, purple and white electricity intertwining, forming a flowing river of liquid lightning that snaked downward, emitting a violent, deafening roar.

Changxiao's vision was completely filled by the cascading purple-and-white brilliance. His gaze remained cold, fixed on the atmospheric thunder. The Supreme Yin silver disk began to circle his body clockwise, slowly moving to hover directly in front of his face.

BOOM!

A massive, shivering silver-white thunderbolt dropped from the sky, smashing into the silver disk with a deafening metallic *clang*. The lightning did not dissipate; it flowed wildly, condensing three feet away from him, stabbing relentlessly at the disk and burning away patches of black smoke.

The front seven inches of the thunderbolt were shaped like a sharp prism, flat as a buckwheat seed, buzzing as it pierced the artifact. The shaft behind it appeared to be six feet long, its light flowing, as purple-and-white electricity seemed to flow backward from it, connecting up into the heavens.

Changxiao slowly raised the twelve-cornered lantern, using its light to disperse the overwhelming glare of the thunderbolt. Only then did the shape before him stabilize, revealing its true form.

It was a silver-white, intricately patterned spear.

Chapter 758: Thunder

The thunder roared. Silver-white lightning flowed backward along the spear's tip, extending six feet into the air. Though the storm still poured in the distance, the nearby rain suddenly suspended, each drop becoming a crystal-clear sphere that evaporated and shrank within the lightning's aura.

The glow from Changxiao's lantern intensified, steadily wearing away the electrical glare. He saw the spear was held in a slender, pale hand. The thunder climbed affectionately around the wrist, leaping onto a sleeve cuff adorned with purple-and-white feathers.

Only then did he clearly see the female cultivator standing before him. She had a high-bridged nose, willow brows, and apricot eyes, but within those pupils, purple qi flowed like mist. Her black hair fell like a waterfall, her brow marked by a purple sigil. The dense lightning climbed her body, converging behind her to form an immense, purple-and-white circular disk.

Whether this disk was a divine ability or a spiritual artifact, it was vast as a mountain, covered in dense, fractal patterns of lightning. Suspended over the sea, the woman at its center looked like a mystic bird floating within the eye of the storm, her long spear leveled directly at Changxiao's glabella.

The churning waves below rapidly ceased, and the sea grew preternaturally calm. The rain that should have been falling was caught by primordial magnetism, the drops hovering above the surface before shrinking into nothing. In an instant, the ocean became a perfect mirror, reflecting the mountain-sized thunder disk and the mystic bird of a woman within it.

Changxiao held his lantern as the dense white smoke gathered around him once more. His pupils reflected the purple-and-white lightning filling the world as he asked softly, "Are you a dragon?"

Boom!

A vast thunderclap answered him. The silver spear reversed, planting itself in the air with a metallic clang. The woman stood clad in purple-and-white feathered thunder-robes and boots etched with fine silver patterns, floating in the void. The long feathers of her outer robe began to lengthen, trailing behind her in the lightning.

Her voice was clear and icy, ringing out in harmony with the heavens: "I am Thunder."

Instantly, a silver-white thunderbolt as thick as a water bucket dropped from the sky. Changxiao reacted immediately; the silver disk etched with profound patterns flashed overhead. Its Supreme Yin light held against the lightning for only a fraction of a second before flaring brightly, clearly reinforced by Changxiao's own divine ability and Dharma power.

BOOM!

The sound of the impact arrived a moment later, far louder and more majestic than the bolt itself. The silver disk shook violently, flashing in protest.

Changxiao watched in silence as the purple-and-white lightning gathered like a tide, surging within the dark clouds and reflecting the hazy figure in the sky. The lantern in his hand grew steadily brighter.

The mirror-like sea was completely covered by the purple-white lightning, reflecting the giant thunder disk from both above and below. But at the far horizon, a speck of brilliant gold began to rise.

"Daybreak," Changxiao observed.

The morning sun breached the horizon, signaling the end of the long night. Sunlight pierced the dark clouds, illuminating Changxiao's face and the deep calculations within his willow-leaf eyes.

The Daoist Master understood that as time passed, the chase had become meaningless. Even if he suppressed this woman, he would never find Li Ximing's trail further east.

Although the *Sangyu Merging Nine Profundities Art* was a lock, Li Ximing was also a Purple Mansion cultivator. He wouldn't be stupid enough to double back, and his *Heavenly Audience Gate* specialized in suppression and refinement. He must have been suppressing the curse while fleeing, and by now, the trail was cold.

Changxiao's experience and cultivation base were profound, and he quickly reached a judgment: the dragon clans would absolutely not intervene in this situation. The woman before him could only be a lucky beneficiary of some thunderous fortuitous encounter within a Grotto-Heaven.

Changxiao raised his head and said coldly, "Presumably, Fellow Daoist, you gained an opportunity by swallowing thunder, becoming an agent of Thunder for the dragon clans. You've barely reached the Purple Mansion realm, yet you wield such astonishing majesty."

"I was merely passing through the sea territory you guard. You wish to help someone from your human bloodline; that is reasonable enough. Out of respect for the dragon clans, I will no longer pursue the matter of Li Ximing."

He raised his lantern, preparing to tear through the Great Void and depart, only to find the world erupting in thunder. Purple-and-white lightning fell like a waterfall. Changxiao's expression frosted over as he turned his head.

The thunder that had been gathering in the sky began to move. The sea below surged with an incalculable number of aquatic beings; countless silver and green scales and fins breached the surface before vanishing back into the depths.

The woman hovered in the center of the massive, purple-white Thunder Pool disk, which blazed with fractal patterns. All the storm clouds in the sky converged toward it, like myriad stars paying homage to the moon, arraying themselves around the Thunder Pool, holding it between the heavens and the sea.

"Then *I* must pursue this matter," her clear voice echoed across the world. "After all, the dragon clans have face. You, Fellow Daoist, do not."

East of the Eastern Sea.

The immense thunder storm had just passed, and the torrential rains over the Quhai Sea had stopped. The only thing left on the water's surface were a few pieces of splintered wood, spinning in small whirlpools. A damp, cold wind blew from the coast. Upon the shore, the Great Void fluctuated, and a brilliant light emerged.

The moment this Profound Light appeared, raging flames manifested around it, searing the sea surface and sending up clouds of white steam. It sped across the water and landed on a nearby island.

The light resolved into the cultivator in the white-gold Daoist robes, who staggered several steps before collapsing to his knees.

Earlier, Li Ximing had been fleeing the storm when he sensed Changxiao had run into trouble. He immediately seized the opportunity, fleeing headlong without ever looking back, and plunged back into the Great Void.

Out here, in the vast seas east of the Eastern Sea, his travel speed within the Great Void was astonishingly fast. He did not sense his pursuer's aura, and trusting that detection grew fainter the further east he went, he kept his Supreme Yin Profound Light hidden and focused only on speed.

He didn't know how long he had flown, but spots began to appear in the void ahead, and he could faintly perceive the end in the far distance. Li Ximing had a sudden realization: 'I've reached the Sea's Cape!'

The Great Void behind him was utterly silent; it seemed Changxiao had not given chase. Still, Li Ximing dared not relax. Dragging his heavily injured body, he changed direction in this desolate region, flying south for the better part of a day. Only after using his Immortal Mirror to scan the area and confirming no one was present did he finally emerge into the physical world.

He knelt on the sandy ground, stirring up a cloud of dust that revealed the stark white bones hidden just beneath the surface. The wooden fragments still drifted on the sea. Li Ximing couldn't stop himself from coughing.

"Cough… cough…"

He spat out a mouthful of brilliantly shining blood. When it struck the sand, it sounded like stones colliding, shattering into a dense white powder mixed with tiny insects that immediately scattered. The few drops that pooled in hollows instantly grew into clams, remaining motionless among the rocks.

The flames of the *Sangyu Merging Nine Profundities Art* still flickered on and off across his body, melting the surrounding sand into patches of crystal. Li Ximing felt a searing heat throughout his body; the damage to his Dharma Body was clearly significant.

"Hahaha… *cough, cough*… Hahahaha!"

Li Ximing laughed even as he coughed, feeling not distress, but overwhelming relief at having survived the calamity.

He had been fully prepared to sacrifice his spiritual artifact, even his Dharma Body itself. He had been ready to leave behind just a single sliver of his Shengyang and use the Supreme Yin Profound Light to take Changxiao down with him.

Once Changxiao was dead, the resulting trouble would have been just as severe as if he lived. But now, Changxiao was alive and he had escaped, saving both the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger and his Dharma Body. Although he was heavily injured and afflicted by the curse, this outcome was far, far better than his grimmest expectations.

He stood up. The ground was covered in the white insects, still waving their slender, pale limbs. Li Ximing suppressed the searing pain in his spiritual sense, glanced at them, and whispered, "Return."

The instant he spoke, a wind swept the ground, scraping all the scattered white powder and stone fragments toward him. The countless white insects swarmed back, and even the clams leaped from the rocks, gathering into a single mass at his feet before self-immolating in a burst of purple flame.

'This blood… corrupted by the curse… it cannot be reabsorbed into the Dharma Body or refined into Bright Yang materials. Normally this wouldn't matter, but in my weakened state, I absolutely cannot leave a single trace behind that someone could use for divination.'

Taking a step, Li Ximing noticed a sand-louse type of Demon beast burrowed beneath the sand. It had not yet developed true intelligence, but its cultivation wasn't bad; it knew a terrifying presence had arrived on the shore and was trembling in its hiding spot. The bones he had seen earlier… they were likely this creature's leftovers.

Unwilling to leave any trace of his presence, Li Ximing suppressed the urge to cough and stomped his foot once. The sand-louse was instantly incinerated into nothingness. He turned, found a reef, and leaned against it to inspect his injuries.

His Dharma Body had been roasted by True Fire multiple times, leaving his entire back slightly cracked. His shoulder was pierced by several holes from the Supreme Yin light. Changxiao's arts focused on yin-aligned powers and curses,

so while his body had no massive missing sections, his overall condition was far from optimistic.

His Shengyang, a key Purple Mansion acupoint, ached under the influence of the *Sangyu Merging Nine Profundities Art*—he still didn't know what medium Changxiao had used to inflict it. Black flames roiled within his Juque Palace, while both invisible and deep-black flames intertwined on his skin, steadily draining his divine abilities and Dharma power.

He gathered his thoughts, his gaze sweeping over the wooden fragments on the sea. "I don't know which outer sea this is, but people clearly live here… That's convenient enough."

Li Ximing was not afraid of encountering some powerful expert here at the Sea's Cape, where spiritual qi was thin. Even if he was so heavily injured that his Dharma power failed and his body collapsed, killing a Foundation Establishment cultivator was merely a flick of his sleeve. As for Qi Refining or Embryonic Breathing cultivators, it would take nothing more than a puff of air or a sharp glare.

"Unless a Purple Mansion cultivator happens to be passing through, only then would I need to be cautious."

The flames on his body raged. Unwilling to scorch the coastline and leave obvious traces, Li Ximing used his Bright Yang divine ability to suppress them. But as he took two steps, the black fire within his Juque Palace surged, rising to contend equally with his own Bright Yang Purple Flame.

Li Ximing focused his divine ability inward to suppress it. Yet, the moment the black fire in his Juque Palace dimmed, the flames on the surface of his skin suddenly swelled, nearly breaking his containment and threatening to incinerate his surroundings.

"What a bizarre art. The inner and outer flames are a single entity. Suppress the external fire, and the Juque fire flourishes. Suppress the Juque fire, and the external fire rages… This must be from the Encompassing Profundity Daoist tradition."

It was too inconvenient to deal with now. Li Ximing could only let the flames inside his Juque Palace rage temporarily as he rode his escape light forward, stepping once to appear in the forest at the island's center.

This forest was dotted with numerous villages. They had pale yellow thatched roofs and were mostly wooden structures; the better ones were merely crude stone-framed houses. Li Ximing scanned them. Based on this level of architecture, even if cultivators were present, they wouldn't exceed the Jade Capital Wheel realm.

As expected, when Li Ximing landed for a look, the inhabitants were all savages. They had no cultivation and were shouting in some barbarian tongue, babbling incomprehensibly.

His injuries were worsening, and he couldn't spare them much thought. He scanned again. There were over ten thousand savages gathered below. Though they lacked cultivation, they had their own survival methods, including a stone altar that was covered in bloody offerings from dissected animals. Red blood flowed down its sides, where a powerful-looking tiger demon crouched, lapping up the blood.

This tiger demon seemed to be at the Qi Refining realm. It looked like some wild, backwater species; not only was its cultivation impure, it didn't even know how to properly refine the blood offerings, merely lapping them up raw. Li Ximing couldn't be bothered to give it a second glance. He raised a finger and blew lightly.

A wisp of purple flame shot from the air and landed on the ground. The tiger demon had no time to react; it was still lapping at the blood when it was instantly incinerated into ash. The area below exploded into chaos. The crowd of kowtowing savages stared, dumbfounded. After a moment, seeming to conclude their god had departed on the wind, they gathered the remaining offerings and quickly retreated.

'It's lucky for them it was me who arrived. Had it been another Purple Mansion cultivator, this group of barbarians—not even my own species—wouldn't have amounted to two mouthfuls.'

Li Ximing glanced away, then activated the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger, channeling the *Mountain-Chasing Profound Evasion* art to escape into the earth beneath the island.

He had spent a long time searching in the Great Void before selecting this specific island. Although its spiritual qi was thin, its earth veins, water veins, and fire veins were all complete and sufficiently complex. The terrain was also stable and wouldn't be easily disturbed, making it suitable for his recovery. After

all, he didn't know how to set up arrays, and he was injured; if he healed in an ordinary place, the leakage of his power would soon sprout Bright Radiant Sky Stones, gray cicadas, or gardenias, attracting unnecessary suspicion.

After traveling deep into the earth veins, Li Ximing found a gentle junction where the earth and water veins intersected. He casually set down a simple array disk and sat cross-legged. The fire in his Juque Palace was already burning uncontrollably. He activated his *Heavenly Audience Gate* divine ability, and it flashed, slamming down hard internally.

Boom!

Intense black flames instantly erupted from his body, accompanied by a violent tremor that spread outward. The fire, deep within the earth, immediately began to gather the earth-malevolent qi, roasting the surrounding veins until they roiled.

The *Sangyu Merging Nine Profundities Art* was clearly extraordinary, especially having been cast at full power by a late-stage Purple Mansion cultivator like Changxiao who had already crossed an immortal threshold. The curse was astonishingly stubborn. His attempt to suppress it not only failed to wear it down but instead stimulated its full power, causing turmoil throughout the earth veins.

Li Ximing couldn't stop himself from spitting out another mouthful of blood, which he instantly incinerated. He activated *Heavenly Audience Gate* at full power, forcing all the black flames out of his Juque Palace and redirecting them to his sides.

Although Li Ximing had never studied the *Sangyu Merging Nine Profundities Art*, he was beginning to understand it. The curse was clearly designed to grow stronger and stronger after impact, but his own *Heavenly Audience Gate* divine ability specialized in suppression and refinement, which was the only reason the curse hadn't been able to advance an inch.

He was not afraid. Activating *Heavenly Audience Gate* fully, it manifested within his Juque Palace as the ornate, bright-white celestial gate. The dragon banners and luan-drawn chariots within its sky glows all transformed into pure light, beginning the arduous process of grinding the curse down, bit by bit.

Bright Yang was, after all, the core Dao lineage of the former northern hegemon, the Wei state. Barring a few specific counter-lineages, its flaws were pitifully

few. *Heavenly Audience Gate* was not only supported by his Dharma Body, it could stand against a tyrannical curse like the *Sangyu Merging Nine Profundities Art* without backing down. As one of the premier divine abilities for suppression and refinement, it immediately bore down on the black flames, causing them to dim and begin fading at an agonizingly slow, but steady, rate.

Chapter 759: Curse Fire

Li Ximing cultivated within the earth veins for some time, managing to temporarily grind away nearly half of the black flames within his Juque Palace. His bright Bright Yang Purple Flame had once again regained the upper hand, but he was forced to stop.

The reason was simple: as he steadily forced the fire out of his Juque Palace, the invisible and deep-black flames covering his body grew increasingly intense. They had already melted layer after layer of the surrounding cavern walls and were spreading into the earth veins. If he continued, this earth vein would transform into a fire vein, and a volcano would soon erupt on the island.

'No matter how stable this region is, it can't simply endure a Purple Mansion-level flame burning indefinitely… When the time comes, it won't just attract other cultivators to investigate; I'm afraid it will also cook all ten thousand or so people on the island alive'.

Li Ximing stopped. Fortunately, his current cultivation was worlds apart from what it had been. Furthermore, having just walked the line between life and death, his understanding of both Bright Yang and the Great Void seemed to have deepened significantly.

He immediately took out the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger and activated its divine ability. The entire earth vein rumbled and began to shift, moving several inches to the left. He then flicked a finger, and with a chiming sound, a jet of cold water erupted from the wall.

Tsssss!

He had linked the earth vein to the water vein. Surging groundwater poured into the chamber, and the surrounding water vein instantly released countless clouds of steam. The malevolent qi in the earth vein sank immediately, but the dense curse fire still filled the space, instantly vaporizing the water as it entered.

'This ground-water is naturally nothing against a Purple Mansion's arts, but its advantage is that it flows without end. It can prevent the fire-balefulness from accumulating, affecting the surface, or causing anomalies on the island that might attract unwanted attention'.

Sure enough, the steam generated by the water vein immediately rushed up through the gaps in the earth-malevolent qi toward the surface. The rest of the groundwater refilled the area but could not get close to the flames, leaving only a chamber of roiling black fire and endless steam rushing upward.

'Now, what rises to the surface isn't fire balefulness. The qi will condense back into water, at most forming a large spirit spring. This kind of tectonic change is common. The traces are almost non-existent, and it won't harm the people on the island'.

An operation that would have been impossible during his Foundation Establishment realm was now accomplished with a mere flip of his hand. He used the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger to slightly reinforce the earth vein, then sat cross-legged again. Pinching his fingers to calculate the time, he realized several months had already passed.

"The family hasn't crushed the emergency jade pendant, so nothing too urgent must have happened".

"Furthermore, I am overseas and not injured to the point of death; I still retain a significant portion of my strength. The family should be safe. Even if Changxiao has it out for me, he likely won't trouble my family…".

"Second, this entire affair was handled through Purple Smoke Gate. If I had been struck dead by Changxiao instantly, Tinglan and Sumian could have pretended nothing happened and stayed out of it. But since I didn't die, they have both lost face in this matter. They will have to protect my family, at least somewhat".

"Only Zhouwei… he is the one in danger now. It's a good thing he was already in seclusion, cultivating within the lake. I just don't know how he is".

"This *Sangyu Merging Nine Profundities Art*… it's becoming harder and harder to deal with".

Li Ximing had been afflicted by the curse for a long time now. Although he had forced most of the fire out of his Juque Palace, the flames on the surface of his body were now roasting him so fiercely that his skin flowed with a glassy, glazed light, growing more fragile by the moment.

'[Valley Wind Guides Fire] isn't wondrous enough to seize another person's flame and make it my own; it can only control my own flames or ownerless fire. Otherwise, I wouldn't be suffering like this…'.

Li Ximing remained troubled, but the profound relief of having escaped Changxiao's grasp still allowed him a moment of grim humor.

"If I, Li Ximing, could actually seize another person's flames for my own use, people might even believe I was the reincarnation of some Fire Virtue True Monarch…".

It wasn't just the bottleneck in expelling the flames; the curse's negative effects on his Dharma Body were becoming more pronounced. He felt a stinging pain in his forehead, and as the dual flames burned him inside and out, his divine abilities and Dharma power all felt icy cold, a sensation that was difficult to resolve. He could only suppress the flames, but the stinging forehead and the encroaching cold in his power were not so easily dismissed.

"At least *Heavenly Audience Gate* drove most of the fire out of my Juque Palace," he mused. "That counts as a good thing".

By stabilizing his Juque Palace, his Dharma Body at least wouldn't collapse. Though the surface flames were troublesome, Li Ximing could still move and cast spells while enduring the curse.

'But in this state… it's not suitable for traveling. And I'm afraid I'll run right into Changxiao if I try to go back'.

He had luckily escaped during that storm, and Li Ximing guessed that the dragon clans might have intervened. Either by accident or through one of their pawns, someone had blocked Changxiao for him.

"Xiao Chuting is away in the Northern Sea, so it couldn't have been him. The others wouldn't be bothered. Senior Tu Longjian is in the Southern Sea… It could only have been a dragon. A pity… I still ended up using Zhouwei's favor with the dragon clans. I've let him down".

Li Ximing understood perfectly how much that favor would have helped Li Zhouwei after his breakthrough; only after reaching the Purple Mansion realm himself did he truly appreciate the sheer power of the dragon clans. He could only sigh silently in guilt.

He tried to divert his thoughts, sitting in place for several more days to repair his Juque Palace, but the flames on his skin only burned hotter, and cracks began to spread across his Dharma Body. Anxiety finally gripped his heart.

"What a venomous art! And the Earth-Gazing Bloodstone is back in the family treasury… But even if I had it in my hands, it would likely be just a drop in the ocean against an injury of this magnitude".

If he wanted to preserve his Dharma Body, he would have to suppress the external flames, which meant giving up the ground he had taken in his Juque Palace. The past several months of effort would be wasted. But if he didn't suppress the external flames, his Dharma Body would grow weaker and weaker until it, too, showed signs of collapse.

Li Ximing could also use spirit items to mend the damage, but the *Sangyu Merging Nine Profundities Art* was not Yehui's True Fire. These Foundation Establishment-grade materials would only treat the symptoms, not the root cause. It would just be delaying the inevitable for a few years and wasting his savings.

'If I don't want to just sit here and wait for death, the only alternative is to risk going out to search for a cure. But in this state, wreathed in a massive aura of fire… whether in the Great Void or the physical world, I'm like a shining lantern. Who wouldn't see me?'.

He pondered this for a long time before silently raising his head.

His gaze instantly pierced the layers of rock above him, observing the ten thousand savages on the island—a group even more primitive than the Mountain Yue.

Since advancing to the Purple Mansion realm, Li Ximing understood many profound mysteries. Like every cultivator who reached this realm, he intrinsically understood how to consume blood qi, just as he understood how to fabricate a new body or how to occupy a Dharma Body with his Shengyang—it was all as natural as eating or drinking.

And that wasn't even mentioning that he was an alchemist.

If he just had the inclination, with his alchemy skills, he could easily refine a suitable pill to solve his current problem. With such a pill to suppress the curse, combined with his divine ability, he could drive the fire out completely without any risk or significant cost.

Li Ximing stared grimly at the surface for a long moment. His ear twitched. Finally, he closed his eyes. He retrieved a stone box from his sleeve and flicked it open, revealing a clear, bright spirit water inside.

He drank two mouthfuls before entering deep seclusion to continue the suppression.

Chapter 760: The Xia Migration

Moongaze Lake

Brilliant sunlight bathed Pingya Island, casting the long shadows of its towers across the stone steps. Ascending those steps tier by tier, Kong Guxi knelt before the main hall's entrance. To his left and right, cultivators hurried past, none paying him any mind.

The array formation at the Profound Peak mountain gate had been easily shattered, their ancestral lands were lost, and the entirety of Shanji Prefecture had fallen. Fu En, who had been in seclusion for a breakthrough, had died catastrophically, unleashing a pillar of Geng Earth Qi into the heavens. Yehui himself had appeared at their mountain gate, shaking the Wasteland to its core. The Kong family members could do nothing but beat their chests in despair.

The Profound Peak Gate had treated the common people and cultivators under their rule well, and their influence was deeply rooted. The half-million people who had migrated with their clan and their affiliates all wept, and a chorus of grief rose to the heavens.

The Profound Peak Gate was, for all intents and purposes, destroyed. Kong Guxi had long been prepared for this and was not surprised. Though his grief was profound, he still set about stabilizing the situation.

The fact that he had now abandoned the Wasteland to rush here for an audience was due to a single reason: Daoist Master Zhaojing, Li Ximing, had not been seen in four months, while Daoist Master Yehui was unharmed and had appeared multiple times in Shanji Prefecture.

Even more damning were the rumors spreading among the great clans and immortal sects: Daoist Master Zhaojing had been attacked by Yehui and another Daoist Master working in concert. Whether he had fallen was unknown, but at the very least, he was said to be gravely wounded somewhere in the Eastern Sea.

The news had made Kong Guxi's legs weak. Hearing further that the northern Funan territory was under attack, he used it as a pretext to come to the island and seek an audience with Li Jiangqian.

Now, as cultivators ignored him or shot him disdainful looks, whispering amongst themselves, Kong Guxi's heart grew heavier. Behind him, Kong Qiuyan knelt obediently, not daring to even lift her head.

After a long wait, a voice called from above.

"Lord Kong, the Young Lord will see you".

Kong Guxi quickly gathered his robes and hurried up the steps. Passing through two sets of hall doors, he saw a young man in dark red robes seated in the main chair. It was Li Jiangqian, the current head of the household. Standing beside him was a woman in a cloud-silk dress—Li Quewan.

Li Jiangqian had been sitting in this hall for five sleepless days. It wasn't just him; the entire Li family's upper echelon was in constant motion, while the lower ranks were silent with fear. To put it bluntly, the entire clan was frozen in a tense silence.

The situation was incredibly difficult. Kong Guxi was no longer the master of the Profound Peak Gate; he was someone to be avoided. Without access to information, he couldn't grasp the situation, but even he could smell that something was terribly wrong. How could others not?

Though the young man before him was only at the Qi Refining realm, Kong Guxi bowed with the utmost respect.

"Greetings, Young Lord".

"Lord Kong, you're too polite".

Li Jiangqian seemed calm, showing no signs of panic as he replied evenly. "Is there an urgent matter, my lord?".

Seeing Li Jiangqian's composure, Kong Guxi felt a measure of his own anxiety subside. His main purpose for this trip was simply to see the Li family's state for himself and get a sense of his own position. He didn't dare ask too many questions, instead saying respectfully, "We were guarding the Wasteland when a group of cultivators arrived from the east. They claim to be from Crimson Reef Island and wish to gather qi. I did not dare to stop them… so I came to ask the Young Lord first".

Li Jiangqian subtly clenched his fist within his sleeve. "Gather what qi?" he asked in a low voice.

Kong Guxi replied, "The Guo family members said they wish to gather the qi of the people's lament. Over in Shanji Prefecture… Daoist Master Yehui has already given his approval. I still have half a million people in the Wasteland, all loyal followers. Their grief is potent; one can act as ten. The Guo family hopes to gather qi there".

'They came so fast…' Li Jiangqian thought, falling silent for a moment.

The relationship between the Li family and Crimson Reef Island was extremely tense. Although their Purple Mansion masters had yet to meet, there was no shortage of enmity between their subordinates. Crimson Reef was also on friendly terms with Capital Immortals Dao, making this group's arrival a highly complex matter.

If Li Ximing were actually at home, waving them away would be a trivial matter. The fear was that with Li Ximing absent, Capital Immortals Dao and Crimson Reef Island were colluding, using this as a pretext to interfere on the Eastern Shore.

'Daoist Master Yehui of Capital Immortals Dao fought with our Daoist Master. He must be certain our Daoist Master is not at the lake. This is trouble…'.

He nodded. "I understand. Please wait for a moment, my lord. I will consult my elders and give you a reply".

Kong Guxi nodded quickly and retreated, his heart pounding with fear. Some things didn't need to be asked. Just by making this trip, the atmosphere of the situation told him more than enough.

After the man had left, the great array of the hall sealed shut. Li Jiangqian sat down, a hint of exhaustion on his face. "Wan'er," he said quietly, "I know your cultivation is important, but I had to call you out. This matter is too great".

Li Quewan asked, a little uneasily, "The Daoist Master…".

"It's true. He has not returned for several months". Li Jiangqian rubbed his wrists. "His absence is a small matter; Capital Immortals Dao's reaction is what's truly alarming. Situ Mo has crossed the mountains again and is eyeing Funan covetously. Capital Immortals Dao has already consolidated its hold

on Shanji Prefecture, and the situation on the Eastern Shore is growing more unstable".

"Elders Minggong and Chenghui have both gone to Funan, and Ding Weizeng and the others have gone to the Eastern Shore. Father is in seclusion. If a fight breaks out, we can only save either the Wasteland or Funan".

"What is the elders' decision?" Li Quewan asked.

"Save Funan". Li Jiangqian's gaze was heavy. "As I see it, if Capital Immortals Dao pushes south, Purple Smoke Gate and the Sword Gate cannot sit idly by. Shanji Prefecture is easy for Capital Immortals Dao to attack but hard to defend; they cannot hold it for long. Once some compromise is reached and they withdraw, the Wasteland cannot be held either".

"And if the Wasteland falls, the Xiao family will also be uncomfortable. Funan belongs to our family alone, but the Wasteland does not. It is easier to retake the Wasteland after it's lost than to save Funan once it has fallen".

Li Quewan nodded in agreement, then added worriedly, "But this matter with Crimson Reef Island…". She paused, glanced at her brother, and then continued, "Right now, only the Purple Mansion realm and the other immortal sects know our Daoist Master is missing, so we can maintain a calm facade. But the next step is for everyone, inside and out, to know our family is in trouble… Since you are preparing countermeasures, brother, even if the Wasteland is abandoned, our weakness will be exposed sooner or later".

Li Jiangqian sighed. "Kong Guxi isn't making a scene. He hasn't shed a single tear. He's too perceptive. If a stupider leader had come and thrown a fit, our family would have the perfect excuse to abandon the Wasteland, let him rebuild the Profound Peak Gate as a buffer, and delay our weakness from being exposed…".

After a moment of thought, Li Jiangqian summoned a subordinate. "Go and make it clear to Kong Guxi. Crimson Reef shouldn't even think about causing trouble on our territory. If they want to gather qi of resentment, they can go back to their own overseas domains and collect it. They have more than they could ever use; why come to our home?".

After the man left, Li Jiangqian pulled out a letter, his brow furrowed with impatience. "I'll write to Jiangxia at once. The Wasteland can be lost, but the people of Profound Peak must be evacuated. Tell that boy to keep himself alive. If he

dies at the hands of Capital Immortals Dao or Crimson Reef, I, his older brother, will have to avenge him".

Li Quewan nodded silently. She saw another figure approach from below, emerging from the shadows like the wind. He was clad in pitch-black Dharma robes with a black jade pendant at his waist, his expression grim. Li Jiangqian quickly stepped back and bowed respectfully.

"Grand-Uncle".

Li Chenghuai nodded. "I've just returned from the north. Capital Immortals Dao has made a move. They've sent a man named Wang He to consolidate the power of the Wang clan in Jiangbei".

The Funan Wang clan was involved in the family's strategic layout around Xiaoshi Mountain in the north and was also key to Funan's stability. This was no small matter. "What happened?" Li Jiangqian asked. "Our family is in some trouble at the moment, and Wang Quwan is in seclusion at the lake. With the head of the Funan Wang clan absent, I fear they won't be able to stand against Wang He's influence…".

To his surprise, Li Chenghuai shook his head. "The one in charge of the Wang clan… is Wang Quwan's younger brother, Wang Quyu. He went against all opposition and barred Wang He from entry, refusing to see him. He then led a contingent of his clansmen from their home to meet your brother. They have already been integrated into the various mountain defenses and are standing guard together".

Li Jiangqian nodded slowly, pacing back and forth twice. It was the first piece of good news he had heard in a long time. Li Chenghuai also seemed pleased. "I thought that when trouble started, Funan would be the first to become unstable… After all, a large portion of the Wang clan's main branch is still under Capital Immortals Dao's domain. For them to provide timely aid like this and stabilize Funan…".

"Although we still can't rule out the suspicion that they're placing bets on both sides, this move from the Wang clan is undeniably beneficial. Once this is over, they should be rewarded".

Li Jiangqian nodded. "The Wang clan has deep roots in Jiangbei; they have the capital to hedge their bets. With his own sister in seclusion at our lake, he natu-

rally couldn't meet with Wang He. This just goes to show that Wang Quyu has excellent control over his branch of the family".

Li Chenghuai sighed. Li Jiangqian then recounted the situation with Crimson Reef Island, and the good mood from the news vanished. "The cultivators of Crimson Reef are difficult to deal with," Li Chenghuai said. "Their Merging Fire arts are exceedingly venomous, damaging one's life force and essence. We should consult with Brother Chenghui on this".

The Eastern Shore

In the center of the Eastern Shore's dense forests, and further east still, stood a mountain at the border between the Wasteland and the Eastern Shore proper. It was not particularly grand, but it was covered with numerous towers and pavilions, bustling with cultivators coming and going.

In the main hall at the mountain's peak, a burly, golden-eyed man rose from his meditation, his breath flowing like light. As he stepped down, several of his trusted aides immediately approached him, bowing respectfully.

"Third Young Master!".

Li Jiangxia lifted his chin. "How much time has passed?".

"Reporting to my lord, two months have passed".

Li Jiangxia's cultivation talent was extremely high, second only to his elder brother Li Jiangqian's within the family, and his resources were first-rate. He never worried about cultivation bottlenecks, only about whether his foundation was solid enough or if he had mastered enough arts. He had spent two months breaking through to the fifth layer of Qi Refining and still felt he had energy to spare. He asked in a deep voice, "Have you seen the Daoist Master?".

He was in command of the various families on the Eastern Shore, and his generous and forthright personality had naturally attracted a group of loyal followers, including many minor officials. Upon hearing his question, they all hesitated and shook their heads.

Li Jiangxia's expression immediately darkened. He had them report the latest news, and his eyelids twitched as he listened. "Where are the various lords stationed?" he asked again.

The cultivators bowed their heads and mumbled evasively. One guest elder stepped forward. He seemed to be from the Wasteland, at the early Qi Refining realm, and had only pledged allegiance in recent years. His surname was Fu, and he had switched his allegiance from the Profound Peak Gate early on.

He seemed rather clever. "Reporting to the Young Master," he said with a smile, "my family received news from Kong Guxi. Lords Minggong and Chenghui are both in the Funan territory".

Li Jiangxia looked up, taking note of the man. He glanced around and waved his sleeve. "Everyone, return to your duties. There's no need for so many of you here…". He paused, a faint, unreadable smile on his face. "Guest Elder Fu, you will stay".

The crowd hastily departed, leaving only a few of his personal aides in the hall. Just then, a Jade Court Guard brought a letter up from below. Li Jiangxia began to read it as he spoke. "You have good sources of information".

He scanned the letter in his hand and saw that his family's elders were indeed in Funan. He understood at once.

'Crimson Reef Island is also getting involved… Li Jiangqian intends to abandon the Wasteland… It's not a bad strategy, and it's easy to relocate the Profound Peak Gate's cultivators. But Li Jiangqian, oh Li Jiangqian… have you considered the half-million common people in the Wasteland?'.

'Crimson Reef Island, Capital Immortals Dao—which of them isn't looking to make a profit? The moment we abandon this place, those two won't play your game of relocating people to bolster Shanji… They will be eaten clean and taken away!'.

Frustrated, he waved the Jade Court Guard away. The guest elder, Fu, was pleased with the praise and stepped forward. Seeing that only Li Jiangxia's confidants remained, he cupped his hands and whispered, "Young Master, Capital Immortals Dao is watching like a tiger, and their troops will surely march east. The Wasteland and the Eastern Shore have benefited from your grace for years and are both your pillars; neither should be lost. I hope the Young Master prepares early".

Li Jiangxia stood with his hands behind his back. "What preparations?".

Guest Elder Fu lowered his voice. "When Capital Immortals Dao attacks, first abandon the strongholds connecting the shores. When the enemy reaches Funan, you can dispatch troops to the Second Young Master's side to relieve his pressure. Then, when the Profound Peak arrays can no longer hold, you should cede the Wasteland and retreat to the Eastern Shore. The various lords will surely come to your rescue. The Wasteland may be lost, but the Young Master's own forces will be completely preserved".

Li Jiangxia understood his meaning instantly. He glanced at the man. "You mean the elders would come to rescue the Eastern Shore, while Funan is caught between the Golden Tang Gate and Capital Immortals Dao, its rear cut off by cultivators crossing the river. My second brother's forces would be utterly routed, losing both land and men".

Guest Elder Fu simply smiled without a word. He watched as Li Jiangxia put away the letter and looked up at him. Those golden eyes flashed as he lifted his foot, revealing a boot of black iron with gold trim. Fu was stunned. "Young Master, what is…".

BAM!

He felt a massive force slam into him as a heavy kick landed squarely on his chest, accompanied by the sound of cracking bones. His entire body flew through the air, crashing into a pillar with a loud boom and then tumbling, breaking several more pillars before spitting out a mouthful of blood.

"Pfft!".

Li Jiangxia's gaze was glacial, as if he were about to devour the man alive. He took a step forward, and with a sharp *shing*, he drew the sword from a nearby aide's scabbard. The bright blade pointed directly at Guest Elder Fu's forehead.

"You son of a bitch… My brother and I might squabble amongst ourselves, but that's for the Li clan to take power from the Li clan… What the hell are you? You dare come here to sow discord and play these treacherous games?!".

Guest Elder Fu didn't know where Li Jiangxia got such strength. A burning pain spread through his chest. He opened his eyes to see a pair of ruthless golden pupils staring back at him. The easygoing and generous young master was gone, replaced by someone with a terrifyingly cruel edge.

"Young Master!".

Li Jiangxia pressed the sword to his neck. An aide, who knew this man was courting death but hadn't realized how badly, quickly tried to intervene. "The Fu clan is, after all, an external family of Profound Peak. At this critical time… it is not advisable…".

'Profound Peak…'.

Li Jiangxia paused. He grabbed the man by his collar and lifted him into the air with one hand. The young man was already powerfully built, and Fu broke out in a cold sweat from the pain. He heard the youth's cold voice say, "If your words were to leave this room, everyone from Profound Peak would have to kneel on Pingya Island, and Kong Guxi would have to flay you alive to protect his ancestral lineage!".

Chapter 761: Threats

Hefted the man, Li Jiangxia tossed him to one of his trusted aides and paused briefly before giving the order.

"Send him to Kong Guxi."

The confidant departed with the man. Only then did a youth who had clearly been waiting for some time step into the hall. He approached and bowed.

Li Jiangxia's attitude softened considerably. "Xuantong, you've arrived just in time."

An Xuantong was the most outstanding cultivator of his generation in the An clan. A year older than Li Jiangxia, he was already at the Qi Refining realm. He had been in seclusion in the dense forests, mastering the *Art of the Azure Cliff and White Smoke*, a third-grade cultivation method from the Jiang family lineage. This technique only became viable again after the spiritual qi was restored following the return of the Jade True.

He looked weary from his journey. Clasping his fist, he retrieved a jade pendant from his sleeve.

"Young Master, I just came from the forests. Lord Cui passed along a message. This jade has been nurtured by his own spiritual sense. If the situation in the Wasteland changes, crush this talisman, and my lord will come to provide reinforcements."

"Good."

Li Jiangxia tucked the item into his sleeve and strode forward, listening as An Xuantong continued in a low voice, "I heard that Profound Peak Gate has lost its authority. The minor clans on the Wasteland border are wavering, sending feelers out to Capital Immortals Dao. Neither side is stable."

Li Jiangxia remained unconcerned. "Ignore them for now. Ultimately, they are Profound Peak's people. If they truly defect to Capital Immortals Dao, it is

Profound Peak that loses face. My older brother is the definition of vengeful; the clan is keeping detailed records. When this situation stabilizes… they will pay."

He turned the question back on him. "Elder An… is missing… and with so much happening, has the An clan remained stable these days?"

An Xuantong answered respectfully, "The An clan has been loyal for five generations; we are old vassals of the household. The entire family worries for the clan's affairs. Several of my younger brothers have come out of seclusion, and the elders repeatedly petitioned to come east and fight Capital Immortals Dao to the death. Fortunately, the elder lord stopped them…"

Unlike the reserved An Siwei from the previous generation, An Xuantong clearly had a mind of his own. Li Jiangxia knew these were not empty pleasantries; the An and Chen families were the most deeply entangled with the Li clan, bound securely to their war chariot. The moment the Li family showed instability, those two families grew the most anxious.

"Elder Zheyan is old," Li Jiangxia replied. "There is no need for him to risk himself again. These matters are for the younger generation… Is Pei Xie out of seclusion? I will go see him. You handle things here."

An Xuantong nodded quickly. "Lord Pei is currently managing affairs in the Wasteland."

Pei Xie was a rogue cultivator from the Wasteland and one of Li Jiangxia's closest friends, whom he had known for five or six years. This rogue cultivator was highly talented, and though somewhat older, he had relied on resources from Li Jiangxia to reach the late stage of the Qi Refining realm.

As Li Jiangxia's most trusted subordinate, An Xuantong had already arranged everything. He reported Pei Xie's location, saw Li Jiangxia off, and then returned to seek out another attendant.

An Xuantong asked about the incident with the guest elder. After listening to the explanation, he fell silent for a moment and sighed.

"A timely word cannot save a ghost destined to die. That man Fu Jie has a suicidal nature. I suppressed him time and time again, but he just assumed I was afraid of him stealing the spotlight. The moment I went into seclusion, he ran off to get himself killed."

He let out a cold laugh. "So be it. Did the Young Master send him to the Lake… or to Profound Peak?"

"Reporting to my lord, he was sent to Profound Peak."

An Xuantong understood immediately.

'He's afraid the Eldest Young Master (Li Jiangqian) will exploit this against Profound Peak… It seems the Third Young Master still pities the common people of the Wasteland. This means that even if we must retreat, he'll try to block Capital Immortals Dao and save more people for the Eastern Shore.'

'But sending him there… puts Profound Peak in a difficult spot. Fu En was, after all, loyal. This is bound to chill some hearts.'

Having anticipated the fallout, he immediately began preparations. He retrieved several scrolls and had some cultivators deliver them to his quarters. After a moment's hesitation, he returned and sought out someone to carry a message to the Lake.

"Profound Peak's mountain gate has fallen," he said quietly, "and Fu En died catastrophically during his breakthrough. This is already an extremely sensitive matter. At this critical time, this Fu Jie refused to keep a low profile and instead courted his own death. He is finished. The Fu family is unlikely to survive this. If anyone begs for mercy, the main family absolutely must not agree."

The Wasteland.

Kong Guxi felt a chill rise from the soles of his feet as he returned from Moongaze Lake. Behind him, Kong Qiuyan hurried off to issue orders to the sect members. The Gate Master walked quickly toward the main hall, where, as expected, a crowd was waiting.

Their expressions varied. Some were families and former sect members who had fled Shanji Prefecture, desperate for a place of refuge. Others were local cultivators from the Wasteland border whose mountains had been seized by Capital Immortals Dao, here to beg for aid. More still were members of the Kong clan itself.

The new Profound Peak mountain gate was not even as spacious as their original gate's reception peak. Now, crowded shoulder-to-shoulder with people, the grievances aimed at him, the Gate Master, threatened to blot out the sky.

Before Kong Guxi could speak, a gray cloud descended from the heavens. The mountain fell instantly silent as a voice boomed from above:

"The Guo clan of Crimson Reef Island has come to visit the Kong clan. Please show yourself!"

Crimson Reef Island had a terrible reputation. In an instant, the refugee cultivators and the opportunists alike scattered like the wind. Kong Guxi understood his own predicament clearly; seventy percent of his sect was disloyal, but he never realized it was this porous.

'I haven't even walked out the door… and they're already here.'

A middle-aged man in ornate red robes descended from the gray cloud. He was at the peak of the Foundation Establishment realm, his cultivation clearly honed to its limit. He wore a token at his waist, and behind him, a retinue of Crimson Reef cultivators stood in array. Though the man's features were grim, the display was imposing.

"My lord, I…"

Kong Guxi moved to greet him, but the man cut him off coldly.

"Guo Hongjian, of Crimson Reef Island."

Although Kong Guxi did not recognize the man, he knew from his bearing that he was from the direct lineage. He quickly gestured to the main seat. Guo Hongjian ignored him, refused the tea that was offered, and demanded, "That matter of gathering qi. Have you asked your masters?!"

Kong Guxi's expression changed drastically.

When Crimson Reef first asked, they addressed the "Kong clan," not Profound Peak. Now, this man did not call him Gate Master, and referred to the Li family as "your masters." The implication was that Profound Peak was destroyed, and the Kong clan were nothing but servants.

While this wasn't far from the truth, it was a reality that neither the Li family nor Profound Peak was willing to acknowledge. All other visiting powers had afforded them basic courtesy. How could they compare to Crimson Reef Island?

Kong Guxi swallowed his rage and replied respectfully, "Daoist Guo, I have received a reply. The Wasteland is a chaotic warzone. Capital Immortals Dao watches us like a tiger, ready to strike west at any moment. Your esteemed clan wishes to build palaces to gather qi, but I fear the war will interfere. It is simply not convenient for your sect to operate here."

Guo Hongjian was not interested in the polite refusal. He knew the roundabout answer meant no.

"Your Profound Peak? *Your* Profound Peak?" he spat. "You have to ask the Li clan's permission for everything. What Profound Peak do you have left to speak of! A few remnants! We should be praised for not simply crushing you, and you stand here playing games with me!"

Kong Guxi gritted his teeth, but Guo Hongjian stepped closer, his voice rising.

"Surnamed Kong! Back then, regarding the Radiant Sky Stone affair, wasn't it your family that instigated things? How many times did you sow discord? My sister entered the inland seas on orders, and wasn't it your people who blocked her at Salt Lake, forcing her to reroute and miss her chance! All the little tricks your Profound Peak has pulled over the years! Today you dare to dither with me? If we truly settle old debts, none of you have enough lives to pay!"

Behind them, Kong Qiuyan's face went white. Kong Guxi lowered his voice. "The decision regarding the gathering of qi was made at the Lake. It is not something a minor cultivator like myself can decide. My lord does not need to take his anger out on me."

"Then go get the Li family member!"

Guo Hongjian was no stranger to the Li family. He had crossed blades with Li Qinghong during the North-South conflict and had nearly captured Li Xijun while escorting the Radiant Sky Stone. His clan had sent him here for a precise reason.

'They just want me to probe Li Xi… Daoist Master Zhaojing. I'm only afraid I can't make *enough* trouble!'

He barked, "I see you're nothing but a sniveling servant. Get the Li representative here!"

Kong Guxi retreated silently, whispering to an attendant, "Go to the forest and request their presence."

Only then did Guo Hongjian take a seat. A short while later, a figure strolled into the hall. He had refined brows and steady eyes; while not stunningly handsome, he possessed a graceful air, draped in purple robes. Guo Hongjian glanced at him. "Who are you?"

Cui Jueyin had just rushed over from the dense forests. His Cui family was also an Eastern Sea power; he knew exactly what Crimson Reef Island cultivators were like, and the relationship between their two families was poor at best.

"Cui Jueyin of Moongaze Lake," he answered calmly. "I govern the dense forests and manage the Wasteland on the Eastern Shore."

Guo Hongjian sipped his tea. "Not a Li… a Cui will do just fine. Crimson Reef wishes to gather qi in the Wasteland. Your clan simply needs to cede a piece of land."

The youth opposite him remained perfectly composed. "It is not that Moongaze Lake is unwilling to lend the territory. Your esteemed clan uses Merging Fire, and gathering qi in this manner harms living souls. The inland is not the outer seas. Such an act against cosmic harmony cannot be permitted. Hengzhu and the Sword Gate both uphold the righteous path and will not tolerate such actions."

Before Guo Hongjian could explode, Cui Jueyin continued, "This is our family's concern. We fear, Fellow Daoist, that you will perish here and damage Crimson Reef's reputation. However, if you have no such fears, I can report this matter again and ask the Lake."

Guo Hongjian's expression turned ugly. Seeing Cui Jueyin's calm demeanor, he sneered, "If Moongaze Lake cannot help me with this, and I receive no news in three days… then it doesn't *have* to be Moongaze Lake. Once Capital Immortals Dao crosses the border, I shall be able to gather qi in the Wasteland all the same."

Hearing the threat, Cui Jueyin gave a mild, flat bow. "Daoist Guo speaks reasonably. By all means, wait for Capital Immortals Dao to cross the border, then you may gather your qi. When Capital Immortals Dao invades, and your Crimson Reef acts as their accomplice, killing everyone… let us see how the Sword Gate and Purple Smoke Gate react."

His voice turned cold. "Fellow Daoist, you ventured inland. Be careful not to cross a line and die here in the Wasteland. Crimson Reef wouldn't even be able to say a word."

Guo Hongjian laughed in fury. "Good, good… I truly want to see who your family intends to send to defend the Wasteland."

Though Cui Jueyin's cultivation was lower, his aura did not yield an inch. "As you wish, Fellow Daoist. Just don't laugh too soon, only to be slapped to death here in the Wasteland by a Daoist Master."

Cui Jueyin flicked his sleeve and departed.

Guo Hongjian was suddenly uncertain. This was, after all, a matter of life and death.

'I must visit Daoist Master Yehui's mountain gate and listen to his divine instructions,' he thought. 'This Cui seems to have a strong background. I need to investigate him.'

Guo Hongjian likewise stormed off, riding the wind away. The confrontation had ended badly for everyone, but Kong Guxi, waiting at the side, felt a wave of relief. He wasn't afraid of them fighting; he was afraid that the Li family would back down and negotiate.

When the hall doors were sealed and the array was activated, Kong Guxi finally spoke. "Cui Jueyin was strong. The Lake must still have an ace up its sleeve."

Kong Qiuyan nodded, answering fearfully, "I hope so."

Kong Guxi sighed. "Our mountain gate is gone. Regardless, Profound Peak owes the Fu family. We must care for their descendants in the future."

Kong Qiuyan only nodded. Kong Guxi studied the haggard look on her face. The ordeals of the past two years had clearly broken her spirit. That unique composure belonging to the disciple of a great house was gone, replaced by a constant, forward-looking terror. The sight left a bitter taste in Kong Guxi's mouth.

"Yan'er," he said, "my vision was too shallow… Back then, when the North-South conflict was looming, the sect discussed a marriage alliance with the Li clan. I held onto the empty airs of an immortal sect, feeling that you should not marry down…"

"After Li Xicheng died, Aunt Tingyun even had you meet Li Xijun. You, too, felt he was a great character. But the idea was shot down by us old stubborn fools and arrogant fools… Otherwise… otherwise…"

Kong Qiuyan was silent for a long moment before she replied. "Otherwise what? Otherwise the sect would be better off today? Or perhaps, otherwise I would simply be a widow by now? My lord, although you act with the sect in your heart, you cannot say such things. I still have sect duties to attend to. I will take my leave."

She exited through a side door, leaving Kong Guxi stunned by the response. Just then, a frantic, chaotic banging echoed from the main hall doors.

Kong Guxi still felt hollow, but his body reacted first. He moved to open the door and found an elder man knocking urgently. Kong Guxi stared blankly as the door opened, revealing a figure bound and pressed to the ground in the courtyard, wearing rich robes, his face obscured.

The elder, Kong Guli, his face flushed red, whispered, "Gate Master, Fu Jie provoked the Third Young Master, intending to harm the direct lineage! He was captured and sent here… The Third Young Master's meaning is… for the Gate Master to handle it himself."

Kong Guxi's vision went black, and he nearly collapsed. He steadied himself and asked, "Is this… Elder Fu En's direct kin? Fu Jie… yes, I have heard that name."

Seeing the man beside him nod, Kong Guxi felt his mouth go dry. The Fu clansman knelt on the hall floor, moaning, mumbling incoherently. Kong Guxi was lost. He grabbed his brother by the arm.

"Wasn't he called clever? Brave? Always saying shocking things? How could he fall so low as to sow discord!"

No one answered him, least of all Kong Guli, who didn't know the specifics. The man on the floor just whimpered, unable to speak clearly. Kong Guxi finally managed to summon the guards who brought him, and after listening to their report, he felt a fire consuming his heart. He stalked forward, grabbed Fu Jie by the collar, and snarled:

"Was this the time to be clever? You are a child of this sect, sheltered for generations! How could you interfere in the affairs of an Immortal Clan… trying to be a petty strategist…"

The wound on Fu Jie's chest had not healed. His pale lips trembled. Mortally terrified that Fu Jie might actually speak, Kong Guxi slammed him back onto the ground, interrupting his words. With a sharp *shing*, Kong Guxi drew his sword and hacked down with all his might.

He struck in such a hurry that with a wet tearing sound, the man before him was split in two. Blood, bile, and viscera spilled out, splashing across Kong Guxi's feet.

The Gate Master stumbled back a step and threw the sword down with a clang. Dizzy, refusing to look at the remains on the floor, he ordered, "Quickly! Send someone to thank the Third Young Master!"

Chapter 762: Inquiries, Before and After

Funan.

The main mountain of Funan seemed much emptier than before. A young man in silver armor and black robes stood at the peak, with six ancient-style silver tokens hanging from his waist. His long spear was planted in the ground beside him, occasionally sparking with motes of lightning.

A woman in a red palace dress, holding a six-pointed brazier from which a feather-like flame danced, quickly ascended to join him. The young man looked up wearily, setting aside the thin paper in his hand.

"Elder Sister, you've come. Is Situ Mo here? What word from Weizeng?"

"No," Li Minggong shook her head, her expression heavy with worry. "There's no need to worry about Weizeng. Bringing him into the family back then was an exceptionally wise decision. He can hold his own now and is completely loyal. With him watching the front lines and us stabilizing the rear, Situ Mo will not move easily."

"I came this time because I received news from the main family..."

She handed the letter to Li Chenghui. The young man read it, his calm expression shifting to surprise. "Fu Jie was killed..."

They exchanged a look. Li Minggong sealed the hall doors and lowered her voice. "It no longer matters which young master is using this to weaken Profound Peak's prestige and influence. In short, the matter is trivial. What's important is Crimson Reef Island. Guo Hongjian appearing in person—that is a major event."

Li Chenghui read the letter twice more. "Jiangqian is ruthless, decisive, and willing to sacrifice Profound Peak. Jiangxia, though arrogant, prefers the open and

righteous path and feels pity for the common people. This arrangement is correct. There is no need for us to be reassigned."

"As for Crimson Reef Island… let Guo Hongjian do as he pleases. The man doesn't look very bright; in truth, he relies entirely on Yehui's instructions. We can only wait."

Li Chenghui pondered this for a moment, confused. "But Capital Immortals Dao is being far too polite to our family. Ever since they conquered the mountain gate, they haven't seemed particularly keen on avenging themselves against Profound Peak or Kong Haiying. Otherwise, why would there still be no reaction after all this time?"

Just as Li Minggong was about to answer, the hall fell deathly quiet. The great array shuddered slightly. The tightly sealed doors rattled violently, as if pushed by some unseen force.

Creee…

The hall doors swung open naturally, from the inside out. A cold wind rushed in from outside. Li Chenghui felt the wind, bone-chilling and sharp, and shot up from the main seat. His heart sank.

'Purple Mansion!'

To a Purple Mansion realm expert, the mountain's array was no different than air. For such a cultivator to bother pushing the door open upon entering was already a sign of considerable friendliness. Regardless of who the visitor was, neither of them had the right to remain standing. They moved to the side, bowing low to welcome the guest.

"We juniors of the Li clan respectfully welcome the Daoist Master," Li Minggong said deferentially. "We wonder which esteemed personage has graced us…"

A figure in a simple brown robe materialized before them, faintly radiating a profound and mysterious light. Neither sibling dared to look up.

"We pay our respects to the Daoist Master," Li Minggong said.

The Daoist Master's voice was surprisingly amiable, though it carried a heavy, deep resonance.

"No need for such ceremony! I am Sumian, the Abbot of Profound Wonder Temple. I searched the seas for several circles, but I never found a trace of the Daoist Master, so I came here to ask you two."

They quickly guided him to the main seat and stood respectfully to the side. Only then did they see the Daoist Master's true appearance: he was dressed as a layman, appearing middle-aged. Age did not show on his features, but his voice was deep.

"Rumors are flying everywhere, and going directly to the Lake is inconvenient. Seeing as you two are both here, I turned aside to ask… has Daoist Zhaojing returned?"

Li Minggong hesitated instantly. But facing a Daoist Master, she couldn't exchange a glance with her brother. In that brief moment of hesitation, Sumian sighed.

"No need to hide it. The sea is in chaos; I heard the news as well. Pursued by Changxiao. I am just asking for any sign, any trace of his whereabouts. Any small bit of news would keep the two of us from being this worried."

Li Chenghui couldn't coordinate a story with his sister, so he could only listen as Li Minggong replied, her voice fraught with worry, "Reporting to the Daoist Master, we have not returned to the Lake for several days, but we have received no news whatsoever of the Master's return… We do not know his current situation."

Sumian studied Li Minggong, as if discerning something. After a long moment, he demanded, "Then where is Li Zhouwei?! Things are in such a mess, and he still hasn't come out to stabilize the situation? Must he wait for Capital Immortals Dao to attack?! Without him here to stand guard, how can a few of you possibly withstand their plots!"

At Sumian's sharp question, Li Minggong looked awkward. She had no choice but to answer, "The Family Head has gone into seclusion…"

Sumian flicked his sleeve, appearing impatient. "Any time would be better than this one! Your Lake is not some great nexus of spiritual qi; his breakthrough will probably take even longer!"

Li Minggong paused, then said hesitantly, "Yes… a breakthrough from Foundation Establishment can be long or short. We juniors cannot predict the time… Our direct lineage…"

"Enough!"

Sumian cut her off with a wave of his sleeve before she could finish. "You two just focus on defending Funan. You don't need to worry about the Wasteland. I will go find Yehui and ask him for the details."

The two quickly expressed their thanks. When they finished bowing and rose, the Daoist Master had already vanished. Li Chenghui felt a deep sense of unease. He hesitated twice, but the question he wanted to ask remained unspoken.

Li Minggong's worry only deepened. She paced the hall anxiously. "Daoist Master Sumian usually manages nothing, but in a true crisis, he appears…"

Li Minggong stopped abruptly. Li Chenghui also looked up, thoughtful. He had detected a strange floral scent in the air. A clear breeze drifted in from the courtyard, hovered, and then coalesced in the hall, forming a person.

This woman wore an autumn-yellow satin robe embroidered with butterfly patterns. Her face was lovely, with thin eyebrows and two small dots of teal pigment at the corners of her eyes. The moment she appeared, she raised a hand to stop the siblings' movements, frowning.

"Chenghui… Minggong… it is you two, correct?"

They understood immediately: the previous Daoist Master had barely left, and a second one was already in their hall. They had no choice but to retreat to the side and bow respectfully. "We pay our respects to the Daoist Master."

The female Daoist Master kept frowning, though her voice was melodic and gentle. "Rise… I am Daoist Master Tinglan from the Purple Smoke Blessed Land. I have a question or two for you. There is no need for such ceremony."

She seemed to briefly scan the hall's furnishings. "Has a Daoist Master with willow-leaf eyes, carrying a bright lantern, been here to find you?"

She paused for the briefest instant, then asked, "Never mind… *has any* Daoist Master been here to find you?"

Li Minggong replied respectfully, "Daoist Master Sumian was just here…"

She recounted the entire previous conversation. The female Daoist Master paced one step in the hall, then sat down in the main seat, silent.

Her makeup was exquisite. As she sat there quietly, she was as refined as a divine statue. Illuminated by the dawn light, a faint, weak rainbow halo pulsed behind

her head. Daoist Master Tinglan's expression, however, was not beautiful. Her eyes had even turned somewhat sinister.

The satin-robed Daoist Master narrowed her eyes slightly and spoke, enunciating every single word.

"I just came from Profound Wonder Temple. Old Daoist Master Qi is right there in the temple. He has not moved at all."

Chapter 763: Capital Immortals Dao's Choice

The moment she spoke, the entire grand hall fell silent.

'The Daoist Master Sumian from earlier was fake!'

Li Minggong was shaken, a profound chill flooding her mind. The siblings stood frozen by the side of the hall, a suffocating, bone-chilling pressure filling the air. Behind her, Li Chenghui's earlier suspicions were instantly resolved, replaced by that same cold dread.

"That person was probing for information," he thought. "He asked about Zhouwei… his entire purpose was to ask about Zhouwei…".

How could a mere Foundation Establishment cultivator possibly see through the divine abilities of a Purple Mansion expert?. If that wasn't Sumian, who was it? Yehui? Changxiao?.

The thought flashed past like lightning, only to be replaced by a second, more terrifying one.

"If the first Sumian could be fake… how do we know this Daoist Master Tinglan is real?!".

Tinglan, meanwhile, lowered her gaze in thought. Seeing the two so shocked and suspicious they couldn't speak, the satin-robed Daoist Master tapped the table, her voice laced with doubt.

"He probably isn't Changxiao. While Changxiao's Life Divine Ability isn't primarily focused on confusing the mind, deluding you two would be trivial. To disguise himself as Sumian… logically, it must be someone whose Life Divine Ability is still incomplete.".

Her voice was gentle, giving them a moment to digest the information. Seemingly reaching her own conclusion, she asked again, "Your family head. Where is he currently in seclusion?".

For a second, the air in the hall seemed to vanish. Li Minggong froze.

While everyone in the clan knew Li Zhouwei was in seclusion, there was no specific news about *where*. But it wasn't hard to guess… the place where spiritual qi gathered, the nexus where Bright Yang converged, it had to be Gardenia Scenery Mountain.

As the Daoist Master before them repeated the question, Li Chenghui stepped forward and answered honestly, bowing, "His seclusion was a matter discussed between the Daoist Master and the Family Head. It should be somewhere on the Lake. As for the specific mountain, we do not know.".

Tinglan listened and shook her head, her expression turning serious. "Fine. I will ask you only one thing. What is the status of Zhaojing's soul lamp?".

Without hesitation, Li Chenghui bowed. "The soul lamp is fine, I ask the Daoist Master to rest assured. If something had truly happened to our Daoist Master, the rising Bright Yang would have illuminated an entire domain. The Eastern Sea shows no such phenomenon, which is proof enough.".

"I know," Tinglan nodded grimly.

"There is no phenomenon in the Eastern Sea, otherwise your family wouldn't be in this state. As long as Zhaojing is still alive, Li Zhouwei's seclusion will not be disturbed. Things will just be… rather difficult for a while.".

She rose and paced down from the main seat. "I heard," she said softly, "that your family still holds a token to my Blessed Land, left by that old Ling Yanzi back then. My Blessed Land happens to be accepting disciples these days, and there are still spots remaining. Ling Yanzi's own lifespan is nearing its end, and he is anxious to pass on his legacy. Send a few people over.".

Having said her piece, she vanished from the hall like a gust of wind. The two bowed deeply to see her off. Long after she was gone, Li Minggong finally stood up, feeling a chill crawl up her spine. "Brother," she whispered, "Foundation Establishment cultivators cannot see through divine abilities. Never mind one transforming into another Daoist Master, even if one transformed into our own ancestor… how many of us would be able to tell?".

Li Chenghui's expression was heavy. He picked up his spear from the side. "Whether we can see through it or not, we must act as if we can't. The best course is to say less. Daoist Master Tinglan mentioned the old story and clarified the path to the Purple Smoke Blessed Land. It probably wasn't an impersonation.".

He fell silent for a moment, avoiding any mention of Li Ximing or Li Zhouwei. He only asked, "Who among the Jiangque generation is suitable for Purple Smoke?".

Li Minggong saw the exhaustion in his eyes and knew not to press the other matters. "Purple Smoke primarily accepts female cultivators, and their requirements are strict. I think Queyi is the most suitable, but several of the children can go and try. Whoever ends up staying can join the Purple Smoke Gate.".

"Then they must go," Li Chenghui said, then hesitated. "However, given the current turmoil, our family's direct descendants should not be traveling, and we have no spare manpower for an escort. Write a letter first. Invite Senior Ling Yanzi to come here as a guest. He can take them back with him when he leaves. That will avoid complications.".

The young man put his brush down, resting it on the edge of the table. "It's just… although Queyi is an obedient and clever child, she lacks her own opinions. With the family in such trouble, once she's on someone else's territory, who knows if she'll be bullied…".

Li Minggong stepped forward, placing her brazier on the table. "We cannot predict the future," she comforted him. "If she enters Purple Smoke, she will at least have a life-saving talisman, and one's temperament is not set in stone. It used to be said that Elder Brother Chengliao was the accomplished one, I was too soft, and you were too reserved. Aren't all of us holding our own now…?".

Li Chenghui finally nodded. At the mention of his brother, Li Chengliao, a deep weariness crossed his face. "Brother Liao… if he were here, the family would be much more stable. The younger generation is not what it used to be; they lack discipline. You and I were forced to take up this burden halfway through and have no energy left to manage them.".

He finished writing the letter to Purple Smoke and handed it to Li Minggong, just as a figure rushed frantically into the hall. He was white-haired, his face a mass of wrinkles, his back hunched—it was Qu Bushi.

The old man's clothing and provisions had improved greatly; at a glance, one might mistake him for the patriarch of some lesser clan. But his face was stricken with panic, and he had lost all composure. "My lords!" he reported, "Situ Mo has made his move! Capital Immortals Dao's forces have also reached the river's edge! There are already calls for help from the northern border!".

Li Chenghui's form instantly dissolved into lightning and shot out of the hall. Li Minggong exited with Qu Bushi, who was visibly frantic. Li Minggong tried to reassure him in a low voice, "Old senior, do not worry. Funan is heavily defended. The people coming this way are merely a diversion to tie us down. Their main army has gone to the Wasteland, greedy for plunder.".

Qu Bushi didn't know the larger picture; the news of Li Ximing's disappearance alone was enough to terrify him. Having scraped by in the Eastern Sea for a hundred years, the old man only held one truth in his heart:

'It doesn't matter who is greedy for what, east or west. It doesn't matter what you lose, as long as you have your Purple Mansion expert. If you lose your Purple Mansion expert, nothing you gain matters…'.

The two sped onward and saw rolling golden qi to the west; a battle had already erupted. Li Minggong squinted into the distance. Li Chenghui's ocular arts were stronger than hers; he saw the distant figures first, decisively changed direction, and his heavy voice echoed back:

"Capital Immortals Dao's attitude is ambiguous, and they didn't send many people. You all will be enough to resist them. I am going to reinforce Ding Weizeng. Situ Mo has been coming year after year; it's become too easy for him. If we don't beat him until it hurts and kill a few Golden Tang Gate members, that old bastard will never learn restraint…".

Li Minggong tossed the Chongming Profound Insight Screen into his hands. Li Chenghui immediately vanished in a streak of lightning. Hearing his words, Li Minggong's pounding heart finally began to slow.

'Capital Immortals Dao… why did their attitude suddenly soften…?'.

A streak of light rapidly approached from the horizon, while another figure rode the wind from the front. She was at the mid-stage of Foundation Establishment, with somewhat captivating features, but dressed in plain robes and holding a sword. She skimmed across the water; it was Miaoshui.

Miaoshui had once been a cultivator of Dense Cloud Cave and had some friction with Li Minggong. But when she surrendered years ago, Li Minggong had personally pleaded her case. Minggong was generous, magnanimous, and willing to bend; after a few friendly overtures, the old grudges were naturally never mentioned again.

In their last clash with Capital Immortals Dao, Miaoshui had nearly perished, saved only by the intervention of the Daoist Master. Having hovered on the brink of death, Miaoshui's temperament had changed considerably, and her cultivation had improved. Seeing Li Minggong, she wore a grave expression.

"Minggong, you're here. We just received word from the Northern Brocade River King. Guan Lingdie is leading a group of Capital Immortals Dao cultivators this way. Gongsun Bofan and Song Yunbai are right behind her… there are six in total.".

With Li Chenghui and Ding Weizeng occupied with the Golden Tang Gate, their side consisted of Li Minggong, Qu Bushi, Miaoshui, and Elder White Ape. There was also Sun Bo, a guest elder originally from Profound Peak, still on the mountain. They were clearly outmatched in strength.

However, the moment Li Minggong heard that Guan Gongxiao was not present, she knew he must be leading the main force to attack the Wasteland. She let out a heavy sigh of relief. After all, besides Li Zhouwei, the Li family currently had no one who could handle the Capital Immortals Dao Young Lord. If he had come personally, it would have been a catastrophe.

"Fellow Daoist Miaoshui," Li Minggong said, already prepared. While crushing a jade pendant to summon reinforcements from the family, she retrieved a chain of small, cold-iron rings from her sleeve, all engraved with Pit Water patterns. There were eighteen silver rings, each no larger than a fist.

She pressed them into Miaoshui's hands. "This is Capital Immortals Dao's own artifact, the Pit-Metal Encircling Chain. Use it for now. This artifact excels at entanglement and imprisonment; you've tested it a few times before. Leave Gongsun Bofan to me…".

Although their side was short two people, Li Chenghuai was just across the river on the north bank, only a moment away. He wore the Supreme Feather Nightrobe and carried the Yang family's Night Ghost Secret Talisman, which could summon Foundation Establishment-level yin-qi puppets. He could easily stall two opponents.

Since Guan Gongxiao had not come, and Guan Kan had been killed by Li Zhouwei long ago, as long as they blocked Guan Lingdie and Gongsun Bofan, defending Funan would not be difficult. They wouldn't even need Cui Jueyin for support, freeing him to reinforce Profound Peak.

Miaoshui accepted the artifact and nodded. With a light gesture, the chain of cold-iron rings began to weave through the Converging Water around her wrist. Li Minggong soared upward on her fire, activating her Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier and Pure Feather Li-Fire simultaneously, unleashing countless red and white plumes backed by soaring flames.

As expected, a woman in a colorful skirt and azure ribbons flew in from the north, tall and slender. Gongsun Bofan, still in his straw cloak, stood beside her holding his saber. The scattering of cultivators behind them were clearly not famous figures.

Li Minggong glanced at them from afar, recalling Li Chenghui's words. As the group drew near, she bowed slightly and said, "Fellow Daoist Lingdie.".

Guan Lingdie, who had been extremely hostile the first time they clashed, showed little malice in her eyes today. Seeing Li Minggong bow, the woman instinctively raised her hand, almost returning the courtesy. Her hand reached her chest before she remembered she was here to pick a fight. She awkwardly retracted it. "Ming… Li Minggong…".

Guan Lingdie recovered quickly, adjusting her attitude and stating calmly, "In the battle on the river years ago, my Capital Immortals Dao narrowly lost. Today, we find this opportunity, and wish to spar a round or two with our Daoist friends!".

This statement stunned not only Li Minggong, but even the guest elders on Capital Immortals Dao's side. Only Gongsun Bofan, looking thoughtful, gripped his saber tighter and watched the group calmly.

Li Minggong simply summoned her feather-fire and nodded. "Please!".

Shanji Prefecture.

At the Profound Peak Gate, the mountains were as majestic as ever, but the ground was a scene of utter ruin. Palaces, pavilions, and even the courtyards

on the mountainsides were in disarray. All manner of items were scattered across the steps; the place had clearly been looted clean.

Black-robed Capital Immortals Dao disciples could be seen moving about the mountain gate. Some held brushes, transcribing array formations; others held jade vases, suctioning spiritual fire and spirit water from the treasure grounds. After draining them, they didn't bother to destroy the arrays but simply walked away, heading to the summit to deliver the spiritual items.

Despite invading another's mountain gate, there was a strange sense of order to their actions. The Capital Immortals Dao disciples were highly disciplined, each working silently at their tasks, only occasionally hiding a spiritual item or spirit stone in their sleeves, without any fighting or commotion.

Following the steps upward, spiritual qi billowed from the great cavern of Profound Peak's main summit. Upon the jade seat where Changxi had meditated for centuries, a youth in a deep blue Daoist robe was now seated. He had a rather sharp chin and could be considered handsome, but his expression was not pleasant.

The Daoist Master tossed a brownish-yellow token up and down in his hand. Kneeling before him was a man in black Daoist clothes, his face marked with several black lines. A white silk ribbon tied at his waist trailed on the ground as he pressed his forehead respectfully to the floor.

"Paying respects to the Daoist Master!".

Hearing this, Yehui, seated above, finally turned his gaze to Guan Gongxiao. This young lord was very talented and extremely respectful. Yehui had always found him useful, so he gave him an extra look. "You are obedient enough.".

Guan Gongxiao said reverently, "The Daoist Master is as lofty as Mount Taishi, his vision spanning ten thousand miles. This junior has only a mouse's short-sighted view and would never dare defy you.".

Yehui ignored the flattery. "This is clearly the Li family's weakest moment," he said quietly. "Do you know… why I ordered you to sit here and do nothing?".

Guan Gongxiao hesitated. "Daoist Master Zhaojing?".

Yehui gave him a heavy look. "If you couldn't even see that, you wouldn't need to be the Young Lord. Right now, whoever moves against the Li family is just a spear for Changxiao, to be used to force out Li Zhouwei. This holds zero benefit

for my Capital Immortals Dao. You must understand, Li Ximing is a cultivator who is deeply bound to his family. If you grievously wound *him*, he might just dust himself off, walk away, and maybe even greet you the next time he sees you. But if you were to kill Li Minggong and force Li Zhouwei to appear…".

Yehui paused briefly. "Then you, Lingdie, and everyone in Capital Immortals Dao, up and down, would have to be ready to face the Profound Light from the Great Void… at any time.".

Guan Gongxiao nodded slowly. "But… our sect is already enemies with the Li family. To do nothing… to just let this pass…".

But the Daoist Master said softly, "You think our few conflicts made us mortal enemies? No. As long as you and Lingdie didn't die… and Li Zhouwei and Li Chenghui didn't die… this entire affair can be spun as me helping *him* (Zhaojing) build his reputation. It was just part of the standard process of carving up Profound Peak.".

"The only event truly worth debating was me driving him from the Eastern Sea. And even that, I can claim I was *used*… Do you understand?".

Guan Gongxiao listened, looking slightly bewildered. He watched the Daoist Master continue.

"In this world, the truth is never what happened. It is what it *can be*, and what both sides *need* it to be for their mutual benefit. Changxiao is strong, and I was coerced by him. That is enough.".

"Teaming up with someone like Changxiao, one single misstep, and you will be the one carrying the blame for him. I have already handled this affair delicately enough…".

Yehui stood up, passing the brownish-yellow jade token from his left hand to his right. He raised an eyebrow.

"Since he, Li Ximing, was willing to cede the mountain gate, and Kong Haiying is now dead at my hands, what irreconcilable hatred remains between us?. Changxiao still wants me to take the fall for him? How could such a wonderful thing happen in this world?".

Chapter 764: Retreat

Guan Gongxiao clasped his hands, still confused. He lifted his head, his forehead no longer pressed to the floor, and his voice remained low.

"This junior is dull… I still do not understand. According to the reports from the surrendering Profound Peak disciples, the one in the secret chamber was Fu En. Daoist Master Zhaojing investigated it, and when I later took his belongings, everyone also said it was Fu En."

Before Yehui could answer, Guan Gongxiao bowed respectfully again.

"This junior understands the Daoist Master's meaning—that all things can be weighed. But Kong Haiying was a Purple Mansion seed and exceptionally talented. How can this be compromised? If we simply let this be glossed over, and Kong Haiying breaks through, I fear he will be no less a threat than Li Ximing."

A flicker of approval finally appeared in Yehui's expression. He nodded, and with a pinch of his thumb and forefinger, he flipped the brownish-yellow jade token in his hand, revealing the golden character carved upon it.

□Kong□

The Daoist Master spoke softly.

"How could I not know? I have met Kong Haiying personally. We fought, we drank together, we even allied to deal with that pig-headed Guo E. I am familiar with his aura. I would not mistake it."

His gaze grew complex. "The one in that secret chamber was Kong Haiying. The aura was clear. Everything else might be wrong, but that point is undeniable."

Understanding dawned on Guan Gongxiao. He replied respectfully, "This junior understands! This is the Li family's 'sincerity.' They spread the news that it was Fu En to save face, while in reality, they handed Kong Haiying over to us as a tacit plea for peace… No wonder… no wonder…"

With that piece solved, everything else clicked into place. He continued, "Therefore… the heavy defenses at Funan and the emptiness of the Profound Peak Wasteland follow the same logic. If not for the Daoist Master's guidance, this junior would have nearly blundered into disaster!"

Yehui's gaze, however, did not rest on him. It drifted past, settling on the 'Kong' character in his hand with an illusory emptiness. His heart felt hollow.

'He is well and truly dead…'

Guan Gongxiao was still thinking, stating respectfully, "Daoist Master, rest assured. The Kong clan's lineage… I will wipe it out…"

He was halfway through his sentence when Yehui shot him a weary look. The Daoist Master's eyes were sharp-cornered, and his exhaustion only made them look more vicious. Guan Gongxiao froze instantly.

"Give Purple Smoke Gate some face," Yehui said coldly. "Kill, kill, kill… You've come all the way from the overseas to Jiangbei, and all you can think about is killing. Look at the Revering Radiance Gate over there. Learn from Zhong Qian! Revering Radiance Gate is already the leader of Jiangbei's righteous path, and you are still here, obsessed with killing!"

Guan Gongxiao bowed in terror. "This junior knows his crime!"

Yehui slapped the jade token onto the table. "When you are inland, you follow inland rules! You must play their games. If I hadn't made that trip personally back then, Gongsun Bofan would have defected to Chengshui Marsh long ago. Why would he ever serve you, Guan Gongxiao!"

Guan Gongxiao lowered his head. "There are half a million commoners in the Wasteland who hate Capital Immortals Dao. If we do not use them as blood food, we are leaving countless enemies behind!"

A flicker of real anger stirred in Yehui. "Still thinking with that overseas brain !" he cursed. "Li Chenghui already showed you how it's done, and you still haven't learned! Why is the Dense Cloud territory still in chaos? When you take the Wasteland, you do not touch those half-million people. You show great magnanimity. Then you turn heaven and earth upside down—depose the main branches of the lesser clans and elevate the secondary ones; support the outsiders and punish the insiders. The foundation of Profound Peak, its people, will instantly dissolve. They are about to be absorbed by Purple Smoke anyway; they won't have a chance to correct it. By then, they'll only have one

or two Foundation Establishment cultivators left. In three generations, the hatred will vanish!"

Guan Gongxiao could only nod in agreement.

Daoist Master Yehui continued in a calmer tone, "From now on, I will not show my face often. White ye will do the same. Dismantle the great clans, carve up the spirit fields, and forbid annexations. We will no longer walk the path of blood-qi. We will operate as a righteous path."

Guan Gongxiao whispered, "Many of the Dao methods in our sect rely on blood-qi. We will have to rely on our overseas footholds for supplies."

Yehui shook his head. "Learn from the North. Apply heavy pressure and exploitation, forcing those below to secretly refine blood-qi themselves. Then, we shall 'exorcise demons and defend the Dao.' And just like that, the blood-qi is ours. You can learn something from every direction… You still have much to improve upon."

"Learn from the Li Clan's centralized control over the populace, but not their rigid self-restraint. Learn from the Golden Feather Sect's laws against annexation, but not their defensive lack of ambition. You can learn how Revering Radiance Gate manipulates public opinion to pose as righteous, or how Profound Wonder Temple tricks its disciples into bitter cultivation, all to gather qi for their Daoist Master… Even Situ Mo, that opportunist… his methods are worth your study."

"And that blood-qi. From now on, our own disciples use less of it. Using it to heal injuries is fine, but don't let people see you walking around radiating turbid energy, looking like an obvious demonic cultivator!"

The Daoist Master stood and paced down from his seat. Glancing at Guan Gongxiao's expression, his voice finally took on a trace of solemn gravity.

"Your aunt died early, before she could bear me an heir, and I am too tired to remarry. Capital Immortals Dao will belong to you and your Guan clan in the future. If not for your mother's dying wish, I would have lost patience and replaced you as Young Lord long ago. I would never have taught you this much. You would do well to remember that."

Guan Gongxiao was overcome with gratitude. He knocked his head respectfully on the floor three times. "Uncle's guidance will be remembered, every word.

The Daoist Master is the Lord of Capital Immortals Dao, today and for a hundred, even a thousand years. Gongxiao will serve you faithfully, without a second thought."

"Haha!" Yehui laughed twice, then cursed, "Scram… You certainly learned how to flatter quickly enough."

As Guan Gongxiao retreated, Yehui was struck by a moment of contemplation. He stood and murmured to himself.

"Having a descendant like Gongxiao may not be a bad thing. Someone brilliant like Li Zhouwei is too risky; if he doesn't ascend to the clouds, he plunges into the abyss. Someone weak and mediocre like Kong Guxi is just talentless trash destined for ruin. And those like Zhong Qian or Li Xijun are gifts from heaven, far too rare. Someone who is simply willing to learn and willing to listen… that is enough."

The Wasteland.

As the sky darkened, Kong Guxi stepped out of the hall, only to see a crowd of people rushing up the peak. The old man leading them was his own brother, Kong Guli, his face a mask of shock and terror. He yelled:

"Ninth Brother! Capital Immortals Dao is attacking!"

The situation was so urgent that Kong Guli forgot all honorifics, shouting his sibling's ranking. Kong Guxi was too stunned to care. His hands and feet went numb. "How many?!"

Kong Xiaxiang, standing to the side, had long since lost the arrogance in his brow. "We heard the Capital Immortals Dao Young Lord, Guan Gongxiao, is leading them personally! There are more than ten Foundation Establishment cultivators. The sky is filled with the light of their techniques! Our scouts took one look from afar and fled back immediately."

"I already went down to give the order, telling the main lineages and cultivators in every prefecture to escort the populace and retreat. Most of them are loyal…"

"Guan Gongxiao is here!"

Kong Guxi was terrified. He gritted his teeth. "We already had evacuation plans, but they came so fast… We won't be able to stop them. I fear few will survive…"

As he spoke, Kong Guxi immediately turned back into the hall. "Qiuyan! Grab everything!"

Just as Kong Qiuyan acknowledged the order and turned to leave, a massive explosion tore through the sky. A gray cloud blazing with fierce flames appeared, casting a white-hot crimson glare across the heavens as rings of clouds shot toward them.

BOOM!

A torrential rain of Merging Fire poured down, smashing into the mountain's defensive array and causing it to shake violently. The great hall swayed, forcing Kong Guxi to ride the wind and burst through the array's barrier.

The figure in the sky stood atop a cloud-ring, wielding a token of Merging Fire, his back lit by billowing gray flames. Who else could it be but Guo Hongjian?

"Kong remnants! Come out and die!"

As the Gate Master of Profound Peak, Kong Guxi was not lacking for artifacts. With a light flick of his sleeve, he summoned a pale green mountain peak and a deep black banner. Grasping the flag, he sent the mountain flying up to meet the flames.

"Fellow Daoist Guo, why such burning anger!"

He already hated Guo Hongjian to the bone, but he couldn't afford to offend Crimson Reef Island. Even with a belly full of rage, he couldn't let a single sharp word escape.

He had only just activated his artifact when the scalding Merging Fire crashed down, covering his defenses and causing the artifacts to groan and crackle. He heard incantations from the other side and vaguely saw a red light speeding toward him.

Merging Fire damages one's essence and life; it was one of the most insidious Dao lineages. He wouldn't dare let it strike him, frantically raising the black banner to defend himself.

But Kong Guxi had little talent to begin with and had spent the first half of his life as a wastrel with almost no combat experience. Guo Hongjian, while not particularly bright, had survived numerous life-and-death battles. He feinted, then unleashed a rope of fire from his other side, attempting to hook Kong Guxi's artifact.

CLANG!

Fortunately, Kong Guli arrived in time. The old man was far more experienced in fighting. He thrust out a spear, hooking the fire-rope and triggering a blinding flash in the air. Guo Hongjian was just about to shout a threat to boost his own morale when a thunderous roar erupted from below:

"Dog thief!!"

A man in a golden-armored mask burst upward, spear in one hand, axe in the other. His face was hidden, but the eyes visible through the mask were shot with crimson blood. "Do not harm my Profound Peak Gate Master!"

He shot through the flames like a streak of golden light, splitting the cloud-ring with his axe and sending Guo Hongjian stumbling back. Only then did Kong Guxi manage to escape. He looked up to see radiant light bloom in the sky as the white Steps of Radiance descended. Cui Jueyin appeared, saying softly:

"Gate Master, leave this to me! Take the others and retreat first."

Kong Guxi scrambled back. He tried three or four times but couldn't extinguish the flames clinging to his artifact; his own robes were beginning to smolder. Kong Guli stepped closer, helping him put out the Merging Fire as the other Kong Foundation Establishment cultivators gathered around.

Kong Guxi looked at the black clouds massing on the horizon. Fu Yuezi was fighting with extreme ferocity; his Immortal Foundation, 'Heavenly Gilded Helm,' activated, he glowed with golden light, coordinating with Cui Jueyin's techniques to tie down their opponent. But more figures were flying in from the distance. Kong Guxi was horrified.

"Capital Immortals Dao attacks with such force. What of Moongaze Lake?"

"We heard Capital Immortals Dao forces are attacking Funan, and Situ Mo has also taken the opportunity to push south. Funan is in peril!" Kong Xiaxiang replied.

Kong Guxi shuddered. "The Situ family… they were once our allies, and now it has come to this… What do you all advise?"

Kong Guxi had already ordered Kong Qiuyan to pack their valuables. The meaning was obvious. The others, no matter how slow, understood. They bowed.

"Capital Immortals Dao's momentum is too great. We must retreat."

Kong Guxi wailed, "But… but the Wasteland still holds the people of my Profound Peak."

Several men immediately grabbed him to pull him away. Kong Guxi's mouth cried in sorrow, but his feet were very soft. With just two tugs, he was moving, taking off on the wind. The group flew away like a gale, nearly leaving Kong Qiuyan, who was still gathering the valuables, behind.

Kong Qiuyan, her expression awkward, hurried to catch up with the other disciples. Kong Guxi immediately ordered, "Quickly! Inventory the spirit items and artifacts!"

The Foundation Establishment cultivators hurriedly began taking stock. Having already lost their mountain gate once, losing their new headquarters didn't seem quite so painful. Only a few disciples, whose families were still in the Wasteland and now likely lost, began to sob quietly.

Kong Guxi dispatched a few of them, instructing in a low voice, "I have already crushed the jade talismans. Every prefecture knows to flee. If you are worried, you may go and provide support."

Most of the Profound Peak disciples who remained loyal were related to the Kong clan by blood or marriage; their relatives had already been transferred to the Lake. Only a few held local defensive posts not far from here, so they scattered to assist them.

Kong Guli felt uneasy. "Gate Master, we are abandoning our territory and fleeing. Will Moongaze Lake punish us?"

"It should… be fine…" Kong Guxi paused, lowering his head. "Capital Immortals Dao came with overwhelming force. The Daoist Master will likely be relieved that we simply survived. As for punishment… it shouldn't be too severe…"

He sighed. "Never mind Guan Gongxiao, we also had that peak Foundation Establishment cultivator Guo Hongjian. His Merging Fire is ferocious. We are not his match. If we had been any slower, and one of them caught us, we might not

have kept our lives. If the other one joined, escape would have been impossible."

The group stood in silence. After a while, the eastern sky was covered by the black clouds, and Moongaze Lake's first mountain on the eastern shore, [Dense Forest], gradually came into view. Only then did Kong Guxi's terror truly set in. He looked back several times and whispered:

"Go see the Third Young Master first. Li Chenghuai… we can pay respects to him later…"

He sped toward the eastern shore boundary, only to find the area bustling with cultivators moving back and forth; it was far from stable. Kong Guxi landed and sent someone down to ask. A moment later, a man descended quickly from the main hall—tall, with golden eyes and long hair, walking with a steady gait.

"Third Young Master!"

Li Jiangxia had been run ragged these past few days. The hearts of the people in the Wasteland were unsettled, requiring him, a direct descendant, to personally stabilize many situations. Now, with Capital Immortals Dao attacking, the trouble had multiplied.

Though Li Jiangxia looked worried, he was still polite to Kong Guxi. He nodded curtly. "What is the situation in the east? I saw Lord Cui's light heading over. Did he intercept them? Is the Gate Master injured?"

Kong Guxi replied, "It is shameful. The Capital Immortals Dao forces came too quickly. Guo Hongjian is powerful. Fellow Daoist Cui intercepted him. Crimson Reef Island harbors ill intentions. I did not dare remain and retreated early. I am not injured."

Not long ago, Li Jiangxia had bound Fu Jie and sent him over, and Kong Guxi had endured the pain of executing him personally. But both men tactfully avoided the subject, acting as if there was no friction between them.

Li Jiangxia merely lifted his head slightly. "The Profound Peak populace is still in the Wasteland. Has the Gate Master arranged for disciples to bring them to the eastern shore?"

Kong Guxi found it difficult to speak. He paused before saying, "There were arrangements. But Guo Hongjian arrived too quickly. We… fled in panic and lost our composure. But I have sent disciples to clean up."

Hearing this, Li Jiangxia lowered his gaze and nodded. He asked again, "The primary lineages of the minor clans and the orthodoxies of the small temples under Profound Peak's rule. Were they brought out?"

Kong Guxi grew uneasy. "No… But they received the message. We will count them when the time comes, and see how many were saved."

Li Jiangxia lifted his chin, thoughtful. "Since the Gate Master has already escorted his disciples here, have them fall back to the eastern shore. Proceed to the border between the shore and the Wasteland, and according to the situation, support Lord Cui's retreat."

Kong Guxi nodded repeatedly. Behind Li Jiangxia, An Xuantong sighed inwardly, bowing his head in silence.

'What a pity. The foundation of Profound Peak… finally reduced to nothing. Standing before me is truly no longer the Gate Master of Profound Peak, but merely a remnant of the Kong clan!'

Chapter 765: The Fiend

The Ends of the World.

The small island was thick with dense jungle, threaded by the movements of wild beasts and dotted with numerous native stockades. Spiritual qi was thin, but at the island's center boiled a bottomless azure spring. Several azure creeks flowed out from it, vanishing into the forest.

A cultivator in black robes sat cross-legged by the pool, guarding it in silence. After most of the day had passed, a brown-robed cultivator finally sped over, landing by the spring and clasping his hands.

"Fellow Daoist Feng, I borrowed the Lishu Fire-Averting Cover."

The cultivator named Feng leaped up from the poolside, his earlier stillness clearly just a pretense. "Many thanks, Fellow Daoist Fang! Quickly, bring it out!"

The man surnamed Fang retrieved a bright red jade pearl from his sleeve, his voice full of reluctance. "You must be careful… I had to pledge my family heirloom, the Wuting Talisman Brush… and even added a spirit stone as rent. If that brush weren't so unique, they never would have let it go…"

Cultivator Feng glanced at him, speaking patiently. "Relax. I've been to this island many times. The savages here were raised in this place by my own great-ancestor, conveniently left for his descendants to use. He was so afraid of them producing someone powerful that he never even taught them to write."

"This island has always been barren of spiritual qi. When I came today, I found the island suddenly had a faint aura, all of it originating from this great boiling spring at the center. There must have been a change in the earth-veins."

He took the jade pearl and infused it with his spiritual qi. It immediately swelled and expanded, transforming into a red barrier covered in runes that enveloped them both. Feng led the way, sinking into the lake while speaking.

"I once visited Lord Xia, an alchemist in the Admirable Sea. He mentioned that a spring, azure in color, that erupts powerfully from the earth with a rising intent, is called a 'Cave Spring' when it reaches the point of transforming water. A remarkable Dao lineage inland cultivates this. They call it 'Pristine Water'."

Fellow Daoist Fang asked, "Pristine water? What kind of Pristine water? What level of expert does one become after cultivating it?"

Cultivator Feng shook his robes and pointed upward. "Naturally, higher than the sky."

The surrounding lake water was growing hotter. Fang said in alarm, "Higher than the sky? A Foundation Establishment cultivator's Dao lineage!"

Cultivator Feng smiled without speaking, shaking his head. "That's called Purple Mansion! It is the lineage of a Purple Mansion cultivator! Don't be fooled by how impressive those island lords look moving mountains and filling seas. A true expert of that lineage could kill them with a single glance."

He changed the subject. "Regardless, the object in this cave is capable of making the entire area boil and filling the whole island with spiritual qi. It must be a Foundation Establishment-level spiritual item. As long as we get our hands on it, you and I won't have to worry for the rest of our lives."

Fang sighed. "I rely completely on your guidance, Fellow Daoist. I am just a mixed-qi cultivator. What good would a great treasure do me? Fellow Daoist Feng, at least you have pure-qi. Once you obtain this opportunity and ascend step by step, do not forget to lend me a hand."

As they spoke, they had already entered the earth-vein. On both sides, scalding steam mingled with flames, blasting the artifact and making it hum. Cultivator Feng was clearly struggling to power it, and he handed control to his partner. His face changed.

"How tyrannical! We haven't even reached the depths of the earth-vein… where did such terrifying earth-fire come from!"

Fang's lineage was clearly inferior to his; he had never even seen earth-fire before. He could only pretend to nod. Feng's expression shifted several times before he gritted his teeth.

"How many medicinal pills do you have left!"

Fang mumbled the meager contents of his pockets. Feng made a decisive choice.

"We both have enough pills. Since we have already come this far, how can we return empty-handed? We must go deeper into the vein and see. Even if we can't take anything, at least we will know what is down here!"

He gritted his teeth and pushed his spiritual qi, flying downward for several more minutes. Finally, the steam ahead of them thinned. The subterranean flames flickered, and they vaguely saw an open space.

The cavern floor was made of smooth stone slabs, carved with countless complex patterns. At the very center, on a platform resembling an altar, danced a plume of deep black fire.

A rush of excitement flooded their minds. Before they could even recover from the shock, Cultivator Feng took advantage of a moment when the flame dimmed to scan the area. He vaguely spotted a skeleton sitting next to the fire!

The skeleton sat cross-legged and appeared to have been dead for many years. A glittering, metallic-looking storage bag lay beside it, gleaming dazzlingly in the firelight.

Cultivator Feng's heart pounded as greed consumed him.

'The sitting-place of a deceased cultivator! My opportunity has come!'

He immediately began to back away, whispering urgently, "I can't hold on much longer! We must leave, quickly!"

Both men were spent forces, and the surrounding flames were beginning to flare brighter with the earth-vein's cycle. Fang could already feel his feet burning. He nodded frantically, and the two vanished back into the sea of fire.

Long after they departed, only the vast flames remained. On the ground, the skeleton's finger twitched. Flesh and skin instantly reappeared, and a white-gold Daoist robe shimmered back into existence, revealing a proper face.

Li Ximing let out a long, deep breath, feeling a sense of relief.

"Someone came!"

Li Ximing was trapped by Changxiao's Sangyu Merging Nine Profundities Art. The moment he left this spot, the flame on his body would flare like a beacon, so he could only use spiritual items to suppress it. Months had passed, and he

had already used more than a dozen drops. His only hope was for someone to come from the outside.

"This spring is subtle; it doesn't draw attention and looks like a natural change in the earth-veins, so it won't cause a major disturbance. The downside is… very few people come. After waiting for months, a single Qi Refining layer-one cultivator finally shows up!"

A Qi Refining cultivator was naturally useless. If Li Ximing hadn't intentionally suppressed his flames, the two men wouldn't have even been able to see him. He left them alone, letting out a long line to catch a big fish.

'Qi Refining is far from enough… I need at least a Foundation Establishment cultivator… only then is there a possibility of escape.'

The only Purple Mansion-grade healing item in his possession was a single Profound Adamant Heart-Sutra Pill. He still had plenty of treasure medicines and supplementary herbs in his storage bag. Li Ximing was, after all, a Purple Mansion Alchemist. Over the past few months, he had slowly formulated a path to healing. Unfortunately, it required a Foundation Establishment demon beast as the primary ingredient. Sitting here paralyzed, he certainly couldn't refine it.

'Lure a few Foundation Establishment cultivators here, find a way to make them gather a few spiritual items for me… and then capture a Valley Water demon beast. Then I can devise a way to refine a pill… and suppress this injury first.'

He pondered briefly, then borrowed the power of the Immortal Mirror. His spiritual sense leaped out, watching the two men depart. Before they had even left the island, the black-robed Cultivator Feng, seeing that his partner's spiritual qi was exhausted, drew his sword and, in a flash, cut him to pieces.

'Truly decisive… Now he doesn't even have to return the artifact. He can just keep it for himself.'

Li Ximing coldly watched Cultivator Feng leave the island, a strange feeling rising in his heart.

'So now *I'm* the old Purple Mansion fiend suppressed in an earth-vein, just like in the stories… just waiting for some foolish kid to accidentally release me, only to be utterly slain by him with an immortal sword after seventy-eight chapters of twists and turns. What a beautiful story.'

Chapter 766: Deeper into the Mist

Moongaze Lake.

A black shadow flashed past. The man, clad in dark robes, raced forward on the wind, leaving a chilling trail of gray mist in the air. He wore the Supreme Feather Night-robe, an artifact adorned with foot-long black tassels that shimmered with iridescent light at their tips, accelerating his speed with every moment.

To put it bluntly, the Supreme Feather Night-robe was the finest Dharma artifact the Li clan possessed. Li Xizhi had exhausted countless resources to acquire it; it was doubtful a better robe could be found in all of Jiangnan among those beneath the Purple Mansion Realm.

The two-finger-long piece of black jade in his hand was unremarkable, appearing merely as an impure trinket. But Li Chenghuai knew this Night Ghost Secret Talisman was far more extraordinary.

The rest of the Li family believed the talisman could only summon an entity at the Foundation Establishment level. Li Chenghuai, however, understood it was a genuine ancient artifact capable of far more than just summoning a night-ghost. Its true potential was simply beyond his current level of cultivation.

Soon, the landscape of Funan came into view. The sky above it was a blazing mix of red and white flames. Li Chenghuai pushed his speed, riding the wind until his form blurred and faded like water.

Li Minggong stood in mid-air holding her brazier, spiritual fire surging to block Guan Lingdie. Nearby, Miaoshui, Elder White Ape, and even Qu Bushi were locked in desperate combat. Clearly outnumbered, the Li allies were pale and hard-pressed.

'My brother isn't here…' Li Chenghuai mused. 'Li Chenghui must have gone to rescue Ding Weizeng.'

He retrieved the black jade from his sleeve, placed it in his palm, and tossed it lightly into the air.

A fierce gale erupted. Swirling motes of yin qi coalesced into a dancing vortex of blackness, from which a magnificent, horned yaksha emerged. Wielding a trident of dark energy, it charged straight into the ranks of the Capital Immortals Dao.

The yaksha possessed considerable power. It dissolved into black mist and descended upon the cultivators, immediately unleashing a frigid wave of energy that disrupted their techniques. It followed by sweeping its trident, throwing the Capital Immortals Dao formation into chaos.

Li Chenghuai himself materialized from the shadows directly beside Guan Lingdie, his own sword drawn, unleashing a brilliant white slash of sword-light as large as a ship's sail.

Startled, Guan Lingdie's form dissipated like smoke. Li Chenghuai shook his robes, his own body flickering as he prepared to pursue, when a soft voice sounded next to his ear.

"Little brother, no need to be so fierce!"

Li Chenghuai instantly recognized the voice of his elder sister, Li Minggong. Though shocked, his reflexes were sharp; he immediately slowed his attack by half a beat, letting the sword-light strike empty air as he sent back a spiritual transmission: "What is…"

Li Minggong, who had already formed suspicions, replied concisely, "The Capital Immortals Dao is merely going through the motions. Their real goal was to destroy the Profound Peak Gate's foundation. Now that it's come to this, there's no need to fight them to the death. Just keep them occupied."

Understanding dawned on Li Chenghuai. He engaged, coordinating his attacks. His techniques and swordplay were fundamentally sound, and he pressed the assault. Guan Lingdie, now facing two opponents, likewise fell back, refusing to be drawn into a desperate fight.

Guan Lingdie was the stronger cultivator; even when holding back as if in a spar, she had completely suppressed Li Minggong. Now, with the pressure relieved, Li Minggong finally had a moment to think. The Capital Immortals Dao's peculiar attitude, combined with the words of Daoist Master Tinglan, rushed back to her.

'If the real enemy isn't the Capital Immortals Dao, but Changxiao trying to destroy my family… was chasing our Daoist Master out to sea truly his only plan?'

She poured spiritual qi into the Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier. Flames mixed with the distinct red-and-white down of Pure Feather Li-Fire billowed forth.

'Based on what Daoist Master Tinglan implied… Changxiao probably hasn't returned either. But if he orchestrated this plot long ago, seeking something our family possesses… wouldn't this be the moment for that plot to manifest?'

'If that's the case, the Daoist Master who disguised himself as Sumian is almost certainly the other Purple Mansion cultivator from Changxiao Gate: Daoist Master Chengyan!'

Daoist Master Chengyan was famous for never emerging from seclusion, but given the circumstances, it wasn't unreasonable for him to finally appear. Li Minggong's nerves tightened. 'What instructions did Changxiao leave for Chengyan? That Daoist Master came here to gather intelligence; he must be about to act!'

She felt lost in a dense fog, unable to see the path clearly.

'Is defending Funan the right move or the wrong one? But even if we abandon this place and retreat to the north bank… as long as our Daoist Master doesn't return, will we ever know peace? It just means moving the target for their schemes back to the north bank!'

Elsewhere over Funan, the sky was heavy and dark. Fierce winds howled as golden light clashed with resounding cracks of thunder.

Li Chenghui stood amidst the storm, his robes billowing as he held his long spear horizontally, treading upon bolts of lightning. Thunder descended from the heavens, striking the air before him and condensing into a torrential waterfall of lightning that crashed downward.

He had arrived riding the thunder, catching them by surprise. Descending from the sky with the Six Thunder Profound Punishment Talisman, he had struck down a Golden Tang Gate guest elder with nine consecutive bolts to

rescue Ding Weizeng. Now, besides Situ Mo himself, the Golden Tang Gate still had three other Foundation Establishment cultivators clustered around their leader, jointly fending off Ding Weizeng.

This was Li Chenghui's first time fighting Situ Mo directly. Although his Dao lineage held no specific advantage, his artifacts countered the Golden Tang Gate's techniques. By joining forces with Ding Weizeng, they managed to suppress the group.

Now, Li Chenghui beckoned. The six punishment talismans immediately spun around his wrist, unleashing a gushing wave of silvery-white brilliance. "Where Yang culminates, the Six Thunders are born!"

A blinding flash erupted as runes lit up sequentially on the six slender, elegant tokens. In response, Situ Mo casually tossed out a golden shield.

BOOM!

Billowing black smoke surged from the impact. Fortunately, the golden shield was not an artifact powered by blood-qi and managed to hold. Situ Mo instantly drew his saber, blocking the thunder spear that shot out from the smoke with a sharp *CLANG*.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Li Cheng's thunder spear danced, each blow seemingly suppressing the Golden Tang Gate Master, yet Li Chenghui's expression was far from relaxed.

'What is Situ Mo playing at…'

This was too strange. The man fighting him now was not performing at the level expected of the Golden Tang Gate Master. Situ Mo was a veteran Foundation Establishment cultivator who had long ago begun practicing secret arts. Even with the Chongming Profound Insight Screen high above suppressing his golden needles and saber, he should never be such an easy opponent.

Li Chenghui's gaze darkened. The Gate Master opposite him seemed almost dazed. His sister had always described Situ Mo as "suspicious, cunning, sinister, and venomous," yet the man before him today was merely a silent, detached warrior.

Nearby, Ding Weizeng was growing deeply uneasy. He had dealt with Situ Mo many times, had even fought him, and knew the man well. The eyes that should

have been brimming with malice and cunning were utterly changed, replaced by a silent, detached calm that set Ding Weizeng on edge.

He sent a covert transmission: 'Lord Chenghui, I fear this man is plotting something…'

Li Chenghui replied, suspicious, 'You all claim he is treacherous and unpredictable. If he were scheming, why would he act this way and deliberately arouse our suspicion?'

While the two allies grew suspicious, Situ Mo simply rode his golden light, weaving through the wind to meet the rain of lightning. He circulated his power, only for the bronze-green light of the screen in the sky to shine down, locking his two primary artifacts in mid-air, rendering them immobile.

Forced to rely only on hand seals, Situ Mo released bursts of light to counter the thunder. It was a dull, frustrating fight, yet his face remained blank as he silently endured the assault.

Situ Mo had been fighting the Li clan since the era of Li Yuanjiao. He had been at the Foundation Establishment Realm far longer than most; he was an elder of the same generation as Li Xuanxuan. To be suppressed by Li Chenghui—a junior among juniors—using an external artifact should have been a pathetic, shameful humiliation. Yet Situ Mo merely watched in silence.

When Situ Mo set out today, he had received three flying letters, all dispatched from the Great Void. Two ordered him to kill Li Chenghui. The third ordered him to kill Ding Weizeng, specifically to force Li Zhouwei to show himself.

Accompanying the letters were two items: a gray rope etched with patterns of mountains, edged in gold, and surrounded by a faint white halo; and a purple talisman that shimmered like rippling violet water, radiating an unfathomable power. It was ice-cold to the touch, a chill that pierced straight to his soul.

He could not decipher the purple talisman, but the gray rope… Situ Mo knew the gray rope all too well. He had read of it countless times. It was the prized treasure of his clan's own Daoist Master, Situ Huo. A Purple Mansion-grade Spirit Artifact: The Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope!

His clan's Daoist Master, Situ Huo, was exiled overseas, his status—living or dead—unknown. Rumors claimed his Dharma Body had been severely wounded—some said by the elements, others by an enemy—and that he had

lost an arm, forcing him into hiding, never daring to return. Why would *he* get involved in this mess? What possible reason could he have?

Situ Mo had skirmished with the Li clan for years, always carefully dancing along the edge of the established rules. He recalled the time on Jindou Island, when Li Xuanfeng waited in the waters with his bow drawn, forcing Situ Mo to hide, paralyzed, on the island. In truth, the terror he felt then paled in comparison to this.

Since its third generation, the Golden Tang Gate had seen countless masters die suddenly, commit suicide, or be assassinated by their own kin. Situ Mo was a product of this environment; he himself had killed his own brother to take his position. To have survived in the cracks for this long, his insight was sharp. He understood the current situation perfectly.

'Today, the only person who can kill a direct descendant of the Li clan—and do so *within the rules*—is me.'

The Li clan's backing was Li Ximing, who was away. The Situ clan clung to existence thanks to Situ Huo, who was also away. At this precise moment, no one was more suitable for this task than Situ Mo.

In terms of motive, his enmity with the Li clan was deep. In terms of status, he too was the descendant of a Purple Mansion cultivator. He was the perfect hot potato—dangerous to touch, difficult to discard. The only difference between him and Li Chenghui was that Situ Huo placed no value on the Golden Tang Gate.

'Once I kill Li Chenghui, who will Li Ximing seek vengeance against? The Golden Tang Gate, a faction with only a few weaklings left, who could simply seal their mountain and play dead? Will he target Changxiao? Or Yehui? Did the powers who sent this artifact and this talisman not consider this?'

'But what about *me*? Did they expect me to calmly return to the Golden Tang Gate and enter seclusion for my next breakthrough? Impossible!'

The gold-armored man stood coldly, seemingly suppressed and unable to break free, but internally he was frozen, as if clutching a bone-chilling dagger, utterly paralyzed by indecision.

Yes, the Golden Tang Gate possessed a Purple Mansion-grade formation, but what good was it? The formation core was sealed by a higher power, rendered inert. It wasn't just the Golden Feather Sect that held a jade key to the array;

the Azure Pond Sect and the Yue Cultivating Sect had keys as well. That grand formation offered Situ Mo no protection at all.

The moment he used this Purple Mansion Spirit Artifact to kill Li Chenghui, a Daoist Master from the Golden Feather Sect would likely arrive. They would kill him to appease the Li clan, and secondly, they would seize the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope for themselves. They wouldn't show an ounce of mercy.

'But if I *don't* kill him…' he thought, 'I will have accepted gifts from two Purple Mansion cultivators while defying the orders of three. Who under heaven will grant me refuge then?'

Situ Mo had considered handing the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope over to the Golden Feather Sect, begging to survive in the cracks. But he knew that at this very moment, the entire scene over the Tangdao Mountain Range was falling under the gaze of the Golden Feather Sect. Their utter silence was, itself, an obvious answer.

'Daoist Master Qiushui has been in seclusion for years, leaving Daoist Master Tianhuo to manage the sect… That Daoist Master has already given his tacit approval. Perhaps… perhaps one of those three letters came directly from him!'

No matter how he looked at it, Situ Mo was the Golden Feather Sect's dog. If the sect hadn't approved this, who would dare make such a move?!

Situ Mo gripped the Spirit Artifact in his sleeve. Time ticked by, second by agonizing second, as if counting down the last moments of his life. The man finally lifted his sleeve and hissed, "Li Chenghui!"

The man opposite him glanced over. Li Chenghui's eyes were sharp and dazzling, like twin points of ink, with arcs of lightning crawling across his robes. Situ Mo stared at him, momentarily lost, grinding his teeth so hard they audibly cracked.

'There is only one path to survival… only one path…'

Li Chenghui watched the man opposite him. Situ Mo's golden robes whipped in the wind, pulsing with metallic light. The man was clearly over-agitated; his sharp, white teeth were bared, and his body seemed to hunch over as strange, guttural sounds escaped his throat.

'Gold resides in Geng-Xin… Earth forms mountains… that which is baleful shall be bound…'

Li Chenghui sensed the danger and retreated a step. At that exact moment, Situ Mo snapped his head up and let out a guttural roar: "HAA!"

Time seemed to slow. Li Chenghui watched clearly as a gray rope snaked out of Situ Mo's sleeve. It was covered in overlapping mountain patterns, edged in gold, and surrounded by a faint white halo. As it appeared, the light around them instantly dimmed.

BANG!

The Chongming Profound Insight Screen high above shuddered as if struck, recoiling with a dull boom. Its suppressing light vanished. Instantly, the massive swarm of golden needles and the school of fish-like daggers were released, screaming through the air as they shot downward.

In the next instant, the Six Thunder Profound Punishment Talismans that hovered around Li Chenghui exploded outward, blasted apart and scattering in every direction. The lightning they had generated held back the gray rope for a fraction of a second before being utterly annihilated.

"A Spirit Artifact!"

Li Chenghui's mind screamed the warning, but the rope moved like the wind. It coiled like a clever serpent, instantly leaping onto his long spear.

Although Li Chenghui was one of the Li clan's top cultivators and his spear was a Foundation Establishment-grade artifact, it was merely standard issue—nothing compared to Li Qinghong's Duruo Spear. But even if he held the Duruo, it would have made little difference against a true Spirit Artifact.

With a sickening *thud*, the lightning on his spear vanished and all spiritual qi dissipated. The gray rope bound the weapon tightly, then flicked, contemptuously sweeping the spear toward the ground.

But that brief instant was all Li Chenghui needed. He summoned a palm-sized, ornate bronze mirror from his sleeve. Its rim was carved with two rings depicting galloping beasts. It was the Bronze-Winged Brightwhite.

This was the mirror artifact recovered from the Capital Immortals Dao. Though ornate, its quality was not high—only slightly better than his spear. It leaped

forward and struck the gray rope. A sharp *TANG* rang out as the mirror was sent flying backward, emitting agonizing, cracking sounds.

But the desperate blocks had not been useless. Ding Weizeng, who was close by, was already swinging his staff to intercept. Crucially, Li Chenghui had bought himself just enough time. He opened his mouth and drew a mote of brilliant white light from his internal Thunder Pool.

"Secret Art of the Purple Talisman's Primal Light!"

Chapter 767: Ambition and Capacity

A brilliant white point of light flashed, rapidly expanding and transforming. A waterfall of lightning poured down, blocking the gray rope. Only then did the violent crack of thunder sound: "BOOM!".

The Secret Art of the Purple Talisman's Primal Light was, after all, from the Dao of Thunder-Guiding and Cloud-Anchoring lineage. Intense lightning and a violent impact spread out simultaneously. It was far more powerful than his previous artifacts, clearly causing the gray rope to slow significantly, even knocking it backward.

But the thunder-waterfall's dominance didn't last long. The mountain patterns on the gray rope lit up one by one. The center of the lightning burst seemed to spring a leak and instantly deflated. All the purple lightning-plasma was sucked into the gray rope as if by a great whale drinking, vanishing completely in an instant.

'It's a Spirit Artifact of the Earth Virtue or Metal Virtue! Earth smothers rampant thunder, and Metal dissipates residual lightning—it perfectly counters my thunder techniques!'.

Li Chenghui saw it immediately. For years, his lightning, with its tyrannical speed, had been what he used to slay demons and restrain enemies. Now, he was finally the one being suppressed. He spun around, treading on lightning to retreat.

Ding Weizeng had already rushed to support him, striking the gray rope twice with his staff. The rope, however, acted unhurriedly and vanished into the Great Void. Situ Biao and the others pressed forward, intercepting Ding Weizeng. Situ Mo himself, his face cold, rode the wind to chase Li Chenghui.

One golden and one purple streak of escaping light shot toward the sky. Without a thought, Li Chenghui fled east. Above his head, a dark cyan radiance rose as the screen panels unfurled. The brilliance of the "Heavy Abyss Gale"

surged out, rushing toward Situ Mo. But Situ Mo's escaping light was generated purely by his own cultivation, not an artifact, making it hard to shoot down. Furthermore, he had long understood the function of the Chongming Profound Insight Screen in the sky. He had already recalled his golden needles and golden saber into his sleeves. Facing the assaulting cyan light, he only paused for a moment.

Fortunately, Li Chenghui's escaping light was a notch faster, keeping him temporarily ahead. The Chongming Profound Insight Screen's light cycled back, but a patch of gold suddenly appeared before him, captured in his vision. It was an enemy technique that had secretly circled around. Li Chenghui gathered lightning in his palms and pushed forward, dispersing the technique.

As he raced onward, riding the thunder, a thought flashed through his mind like lightning: 'Situ Mo has a Spirit Artifact! A Purple Mansion cultivator must be involved!'.

Li Chenghui felt little panic; instead, his heart was heavy with grim realization. 'Who is behind this? Situ Huo? The Golden Feather Sect? The Capital Immortals Dao? Changxiao? ...Perhaps it's not just one person, but the collective will of several Purple Mansion cultivators...'.

'This is for our clan's Heir... I'm just a thunder cultivator whose Dao path is already severed. Why would they need such a grand formation to deal with me?'.

'They are trying to force Minghuang to appear! This isn't just about Changxiao. I already knew that among the Purple Mansion cultivators, probably none of them wished to see Minghuang break through to their realm, but I never expected their actions to be this ruthless!'.

Li Chenghui had always been deeply baffled by Changxiao's sudden, lethally offensive move. Now, having reached this point, he finally understood.

'I suspected long ago that Changxiao, having acted against the "Son of Heaven's Mandate" repeatedly, held ill intentions toward Minghuang, but I never thought he would act so decisively and so quickly. It seems I underestimated the malice the other houses hold for my family. Changxiao is simply acting on the collective will! Regardless of whether other cultivators want Minghuang to fall into Changxiao's hands, in the matter of forcing our clan Heir to appear... there are far, far too many aligned interests.'.

'As for what happens after he appears, some will want to capture him, others will want him dead… Changxiao saw this clearly. As long as he forced Li Ximing out to sea and kept him occupied, even if Yehui was unwilling to act, too many other Purple Mansion cultivators would fan the flames. Never mind the Golden Feather Sect or the Crimson Reef—even the Si Clan of the Azure Pond Sect, who supposedly backs the Li family, don't they also harbor thoughts of pushing our family to the brink?! If they want the Li clan to submit fully to the Azure Pond Sect, this is the perfect time!'.

Although Li Chenghui didn't know about the events at Mount Luoxia, he interpreted this persecution as fear of his clan's leader, and the conclusion he reached was no different. He had slowly managed to sort through the complexities.

As these thoughts flashed through his mind, Situ Mo, his expression savage, closed his fist on empty air behind him. He caught the gray rope in mid-flight, its bright mountain patterns flashing. His voice boomed like thunder as he roared, "Li Chenghui! Die!".

This shout snapped him back to reality. What was Situ Mo's situation in all this?.

The man, Situ Mo, was clearly recorded in the clan annals as a cunning and venomous individual. His own elder sister had dealt with him and confirmed he was a ruthless tyrant. Such a person, if he were to use a technique or sacrifice an artifact, would naturally do so silently, his expression calm, to prevent his enemy from preparing. Why would he be like this, with a savage expression and a voice like thunder, as if terrified Li Chenghui wouldn't notice him?.

In that instant, clarity dawned on Li Chenghui. He understood. 'Even though he's menacingly trying to kill me, it is only by me continuing to flee, making this commotion bigger and bigger, that I serve his interests! He needs to force Minghuang… he needs chaos! He needs everyone's eyes to fall upon my clan's Heir, satisfying the Purple Mansion cultivators! Only then does *he* have a sliver of a chance to live!'.

At this moment, Li Chenghui was like a black moth caught in a spider's web, beating its wings, struggling to survive. But wasn't the golden-skinned poisonous spider opposite him also trembling, caught in the very same web, just trying to stay alive?.

BOOM!

A torrent of purple lightning surged out, blasting backward into a wave of thunder. The golden needles retreated, but from their midst, the venomous snake-like gray rope shot out again.

Although Situ Mo appeared desperate and furious, and his vicious words served as a veiled hint, he understood even more clearly what must be done and what must not. His hands did not relax in the slightest. The Spirit Artifact that suppressed lightning continued to bind him.

Li Chenghui had already seized the opportunity to swallow a medicinal pill. A red glow immediately lit up his body as both his cultivation base and lifespan burned away to fuel his desperate flight eastward.

On the other side of the Funan region was the battle between Li Minggong and the Capital Immortals Dao. Although that situation was also grim, it now seemed to be his only chance.

'How ridiculous… The Capital Immortals Dao is my family's greatest public enemy since our Purple Mansion breakthrough, while all the other houses are polite and smiling. I never thought… that I would now have to rely on the "goodwill" of the Capital Immortals Dao!'.

The world's affairs were truly profound; everything had been reversed overnight. Li Chenghui tore through the air, just beginning to ride the thunder, when he heard a maddened roar from Situ Mo behind him: "Run! Do you think you can escape!?".

This roar, powered by spiritual energy, echoed across the sky and pierced Li Chenghui's ears. The young man's expression faltered for a fraction of a second. Thoughts raced through his mind: *Can I escape?*.

Was merely having Situ Mo chase him enough to force Li Zhouwei to appear? This tiny Funan region was only the size of Moongaze Lake's northern shore—wasn't the distance too short? Thunder was fast; if there was any slip-up, or if the Capital Immortals Dao decided to help, wouldn't the opportunity be wasted?.

'It isn't a chase… it's my life… Situ Mo's meaning is probably that he doesn't just have one Spirit Artifact… he has more… If he's pushed too hard, he *will* strike to kill first.'.

As Li Chenghui's thunder dissipated, the gray rope fell, blocking the path ahead. He forced himself to take a step, feeling his entire body grow heavy. He changed

direction, heading toward the river. Across the river was Moongaze Lake—the place where Li Zhouwei was in seclusion!.

The moment Li Chenghui turned, Situ Mo knew his opponent understood, at least partially. He was overcome with relief, yet still broke out in a cold sweat. 'Thank goodness the Li family cultivators are smart!'.

He never in his life thought such a sentiment would cross his mind, yet there it was.

'Go south! Force Li Zhouwei out onto the lake! That is the only way we both live! Otherwise, you die… and I will be boiled alive!'.

Situ Mo's face remained savage and agitated, the anxiety in his eyes undiminished. But the hand seal he was forming paused for an instant—he had clearly breathed a sigh of relief. Even the gray rope slowed down. Li Chenghui rode the thunder forward several steps, with Situ Mo using the Spirit Artifact to "forcefully" push him across the river.

BOOM!

The wide river had just appeared before them when the Golden Tang Gate Master slowly raised his eyebrows. The gray rope erupted in brilliant light. Runes flowed out from the mountain patterns, coalescing in the air into falling streams of pale golden light, revealing the artifact's profound function.

It wasn't unheard of for a Foundation Establishment cultivator to use a Spirit Artifact to fight an enemy; Ning Heyuan back in the day was one such example, and he held an ancient Spirit Artifact at that. But whether in terms of cultivation, combat skill, or even the compatibility of the artifact with his Dao lineage, Ning Heyuan absolutely could not compare to Situ Mo.

Now, as this profound ability emerged, Li Chenghui clearly felt the space around him grow obscure, as if he were trapped in a mountain ravine. The gray rope continued to expand and spread, casting down pale golden light from the sky, using the Great Void to lock onto him.

Situ Mo was no easy opponent; Li Chenghui had no choice but to move forward. The Golden Tang Gate Master, growing more confident, was already plotting his next move: 'I absolutely cannot be left holding the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope. As soon as we are over the lake, Li Zhouwei cannot sit by and ignore this. Even if he is truly in deep seclusion, Li Xuanxuan will be forced to wake him.'.

'The moment he appears, I will smash the Rope onto Li Zhouwei, hit Li Chenghui with the Purple Mansion talisman, abandon the Spirit Artifact, and flee!'.

Situ Mo was confident that as long as the Rope was not in his hands, ninety percent of the Purple Mansion gazes on him would vanish.

'As long as I don't flee with the Spirit Artifact, and I don't hide in my own sect's formation in the Tangdao Mountains, but instead make a break for the Eastern Sea, I can definitely survive!'.

'Because—I can still be used as bait to lure out Li Ximing!'.

'As long as I am useful, I will live!'.

Situ Mo was truly worthy of the man who had climbed from the son of a concubine to the position of Gate Master. Even in this certain-death scenario, he had managed to find a path to survival.

He wasn't worried about what Li Chenghui might do; he just stared darkly at his back. 'Li Zhouwei has to show himself sooner or later anyway. His appearing doesn't necessarily mean anything fatal will happen to him, but it *will* save your life. No one in this world doesn't cherish their own life, especially when it's not even asking for Li Zhouwei's life in exchange!'.

Situ Mo's eyes remained fixed on Li Chenghui. He clearly had the Spirit Artifact for suppression and the talisman as insurance, and Li Chenghui knew that stopping meant certain death. But Situ Mo's suspicion surged again. 'But the Li family binds its disciples with clan bloodlines and ancient morals. Li Zhouwei is the clan head. How do I know Li Chenghui isn't some stubborn fanatic willing to throw his life away?'.

And so, the next moment, he silently hid a cluster of golden needles in his sleeve and poured his spiritual qi into them. A chilling voice suddenly emerged: "Li Chenghui! If you dare to die, I will turn around and kill Li Minggong!".

Li Chenghui's figure, flashing like lightning over the river, flickered and stopped dead. Situ Mo's cold voice arrived an instant later: "Don't think I won't do it. The Daoist Masters watching will only think I'm being sensible!".

Li Chenghui's eyes widened slightly, his ink-black gaze staring straight at his opponent. He held one hand, fingers pointed like a sword, two inches from his chest. His other hand was extended behind his back, fingers also pointed. Both hands pinched a glittering golden talisman.

The talisman in front of Li Chenghui suddenly flared, releasing a burst of deep cyan light, heavy as bedrock and solemn as an ancestral temple. It was the Rite of the Azure Proclaimation Earth Virtue!.

The talisman behind his back, however, lit up with a dense black light, hidden as a forest shadow and eerie as a shaman's temple. This was the 'Concealment' ability of the Ancient Merging Shamanic Talisman Dao! Shamanic Talisman Gold Charms!.

This stack of Shamanic Talisman Gold Charms, brought back from the Great Ning Palace by Li Xuanfeng, was one of the Li family's great treasures. Several of the direct descendants carried them. Li Xijun had once used the 'Transformation' talisman to disguise himself as Guo Hongyao. Now, the two remaining types were finally being put to use.

Once the Azure Proclaimation Earth Virtue 'Rite' was activated, it immediately flowed over him like a heavy golden liquid, causing little visible change. But when the Ancient Merging Shamanic Talisman 'Concealment' activated, a black light surged from Li Chenghui's body, causing the gray rope in the sky to freeze.

A Spirit Artifact locking onto a Foundation Establishment cultivator via the Great Void was an inescapable death sentence. But at this moment, Li Chenghui seemed to be hidden from the world, breaking free from that golden lock and soaring away on the thunder. 'Good! It worked!'.

Li Chenghui clearly remembered the talisman's function. When Li Xizhi brought it back, he had explained that 'Concealment' seemed to be a condensed form of the 'Untraceable Presence' Purple Mansion divine ability. Its greater function was escaping Purple Mansion-level scrying and calculations. 'They can't calculate my position anymore!'.

Li Chenghui understood perfectly. The current situation only existed because all the major powers were pushing and nudging each other, fanning the flames. This meant that no single Purple Mansion cultivator would personally use their divine abilities to lock onto Situ Mo or himself!.

'Our clan's Purple Mansion cultivator is out there, watching. No one wants their own Dao lineage to know no peace for the next four hundred years! If they cannot calculate my next move, I have room to act!'.

His figure had only just broken free from the golden lock when Situ Mo reacted in shock. But Situ Mo's eyes had already turned golden. He took a single step, and the cluster of golden needles flew from his sleeve, exploding into countless golden filaments that shot out in all directions like rays of light.

His reaction was astonishingly fast. He had already hidden the artifact in his sleeve, and the very instant Li Chenghui drew the talismans, Situ Mo began activating his own technique. He was so fast they had almost acted in perfect sync.

Li Chenghui's action was unexpected. Any other Foundation Establishment cultivator might have been lost for that crucial instant, creating an opportunity to escape. But the blade the Purple Mansion cultivators had chosen—Situ Mo—had been hammered, forged in fire, and forced to swallow his own hatred. He was too sharp, and too fast.

TINK!

The tens of thousands of light filaments released by the golden needles instantly extended for several miles. Far to the east, a faint, crisp sound of impact was heard.

The sound itself didn't travel back, but Situ Mo sensed it through the connection to his artifact. Before his body could even move, his head snapped around. His venomous eyes, completely bloodshot, focused their golden light, stabbing toward Li Chenghui like two arrows loosed from a bow.

A chill ran down Li Chenghui's spine.

He suddenly recalled his time as a Qi Refining cultivator guarding that small island in the Eastern Sea. The sea was rough then, the setting sun a waxy yellow, and he would read the clan annals. He could recite every passage clearly:

"Later, Geng of the Jin approached the Eastern Sea, but Mo defended the island and would not come out. When Situ Chen arrived, Chen was tricked and killed by him, and thus did not return. When the news reached home, Cheng looked to him and said: When my uncle was still alive, he often worried about this man. He could not be removed, and he once warned me of him with a single sentence, which I have kept in my heart.".

"Liao said: I wish to hear the details.".

"He replied: Observe his ambition and capacity; he will surely become a future disaster!".

Chapter 768: Unexpected

The brilliance of the Shamanic Talisman Gold Charms flowed over Li Chenghui's body. As thunder rose from his feet and a powerful golden light erupted from behind him, the young man's thoughts were quickly interrupted.

BOOM!

Situ Mo, having been tricked and almost losing his target, was no longer just feigning fury; his face was twisted in genuine, dark rage, like a snake handler whose prey had bitten back.

The brilliance of the Golden Tang Gate Master instantly brightened. His diamond-patterned golden robe shimmered with layer upon layer of runes. With a single step, his speed was a world away from before as he reached out to seize his enemy.

A torrent of red and purple light surged over Li Chenghui, with all the purple lightning flowing down to his feet. His expression remained calm, devoid of any fear or panic, like an ice-cold pond. He stepped forward in mid-air, barely managing to evade Situ Mo's grasp by a single, narrow margin.

Situ Mo showed no remorse. As long as Li Chenghui remained within the range of his spiritual sense, there was no way he could escape. His only fear was a repeat of the momentary disappearance from before, which had sent a cold sweat down his spine.

The dark look on his face swiftly vanished, replaced by a cold ruthlessness. A point of golden light rose from the back of his head, transforming into a gourd as white and cold as snow.

'A Dharma Art… or a Dharma Artifact?' Li Chenghui didn't have time to distinguish. A chilling, splendid mist immediately poured from the gourd, descending like a heavenly light that split the clouds and shone directly on him.

Situ Mo's own speed was considerable, and he now closed the distance once more. He joined the tips of his index fingers, murmuring, "Receive the Western orthodox hue, and let the Qi arise…"

With his vast combat experience, Situ Mo didn't waste a moment. While chanting, he also sent his golden needles and golden saber flying. They first sought out the Chongming Profound Insight Screen in the air, and seeing its cyan movement, successfully forced the Dharma Artifact to appear.

Meanwhile, the chilling mist swirled over Li Chenghui. He had already surmised that Situ Mo had held back in their previous encounters, so he prepared his thunder to counter the incoming cold light.

However, a gray-green light rippled over him, and the spell's cold mist cascaded down, as if striking a slippery, round rock. It scattered to either side, and Li Chenghui found he didn't have to act at all.

This was his first time using the talisman, so he was unfamiliar with its effects. The unexpected success was a pleasant surprise, and he quickly raised his thunder. A series of piercing noises rang out in the air.

CLANG!

A dark-gold ruyi scepter appeared directly above his head and smashed down. Li Chenghui raised a bolt of lightning to block it, which burst in mid-air into a spray of brilliant white light and glimmering sparks.

Unfortunately, Metal is born from Earth and distinct from it, and it suppresses rampant thunder. The ruyi scepter effortlessly shattered the lightning and struck the gray-green light on his body, which instantly let out a sharp, cracking sound.

"Crack!"

Li Chenghui knew the talisman's protective power had reached its limit. He could only seize the last fading light to take a few more steps, his hand forming a spell seal as he said, "Where Yang culminates…"

Before he could finish the incantation, a cold aura surged from behind him. A torrent of Geng Metal's malevolent qi rushed in, slamming into the dark-black light of the Shamanic Talisman. The black light vanished in an instant, like ebbing seawater.

The 'Concealment' ability was shattered and gone!

"Puh."

Li Chenghui spat out a mouthful of blood, which turned into scorching thunder. His cultivation was far inferior to his opponent's, and the number of years he'd spent cultivating couldn't compare. His thunder techniques were also countered, making a battle of Dharma Arts hopeless.

He could only grit his teeth and ride the thunder eastwards. Situ Mo watched him, his eyelids twitching, his expression growing ever more savage.

'He still won't give up!'

The venomous, snake-like gray rope crawled up his sleeve, and Situ Mo simply moved aside, throwing the Spirit Artifact forward.

Li Chenghui's talisman was broken, and the Spirit Artifact vanished back into the Great Void, secretly locking onto him again. A curtain of golden light, patterned with mountains and rivers, descended from the gray rope, sealing off the path to the east.

Situ Mo's heart seethed with hatred. Watching Li Chenghui trapped like a bird in a cage, he felt an unexpected sense of powerlessness. He let out a low sigh and said, "You… you are so foolish! You don't even care about your own life! How many people in your Li clan do you think I can kill?"

Li Chenghui brandished his spear, his gaze fixed on the other man as he stated calmly, "You are welcome to kill me. If killing me doesn't force anyone out, then killing anyone else is useless. Once your usefulness is gone, let's see who protects you then."

Situ Mo felt a mouthful of bitter blood stuck in his chest, unable to be spat out. His heart was hot. The situation was now clear to him: Li Minggong and the others were rushing to aid Li Chenghui. Ding Weizeng, without the Chongming Profound Insight Screen, would soon be defeated. Situ Mo's own family members were also on their way.

Li Chenghui absolutely refused to return to the lake. The only option now was to kill him.

Situ Mo refused to give up hope. "Zhaojing's plan failed. How far can Li Zhouwei hide? What good is it for you to die for nothing?"

Li Chenghui was silent for a moment. He glanced at his opponent, his striking eyes seemingly empty. He then replied, "Kill me if you must. When my clan's forces arrive, they will also kill you."

BOOM!

The light curtain of the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope trembled. Someone had arrived nearby. Situ Mo finally gave up. He looked at Li Chenghui one last time and said, "I don't know if I'll survive, but you must die first."

The golden screen in the air descended, and Situ Mo drew his blade. He saw the young man in silver armor and black robes spit out a brilliant, blood-stained point of light. Blood began to seep from the young man's face. Situ Mo's eyes lit up, and he let out a couple of low, laughing sounds from his throat.

He had a deep grudge against the Li clan, and seeing this scene brought him a sense of relief.

Li Chenghui's eyes bulged, and amidst a sky full of lightning, they disintegrated into points of light. His flesh and skin followed, turning into a bloody, crackling torrent of thunder. A suffocating amount of lightning filled the air. Six pieces of the Six Thunder Profound Punishment Talisman coalesced, maniacally draining all the spiritual qi from his body.

Situ Mo retreated without hesitation. He threw the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope, which wrapped around all the lightning and hurtled far into the distance. He clasped the Purple Mansion talisman in his hand and took flight.

BOOM!

No matter how powerful this surge of thunder was, it was no match for a Purple Mansion Spirit Artifact, especially one of the Earth and Metal Virtues. It was ultimately contained within a long, muffled rumble. The lightning tried to lash out at Situ Mo, but it was completely trapped, unable to move a single inch.

As the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope's light faded, all the pale golden brilliance returned to the sky. Situ Mo raised his eyebrows, taking in the scene before him.

To the west were his own cultivators from the Golden Tang Gate. Situ Biao and the others stood ready, with one or two bearing minor injuries. It seemed they had dealt with Ding Weizeng.

On the other side was a woman in a red skirt, holding a six-sided lantern. Red and white flames flickered, and her brilliant eyes were filled with tears. Behind her were the rest of the Li clan members.

Should he continue to fight?

Situ Mo's mind was made up in an instant.

'The Li family has a talisman that can evade Purple Mansion-level scrying. It's not difficult for Li Zhouwei to escape the notice of Purple Mansion cultivators. If it were me, I would have fled in secret, too. Li Chenghui was right—killing them is useless now!'

Situ Mo immediately stepped back. As Situ Biao came to meet him, the Gate Master took the purple talisman from his sleeve and pressed it into the old man's hand.

BOOM!

The thunder in the sky suddenly flared. Even after being heavily suppressed by the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope, Li Chenghui's final, desperate act still made the heavens turn white. Everyone had to close their eyes and retreat from the blinding light.

This was precisely why Situ Mo had thrown the Spirit Artifact. He used the opportunity to catch the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope as it returned from the Great Void. From within it, he retrieved a black brocade bag, then placed the Spirit Artifact back into Situ Biao's hand. He transmitted a cold message to him: "Kill them all! I'm going to the lake to find Li Zhouwei!"

BOOM.

The thunder subsided, and Situ Mo's figure had already vanished as a pale golden streak of light.

Situ Biao could only activate the Spirit Artifact where he stood. A flurry of Dharma Arts passed through the thunder and headed towards him. With flames interlaced with golden water chains, the old man clutched the Purple Mansion talisman, a sense of unease rising within him.

'Why would he give this to me…?'

But he had no time to think. Li Minggong, seeing Li Chenghui's death, nearly vomited blood. Her face wet with tears, her fury was palpable. The old man could only hold up the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope.

However, he had not received the Gate Master's full inheritance. While he knew a few of the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope's wonders, he was clueless as to its true secrets. He could only release waves of yellow light to defend against the incoming Dharma Arts.

…

Situ Mo sped south for a while. Once he was out of sight, and the broad river flowed beneath his feet, he immediately changed direction and headed east towards the Eastern Sea.

This was the most promising path to survival he could think of in that instant.

He left the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope and the Purple Mansion talisman with Situ Biao, so he wouldn't be seen as coveting another's Purple Mansion artifacts. With the Rope and the talisman as a trump card, Situ Biao could continue to fulfill the Purple Mansion's orders, draw their attention, and even manage to kill one or two of the Li clan members, making his sacrifice all the more meaningful.

As for Situ Mo himself, he had deliberately taken Li Chenghui's storage bag to give Li Ximing a way to find him, so he could become a "fish hook" for the Purple Mansion cultivators. This way, even if one of them wanted to kill him, others would be unwilling to see him die.

As for "going to the lake to find Li Zhouwei," that was just a pretense to convince Situ Biao to stay behind and die for him.

'It's a pity about that Chongming Profound Insight Screen; it was a magnificent treasure. Since Li Minggong was there, I had no way to take it. If she had been able to tie me down, the outcome would have been uncertain…'

Having abandoned even the Spirit Artifact, he certainly wouldn't be greedy for the Chongming Profound Insight Screen. He rode the wind, terrified and on thin ice, his mind racing.

The sky before him slowly grew dark. Situ Mo's heart was aching with anxiety, and his hands and feet were ice-cold. The river below reflected the setting sun.

He scanned the scene from south to north, as if expecting a Purple Mansion cultivator to leap out at any moment and crush him to pieces with a single palm strike.

After flying for a while, the land to the south grew desolate, turning into a vast wilderness. There was no one around, not even a passing cultivator. The river was as calm as a mirror, with no sign of a single aquatic demon.

Situ Mo's heart, to his own surprise, began to calm. A cold sweat broke out on his back, and the Golden Tang Gate Master's mind grew clearer than ever.

'I succeeded… Amidst this chaos, the Purple Mansion cultivators' positions will only become more and more fixed. They have colluded to harm Li Zhouwei, and with every passing hour, their thoughts will shift in silence toward wanting to kill Li Zhouwei, and even Li Ximing!'

'After all… even if no one else knows, it's better for those I've harmed to die sooner rather than later!'

His thoughts became more focused, buried deep within his mind. Situ Mo knew he was on the right path to survival. Li Chenghui's face, stained with blood and filled with determination, flashed in his mind for a moment, then quickly disappeared.

He continued to fly out of the wilderness, sometimes in the sky, sometimes diving deep into the river, changing his path constantly. The black storage bag of Li Chenghui was clutched in his hand like a life-saving talisman, and he never opened it.

At this point, his spiritual qi was running low. The long chase with the Spirit Artifact had left him mentally and spiritually exhausted. The tension he'd held all day finally began to ease.

Splash!

He burst from beneath the river's surface, sending water flying in all directions. The water fell back, and the surface of the river became a mirror once more. The world was now at its darkest point, and the surroundings were incredibly black, save for the faint sound of wind rustling through the trees.

The last of the river water dripped from him, and Situ Mo lowered his eyes, his gaze falling upon the river's surface.

Reflected in the water was a man in golden-white armor. A black robe was draped over his shoulders, billowing in the night wind. A brilliant light of Bright Yang heavenly light streamed down from his armor, rippling across the surface of the water.

His black hair was loose. Two black-flame arms grew from his back, each holding a black halberd pointed towards the river on either side. A white-veined profound armor plate extended slightly on his left hand, and his fingers were joined, pinching a shimmering golden talisman that was slowly transforming into a black light in the wind.

'Concealment.'

The young man's other hand held a long halberd outstretched. A dazzling heavenly light surged from the center of the Grand Ascension Halberd, and the sharp, long blade rapidly grew larger before his eyes. Situ Mo vaguely saw a point of light rise from the center of the other man's brow, and then, a boundless white light engulfed his vision.

CLANG!

The Grand Ascension Halberd struck his Dharma Robe like a streak of light, and the Golden Tang Gate's top-tier Dharma Robe groaned under the unbearable pressure. Situ Mo felt as if his internal organs were on fire.

BOOM!

Then, the Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light smashed into his face like a sharp sword. An explosive boom mixed with the sounds of shattering reverberated through the night sky.

A mouthful of fire shot from Situ Mo's mouth and scorched his lungs, making his entire body convulse. He wasn't surprised by the man's power since he'd left seclusion. All he felt was a chilling horror.

'How is this possible?! How is he here at this time?!'

'This is a vast river! How could he have blocked my path?'

It all happened too suddenly. Situ Mo had never imagined a direct descendant of a Purple Mansion cultivator would appear right in front of him. And all the things he had relied on for his arrogance at the lake—the Purple Mansion talisman and the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope—he had thrown away in Funan!

What was more, the person who had appeared was a Purple Mansion Seed like Li Zhouwei!

His golden robe could no longer bear the strain. It dimmed in mid-air. The bright light shone through, and two arms made of black flames shot out from either side. Situ Mo's golden talismanic light shield had no time to fully form. It was seized by the arms, which were imbued with an anti-Dharma power, and it corroded away, unable to close.

Thump!

One of the arms suddenly locked around his throat. Situ Mo felt the world spin. The stars and moon blurred before his eyes. He had been lifted into the air and was now staring into a pair of golden pupils.

A pair of golden eyes, full of hate, as if blood were about to drip from them.

Chapter 769: The Sword

The flames boiled, flowing down the heavenly light. The hand on his neck tightened. Situ Mo still couldn't understand.

Why?

How could Li Zhouwei have found him on this vast, flowing river? Situ Mo's initial shock quickly gave way to a cold understanding. Li Zhouwei must have been guided by a Purple Mansion cultivator. But why would Li Zhouwei reveal himself? Wouldn't it be better to flee straight to the Eastern Sea?

The Purple Mansion masters might not be able to track Li Zhouwei, but could they not track *him*? Situ Mo had been released by them, yes, but how could their profound abilities not include a few watching eyes? No matter how fast Li Zhouwei fled, he could never outrun a Purple Mansion cultivator.

'Why did he have to eliminate me, the knife?'

'Unless… the Purple Mansion cultivator guiding Li Zhouwei *wanted* him to eliminate me… But their eyes are definitely on me. Even if he uses that talisman again… can he really escape?'

But he had no time to speak. Bright Yang and heavenly light erupted from his face. The Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light from Li Zhouwei's brow exploded Situ Mo's entire head into a mist of bone and gore. Scalding blood vaporized instantly into golden malevolent qi.

The Golden Tang Gate Master, who had fought the Li family for four generations, finally melted away in the scorching Bright Yang light. All that remained were two storage bags and a dim, diamond-patterned golden robe hanging from the Grand Ascension Halberd, its empty sleeves flapping in the wind.

Clatter.

Brilliant golden needles fell from the sky, scattering onto the river's surface. This precious set of Foundation Establishment Dharma Artifacts was drawn up

by the heavenly light and floated back into the air. Li Zhouwei withdrew his halberd, his body turning into a streak of light.

BOOM!

As Situ Mo perished, the sky rapidly brightened. The woods around Salt Lake stirred, every leaf rustling as it drooped. The calm water rippled violently. A massive surge of golden malevolent qi struck the lake, pulling at the celestial phenomena above, scattering the clouds and mist. A deep autumn chill spread, and the night passed in an instant, revealing the dawn.

Situ Mo had been a peak Foundation Establishment cultivator who practiced a secret art and had his sights set on the Purple Mansion Realm. His sudden death meant his essence and life force were largely preserved, creating a swift and violent phenomenon.

The golden malevolent qi touched the heavens before descending, making contact with Salt Lake's surface and bed. Gold is the child of Earth. The scene instantly became a hundred times more brilliant. The lake's surface shifted between azure, blue, and red as the earth-veins vibrated, clearly nurturing a new mineral vein below.

Li Zhouwei did not suppress the death phenomenon. The changing sky and trembling earth instantly drew countless gazes. Instead of fleeing to the Eastern Sea, he flared his Dharma light and appeared against the brightening sky by the riverbank. Placing two fingers before his chest, he surged his spiritual qi.

BOOM!

The river gurgled past as the sky grew brighter with the morning glow. A Radiant Pass materialized from thin air. Piles of white bricks stacked high, its corner towers rising, golden and resplendent. It tore through the void with tremendous momentum, illuminating the surroundings from within the clouds.

Powered by Li Zhouwei's full strength, the Radiant Pass shone over Salt Lake, visible from far and wide, attracting observers. Li Zhouwei stood beneath it, clad in platinum armor, holding his halberd.

The view here was open—the former shore of the Profound Peak Gate's territory. As he simply stood there, gazes from the Great Void locked onto him one by one. Streaks of light even whistled in from over the river, stopping cautiously over the lake nearby.

Li Zhouwei remained motionless. His platinum armor gleamed under the radiant light. He planted his halberd on the ground, raised his head to the sky, and his voice boomed like thunder:

"Li Zhouwei of the Moongaze Li Clan is here! If you intend to kill me to prevent future trouble, then make your move!"

The sound rolled across the lake. After a moment of brief silence, no one answered.

Li Zhouwei's grip on the Grand Ascension Halberd tightened, his knuckles whitening. With a *clang*, he set the halberd upright in the air beside him and actually sat cross-legged beneath the Radiant Pass, taking a jade box from his back.

The box was as bright green as jadeite, with clean, elegant lines. The lid slid open smoothly, revealing a cyan blade.

The sword was four feet five inches long, its body a blend of cyan and white. The edge was pure white and magnificent, its light shimmering like water. Two ancient characters were engraved on the center of the blade:

Qingchi

Amidst the chilling gleam, the sword seemed to pulse faintly. The hilt was wrapped in simple black cloth, meticulously trimmed by the original owner, with rounded edges. Where the tassel hung, two more words faintly appeared:

Annihilation

This was Seven-Foot Azure Nether Bronze, a Metal of the Supreme Yin and Lesser Yin. After years of care, its cyan-white hue had only deepened. Even under the brilliant radiant light, the sword's own gleam shot toward the sky.

Li Zhouwei simply placed the jade box on his knees and waited.

Points of bright escaping light quickly appeared over the river, drawing closer. After two breaths, six cultivators in gray-white robes arrived, nearing the lake's surface.

Their robes were gray and white with golden trim—the attire of Changxiao Gate. The leader was handsome and tall, his eyebrows slanted up to his temples, carrying the air of a true immortal adept. He was clearly a high disciple of an immortal gate, but his expression was complicated.

Seeing the young man sitting unmoving beneath the Radiant Pass, the man flicked his sleeve. He did not attack immediately, but turned his head and asked, "Where is the Daoist Master? This man fled to Salt Lake, making us wait at Moongaze for nothing. Now that we are here, why is the Daoist Master not present?"

A cultivator beside him bowed. "Martial Uncle Yunan, Zhaojing is outside. The Purple Mansion cultivators within the sea have no reason to privately harm a Foundation Establishment cultivator. Daoist Master Chengyan should be supporting us from the Great Void."

Yunan Zi was usually stationed overseas and had a fiery temper, but he understood the affairs within the sea. Hearing this, his anger flared. "Baibin Zi, you are too soft! What is there to fear? This is a Purple Mansion Seed! I hear he has destiny on his side and is far more terrifying than Zhaojing. Isn't it more dangerous to let him escape? If the Daoist Master just killed him with one palm, the Moongaze Li Clan is still on the lake, a weakness we can still hold. If Zhaojing dares to harm one of our disciples, we can just grab a Li clan direct descendant and kill them. What can he do?"

Baibin Zi whispered, "Martial Uncle, you are used to killing overseas, but it is different here. The Li Clan has ties to several Purple Mansion families and is an immortal clan itself, with several in-laws among them. Even a Daoist Master can not kill and fears such retribution. Brazenly harming a direct descendant of a Purple Mansion line is not something the various houses will tolerate."

"Cowardice only leaves behind future disaster! ...All those ambushes on the lake... we let him escape. The Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope isn't here, and now we're short one Situ Mo!"

Baibin Zi could only try to placate him. "Martial Uncle, do not be angry. Fortunately, several Daoist Masters kept an eye on Situ Mo. Daoist Master Chengyan, following the Grand Daoist Master's orders, had us stand guard at the lake while he personally tailed Situ Mo. Now, we have caught our fish."

"What's more, Daoist Master Chengyan said… Li Zhouwei is too dangerous, and the other sects only want to fan the flames. If things go wrong, he will personally act. Even risking retaliation, he will capture Li Zhouwei. We are just trying the low-cost method first."

"Situ Mo wasn't bait for *him*! Without Situ Mo, do you know how many things can no longer be done?!" Yunan Zi retorted angrily as the group came to a halt over the lake.

Yunan Zi squinted, looking at the Radiant Pass in the clouds. Its aura was shocking, and he finally grew serious. He stared intently at the young man, shook his sleeves, and said, "Bring your swords. We can capture him just the same!"

The others immediately moved closer. Just as Yunan Zi moved his fingers to form an incantation, the young man abruptly raised his head. A pair of golden pupils stabbed toward him. Yunan Zi froze, his anger turning into a chilling palpitation.

'No wonder the Grand Daoist Master wants him captured…'

Yet, facing six sudden opponents, Li Zhouwei didn't say another word, nor did he form any seals for a Dharma Art. The first thing the young man did was tie the cyan-white treasured sword to a prominent place on his armor.

The group, feeling profoundly slighted, glanced at each other. Baibin Zi had already taken a glowing ring from his sleeve. It was only the size of his palm and as thick as a finger. He pinched the ring and looked at the man below, a silent doubt in his mind.

'Strange…'

There was no time to think. Every extra hour brought another variable. The cultivator showed no mercy, immediately bringing out a Spirit Artifact. He raised the glowing ring and chanted, "Dispel the light and scatter the sharpness, let the sun dim and stars fall. Do not let bright fire be born, do not nourish its qi…"

As he spoke, Yunan Zi led the charge. The Daoist held a thin technique sword, which pulsed with rings of golden light. He acted decisively, striking first.

Li Zhouwei glanced at him and drew his halberd. With a surge of strength, the weapon lunged like a flood dragon emerging from the water, thick with black flames. Yunan Zi, relying on his extra years of cultivation and his experience overseas, did not flinch, meeting the halberd's light head-on.

CLANG!

With a metallic shockwave, Yunan Zi's longsword was uncontrollably forced upward. The Geng Metal light on the blade was corroded by the black flames and vanished completely. Li Zhouwei was unforgiving. Pinning the blade, the Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light erupted from his brow and shot forward.

The golden Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light suddenly expanded. This Dharma Art, enhanced by Concealed Plunder Gold, pierced the distance. It wasn't aimed at Yunan Zi, but shot instantly toward Baibin Zi, who was casting his spell further away.

The attack was too fast. Baibin Zi never expected Li Zhouwei to ignore the other five and attack him from afar. Caught off guard, a halo of light appeared around Baibin Zi, barely blocking the blast. It burned fiercely, sizzling and crackling.

Baibin Zi's chant faltered, causing the light in his hand to flicker. The others, feeling slighted, brandished their own Dharma Artifacts. Li Zhouwei pulled his halberd back, sweeping it horizontally to scatter the attacks from two opponents as his two black-flame halberds shot out to intercept the enemy artifacts.

One remaining Radiant Fire Dharma Art was fast and fierce, shaped like a sparrow. It had a strange brownish-yellow hue, clearly empowered by a spirit flame and not just a simple technique. Its power was immense. Before it even reached his back, flames erupted all around.

A small banner immediately appeared behind Li Zhouwei. Five-colored Radiant Fire swept out and collided with the attack, blocking it. But the enemy Radiant Fire suddenly changed color, and a sword shot out from within it. The sword blazed with fire, its light flashing—it was a sword-control technique.

"Excellent technique, Junior Brother Zhuang!"

The Radiant Fire user was clearly powerful. Yunan Zi knew his strength and had specifically chosen him for this. Now, Yunan Zi also drew his sword, unleashing his own long-brewing Dharma Art. He released a wind of Dry Qi, pressing toward Li Zhouwei.

But Li Zhouwei was unhurried. The Radiant Pass behind him flared brightly. Heavenly light descended, gently suppressing the flying fire-sword. He feinted with his halberd, then stabbed back toward another person nearby.

He held off all five Changxiao cultivators by himself, showing no sign of strain. Facing Yunan Zi's wind of Dry Qi, he was fearless. He swept his halberd, turned his head, and shot the Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light from his brow at the sword of the cultivator named Zhuang.

A short distance away, although Baibin Zi had been interrupted, his cultivation was profound. Within a few breaths, he finished the spell. He gently tossed the light ring, which expanded rapidly in the air until it was the size of a courtyard and as thick as a tree trunk. Waves of spiritual light pulsed from it, enveloping everything.

In an instant, the color of the Radiant Pass behind Li Zhouwei dimmed. The flames on the Radiant Fire banner flickered, and even the Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light on his brow shrank.

Only the black flames on his halberd raged on, undiminished, even forcing the spiritual light from the sky back by a fraction.

"A Spirit Artifact," Li Zhouwei stated, bracing his halberd. Yunan Zi's wind of Dry Qi was still swirling around the weapon, dispelling the Bright Yang spiritual qi. Attacks assailed him from both sides, forcing him to take a step back.

Yunan Zi and the man named Zhuang were both direct descendants. The other three were slightly weaker, but two were still late-stage Foundation Establishment cultivators. With Baibin Zi controlling a Spirit Artifact from above, the contingent Changxiao Gate had sent was clearly intended to overwhelm him.

He stood firm as the Changxiao cultivators slowly spread out to surround him. Baibin Zi, operating the Spirit Artifact in the sky, watched him carefully, the shadow of doubt in his mind refusing to disperse.

"Still no orders from the Daoist Master… How strange. Whether it's to kill or capture… there should be an order!"

A cold wind whistled through the upper sky. Baibin Zi was almost distracted. He looked up. Higher in the sky, a faint wisp of cyan was drifting northwest.

Baibin Zi was a high-level cultivator from Changxiao Gate. He certainly knew what that cyan wisp was. It was the "Treasured Tassel Spring Breeze" from the Sword Gate. It flew from the top of the Sword Peak, traveled all the way to Salt Lake to merge with the daytime sea breeze, and nourished the lands of Jiangnan. It was a precious commodity, but no one dared collect it within the Sword Gate's territory.

'Before merging with the sea breeze, the Treasured Tassel Spring Breeze travels through Sword Gate territory… Is this its path? …Why is it blowing over the Profound Peak Gate?'

His expression froze. A white light flashed from his hand, and he snatched a rogue cultivator from the air nearby. The man had been enjoying the show and was caught completely off guard, nearly spitting up blood in terror.

Baibin Zi grabbed his throat and hissed, "Whose territory is this?! Wasn't Profound Peak eaten by… the Capital Immortals Dao?"

The man was a local rogue cultivator. He stammered in fear, "Daoist, sir… Profound Peak hasn't had any territory by the lake for a long time! I heard that the entire area around Salt Lake was secretly returned to the Sword Gate. It's been Sword Gate territory for ages! The Profound Wonder Temple also hurried to hand over their land. From here all the way north, including more than half of Salt Lake's surface… it's all Sword Gate land!"

"Sir, they say that if a sword cultivator looks up from here, they can even see the glow of the Sword Peak!"

Baibin Zi and the others had been in seclusion for years. The moment they came out, they were pulled into this ambush on the lake, all within a day or two. They only knew the Capital Immortals Dao had annexed Profound Peak; they had no idea about any of this. His heart pounded.

"So that's it! No wonder… He unexpectedly walked right into the 'trap'… No wonder!"

Chapter 770: The White Crane Falls

'That cyan-white sword at his waist must be the legendary Qingchi.'

Baibin Zi watched the man fighting within the spiritual light of the Yongjing Profound Ring, and a deep sigh escaped him.

Li Chejing had not been a member of the Sword Gate, nor had he reached the Purple Mansion Realm. After a hundred years, the Sword Immortal's connection to them had faded. For all these years, there had been no news of interaction between the Sword Gate and the Li family. The Sword Gate's feelings for that short-lived Sword Immortal were likely more regret than any deep bond.

But Baibin Zi remembered, back when he was only an early-stage Foundation Establishment cultivator assigned to guard the Changxiao Gate's assets in the Chengshui Mausoleum Market, he had heard of another man: that Sword Immortal's elder brother, Li Tongya.

And that man, Li Tongya of the Celestial Moon Sword, had personally slain a Maha, causing a sensation. He had been recorded in the Sword Gate's Chenghua Hall as an exemplar for all Sword Gate disciples, praised and remembered by all.

Baibin Zi understood perfectly. The man before him, Li Zhouwei, was not just the Li Clan Head and a descendant of a Sword Immortal; he was the direct, orthodox blood descendant of Li Tongya!

'A figure like this, wearing the Qingchi sword—a blade that belonged to a past Sword Immortal and a great virtuous cultivator—if he is killed by a Purple Mansion cultivator on Sword Gate territory… Myriad Radiance will surely erupt in shame and humiliation! The Sword Gate can forget about its moral high ground and its reputation as sword cultivators ever again!'

Even now, Baibin Zi had not received a single word from Daoist Master Chengyan. He didn't need to think hard to know why. The Daoist Master must be in some kind of trouble in the Great Void… At any rate, he was their Daoist

Master, so Baibin Zi could only frame it charitably in his mind: he was in a "standoff" with the master of the Sword Gate.

'We can't count on the Daoist Master…'

Baibin Zi was lost in thought mid-air. Below, within the spiritual light, the black flames raged. Li Zhouwei had retracted most of his Dharma Arts, his halberd thrusting and stabbing, shadows blurring. He used the black flames' anti-Dharma properties to resist the spiritual light, and had already found his footing against the five-man encirclement.

'What is Baibin Zi spacing out for up there?!'

Yunan Zi was fighting with suffocating frustration, his heart burning. This young man had almost no weaknesses. Not only were his Dharma Arts powerful, but his halberd possessed an anti-Dharma power that shattered flames and magical light with every sweep and thrust. Yunan Zi could only use his own sword to run interference.

Daoist Zhuang at his side excelled in Dharma Arts. Back in the Eastern Sea, his torrential Radiant Fire had always overwhelmed his enemies. Who knew he would run into a Bright Yang cultivator who didn't fear fire, and who also had anti-Dharma flames that corroded his techniques? He couldn't even use fifty percent of his true strength.

This enraged Yunan Zi. He leveled his sword, pressed two fingers against the blade, and began chanting. Talismans shook loose from his sleeve. Daoist Zhuang, having worked with him for years, reacted instantly, crushing a green gourd and shouting, "Trap him first!"

The two cultivators on the flanks exchanged a look and each pulled a chain of purple, water-patterned links from their sleeves, gripping the Dharma Artifacts as they chanted.

Li Zhouwei seized the opportunity to pull his halberd free from the swamp of Dharma Arts. The flames of the Cyclic Soul-Refining Halberd Arts flared, finally calming the five or six gales of Dry Qi that had been swirling around him.

In the span of a single move, Li Zhouwei suddenly raised his halberd, the light between his brows surging. Four of his opponents scattered, but the last remaining Changxiao cultivator was out of luck. The old man, standing on the wind holding a brown-lacquered peach-wood staff, had no choice but to grit his teeth and block.

Having gained a moment's breath, Li Zhouwei's assault became ferocious. Before the halberd even arrived, the Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light struck first. The old man raised his tortoise-shell-like defensive artifact. With a tremendous *BOOM*, white light and flames exploded against the shell, sending it flying backward.

Only then did the halberd arrive, trailing raging black flames and a turbulent wave of spiritual qi.

With the swarm of Dharma Arts no longer tying him down, Li Zhouwei attacked with his full strength, golden flames practically leaping from his pupils. The old man was scared witless. He raised his peach-wood staff high, his Immortal Foundation spinning as a wave of brownish-yellow power surged forth.

BOOM!

The old man was no expert in artifact combat. The few techniques he specialized in had already been broken, and now he was suddenly taking such a ferocious hit. Fortunately, the peach-wood staff had some life-saving properties. The Dharma Artifact let out a low, mournful cry.

CRACK!

The halberd suddenly swept sideways. Its bright, crescent-shaped blade flashed. The old man felt an overwhelming, uncontrollable force transmit from his hands. The peach-wood staff was instantly ripped from his grasp, hooked by the halberd, and sent flying high into the air.

"Not good!"

The staff struggled wildly in the air. The old man was, after all, a direct descendant of Changxiao. He immediately formed a seal, and the staff turned into a brown speck of light, trying to pierce the void and return to his hand.

BOOM!

But the pristine white Radiant Pass appeared, smashing down on the speck of light. The technique was instantly shattered by the suppressive force, revealing the artifact's true form, firmly pinning it below.

'There's a reason the Wei and Li families often use halberds… Combined with this Immortal Foundation, it truly is the Dao of Suppression…'

The old man, having lost his artifact, was humiliated. But thankfully, Daoist Zhuang's green gourd was already active, pouring forth a torrent of white water that descended with overwhelming spiritual qi.

Li Zhouwei immediately felt the wind of heavenly light gathering at his feet weaken. He knew at once:

"A Mansion Water Dharma Artifact!"

The raging Mansion Water washed over his feet. Before the water even touched him, the spiritual wind supporting him had completely dissipated, leaving only a fading spark of heavenly light beneath him as he hovered in the air.

He stomped thin air, and a jade mountain appeared beneath his feet. The mountain expanded rapidly, revealing vivid clouds, immortal cranes, and ancient pines. In less than two breaths, it had firmly planted itself in the water.

Li Zhouwei stood atop the Jade-Mist Mountain. The Jade True Dharma Artifact flared with light, forcing the surrounding Mansion Water to part. But two purple, patterned chains were already flying toward him, seeking to bind him. Li Zhouwei had always despised these binding-type artifacts. He had no choice but to raise his halberd and parry them.

"Hah!"

A sharp shout echoed from above. Yunan Zi had drawn his sword. He took a mouthful of clear water and spat it onto the blade, unleashing a wave of azure-green, gloomy light.

Shoo…

The profound light shot from the sword, seeming to take the weapon's own spirituality with it. The Geng Metal radiance that had covered the blade vanished completely, leaving only a hollow, dim sword body.

Yunan Zi cultivated True Qi and had practiced Dharma Arts for many years. His casting speed was extreme. He left the sword hanging in the air and pulled a jade talisman from his waist, clutching it as he immediately began preparing his next technique.

Li Zhouwei, however, grew serious. The Yang-Li Crimson Sparrow Banner unfurled violently, blasting five-colored Radiant Fire to temporarily hold back the

two purple chains. He thrust his halberd upward. *Clang!* He struck the azure-green light from the air.

The profound light flickered and disappeared.

Li Zhouwei swept his halberd back, blasting apart the techniques on either side and stirring up a wave of spiritual qi. But his golden eyes were still searching the air.

He knew from that first clash that this thing was unusual. It seemed to be some kind of Dharma Art condensed with metal essence, difficult to disperse. To make matters worse, the spiritual light from the ring above was constantly falling, suppressing his own techniques.

He silently swallowed a pill. His two black-flame arms swept their halberds into the Radiant Fire to fend off the two purple chains. He glanced at Yunan Zi hiding in the back and stepped forward into the void, his Jade-Mist Mountain suddenly rising.

CLANG!

The azure-green light was getting faster, dodging his halberd several times. Only thanks to the suppressive influence of the Jade-Mist Mountain was he able to knock it from the air.

This great mountain of the Jade True Dao Lineage had appeared at the perfect time. It radiated beams of white light, coordinating with the suppressive power of his Bright Yang. When Daoist Zhuang saw him searching the air and realizing he was using the Dao of Suppression, he knew Li Zhouwei wanted to pin his martial uncle's azure-green light. Zhuang hurried forward, stirring up his Radiant Fire.

Li Zhouwei controlled his artifact, which suddenly flew out of the Mansion Water. It shone brightly, but instead of attacking the nearest target, it pressed down on Daoist Zhuang.

By ignoring the others like this, the azure-green light was able to escape. It found an opening and slammed into his back. The scales of his Yuan'E Soft Armor instantly stood on end. The light around Li Zhouwei dimmed, and the technique shot away again.

But the mountain pressing down on him sent Daoist Zhuang's soul fleeing. His techniques were strong, and in an instant, he turned into a streak of fire and

scattered, gritting his teeth. "If Martial Brother Yufu hadn't fallen overseas, how could this beast be so arrogant!"

But the jade mountain did not chase him. Instead, it *boomed* as it smashed down onto the green gourd.

'The most critical piece here is Daoist Zhuang's Mansion Water artifact. I'm already suppressed by the spiritual light from the sky, and this artifact scattered my movement technique. I was trapped on the Jade-Mist Mountain, waiting to be besieged!'

The gourd was not a defensive artifact. Pinned by both an Immortal Foundation and a Dharma Artifact, it instantly began to wail, faring even worse than the wooden staff. In a moment, it was seized by the Radiant Pass above.

As Li Zhouwei broke free, three Dharma Arts exploded against him. His armor brightened rapidly, every scale humming.

The next instant, he transformed into a brilliant streak of heavenly light, as fast as a fish darting through water, and vanished within the golden mist.

The light-shifting ability of the Yuan'E Soft Armor!

A sense of crisis erupted in Yunan Zi's heart. The jade talisman in his hand was only half-lit when a blinding heavenly light shone in his eyes, so bright it seemed to scorch his face. He was forced to abandon his technique, sweeping his sleeve to release a black halo.

CRACK!

The halberd stabbed the halo. His hastily deployed defense was useless; it shattered into motes of light. The halberd's light flew in, and the Radiant Pass from behind Li Zhouwei shot forward as well.

Yunan Zi's technique was rushed. He was still reeling, his feathered robes ringing as sparks flew. He couldn't just wait to die. Using the moment his opponent's technique faltered, his figure vanished and reappeared several dozen feet away.

But the halberd pursued him relentlessly. It made a small turn, the crescent blade stabbing at him again. This time, Yunan Zi had a moment to breathe and was much calmer. He flicked a jade bead from his sleeve to block it.

Who knew the halberd would just hook and slap the bead aside? Li Zhouwei completely ignored the sword and techniques chasing him from behind. His two extra arms didn't even turn to defend, but instead brought their own halberds stabbing forward.

"How dare this demonic disciple be so savage!"

Yunan Zi's mouth was full of shock and anger, but his legs were already moving. Most of his Immortal Foundation's wonders were related to Dharma Arts. Changxiao Gate was a great Dao lineage of techniques; almost none of them practiced artifact combat. Their swords were only for casting. How could he possibly fight this man up close? He turned and fled.

As he dashed away, the sound of flames and water exploded behind him. Spiritual light shot everywhere as Li Zhouwei blocked the surrounding attacks. With another loud shockwave, Li Zhouwei burst out of the flames and shot directly toward him!

The golden-eyed man was now covered in fire. The scales of his Yuan'E Soft Armor were baked red, glowing faintly under the extreme strain. Li Zhouwei used the armor to shift through light and close the distance, the mantra in his mouth having hummed for some time. The Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light between his brows was condensed to its absolute limit:

'Shine upon the Eight Desolations, let all bow to me… Ten thousand spirits look up, the Shangyao is the Celestial God!'

After three consecutive pursuits, the Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light finally erupted into a brilliant white column of light as thick as a water bucket. Yunan Zi's pupils were instantly enveloped by the boundless, brilliant light.

He finally understood why his opponent had chased him three times without giving him a single moment to react.

'We're outside the range of the Yongjing Profound Ring!'

BOOM!

A gray light shield suddenly erupted from Yunan Zi's body. The searing Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light spread over the entire shield like molten Malevolent Earth. He felt his entire body burning and yelled through clenched teeth, "Baibin Zi!"

His voice was immediately drowned in the light, which was now mixed with black flames that slammed against the shield, hissing and sizzling.

Yunan Zi was confident in the strength of his talisman and wasn't afraid. In fact, he was enraged that such a precious talisman had to be used, and a venomous sneer crossed his face.

But as he looked up, he vaguely saw a glint of gold within the flashing light.

'What is that…'

In an instant, his vision cleared. He saw a small, palm-sized vial engraved with crimson-gold Radiant Fire patterns. It was tilting.

From the mouth of the vial, a single drop of liquid slowly trickled out. It was extremely viscous, and the liquid itself was covered in patterns of a terrifying apricot-yellow.

Fear, belatedly, seized Yunan Zi. He wanted to move, but realized that all the brilliant light surrounding him was only there to trap him.

Drip.

Li Zhouwei snapped his halberd back. The halberd swept out a crescent of wind, carrying dense black flames that blasted the pursuing Radiant Fire and Mansion Water into a shower of light. As the halberd returned, the five cultivators chasing him all retreated a step.

BOOM!

A dazzling, apricot-yellow light shot into the sky. The others couldn't help but squint. Salt Lake, already colorful, was now reflected as a pure golden lake. A massive torrent of Radiant Fire instantly filled the sky, so powerful that even the glowing ring above dimmed slightly.

Daoist Zhuang looked stunned. He was swept by the intense Radiant Fire, and his robes began to burn with apricot flames. But as a Radiant Fire cultivator himself, he was already in the best shape of the group. He batted at the flames on his robes while looking up.

The apricot light dimmed slightly, finally revealing the scene.

A violent storm of Radiant Fire was rising from behind the golden-eyed man. As the apricot flames rolled over him from behind, Li Zhouwei raised one hand, the

edge of his Grand Ascension Halberd pointed flatly at the five men. The circular core of the halberd pulsed with rings of light.

That little speck of azure-green light had lost its spirituality. It drifted sluggishly within the halberd's core, its once-sharp form having been baked into an oval shape, struggling feebly.

Li Zhouwei stood there, armored and holding his halberd. Behind him was the light of True Qi, suppressed by the Radiant Fire. The falling phenomenon of the cultivator's death was transforming into gentle, ethereal immortal cranes. They had only just managed to flap gracefully in the air three or four times before they were swiftly consumed by the fire and fell from the sky.

'Yunan Zi is dead! The esteemed direct descendant of a Purple Mansion, Yunan Zi, just died like that!'

The lake was golden. The dawn was brilliant. Radiant Fire ascended, and white cranes fell. Amidst the bright apricot glow, Li Zhouwei's halberd seemed to gather all the golden light in the world, dazzling the eyes of the remaining cultivators.

And his cold voice echoed across the lake:

"A direct descendant of Changxiao, is this all you are."

Chapter 771: The Flames Die

As the shout fell, the apricot-yellow light was still spreading, and fear had already taken root in the others. Daoist Zhuang held his Radiant Fire aloft. Seeing Li Zhouwei stand motionless with his halberd, he realized the man was recovering his breath. His heart seized, and he yelled:

"Act now! That Dharma Artifact he just used was no simple thing! He must be weak right now!"

His shout instantly steadied their resolve. The few of them exchanged a glance, urged their Dharma Artifacts forward, and instead of retreating, charged at the man before them.

Daoist Zhuang, meanwhile, formed a hand seal and cast a spell, standing still. With two fingers clasped, he moved his fire into his dantian, his heart filled with both fear and greed. In truth, Daoist Zhuang was not one of the original direct disciples of Changxiao Gate, but a late addition who didn't even have a Daoist name. He had no loyalty to Chengyan in the Great Void to speak of. But his eyes were sharp. In the raging Radiant Fire just now, he was the only one who saw that the opponent had used a Dharma Artifact.

'Such a powerful Radiant Fire artifact… it must be extraordinary… if I could get my hands on it…'

At that moment, Daoist Zhuang's killing intent was the strongest. Righteously, he had stabilized the morale of the group, while Li Zhouwei, for the first time, revealed a smile. He pushed his halberd sideways, bracing it with a clang against the Dharma Artifacts of two of them. Behind him, the Yang-Li Crimson Sparrow Banner rose once more.

The few cultivators engaged in combat again. As expected, after the intense battle, Li Zhouwei seemed to be running low on spiritual qi. The spiritual light from the sky descended once more, surprisingly pinning down the savage man again.

The battle below was fierce. In the sky, Baibin Zi had tears in his eyes and gritted his teeth. Area-of-effect Dharma Artifacts like the Yongjing Profound Ring were inherently taxing on the mind, and it was even more difficult for him to control the Dharma Artifact with his Foundation Establishment Realm cultivation, making it hard for him to free his hands. But with his heart filled with grief and indignation, he no longer cared about whether a Daoist Master should intervene. His eyes bulging with fury, he poured all of his spiritual qi—even his essence—into the Dharma Artifact.

With this influx of spiritual qi, the Yongjing Profound Ring finally revealed its true might. The suppressive spiritual light grew thicker and thicker, gradually even pushing back the black flames on Li Zhouwei's halberd. He was increasingly put on the defensive, sustaining several injuries in a row.

Baibin Zi watched with elation, pouring even more spiritual qi into it. Who knew that a small gray brocade pouch at his waist would suddenly leap, and a talisman inside would activate with a pop, bursting into flames. Suddenly, a brilliant azure light shone forth, and a golden beam escaped from the top of Baibin Zi's head. He abruptly regained his clarity. His mind was blank for a moment, and his confusion quickly receded.

'Not good!'

Seeing the agitated state of the others below, he felt a chill crawl up his spine. Taking advantage of the talisman's effect before it faded, he struck the Yongjing Profound Ring with a palm. The spiritual light in the sky instantly shifted, and the Dharma Artifact reverted to its original form, falling into his hand. Baibin Zi's face was grim. He felt his entire body go soft and quickly formed a hand seal, descending.

When Li Zhouwei saw the spiritual light from the sky cease to fall, he understood that the other party had not fallen for it. A sense of pity arose in his heart. The halberd in his hand, however, suddenly changed. The raging black flames increased in power several times over, and the Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light between his brows erupted again. Just as the old man was about to retreat, the Sun's Resonant Radiance Art suddenly burst forth, transforming into several white beams that dragged him to a halt. In just that single moment's delay, the halberd descended with intense wind pressure.

BOOM!

The old man's hands were instantly shattered. The Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light flew over and punched a fist-sized hole in his head, flashing with flames. He was surely cooked inside.

'What a pity…'

The Heavenly Radiance, Hidden Light was launched too hastily this time, its power far less than before. As the remaining few quickly retreated, Li Zhouwei did not give chase. Instead, he retracted his weapons and stood still in the air.

Baibin Zi descended on the wind. Daoist Zhuang, who was extremely displeased with Baibin Zi's sudden retraction of his Dharma Artifact, was about to lash out, when he saw Baibin Zi's cold expression and heard him say:

"The talisman from the Daoist Master worked! We were either deceived by fate just now, or deluded by a Divine Ability or Dharma Artifact. Retreat, now!"

When he said that, Daoist Zhuang felt a wave of cold rush to his head. He was horrified, thinking to himself:

'Why would I have craved his things!'

Baibin Zi took a few steps back, his heart ultimately filled with unwillingness. The original plan was not as simple as just the Yongjing Profound Ring. The Yongjing Profound Ring was a Dharma Artifact designed to destroy techniques and overturn profound formations. It was originally meant to deal with the vast number of cultivators and a dozen or so Foundation Establishment cultivators of the Li family, to break their formation at a critical moment and prevent Li Zhouwei's escape.

The real tool prepared for Li Zhouwei was the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope! That spiritual rope was for entangling and binding, restraining artifact combat. Coupled with the Yongjing Profound Ring, it would have left Li Zhouwei with no way to escape.

'Who knew… it would come to this!'

Gazing at Li Zhouwei, who stood steadfastly with his halberd, Baibin Zi's eyes slowly fell. His heart was bitter:

'This matter today… it's not just my Changxiao Gate, is it? More than one or two people want to harm Li Zhouwei.'

He could only keep these words in his heart, not daring to speak them aloud. The Yongjing Profound Ring in his hand glowed faintly, and his mouth trembled. In the end, he said nothing at all, and flew away on the wind.

The immortal cranes in the sky still wailed and circled within the raging Radiant Fire. Li Zhouwei propped up his halberd and slowly closed his eyes. The golden-eyed man wiped away the blood from the corner of his mouth, and stepped, one foot at a time, from the air to the ground. A glint of moisture appeared at the corner of his eye, only to instantly evaporate and vanish on the scorching red Yuan'E Soft Armor.

The Great Void was a pitch-black expanse, undulating without cease. Yet, in one spot, a faint light shone, revealing a low table in the darkness. A middle-aged man in a Daoist robe sat cross-legged beside it. His hair and beard were half-white, and he appeared amiable. On his back, he carried a treasured sword with a Geng Metal scabbard, which emitted a brilliant light.

Across from this sword cultivator sat a man in brown clothes. He seemed somewhat simple and honest, waiting respectfully by his side, head bowed and silent, as if awaiting instructions.

"Senior Li… what do you think…"

Although the brown-robed man was respectful, his expression was troubled. He hesitated before speaking, and the sword cultivator across from him finally raised his brows, glanced at him, and replied:

"What is there to see?"

The brown-robed man immediately fell silent, sitting there feeling somewhat stifled. The sword cultivator lowered his brows and observed the Great Void for a moment. Only when the surrounding Purple Mansion cultivators had dispersed did he speak:

"Fellow Daoist Chengyan, I don't care how you throw your weight around on your own territory, but for you to run all the way to my Sword Gate's domain to act so brazenly, and to try and kill a descendant of one of our Sword Immortals, that's against the rules."

'Was that just me…?'

Chengyan's heart was bitter, but he replied aloud:

"This matter was my oversight. I originally wanted to invite this young friend to my Changxiao Gate for a visit, and to ask him for news of our Great Daoist Master. I didn't expect such a great conflict to erupt. It makes my sect look bad."

"It's true that this junior was imprudent. I apologize to you, Senior… please do not hold it against me."

Daoist Master Lingmei raised his brows, and the upward slant of his eyebrows immediately revealed their sharpness. The sword cultivator replied:

"Bullshit."

Chapter 772: Sorting the Aftermath

This reprimand from Daoist Master Lingmei was blunt, almost an open scolding, yet Chengyan did not dare show the slightest hint of dissatisfaction, standing with his head bowed obediently.

Lingmei sat upright with his sword on his back, admonishing him as if he were a junior:

"Changxiao is a treacherous one. I saw long ago that he was vicious and his schemes poisonous. And now he's taught you to be just the same, utterly lacking in composure!"

Chengyan could only nod in agreement. Lingmei continued, his face cold:

"It's useless talking to you. You lot from overseas are all unscrupulous, stirring up such a commotion. You bring out one Dharma Artifact after another. That Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope belongs to Situ Huo. How did it end up in your hands?"

Hearing this, Chengyan shook his head and replied, "Senior, that Dharma Artifact was either given by Situ Huo, or the Situ family found it somewhere. It truly has nothing to do with my sect. How could it be a Dharma Artifact supplied by Changxiao…"

"Who knows," Lingmei sneered.

"The Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope isn't a signature Changxiao artifact like the Yongjing Profound Ring. If you really did provide it, who would ever know? What's the plan for it now?"

Chengyan raised his eyes, slightly embarrassed, and said in a low voice, "Daoist Master Tianhuo… should be on his way to retrieve it. After all, it was meant to be given to them."

The Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope had fallen into the hands of the Golden Feather Sect the moment it appeared. If it was something Changxiao

Gate had acquired, this would look like a massive loss. But Lingmei remembered clearly, and said:

"Changxiao really does make good bargains. Situ Huo pledged the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope to the Golden Feather Sect back then. Later, he was driven out, missed the rendezvous, and remained in hiding to nurse his injuries, so the Dharma Artifact stayed with him…"

"I'm afraid Changxiao was entrusted by him, took some benefit, and was supposed to return this item. But it's a hot potato; you couldn't even use it once without being linked to Situ Huo, inviting a whole crowd for interrogation. So you conveniently threw it into Situ Mo's hands, letting him use it once while also wiping your own hands clean…"

Although Daoist Master Lingmei was a conservative and stubborn member of the Sword Gate, he himself was not bound by convention. His mind was flexible. While this was his speculation, it was very likely the truth. He dared to say it, but Chengyan did not dare to confirm it, only replying:

"Senior jests. This matter is so complicated, and our sect's Daoist Master has not returned from the Eastern Sea. His whereabouts are still unknown. How could we possibly arrange so many things…"

Seeing him continue to play dumb, Lingmei scoffed and replied, "I won't waste any more words on you. I fear if you stay longer, you'll run out and get killed by Hengli, and the blame will land on my Sword Gate. This matter ends here. Do not stir up any more trouble near my Sword Gate's territory!"

As if granted amnesty, Chengyan immediately took his leave. Lingmei remained seated in the Great Void, feeling rather relaxed.

'Li Zhouwei gave me a good excuse. I didn't get dragged into it, and now he owes me a favor. Just showing up to intimidate Chengyan was enough to stop others from fanning the flames. Li Ximing gave me enough face, so with this, both human sentiment and face are fully satisfied!'

He stood up cheerfully, took the treasured sword from his back, and held it in his arms, laughing inwardly:

'Now let's see if those old fogeys in the sect can still lecture me about morality and orthodoxy… claiming I'm a heretic who has strayed from the Sword Heart… If I had hidden away adhering to the Immortal Abode's rules, how could I have

saved Li Zhouwei? When rules and morality conflict, I'd like to see what you have to say now!'

Moongaze Lake.

The sky was gloomy, laced with crackling thunder. A continuous, dreary rain drifted through the air, scattering across the vast expanse.

The faint golden radiance of the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope hung frozen in the sky, the ferocious Radiant Fire suppressed beneath it. A golden stream of light rose up as a white-haired old man in a Golden Tang Daoist robe formed hand seals to cast a technique.

"Situ Biao!"

The red-skirted woman and the others were trapped by the Dharma Artifact, unable to advance or retreat. The Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope was an item of both Earth Virtue and Metal Virtue, making it difficult to effectively counter. It scattered chaotic, pale-golden light, pushing them back time and again.

The Golden Tang Gate had the upper hand, but Situ Biao's expression was as ugly as if he'd seen a ghost. It was laced with despair.

Situ Biao was one of the few remaining elders. His bloodline wasn't particularly close to the main branch, but his cultivation was high, which was the only reason he had survived round after round of purges. He wasn't stupid. Having reached this point, even if he couldn't see the full network of plots behind the scenes, he had sensed enough.

He could accept Situ Mo using him as cannon fodder. Situ Biao didn't have much lifespan left anyway, and he reckoned trading his worthless old life for Situ Mo's escape wasn't a loss. Besides, with a Dharma Artifact in hand, he could at least deceive himself. But who knew that right in the heat of battle, a vast and familiar surge of Golden malevolent qi would suddenly erupt in the east, soaring to the heavens.

Crack…

The jade talisman in his sleeve shattered. The talisman the old man held tightly in his hand even loosened its grip. He hesitated, but ultimately, he did not throw it. Instead, he put it back safely in his storage pouch.

Situ Mo was dead. There was no need for him to hold out here.

"Pfft."

Not far away, Li Minggong spat out a mouthful of blood. She too looked up at the pillar of Golden malevolent qi rising in the distance. Tears welled in her eyes again, but through the blur, she saw that the wretched light of the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope had frozen solid.

Everyone's techniques solidified in mid-air. Even the roiling Radiant Fire stopped, as if it were a sculpture. The mountain and river patterns on the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope abruptly dimmed. A hand and half a sleeve reached out of the empty air.

The sleeve was embroidered with golden flame patterns, its cuff adorned with golden stone and wind-blown sand. The hand itself was fair and delicate, with long fingers.

This hand lightly pinched the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope. The gray rope, so imperious just a moment ago, twitched in his grasp like a dead snake and, under the petrified gaze of the crowd, vanished.

A full breath passed before the flowing mountain patterns in the sky belatedly faded. The space beside Situ Biao was suddenly empty. The old man trembled in the air like a plucked chicken.

"Clang!"

Tears streaming, Li Minggong held her lamp in one hand and activated the Capital Immortals Dao Bell. With the other hand, she drew the sword from her waist and shouted:

"Your Golden Tang Gate's actions… even a Daoist Master couldn't bear to watch!"

Situ Biao's scalp went numb. An ill wind was already rising beneath his feet. He hurriedly took the talisman out again, concealing it in his hand as he yelled into the oncoming wave of Radiant Fire:

"Retreat!"

The Chongming Profound Insight Screen was still in the sky. Without the support of the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope, the Golden Tang Gate's techniques were almost half-useless. There was no point in fighting. The old man just held the talisman high and shouted:

"Li Minggong! Don't force my hand!"

Li Minggong tearfully called for her people to halt, allowing Situ Biao to retreat several miles. She rode her True Fire, glaring after them with hatred, but then she paused, stunned.

She wasn't the only one. Elder White Ape, Li Wen, and the others all froze in mid-air. Far in the distance, Situ Biao was once again frozen, unable to move, the light around his body ceasing to pulse.

The same hand with the golden stone and flame sleeve emerged from the Great Void again. It stretched out five fingers and, with a *whoosh*, plucked the talisman right out of Situ Biao's hand.

'This…'

Despair washed over the faces of the Golden Tang Gate cultivators, one after another. But the frozen state did not break. The Daoist Master stepped fully out of the Great Void. He wore robes of golden stone, wind-blown sand, and flowing flames. He was seven chi tall, with elegant brows, handsome eyes, and his hair bound up.

This Daoist Master flipped the talisman over in his hand and asked:

"Any more?"

Situ Biao trembled in terror, shaking his head frantically. The Daoist Master said, "Oh," turned, and stepped back into the Great Void.

Only then did Situ Biao and his men, drenched in sweat, flee on the wind. The Li clan cultivators didn't dare approach the Daoist Master, so they had no choice but to let them escape.

Once Situ Biao's group was gone, Li Minggong finally crumpled, her vision going dark as she nearly fainted. Li Chenghuai quickly stepped forward to support her.

She had rushed to provide aid, then fought a desperate battle against Situ Biao, who wielded a Dharma Artifact. Her heart had been frantic, and she had lost

her composure, fighting the hardest of anyone. Her spiritual qi was long since exhausted; she had only been forcing herself to stand straight.

"Elder Sister…"

Li Chenghuai supported Li Minggong and looked around. Everyone was wounded.

Elder White Ape had reverted to his original form to resist the Situ family and had his heart and lungs pierced by a golden hook. His body was covered in gouges where his flesh had been ripped away. Now, back in the form of a white-haired, robust man, many wounds were deep enough to see bone.

Li Wen's strength wasn't enough to fight alone, so he had assisted Elder White Ape and was not badly injured. Miaoshui, who had only recently recovered, had been wounded again—her collarbone was pierced, and half her neck had been carved off. Though she had patched it with Converging Water, it still looked hideous.

The old man Qu Bushi had little combat ability to begin with, so fighting desperately hadn't helped much. He just had a few broken bones. The old man simply stared at the devastated Funan territory below him, his heart aching.

As Li Chenghuai was taking stock, Li Minggong recovered her breath and stood straight in the fire. "Where is Ding Weizeng!" she asked in a low voice.

Before they arrived, Ding Weizeng had held off the entire Golden Tang contingent by himself. His injuries could only be severe. Now that he was nowhere to be seen, he was likely in terrible trouble.

"No phenomenon has appeared. He should be fine," Li Chenghuai comforted her.

They descended together into the main hall. Li Minggong wiped away her tears and asked, "How is the Clan Head's life jade… That golden malevolent qi in the east, was that Situ Mo's death?"

"I'll go ask right now."

Li Chenghuai replied and quickly left the hall. Li Minggong looked at the gazes of the surrounding cultivators, gritted her teeth, and said, "Where is Sun Bai? Bring him here, quickly."

Miaoshui said in a low voice from the side, "During the fight with the Capital Immortals Dao, when we retreated, Guest Elder Sun Bai… lacks combat ability. He couldn't get away and seemed to be forced into a formation somewhere in the mountains to hide."

Miaoshui was being polite. The Capital Immortals Dao had intentionally let them go. Sun Bai could have left with them. But caught between a wolf in front and a tiger behind, the man's nerve had broken. He had feigned defeat to flee and hide.

Li Minggong had already stopped her tears. Sun Bai's actions were understandable, and it wasn't as if they relied on him heavily. To put it nicely, it was more useful for him to preserve his life. She only said, "This is precisely when we need him. Hurry and bring him."

They looked at each other. Li Wen clearly wanted to guard Li Minggong and didn't move an inch. Qu Bushi, being relatively lightly injured, flew up and out of the hall, heading east.

Only then did Li Minggong sit in the master's seat, feeling the world spin. She wielded the Six-Pointed Crimson Flame Brazier and the Capital Immortals Dao Bell, and had also been controlling the Chongming Profound Insight Screen. She had been the main force resisting the Mountain-Shrouding Earth-Moving Rope and had suffered many internal injuries. Though she looked fine on the surface, her insides were a wreck.

They waited a while. Sun Bai had not arrived, but a streak of white light first flew across the sky, dancing elegantly as if stepping on stairs in the air, landing outside the hall.

The white light resolved into a figure in a pale white Daoist robe, looking refined and scholarly, his face etched with worry. It should have been a very civilized attire, but it was singed in several places by Merging Fire, making him look rather battered.

It was Cui Jueyin who had arrived first.

"Lord Cui!"

Li Wen immediately went forward. Compared to the other outsiders, he seemed to trust Cui Jueyin, whom Li Ximing had brought back, far more, pulling him over.

Cui Jueyin saw that more than half of Li Wen's jade armor was shattered and his aura was weak. He felt a trace of unease. Seeing the sorrow on everyone's faces, his suspicions were finally confirmed. His heart dropped. "When I saw the thunder shake, I knew something was wrong… Damn it…"

Hearing this, Li Minggong coughed, hiding the blood she brought up in her palm. She took out a pill and swallowed it. "Many thanks for holding off Guo Hongjian in the wilderness. If not for you, the wilderness would have been in peril."

Cui Jueyin cupped his hands. "It was not my achievement alone. Profound Peak Gate has one Fu Yuezi. That man's strength is outstanding. His artifact skills and Daoist cultivation are extraordinary; he must be the foremost expert of Profound Peak."

Just as he finished speaking, Qu Bushi hurried in with Sun Bai. The old man Sun Bai looked wretched and somewhat ashamed. He bowed. "My strength was insufficient. Please punish me, milady."

Li Minggong had no patience for pleasantries and immediately told him to come and check her pulse. Only then did Sun Bai lift his robes, step forward, and conjure a green light with his Immortal Foundation's wondrous ability. As he placed it on her fair wrist, his expression changed to one of utter shock, and he quickly closed his eyes to circulate his spiritual qi.

Li Minggong's complexion improved slightly. She swallowed a mouthful of blood, and her speech became smoother. "Quick," she said urgently, "go find Ding Weizeng… Send everyone out. We must find him first. Nothing can happen to him."

As she spoke, she pulled her hand back and motioned for Sun Bai to check Miaoshui's and Elder White Ape's injuries first. She coughed twice and asked, "That Daoist Master from before. Do any of you recognize him?"

Miaoshui had been listening from the side. Just as Sun Bai was about to check her injuries, she pushed him toward the old ape and spoke up. "I cultivated in this area in my early years and had an… entanglement with a Golden Feather disciple. Because of family matters, it never came to fruition. From the description I heard, this should be the youngest of the Golden Feather Sect's Tian generation, Daoist Master Tianhuo…"

Li Minggong committed the name to memory. After Sun Bai had checked everyone and analyzed their injuries, she sent them away to heal, then turned to Cui Jueyin. "I'll have to trouble you to lead the search."

Cui Jueyin nodded, left, and departed as a streak of light. The entire hall fell silent, leaving only Li Wen sitting cross-legged outside the hall, silently guarding her.

Only then did Li Minggong let the tears fall, coughing softly. Her heart ached as she thought:

'Now… in the entire clan, it's just me and Chenghuai. Chenghuai was brought out later by Uncle Jun and lacks the same connection and prestige… He can't step up… I cannot enter seclusion. I have to handle my younger brother's funeral rites first.'

'Brother… back then… at the little courtyard on Mount Qingdu… all the brothers and sisters sitting together, we couldn't even fit at three big tables. When Uncle Xijun came with the Clan Head, I never even thought I could reach Foundation Establishment.'

'I thought back then that my role, Li Minggong, was to be an advisor… Now… I'm the only one left to face this.'

Chapter 773: Thunderstorm

After resting for some time to meticulously tend to her wounds, Li Minggong felt as though a great deal of time had passed before Li Chenghuai finally entered the hall. His expression was heavy, a complex mask of relief and worry.

"Elder Sister," he began in a low voice, "Situ Mo has fallen. Word is the Family Head took action above Salt Lake. He first killed Situ Mo, claiming vengeance. Then, while facing six cultivators from Changxiao, he also slew Yunan Zi, forcing the Changxiao contingent to withdraw."

Li Minggong immediately looked up, her expression flashing with vindicated hatred, only for it to be replaced by anxiety. "What happened next?"

"It is said he was received by members of the Cheng family," Li Chenghuai replied, "and has retreated to Myriad Radiance."

Li Minggong let out a visible sigh of relief, the weight in her heart lifting considerably. "As long as he escaped, that's what matters. Both fronts are secure now. Just remind him, while he is out there… his priority is to preserve his life."

Li Chenghuai nodded. Li Minggong coughed, then continued, "I cannot hold on much longer; I must enter seclusion soon. First, organize your brother's funeral rites. Don't let the elders bear too much of that burden. Afterward, I need you to watch over the family. Help them make the decisions. What… what are your intentions?"

Li Chenghuai immediately hesitated. "I wish to share the clan's burdens," he said. "But my father is the Master of the Heaven-Probing Pavilion, and my mother is an immortal scion of the Azure Pond Sect. If I were to take charge, I fear it would not look proper… Our branch has always cultivated at Azure Pond. My appointment to Mount Qingdu was already an exception; there is no precedent for someone like me overseeing the prefecture's affairs or acting as the clan head."

Li Xizhi was the Pavilion Master and highly regarded by the Si family; he was unequivocally an Azure Pond cultivator. The Yang family were also an imperial clan affiliated with Azure Pond. Li Chenghuai's status was indeed sensitive. But Li Minggong had no one else to turn to.

She could only sigh. "Just manage things quietly. You don't need to be the public face. Now that things have settled, the other families won't move rashly. My only fear is that someone might use your status to drag Third Uncle into this, giving the Azure Pond Sect an excuse to interfere. With the clan's Purple Mansion cultivators absent, we would be powerless to resist and would surely fall into a disastrous, muddled outcome."

Li Chenghuai said softly, "Father was involved too deeply in the destruction of the Chi family. The True Monarch has not returned, and Chi Buzi is still out there, his fate unknown. This is precisely why Father and the Daoist Master decided against returning to the family… We must remain cautious."

Li Minggong finally nodded. "This matter isn't insurmountable. After all, we still have Cui Jueyin. His cultivation is profound, his Dao attainment is deep, and his character and ability are both of the highest caliber. With him watching over the clan, nothing truly disastrous should happen."

Just as they concluded their discussion, Qu Bushi appeared at the hall's entrance seeking an audience. Li Minggong quickly asked, "Have you found Ding Weizeng?"

Qu Bushi wore a strange expression and shook his head repeatedly. "Guan Lingdie of the Capital Immortals Dao is here to see you."

Li Minggong froze, hesitating for a moment before replying, "Then… let her come up."

Li Chenghuai frowned, taking a step forward to stand beside his elder sister. Li Wen also hurried back, and the two flanked the injured woman protectively just as the lady in the colorful dress entered the hall.

Guan Lingdie had not come alone. The guest elders escorting her remained outside the hall; only Gongsun Bofan, still wearing his straw cloak, followed at her side. For once, the woman showed some propriety, stopping at a distance. Looking rather awkward, she offered a greeting that was half-soft, half-rigid:

"Greetings, Fellow Daoist Li."

"Fellow Daoist…?" Li Minggong suppressed the exhaustion in her features, replying with her usual courteous tone. "What is this about?"

Guan Lingdie stated her purpose directly: "My sect has a Capital Immortals Dao Bell currently in your esteemed clan's possession. I am here today to exchange for it."

Given how fickle and erratic the Capital Immortals Dao had proven to be, Li Minggong had absolutely no intention of offending them now; reconciliation was the priority. She only said gently, "Fellow Daoist, please speak your terms."

The moment she said this, Guan Lingdie, who retained the temperament of a little girl, immediately dropped her defensive posture. Her tense body relaxed. "Years ago, during a sparring exchange, Situ Mo delivered one of your clan's guest elders to us. The Capital Immortals Dao has provided him with good food and drink ever since. Now, we thought to return him, as a token of gratitude for the return of the Capital Immortals Dao Bell."

'An Siwei…'

Relief flooded Li Minggong's heart. She raised her eyebrows in hope. "Is this true?"

Guan Lingdie paused, then recited fluidly, "Many past frictions and misunderstandings were mostly instigated by the Profound Peak Gate or forced upon us by Changxiao. They were unavoidable circumstances…"

She continued speaking for some time. Li Minggong, noticing how smoothly the words flowed and realizing Guan Lingdie didn't seem like the sort of person who could formulate such a speech, surmised she had likely memorized it from Guan Gongxiao. She waited patiently until the woman finished, then retrieved the dark, lacquered bell from her sleeve.

"The Dharma Artifact is here," Li Minggong said softly. "Please proceed."

Guan Lingdie was overjoyed and quickly gave Gongsun Bofan instructions. He departed, and not long after, Qu Bushi returned. The old man warily circled Guan Lingdie before approaching Li Minggong and whispering:

"The Capital Immortals Dao people below have released Guest Elder An. His aura is stable, and he appears unharmed. His previous wounds have all been healed."

Li Minggong handed the artifact over. Guan Lingdie inspected it, sighed in relief, and without another word, departed on the wind.

A few breaths later, An Siwei finally entered the hall.

His aura was stable and his clothes were clean. The long spear was strapped to his back, looking identical to how he was when he left, save for one detail: his eyes were rimmed with red. In the span of merely a year or two, his face had aged significantly. Though he had no white hair, his entire bearing had decayed, worn down by an invisible weight.

The truth was, the Capital Immortals Dao cared little for An Siwei. In Guan Gongxiao's eyes, he was just trash who had relied on spiritual atmosphere and the Jade True lineage to luckily reach the Foundation Establishment Realm. They had nearly forgotten him in the dungeon. Yet for An Siwei, the internal struggle and anxiety had intensified daily, tormenting him relentlessly.

To now be exchanged for a peak-grade Dharma Artifact by the Li family was utterly sudden. Abruptly released, An Siwei still felt a deep unease. He bowed deeply. "Many thanks, my lady."

As such an old veteran, An Siwei was treated more like a senior relative. Li Minggong urged him to rise. "Please go and rest. Minggong still has many affairs to handle and cannot keep you. The Old Master has been deeply worried; this counts as good news. Please, let him hear it."

An Siwei bowed once more and quickly withdrew.

Li Minggong forced herself to stand, stepping down from the main seat. She stared somewhat blankly at the thunder rumbling in the sky above. "Brother Huai, go capture some of that lightning… seal it in a vial. It is time to inter it in the clan tomb."

Li Chenghuai retrieved a small, dark copper vial from his sleeve. "I already captured some yesterday…"

Li Minggong sighed and followed him out of the hall. A young man was waiting by the main gate—golden-eyed, dark-haired, with a plain face. It was the Second Young Master, Li Jianglong.

Li Jiangqian had already passed down the necessary orders; the arrangements were complete. The group silently flew toward the lake.

They crossed the river. On the north bank, the Fei family had already hung white mourning gauze. Li Chenghui had defended the north bank for years, saving many members of the Fei family from the Floating Cloud Cave. He had spent most of that decade there, and the Fei family knew him well. The sounds of distant weeping carried on the wind.

Beyond the north bank, the entire lake island was draped in white. Despite Li Chenghuai's request for simplicity, sheets of white fabric were everywhere. The area was shockingly silent, a quiet that held until they reached the main island settlement, where the air erupted with chaotic wailing.

The ceremonial hall was hung with white banners. On either side stood many respected elders, while youths and children knelt below. The spirit-coffin rested in the center, surrounded by low sobbing, awaiting the arrival of the symbolic remains.

Li Minggong, now changed into white mourning robes, stepped into the great hall.

The instant she appeared, the sound of grief detonated. Every last person began to howl. Those who had just been whispering or exchanging glances saw her and immediately began to wail at the top of their lungs, forcing out cries whether they had tears or not. The sheer spectacle of it caused Li Xuanxuan, standing in the center, to finally shed tears.

Before the coffin knelt a youth, crying with particular, agonizing grief. Li Minggong moved silently to the side as the spiritual item representing the bones was presented. Li Xuanxuan began to conduct the rites. The youth cried as if his world had ended, nearly fainting from the exertion.

Li Minggong waited for a long time. All eyes kept glancing toward her, clearly awaiting the announcement of the inheritance. She felt utterly sickened by the scene. She turned and went back outside the hall.

Only when the sun began to set did Li Chenghuai emerge with the Old Master. The three of them finally began their discussion.

Li Minggong still found the reality hard to accept, but the inheritance had to be settled to prevent future trouble. She suppressed her pain and asked quietly, "Younger Brother was unmarried, let alone had children. Treasures like the Six Thunder Profound Punishment Talisman must return to the clan treasury. But his other possessions—spiritual materials, his Foundation Establishment

Dharma Artifact, his Qi Refining robes—they must all be passed down according to the laws of succession. They are immensely valuable. Are there candidates?"

Having managed Mount Qingdu, Li Chenghuai answered immediately. "Elder Brother had considered this. Having no son of his own, he thought of adopting the youngest son of one of his clan-brothers. However, the Old Master felt that since he was still young, he might have a natural-born son later, which would create conflict. So, he forbade it."

No one could have imagined Li Chenghui would fall so soon. Li Xuanxuan, his tears spent, just clutched his sleeves and said nothing.

Li Minggong asked, "Who are the closest relations now?"

"There are three," Li Chenghuai reported. "The first has the closest blood relationship: the young son of that clan-brother, the one originally intended for adoption. He is thirteen. He never once met Brother. He is the one you saw in the hall, crying himself to death. That clan-brother dragged the child here at dawn and forced him to kneel there, just to claim the position…"

Li Minggong's brow furrowed in worry. "I thought that might be it… He cries too forcefully. I fear he is skilled at deception, feigning grief for appearances. If we allow such a one to inherit the lineage, I am afraid it will ruin our brother's good name."

Li Chenghuai continued, "There are two others. The older one is also very close in blood. He is excellent in all respects, but he possesses a hot, straightforward temper. He was kneeling in the hall just now, but he did not cry."

"The third is younger and more distantly related. But there was a time when he often visited Brother's residence, and I heard Brother was quite fond of him… However, he is currently stationed at the East Bank defense and has not returned."

Li Minggong was silent for a moment. "Looking at the scene in the hall, it seems most of this generation care only for their own small families and branches; even more care only for themselves. Very few look toward the clan as a whole. They behave like sect disciples. This sickness isn't unique to our family; the Xiao and Chen clans are the same. It is a common ailment of aristocratic clans.

"It is not technically wrong," she mused, "but… secure the Dao lineage for these three. We will observe them all carefully in the coming years… only then will we speak of the inheritance."

She hesitated, just as Li Xuanxuan spoke, his voice hoarse. "Gong'er… bring all three to the main island. Do not let them cultivate other ambitions out there. It will become ugly later."

Both Li Minggong and Li Chenghuai nodded in agreement.

Just then, a slight commotion rose from below, followed by hurried footsteps in the corridor. A man in red robes arrived late, still pulling on white mourning clothes as he flew. His face was groomed to be rather handsome. The Old Master saw that face, and his heart turned to ice. His lips began to tremble.

Li Chenghuai glanced over. It was, as expected, Li Ximing's direct grandson, Li Zhouming. He had been conspicuously absent earlier, and both Li Chenghuai and Li Minggong had tacitly avoided mentioning him. Now, the boy had walked directly into the line of fire.

"Bastard!"

Li Xuanxuan was, after all, a veteran of the ninth level of Qi Refining. The old man swept his sleeve, and an invisible force plucked Li Zhouming right out of the air. The young man had been trying to sneak into the crowd, never imagining the three highest authorities of the clan would be waiting at the entrance. He was terrified.

Trembling, he didn't dare struggle, collapsing to his knees with a heavy thud.

"You… YOU!" Li Xuanxuan was overcome with grief and rage. "Your uncle died serving this clan, and you… the sheer audacity! You dare to arrive late for his funeral rites!"

As the direct grandson of a Purple Mansion cultivator, Li Zhouming was supposed to be a pillar of his generation alongside Li Zhouwei and Li Zhouluo. Instead, he had turned into this useless degenerate, a sight that made the old man's vision darken.

The youth remained kneeling, the golden longevity lock Li Xuanxuan had gifted him at birth dangling and flashing brightly. His face was a mask of terror. He scrambled forward and grabbed Li Xuanxuan's leg, wailing, "Old Master, don't be angry… please, don't be angry! Worry for your health!"

He wasn't ugly; in fact, he was rather refined and well-dressed. If he weren't groveling on the ground, he might even possess a certain dignity. But with his grandfather Li Ximing only recently missing, Li Xuanxuan couldn't truly strike him, and only stared with a frigid expression.

Li Minggong had always despised him. She turned her head away, refusing to watch as Li Zhouming pleaded with the old man.

'Sigh…'

In the end, it was a funeral. Li Xuanxuan gave him a kick. "Get inside!"

Li Chenghuai, ever the diplomat, never commented on such matters and even offered the youth a few quiet words of admonishment.

Li Minggong merely nodded wearily, glancing back into the hall. The moment the three leaders had stepped out, the volume of the crying had instantly diminished, though many were still forcing desperate sobs. The sight filled her with disappointment. She couldn't help but mutter:

"I only fear that the ambition of our six generations… will ultimately be inherited by a pack of…"

"Minggong!"

The old man struck his wooden staff against the stone, cutting her off. Though Li Xuanxuan's eyes were filled with tears, his voice was powerful and aged. "When a family grows this large… useless descendants are inevitable. They will cry here, and then they will go home… The island's selection process for talent remains clear and fair. Several in the Jiangque generation are quite promising. Do not speak such hopeless words."

Li Minggong quickly nodded.

Li Chenghuai stood by silently, though he held his own thoughts back, sighing internally. 'If not for Zhouwei, the Zhou generation would already show signs of exhaustion. And if not for Zhouwei producing good children… how many in the Jiangque generation would truly be presentable? The Old Master always prefers to see the bright side of things…'

The three fell silent. The rain in the sky grew heavier, churning the lake surface.

Suddenly, Li Minggong raised her eyebrows in astonishment, her gaze snapping toward the heavens. Her voice was raw. "Someone is breaking through!"

Li Chenghuai looked up as well, his expression one of immediate delight. He stepped forward, probing the shifting spiritual energy, and met his sister's eyes.

"The Jing Dragon King!"

"Chen Yang! He has been in seclusion these few years and has finally broken through! It makes sense… he must have borrowed the power of the Inward Heart Surging Profundity."

The lake surface rippled violently. Li Chenghuai nodded to his sister and soared into the air, vanishing into the storm. As expected, he saw a coiling, gray flood dragon rising above Mount Qingdu. It bared its fangs, its gaze fierce, its whiskers impossibly long.

A young man in black robes rode atop the dragon. He had broad shoulders, long eyebrows, and pupils the color of pale gray ash. His black hair whipped wildly in the downpour. He circled once before landing gracefully in front of Li Chenghuai. He smiled and clasped his fist.

"Greetings, my Lord!"

Chapter 774: Xia Shouyu

The Sea's Cape.

The sky was a deep azure. A streak of escape-light shot past, drawing a brilliant red arc across the heavens as it sped toward a region where the spiritual qi was thin. After flying for the better part of a day, the light finally descended upon an island, resolving into the figure of a woman.

She wore a wide, brown Daoist robe, over which an ornate Kesi silk cloak had been rather abruptly hung. On her feet were cotton boots dyed an autumn yellow. The ensemble barely looked like a matched set.

She identified her bearings for a moment before flying toward the island's center. As she flew, she observed the masses of savages covering the land and nodded grimly to herself.

'After I inspect the situation, I can take this group away. They can be brought back to the temple to cultivate the barren mountains. I only need to leave a few thousand behind as breeding stock…'

She flew to the heart of the island and found exactly what she was looking for: a massive, churning, green-water hot spring. The spiritual qi was surprisingly abundant, and she was instantly delighted.

'After I collect the item, if this spring eye is still functional, I can certainly put it to good use.'

Her expression turned thoughtful. 'Then again… according to that demonic cultivator, there is a core of flame beneath it. If I move the primary item, this entire spring will probably vanish.'

At this thought, she sneered.

'That bastard surnamed Feng certainly had a clever plan. How dare he steal *my* Lishu Fire-Averting Cover? Using the Wuting Talisman Brush as collateral is

one thing, but the Cover is still *mine*… Where did he possibly think he could run with it?'

With a light toss, the Lishu Fire-Averting Cover bloomed into a protective red halo. She meticulously probed the hot spring, and only after confirming there were no traps did she dive in.

This woman's cultivation was significantly higher, and her speed was nothing the two minor cultivators from before could compare to. She quickly reached the bottom of the spring and followed the earth meridian downward. After a quarter of an hour, she plunged into the heart of the blazing inferno.

Xia Shouyu's Dao attainment was not shallow. Her face lit up with immediate, joyous surprise.

'There really is fire beneath the grotto-spring water!'

She cupped a handful of the flame, observing it closely, and her surprise grew. 'This is *artifice fire*… it is not natural. There truly might be the remains of a cultivator down here! To possess such lingering might after death… he must have reached Foundation Establishment at the very least.'

As the woman moved cautiously forward, the pair of eyes watching from within the flames narrowed in hesitation.

'Why is it only a ninth-level Qi Refining cultivator…'

Li Ximing had waited here for another half a month. His luck, it seemed, was outstandingly good; a second person had already arrived. After observing her for only a few moments and hearing her muttering, he immediately grasped the situation.

'The previous killer who stole the treasure was himself killed. And it seems his killer was the item's original owner, the creditor. He must have exposed his tracks in a market square or some other place. The Eastern Sea is just as chaotic as they say… another life snuffed out.'

Li Ximing quickly dismissed the thought, a bitter taste in his mouth. The Sea's Cape simply couldn't compare to the rich lands of Jiangnan, the center of the world. This godforsaken place was an absolute backwater. After all his efforts at luring someone here, he couldn't even attract the shadow of a Foundation Establishment cultivator.

This Xia Shouyu was likely a top figure in this specific territory, a true "local snake" given that she could so easily track down her own Dharma artifact.

'It makes sense… Anyone capable of reaching Foundation Establishment definitely wouldn't waste their time in this forgotten corner. They would head to the coastal seas, perhaps the Converging Heaven Sea, and pledge allegiance to a major power. Why would they stay here and "eat dirt" in a desolate wasteland with thin spiritual qi?'

Ninth-level Qi Refining would have to do. This cursed place wasn't going to offer anyone better. Li Ximing gritted his teeth and accepted it. As he watched her move step by step through the flames, he found himself facing a dilemma.

'A minor Qi Refining cultivator from the Eastern Sea… she undoubtedly wants nothing to do with the affairs of the Purple Mansion realm. If I reveal a righteous identity, she will never trust me. It seems I truly must adopt the demonic cultivator persona. If I use threats and promises, she will, paradoxically, feel much safer.'

Li Ximing reflected that if *he* encountered some old ghost trapped in the Eastern Sea claiming to be of the righteous path, demanding he fetch a demon beast for a blood sacrifice in exchange for a heavy reward, he wouldn't believe it for a second. He would run as far and as fast as possible!

Furthermore, judging by her mismatched, cobbled-together attire, even if she was a local tyrant, she couldn't have any significant background. She probably didn't even understand the political stances of the major Purple Mansion powers.

'Besides, to lure a Foundation Establishment demon beast here, you don't necessarily *need* a Foundation Establishment cultivator to do it. There are countless ways to trick a beast to this location. A Qi Refining cultivator isn't guaranteed to fail. Since she's at the ninth level, she'll even have an easier time finding one.'

While he plotted, Xia Shouyu was already going mad with joy. If the time and place weren't so inappropriate, she would have started dancing on the spot.

'The legacy of a Foundation Establishment cultivator! That's Foundation Establishment! If there is just one Foundation Establishment Dharma Artifact in there, my family is set for generations!'

She hurried forward, bracing against the flames while cautiously scanning her surroundings. She sent out several talismans to probe ahead, ensuring everything was safe. Only then did she finally walk up to the withered skeleton and send forth a beam of Dharma light to retrieve the storage pouch lying on the ground.

Paff!

The instant her light extended, the surrounding flames swarmed like starving beasts, instantly devouring the beam completely. It vanished into smoke without a trace.

Xia Shouyu hesitated for a second, then had no choice but to bend down, extending her own arm to cautiously pick it up by hand.

Kacha.

An extremely faint sound of friction drifted into her ear. Terror seized Xia Shouyu's heart. She tried to yank her hand back like a bolt of lightning, only to find she couldn't pull it free. Her arm was locked in an icy grip, grinding against her bones with agonizing pressure.

A skeletal white arm had risen from the ashes, its five fingers clamped precisely around her wrist.

Every hair on Xia Shouyu's body stood on end. Her Dharma power surged frantically into her trapped arm as the movement technique she had practiced for years erupted. Her free hand simultaneously shot toward the storage pouch at her own waist.

She couldn't move.

Her spiritual qi vanished as if poured into a bottomless black hole. Every motion she attempted failed. Xia Shouyu froze in place, a perfect statue of terror.

Li Ximing forced her down into a sitting position opposite him. Controlling a mere Qi Refining cultivator was utterly effortless. Slowly, flesh materialized over his skeletal face. He certainly wasn't using his true appearance. Instead, he deliberated, trying to choose the visage that looked the *least* like a good person.

As he pondered, a sinister face instantly flooded his memory: long eyebrows, gray eyes, a visage both fierce and venomous, looking perpetually ready to devour someone whole.

Li Yuanjiao.

"Second Uncle…"

Li Ximing froze, just for the briefest of moments.

Memory always strikes so suddenly, arriving like an unreasonable, brute force—a hurricane without origin or warning, smashing violently into his mind. This was Daoist Master Zhaojing. He had been hunted by a late-stage Daoist Master, had nearly lost his life in the Eastern Sea, and had not shed a single tear even when balanced on the edge of oblivion. Yet now, in this fiery pit, his eyes turned red.

Li Ximing had always been terrified of Li Yuanjiao. Strangely, he had cried when Li Yuanjiao fell, but his grief had been nothing compared to his father, Li Yuanping. In the years that followed, he rarely thought of his uncle, save for paying respects on his death anniversary. But now, in this fleeting instant, it was like seeing him again. This sudden vision was like lightning, and with it, he found he was not only unafraid—he missed him terribly.

'Damn it.'

Li Ximing cursed inwardly. The face flickered rapidly before finally resolving into a complete, terrifying blank. It was a smooth, featureless void. Though it lacked any conventionally fierce expression, this empty visage was more horrifying than any face could ever be.

Opposite him, Xia Shouyu made no sound.

After all, she was completely immobilized; she couldn't have made a sound even if she wanted to. But her eyes were dilated to their absolute limits, as if she would lose consciousness in the very next second.

Chapter 775: Chengming's Seclusion

Only then did Li Ximing remember Xia Shouyu. The woman was already so frightened her legs had gone soft. Seeing the dark, vacant look in her pupils, he worried that a little more time would scare her to death, leaving him with no way to find an exit. He forced the blank, white expanse of his face to split open into a mouth and spoke.

"Little friend… you've finally come."

'Which old monster's cave did I break into! I'm finished, finished! A monster like this… it's probably going to steal my body!'

After all, Xia Shouyu knew she had nothing on her person worth coveting. The only thing a high-level cultivator might possibly target was this body of hers. She wasn't afraid of losing her virtue… she was afraid of someone seizing her body for reincarnation!

Xia Shouyu scrambled on the ground, but her legs were too weak to stand. Fortunately, for this woman to have achieved her status in the marketplace, she naturally had some cunning. She spoke, trembling with dread.

"My… Milord… this humble woman is just a wandering cultivator from the Eastern Sea. I have hardly any flesh on my bones, and the Dao I cultivate is nothing special… I've offended your sacred domain by accident. If Milord has any task! Please, just command me… If you need a blood offering… please let this humble woman go out and find one for you."

Li Ximing let out a dry chuckle. "What do you mean, 'by accident'?"

When Xia Shouyu saw that he was clear-headed and wasn't immediately demanding to eat her, she felt a sliver of relief, but the terror remained an indescribable weight. She shivered.

"It… it was this lowly one, blinded by greed, who offended this sacred place…"

Li Ximing casually released his grip on her, and the woman flopped to the ground, kneeling. He corrected her, "You were *fished* over here by my Divine Ability."

'A Divine Ability? A Purple Mansion expert?!'

A chill seeped straight into Xia Shouyu's heart. She stared at the ground in disbelief. Li Ximing still wore that blank face, and she didn't dare use her spiritual sense to probe him. She could only continue to kneel, shrinking in on herself.

"You don't believe me?"

Li Ximing figured she wouldn't. He immediately raised his hand and waved it through the empty air. Xia Shouyu felt an intense heat flare through her limbs as all four were instantly incinerated to ash. With a dull thud, she dropped to the ground like a block of wood.

"Ah?"

Now limbless, Xia Shouyu lay on the ground like a human trunk, staring blankly at the ceiling of the karst cave. Above her, that faceless visage appeared once more. It blew out a breath, split its mouth open, and commanded:

"Grow!"

Xia Shouyu felt an agonizing, itching numbness at her four stumps. As if an old tree were sprouting new buds, her arms and legs burst forth from the charred wounds. The warm sensation of the ground returned beneath her.

She pushed herself up, the world spinning around her. Her newly grown limbs were even paler and more tender than before, and they felt alien to her. She stumbled and fell right back onto her knees, crying out:

"Daoist Master! I believe you… I believe you! This lowly one believes! I will follow all of the Daoist Master's commands!"

Li Ximing laughed. "That's more like it! Your body is like worthless grass to me. This Daoist Master has no interest in your mortal flesh. What matters is the task I am about to give you. If you do it well, I guarantee you will receive boundless benefits!"

Xia Shouyu couldn't possibly guess what he wanted. She could only press her forehead to the ground, awaiting his orders.

"This Daoist Master is here suppressing an object and cannot leave," Li Ximing said. "I have been hungry for a long time and have no nourishing items on hand. I require a demonic beast at the Foundation Establishment level that cultivates Valley Water. It just so happens you broke in. Bring me one demonic beast of the Valley Water virtue, and you will have earned your merit."

"Me?"

Xia Shouyu froze. The woman actually didn't agree immediately just to escape. Instead, she kept her head bowed and replied:

"Reporting to the Daoist Master, this lowly one is all alone, and my cultivation is pitifully shallow… How could I possibly capture a demonic beast for you!"

Seeing her reaction, Li Ximing knew his previous display had earned her belief and awe. He adopted the tone of a Purple Mansion expert of the demonic path and said:

"Fool! I don't care what excuse you use. Say there is a great treasure here, or some spiritual item, whatever it takes. Just lure it to this spot. Once it's here, it won't be able to escape even if it has nine lives!"

"This lowly one understands!"

Xia Shouyu shuddered violently. After a moment, she asked carefully, "Reporting to the Daoist Master… this lowly one knows the territories of a few Demon Generals… The 'Valley Water' you speak of… should be one of the water virtues, but this lowly one has never seen it… I cannot be certain."

'…'

Only then did Li Ximing remember that, given the barrenness of the region, the knowledge and experience of these cultivators were probably lagging by leagues. He had no choice but to explain.

"The creek and valley are low and receptive, thus they are 'valley.' Valley Water is the water of the gully. It lies in what is stored but not yet released. In the heavens, the rain clouds are the valley, thus it is cloud water. In humans, the belly's storage is the valley, thus it is amniotic fluid. It is all manner of nourishing water that is gestating and unreleased."

'What in the world… how am I, a Qi Refining cultivator, supposed to understand a Purple Mansion expert lecturing on the Dao.'

Xia Shouyu cried out, "This lowly one does not understand…"

Li Ximing's blank face darkened. "Just go find the Demon General who is the best at healing!" he barked.

"Right away!"

This Xia Shouyu understood. She nodded repeatedly. Just as she was about to get up, Li Ximing commanded:

"Wait!"

He reached out a hand and tapped the woman lightly on her pale forehead. The power of a Divine Ability poured down, flowing all the way into her Juque Palace, which she herself could not see, and transformed into a wisp of purple fire that entered within.

"I can't just let you walk away so easily," he said. "I have planted a Divine Ability inside your body. If you dare to flee, this ability will detonate and kill you… This is the far reaches of the sea, and no one you beg for help can dispel it!"

Xia Shouyu was not surprised. The other party wasn't running a charity. It was perfectly normal for a mighty Purple Mansion expert to plant some safeguards. She immediately dropped back to her knees, performing a hand seal and placing her hands over her precious sea of Qi, swearing an oath.

"This lowly one has received this great kindness and will wager my life to accomplish Milord's task! If I violate this oath, may lightning strike me from above, may my Profound Core shatter, and may my path of cultivation be severed forever!"

'Lightning strike her? This truly is the backwater… the Thunder Palaces have already been dismantled, yet they still add that line to their spiritual oaths.'

Li Ximing was reasonably confident in her. He just said, "Be careful! If anyone dares to perform a soul search on you, this purple fire will explode, and you will all die… If this matter is successful, I will reward you with an Essence Gathering Pill and guarantee your path to Foundation Establishment!"

'An Essence Gathering Pill?… Could that be… the Foundation Establishment Pill?'

Although Xia Shouyu didn't know what an Essence Gathering Pill was, she certainly understood what "guarantee your path to Foundation Establishment"

meant. She nodded repeatedly and backed away, flying up out of the fire and exiting the hot spring. The cold sweat that had been plastering her back finally stopped.

The night wind whipped past, making her legs feel weak. Xia Shouyu lifted her sleeve, looking at the distinct marks on her shoulder and her unnaturally pale new forearm. She felt as if she had just passed through a lifetime.

"Is this a fateful opportunity… or a path to certain death?"

…

Moongaze Lake.

Thunder rumbled low on the horizon, and rain began to fall across the island. Water vapor rose from everywhere, and a stillness fell over the land. The great hall was draped in white. Figures hurried to and fro, yet the only sounds were the drip of the rain and the shuffle of footsteps.

No one in the hall spoke. They waited until the storm swept in from the north, blurring the world into a vast sheet of rain. Only then did a streak of light weave through the downpour and land before the hall, resolving into a woman with a jade pendant at her waist. Her features were unremarkable, but she possessed a clear, sharp aura.

"Lady Xinghan!"

The cultivators on both sides bowed to her. Li Xinghan gave them a hurried nod and strode up the steps into the main hall. There, she saw Li Jiangqian descending from the upper level, dressed in white mourning robes. This First Young Master, who was acting as the family head, lowered his brows and spoke.

"Aunt, you've arrived. I was just about to send for you. I received word from Uncle Zhouluo that two more of our elders from the Zhou-generation met misfortune in Funan to the north. Their families have sent someone to collect the subsidy. I cannot make a decision on this matter; it requires an elder's approval."

Li Xinghan had been dispatched to the eastern shore to defend against cultivators from the Capital Immortals Dao. But while the mission was called "defending against the Capital Immortals Dao," this time it was more about dealing with demonic cultivators who had come to plunder amidst the chaos. Her sword had claimed several lives. She had seen blood since she was young and still felt it wasn't enough.

Having rushed back from the eastern shore, she now felt a pang of sadness at this news. "Which brothers and sisters were they?"

Li Jiangqian replied, "One was Uncle Zhouken from the Second Branch, early-stage Qi Refining. The other was Aunt Xingsai from the First Branch, peak Embryonic Breathing."

Li Xinghan knew both of them. Li Zhouken's innate talent had even been considered decent, and he had visited the main island in the past. Hearing this, a sour grief welled up in her heart.

"The family always insists on sending direct lineage clan members out, treating them the same as any common retainer. They are prioritized for border assignments and slaughter grounds… It is meant for training, a good intention, but unfortunately, when something like this happens, their lives are cut short."

Li Xinghan had practiced the sword since childhood and had never encountered this sort of administrative affair. She was perfectly efficient at killing people or demons, but organizing funeral matters left her at a loss. She felt a bit helpless.

"Where are the two senior elders?" she asked, referring to Li Minggong and Li Chenghuai.

Upon this question, Li Jiangqian said, "Great-Aunt Minggong and Great-Uncle Chenghuai have both entered seclusion to heal their wounds. Guest Elder Miaoshui and Elder White Ape are doing the same. Lord Cui is out searching for Protector Ding. Only Qu Bushi, Li Wen, and An Siwei are on the lake."

He paused, then added, "And Protector Chen Yang."

Strictly speaking, Chen Yang was Madam Chen's elder brother, and the biological uncle of his own second brother, Li Jianglong. His breakthrough had undoubtedly allowed the Chen Clan members on the lake to stand a little taller. The Chen Clan and the Li Clan were joined by blood, so Li Jiangqian should have been happy, but he seemed to lack any enthusiasm for the topic.

"Still no sign of Guest Elder Ding?"

Worry filled Li Xinghan's heart. Ding Weizeng's combat power was absolutely top-tier, and he had always been loyal to the family. For him to be missing for several months was deeply unsettling.

After hearing his report, she replied, "We should still gather all the brothers and sisters for a proper discussion. The family has reached this state, and we have all lost our guiding pillar. If we don't work together now, it will be a dereliction of our duty."

Li Jiangqian nodded at once and sent someone to relay the summons. "Reporting to Aunt, I must also enter seclusion soon. Although there is one last Dharma Art I haven't mastered… the matter of Foundation Establishment can no longer be delayed."

He cultivated the sixth-grade Scripture of Heavenly Radiance and the Waning Sun. He had recently mastered the movement art Tread on Flames, the accompanying escape art Heavenly Fire's Crimson Shine, and the now-famous Sun's Resonant Radiance Art. The unmastered technique he spoke of was the sixth-grade Dharma Art, Great Radiance of White Brilliance. This art required Purple Mansion-level Radiant Fire, and there was no longer any hope of waiting for that.

Li Xinghan didn't know the details, but she nodded in response, a touch of envy in her eyes. Although she was a generation above him, she was still only at the fifth level of Qi Refining.

After a short wait, a man in black, pleated robes entered the hall. He wore a sword at his waist, his body radiating a sharp, metallic aura. He was clearly in a hurry. His cultivation had already reached the seventh level of Qi Refining.

Li Xinghan nodded. "Brother!"

Li Zhouluo responded. He had recently been in charge of Mount Qingdu and had reached the point of needing to stabilize his cultivation and practice his arts. The affairs on the lake had become increasingly numerous and hectic. Only now, sitting in the hall, did he finally have a moment to rest.

They waited a while longer, and the eldest brothers, Li Zhoufang and Li Zhouyang, arrived at the hall. The two brothers looked like they'd been carved from the same mold. They always went wherever they were needed and never spoke much. They offered a simple greeting and stood off to the side. Li Jiangqian immediately excused himself and withdrew.

The Zhou generation was not known for producing great talents; these few were already considered their leaders. Li Zhouluo was just about to speak when he heard the thunder and rain raging outside. A person landed before the

hall, shook the rain from his robes, pushed the door open, and entered with a laugh.

"Brothers, it's rare to see you all!"

This man wore a golden lock that swayed and tinkled around his neck. His face was rather handsome, and he wore white robes, clutching a fan painted with birds, fish, and insects.

Li Zhouluo looked slightly awkward, though his expression remained mostly normal. He took a step forward to greet him. "Fifth Brother, you've come. We don't usually see you on the island. What a coincidence you're here today."

Li Xinghan glanced over. The newcomer was none other than the Daoist Master's direct grandson, Li Zhouming. His early-stage Qi Refining cultivation was the lowest among them all. Li Xinghan had almost never seen him. She gave a slight bow and replied, "Today I finally have the chance to meet Fifth Brother."

Li Zhouming smiled, bowing left and right. He hitched up his robes, stepped into the courtyard, and snapped his fan shut in his palm. "Same here. A while back, I ran afoul of the Old Master and got a fierce tongue-lashing. He told me to turn over a new leaf and start acting decent. So, I had no choice but to come over to the island to take a look… and listen to what's going on."

"Good."

Li Zhouluo accepted this. He held the highest post among the brothers present. With Li Zhouwei absent, it was natural that he would lead. He lowered his voice.

"That child Jiangqian needs to enter seclusion for Foundation Establishment, which means someone needs to manage the island's affairs. Jiangxia and Jianglong are both good kids, but they each hold important positions. Placing either of them in charge of the island would show favoritism… I asked the Old Master, and he said the choice should come from the Zhou-generation… What do my younger brothers and sister think?"

As soon as Li Zhouluo finished speaking, Li Zhouming tucked his fan away and grinned. "Well, naturally, Brother, you have the most prestige! Just let Brother manage the family affairs. There's nothing more to say! Nothing at all!"

He tapped the fan against his robes. The brothers Li Zhoufang and Li Zhouyang remained silent as always. Li Xinghan also just held her sword, saying nothing.

Seeing this scene, Li Zhouming just said, "So that settles it? I thought it was some big crisis."

Li Xinghan finally couldn't hold back. She spoke up, "Brother… when the Old Master said the choice should come from the Zhou-generation, did he mean we are choosing one of the *young masters*, or choosing one of *us* from the Zhou-generation?"

Li Zhouluo, who was the most handsome of the group, replied in a clear voice, "The Old Master was afraid the young masters would be dissatisfied. He is hoping to pick from among us brothers. After all, it is only to manage things temporarily for a few years…"

Only then did Li Xinghan find the will to nod. Although she was often away, she was aware of her brother's political achievements. At present, there was truly no other candidate besides him. She hesitated, thinking:

'The Youngest Branch has never had a precedent of managing the family affairs… Do the two Foundation Establishment elders know about this? If this was the Old Master's order, it's no different than directly appointing Fourth Brother to take charge…'

Chapter 776: The Rules

After a moment's consideration, Li Xinghan made a mental note to ask Li Xuanxuan about this later. Outwardly, she accepted the decision.

"Since the elder has commanded it, then we will have to trouble you, Brother."

Li Zhouluo was dressed in black. He cultivated the Gleaming Gold Qi, and regardless of his personality, his aura possessed a certain stern quality that inspired confidence. He clasped his hands in a salute and said solemnly, "Rest assured, little sister."

Nearby, Li Zhouming looked from one to the other, wanting to speak but hesitating. Li Zhouluo had managed Mount Qingdu and had punished Li Zhouming several times before, so he was naturally afraid of him. And though his younger sister Li Xinghan was young, the sword on her back and the heavy killing intent she carried were just as intimidating. He couldn't bring himself to say anything.

Li Xinghan couldn't muster any affection for the Purple Mansion expert's direct grandson, either. The Daoist Master had few descendants to begin with, and the one he finally got was utterly useless. Though Li Xinghan was often away, she had heard the rumors.

'I've heard… that when he's assigned to a post, he becomes greedy, yet in the clan center, he's burdened by incompetence. The Daoist Master doesn't value him and hasn't given him any decent Dharma Artifacts. He's useless in a fight, nearly losing to a cultivator from some minor family. He's a complete disgrace. The old man is just afraid of losing his only direct grandson… He sees him idling about all day and just wants him to stay out of trouble…'

In the end, Li Zhouming was a direct descendant of a Purple Mansion cultivator. For the Daoist Master's sake, it was no great burden for the family to support him. But Li Xinghan disliked him intensely. She turned to leave, but as she reached the hall's entrance, she saw the Li Zhoufang brothers following her

fourth brother, Li Zhouluo, their heads bowed low. She vaguely overheard their voices:

'We two brothers… our father worked himself to death on the river, and now our younger brother is also dead… Regarding the clan's compensation, we hope you can grant his child a sinecure…'

Only then did Li Xinghan remember that the deceased Li Zhouken was, in fact, the biological younger brother of the Li Zhoufang brothers, given up for adoption to carry on another family line. The two were taciturn in front of elders but cared deeply for the younger generation of their own branch. They were here to beg for an official post.

'One should receive resources from the island commensurate with one's talent and effort… Sinecures are usually reserved for outsiders. The clan fears its own descendants will become complacent through generations of entitlement and rarely does such a thing… aigh!'

Li Xinghan realized that her first and second elder brothers were excellent in every way, save for a powerful obsession with this idea of hereditary privilege. She couldn't help but pause, wanting to go back and say something, but she heard a voice call out from behind her.

"Sister!"

It was Li Zhouming, who had followed her out.

'Forget it… Brother Zhouluo should be able to handle this.'

Li Xinghan had no choice but to stop. Facing the fan-wielding young man, she remained polite. "Fifth Brother, is there something you need?"

Li Zhouming clasped his hands together and smiled. "I heard that sister will be leading a group to the western deserts to eliminate a band of rogue demonic cultivators. I've heard there's a type of material in the desert called White Falcon Gold, which can't be bought on the lake. It can be used to forge Dharma Artifacts. Could I trouble you to bring some back for me? I'll compensate you with spiritual resources."

Li Xinghan was a little surprised. "You're starting to think about Dharma Artifacts? That's wonderful news. I'll be sure to bring it for you."

Li Zhouming let out a breath of relief, thanked her profusely, and scurried off. The woman, meanwhile, mounted the wind and flew toward the island's center, a thought turning over in her mind.

'How strange.'

Pondering this, she first detoured to her own cave-residence to pack. By the time the sky began to dim, she landed before a courtyard on the island. The two kumquat pots that used to flank the gate had been replaced with stone lions treading on golden rocks. The woman sized them up for a moment, hesitating.

"So much more extravagant!"

Pushing the gate open, a smile finally appeared on Li Xinghan's face. "Mother!" she called out.

The woman was instantly overjoyed and hurried to greet her. A man tasting wine in the courtyard looked over, and her brother and sister-in-law put down what they were doing and rushed out from the inner room. The whole family immediately pulled her inside with cheerful commotion.

In truth, Li Xinghan's family had once been fraught with conflict. Her father's cultivation was mediocre and he felt unappreciated, while her brother and sister-in-law had even harbored thoughts of splitting from the family. No one cared whether she came home or not. But ever since she had descended from Gardenia Scenery Mountain, her brother and sister-in-law couldn't be driven away. The house was filled with laughter day in and day out, and every time she returned, it felt like a festival.

She was pulled down to sit beside her father, listening to her mother, whose face was beaming. "Han'er! Your uncle has been accumulating merit for so long, he's finally been promoted to be an aide on Wutu Peak!"

A peak aide was already a high position in the Li family, with very few openings. Moreover, Wutu Peak was considered prosperous. Li Xinghan was delighted. "He's finally made it!"

But after the initial joy, something felt wrong. Her uncle was stained by his connection to the remnants of the Yu Clan, and his cultivation wasn't high. Logically, it should have been very difficult for him to be appointed to such a position. Her smile faded. "When was the appointment made?"

Her mother smiled. "It was announced at noon. He was just as surprised and delighted. This position is a great honor. I heard he's been so busy he still hasn't come back…"

'Noon?'

A jolt went through Li Xinghan's heart.

'I had only just left… and Brother Zhouluo specifically promoted him…'

The joy drained from Li Xinghan's face, replaced by a sense of confusion. She held her bamboo chopsticks, unable to decide whether to pick up the food before her. She fell silent.

Li Xinghan asked herself honestly: the Jade True Qi she cultivated, the Treasured Qi of True Unity, was the result of her uncle, Chi Tiaozong, giving up his own cultivation to sit at an altar year after year, chanting sutras to gather it for her. To put it bluntly, the fact that she had earned the Daoist Master's favor and might one day reach Foundation Establishment was at least half due to her uncle's efforts.

Even in her early days, her uncle had provided more than enough help with resources and guidance on her path. While her current cultivation was indeed mostly thanks to the clan's support, it was her uncle who had helped her stand out in the first place.

Her silence grew heavier. Seeing her expression, her family in the courtyard suddenly quieted down. Her father, beside her, glanced at her and said in a low voice, "Zhouluo is in charge of the family today, and you are one of the most prominent figures of the Zhou generation. Some things you just have to accept. Your uncle has worked hard for decades; it's time he received his reward."

"Are you going to be an ungrateful wretch and ask your fourth brother to retract the order? Is your uncle not doing his job correctly, or is your fourth brother's promotion based on merit not just? You had better give me a reason!"

It was true that Chi Tiaozong was competent, but it was also true that Li Zhouluo had promoted him as a favor to thank her for her support. Her uncle had finally achieved a breakthrough in his official career. Li Xinghan truly could not bring herself to refuse this kindness…

Li Xinghan usually looked down on those who engaged in favoritism, but at this moment, her lips parted and closed, unable to form a single word. She put down

her chopsticks and said quietly, "Let's just cherish this… I am away all year. The family should carry on as usual. Don't be extravagant, especially since the elders are in mourning. It's best to keep things simple."

The middle-aged man beside her put down his wine. "Eldest son, tomorrow you will sell the stone lions at the gate and put the two kumquat pots back."

"But Father, you just carefully picked those out a few days ago, you were so happy… you were always going to the gate to look at them… why sell them now…" her brother lamented.

His wife shushed him. She took Li Xinghan's hand and said in a low voice, "Speaking of the elders' affairs… you're an important figure on the island now. Your own safety comes first. If anything happens to you, all of this family's hopes will be ruined."

Before Li Xinghan could answer, her father spoke with earnest gravity. "We all understand… serving the lake is important. But while serving the lake, letting your own friends and family benefit a little is not a conflict of interest. Who can truly act like a saint, completely untainted by personal gain?"

"Daughter understands."

Li Xinghan listlessly ate a few bites, finding it hard to swallow. She knew her father was about to start asking for a post for her brother, so she quickly excused herself from the table. Her father said nothing, but her mother saw her all the way out.

Outside the courtyard, her spiritual sense could still clearly perceive the scene within. Without her, the large table of food seemed suddenly empty. Her mother was wiping away tears, her father was sighing, and her brother and sister-in-law exchanged a glance. There was a long silence, until she heard her father's voice.

"She fancies herself too pure… without her, there's still your uncle. You won't be short an official post. It just won't look as good and might attract the attention of the Clan Justicar from Mount Qingdu. Tomorrow, you'll come with me…"

Li Xinghan couldn't bear to listen anymore. She walked away quickly, mounted the wind, and let the cold night air rush against her face, her heart bleak.

'Pure? If I were truly like Great-Aunt Minggong and the others, who think only of the good of the lake, my uncle wouldn't have a post to begin with! It's just that

I care more about appearances… In the end… his favor wasn't great enough to command me…'

Since childhood, Li Xinghan had held to her Sword Heart, upholding justice and eradicating evil. Now, a thought was gradually becoming clear in her mind.

"I used to think that the constant favoritism on the island was a failure of Mount Qingdu's duty. Now it seems, this is a justice I cannot even uphold myself."

She rode the wind all the way to Mount Qingdu. The side peak was draped in white. An old man, leaning on a staff, was pacing on the summit. Li Xinghan had never seen him rest, and this time was no exception. She bowed.

"Old Master!"

Li Xuanxuan merely glanced at her. "Xinghan, you're here! Is it about Zhouluo's matter? Come inside and talk."

Li Xuanxuan's seniority was immense. Li Xinghan followed respectfully behind him into a pavilion. Once inside, Li Xinghan said deferentially, "The Old Master's orders are naturally well-considered. This junior has no objections. In the family, only Fourth Brother is capable of this great responsibility. It is just that this junior has just gotten a taste of clan affairs and is about to depart again, and my heart is somewhat uneasy…"

She hesitated for a few breaths, then said anxiously, "On the lake… there is much favoritism… cultivators value personal relationships heavily… Xinghan… is guilty!"

Li Xinghan recounted what had happened with her family. Li Xuanxuan stopped what he was doing and nodded silently. The old man sighed. "Xinghan… how old is your father? What is his cultivation level?"

Li Xinghan quickly cupped her hands. "My father is forty-seven years old, at the fourth level of Embryonic Breathing."

Li Xuanxuan nodded slowly. "That child… his path of cultivation, for this life, has already come to an end. He has but a few decades left. Xinghan… can you reach Foundation Establishment?"

Li Xinghan gave a slight nod. "This child will do her best. There is still hope."

The old man let out a long sigh. "And Purple Mansion?"

Li Xinghan could only say, "I dare not hope for it!"

Li Xuanxuan said in a low voice, "For many people in this world, the road of cultivation stops very early. It's not just you who doesn't think about the Purple Mansion Realm; even the young masters rarely dare to hope for it. For all of you, once you reach Foundation Establishment, your cultivation has nearly reached its limit. But you have a great deal of time left."

"On this lake, cultivators like your father are countless. Eighty percent of cultivators stop at Embryonic Breathing. A small portion manage to refine some miscellaneous qi, but their path also ends. The rest get stuck in Qi Refining; most can't advance after a few levels. And then there's the last handful, stuck at the peak of Qi Refining."

The old man seemed to be in a daze. "They have no further path in the Dao. Their cultivation for this life is over. What can they do with the hundreds of years of time they have left? When these cultivators who can't advance a single step have nothing to do, who can control them? No one can!"

Li Xinghan remained silent.

Li Xuanxuan continued languidly, "Don't underestimate them. Preying on mortals, taking a thousand wives and concubines, murdering for blood, cultivating demonic arts—they are capable of all of it! The fact that they now engage in favoritism and scheme for the security of their descendants is already the best possible outcome under our guidance."

The old man said quietly, "Xijun created such a complex, clearly stratified system of bureaucracy, relationships, supervision, and motivation for a reason… Han'er… sometimes we don't need them… but keeping them busy is very important, for us and for the mortals. We can't always keep them busy with merit alone."

Li Xinghan stared blankly at the old man before her.

Li Xuanxuan said, "Later, Zhouwei found various excellent medicines for breaking through bottlenecks. Some of them weren't as useful as imagined, but they had to make sure their descendants were well-arranged before they would be willing to enter seclusion to risk their lives for that slim chance of a breakthrough… A certain degree of sheltering descendants, of relying on personal connections to seek office, is not necessarily an evil thing."

"In the current age, with people everywhere refining blood essence, you cannot hold them to too high a standard."

Li Xinghan clenched her fists slightly. The treasured sword on her back glinted coldly in the moonlight. She asked in a low voice, "Old Master… but is this… truly in accordance with the righteous path…"

The old man leaned back in his chair, his snow-white beard resting on the back of his wrinkled hand. Li Xuanxuan seemed tired. He said softly, "We cannot control a group of eternally greedy people… we can only redirect their greed elsewhere. Han'er, things are not accomplished overnight. Perhaps your generation will have a better way, but to protect the peace of the mortals, this is how it must be for now."

The confusion in Li Xinghan's eyes slowly cleared. She nodded thoughtfully.

"Xinghan, I already spoke with your fourth brother about this in the morning. I only want you to understand one principle."

The old man was hunched in the high-backed mahogany chair, shrinking into the shadows of the room. For a moment, he seemed incredibly ancient. His voice was extremely soft.

"Many things that seem to be outside the rules are, in fact, within them."

…

Island Center.

The night was thick. The great hall was still brightly lit, with scrolls and documents stacked high on the desk. Li Zhouluo read through them carefully, one hand propping up his head, lost in thought.

It was his first time in control of the Pingya Island, and he felt a great unease. After settling matters with his siblings in the morning, he had been busy in this spot until now. He had only just learned many of the clan's secrets.

'So… so many of the retainers are directly subordinate to the island. The family has quite a few geniuses from outside clans. There are even two who failed their Foundation Establishment breakthrough on the island…'

He examined the documents in detail. Well past midnight, he heard someone come up to report.

"My lord, the Third Young Master has returned from the eastern shore. He is waiting outside the hall."

Li Zhouluo quickly put down his brush. "Quickly, show him in."

Chapter 777: Seeking the Pill

A moment later, a golden-eyed young man clad in armor entered the hall. Li Jiangxia was tall, a full head taller than even Li Zhouluo. Upon seeing him, he bowed low, resembling a crouching bear.

"Greetings, Fourth Uncle!" he said in a rumbling voice.

Li Zhouluo quickly helped him up. Li Jiangxia's expression was grim. "Uncle Zhouluo," he said quietly, "I have been guarding the eastern shore all these days, but no news of my father has come from the clan. I could no longer restrain my anxiety. I also have matters to report, so I came back personally to ask you."

Li Zhouluo then recalled that the Second Young Master, Li Jianglong, had returned with Li Minggong and the others. He had learned the news long ago and even attended Li Chenghui's funeral. But at that time, Cui Jueyin was not on the Eastern Shore, which was also swarming with demonic cultivators looking to make a fortune. Li Jiangxia, as the only one who could make decisions, had been unable to leave the dangerous roads. He could only pay his respects from afar. Now that things had stabilized, he had returned with the Profound Peak cultivators to report.

"There is no news," Li Zhouluo replied. "But he should be safe and sound… How are the Profound Peak cultivators?"

"Kong Guxi has returned. Fourth Uncle can ask him for the details… I came this time… to ask for men."

Li Zhouluo frowned. "What is the situation?"

Li Jiangxia looked troubled. "The Capital Immortals Dao forces have not continued west. They are even pulling people back. But the nearby demonic cultivators heard that our clan's Purple Mansion expert is indisposed, and they've been paying frequent visits, hoping to rob us blind. Feeling that there is safety in numbers, they come in groups of three and five…"

"At first, it was just minor skirmishes. But over time, they realized there were no serious consequences. These past few days, it has become more intense. We have even spotted the shadows of Foundation Establishment cultivators."

"Several of the Profound Peak experts are injured, leaving only Sect Master Kong… we are stretched dangerously thin. I was hoping to ask the clan to send a few experts to help."

Li Zhouluo looked somewhat awkward. "It is not easy for anyone in the clan to leave right now. All the powerful elders are in seclusion… There are demonic cultivators in the desert as well. I am already preparing to send Li Wen and Qu Bushi there with Xinghan. It will take several days."

Li Jiangxia sighed.

Li Zhouluo then said, "You wait here a moment. I will see Chen Yang and have him make a trip to the Eastern Shore… His combat ability is strong, and his Immortal Foundation excels at fighting multiple opponents. He is the most suitable choice."

Li Jiangxia had no choice but to nod. He did not immediately withdraw, however, but hesitated before speaking again. "I also came… to request one of the clan's Essence Gathering Pills from uncle."

Li Zhouluo frowned instantly, shooting him a puzzled look. The young man before him was clearly only at the fifth level of Qi Refining. "You are still a long way from Foundation Establishment," he asked. "And even if your cultivation were high enough… would you not practice your techniques first? The clan will naturally prepare a pill for you. Why are you in such a hurry?"

Li Jiangxia hesitated briefly before replying, "This is a request to *trade* for it… I have a sworn friend named Pei Xie, a man of the wilderness. He has reached the late stage of Qi Refining and lacks only this pill to break through. If the clan has a quota, I would like to exchange for one on his behalf."

Realization dawned on Li Zhouluo. He shook his head. "What is the meaning of this! Since you are confident he can break through to Foundation Establishment, and he is your sworn friend, the clan is in desperate need of manpower. We can simply grant it to him. Have him come to the lake to receive his orders. I will see him myself."

At these words, Li Jiangxia looked very uncomfortable. "Reporting to Fourth Uncle… Brother Pei has other plans. He intends to break through in the Eastern Sea and adventure overseas…"

"This!"

Li Zhouluo was stunned. He was secretly displeased.

'From the sound of it… he wants to use the clan's resources to curry favor for himself! We don't even know if this man can break through… giving this to some rogue cultivator from the wilderness is like tossing a meat bun at a dog! It will be gone for good!'

He fell silent, and Li Jiangxia immediately understood his thoughts. "That is why this nephew thought to *trade* for it from the clan…"

Li Zhouluo let out a long sigh and shook his head. "How can this be a simple matter of a trade!"

With Li Ximing missing, if he was injured and healing overseas, he might not return for twenty or even fifty years. Every Essence Gathering Pill used was one less they had. This was not merely a question of value. Under the joint monopoly held by the Purple Mansion clans of Jiangnan, the Essence Gathering Pill had long since achieved a status far exceeding its intrinsic worth.

The Xiao Clan always minded their own business, and Xiao Chuting was wandering the four seas—even the Xiao family couldn't find him. They were also eating into their own stockpile of Essence Gathering Pills. It wasn't easy for the Li Clan to get any from them, either.

After he sighed, the young man before him seemed entirely unsurprised. He bowed.

"This junior is willing to relinquish my own future pill allotment to take this one. When the time comes for this junior's Foundation Establishment… if nothing has changed, I will no longer ask the clan for one!"

"You…"

Li Zhouluo shook his head. "Get up, quickly. What is this nonsense? How could the clan deprive you of your pill? You have long had a reputation for judging character, so I naturally trust you. What Dao path does he cultivate? It's not Merging Fire, is it?"

He made a small joke. Li Jiangxia was overjoyed. "Of course not! Brother Pei cultivates the Gazing the Metal Apex, a path of the Metal Virtue."

"Metal Virtue… Many of Jiangnan's wandering cultivators do indeed cultivate the Metal Virtue… We have one in the stores. Take my writ and go get it."

Li Jiangxia let out a breath of relief, nodding repeatedly before quickly withdrawing. Li Zhouluo, however, was lost in thought.

'I suspect this Pei Xie has been planning to attempt his breakthrough for a long time… He just wasn't confident he could ask for the pill… The moment I take charge, this kid runs right over to request it!

Among the recent managers of the clan, he truly was the easiest to talk to on this matter. After all, Li Zhouluo figured he would only be in this position for three to five years. Li Jiangxia's talent was so high; naturally, Li Zhouluo was willing to sell a favor and have the young man owe him one.

He paced for two steps, adjusted his composure, and sat back down in the main seat.

"Send in the Sect Master of Profound Peak!" he announced.

Barely ten breaths later, an old man hurried in. His hair was white, his features withered. Upon seeing Li Zhouluo, he dropped to his knees with a thud.

"Greetings, Clan Lord! Everyone at Profound Peak is grateful to the noble clan for saving our lives! Guxi is here to thank the noble clan on behalf of all of Profound Peak!"

Li Zhouluo was somewhat astonished. This was the first time Kong Guxi had ever performed a full kneeling kowtow to someone of his status. Previously, he only knelt so completely before the Daoist Master. When meeting the Li Clan Lord, he almost always offered a cupped-fist salute.

"Sect Master Kong, please rise, quickly!"

But Kong Guxi did not get up.

In Kong Guxi's eyes, the Li Clan's benevolence and righteousness had reached the absolute limit. This Sect Master of Profound Peak was kneeling out of deep, genuine emotion. Tears flowed uncontrollably from his eyes, and a low sob escaped his throat.

The Capital Immortals Dao's attack had resulted in the disappearance of the Li Clan's Purple Mansion expert, Daoist Master Zhaojing, and the Clan Lord and Purple Mansion seed, Li Zhouwei. And in Kong Guxi's view, this entire disaster had started because of his Profound Peak Gate! How could this not move the old man to his very core?

Now that the storm had passed, even the few young Foundation Establishment cultivators in his own Profound Peak Gate had fallen silent. Kong Qiuyan, who had once been inscrutable and deep-thinking, was now personally descending to heal the Li Clan's cultivators. Even the long-suffering Kong Xiaxiang had begun patrolling the entire Eastern Shore on the Li Clan's behalf, not to mention the elder Kong Guli… His old brother had nearly refused treatment for his own wounds, insisting on coming to the lake to offer a humble, profound apology!

'The bonds of blood and ties of brotherhood are nothing compared to that Daoist Master's single promise… My Profound Peak… owes the Li Clan an immense debt!'

Chapter 778: A Lesson

Seeing the man's display, Li Zhouluo had no choice but to rise from his seat and step aside. "Sect Master Kong, please, rise at once. You are a Foundation Establishment cultivator and an elder… you honor me too greatly."

Kong Guxi did not wait to be helped. He rose in a single, fluid motion, his voice low and deferential. "In the face of saving our entire lineage, the distinction of elder means nothing. The younger generation of my family is boundlessly grateful to your clan. The Profound Peak Gate has preserved the spark of its existence today solely because of Moongaze Lake. From this day forward, any command from the lake will be met without question."

Li Zhouluo nodded. Moongaze Lake's position was precarious, and they were in the delicate process of easing tensions with the Capital Immortals Dao across the shore. The last thing he needed was for the Profound Peak Gate to do something rash. "For now, you may use the territories on the eastern shore as a temporary station," he said softly. "It would be best if you patrolled them, but there is no need to do anything more… As for the matter with the White Ye Immortal Sect, I must ask you to endure the humiliation for the time being. Do not provoke them again and cause further trouble."

Kong Guxi nodded vigorously, vowing, "I have already instructed my juniors. The Profound Peak Gate is weak. We will be exceedingly polite even to independent cultivators and will never cross the river to cause trouble again. If we bring any more problems to your clan… you won't have to lift a finger. I will personally deal with any of my foolish disciples."

"Just be sure not to cause any trouble," Li Zhouluo cautioned. "If you do, it will be a matter far greater than one or two disciples."

Kong Guxi agreed. Li Zhouluo continued, "The wilderness is no ordinary place; the various major families will not allow them to occupy it for long. Once the Daoist Masters have concluded their discussions, the Capital Immortals Dao

will certainly withdraw, and you will be able to return… For now, how many disciples have you managed to gather?"

At the mention of this, a chill like a block of ice settled in Kong Guxi's heart. "Reporting to the Family Head," he said in a low voice, "aside from a few core Foundation Establishment cultivators, we have four at the Qi Refining stage, ten at the miscellaneous Qi stage, and several at the Embryonic Breathing stage…"

He found the words difficult to say. "When our mountain gate fell, some surrendered and some died. We managed to gather a few more after relocating to the wilderness, only to be attacked again. The Capital Immortals Dao sent the very cultivators who had surrendered to us to win over the rest. Their loyalty wavered."

After so many defeats, even the most loyal disciples knew the Profound Peak Gate was beyond saving. Though Kong Guxi had repeatedly promised that a Purple Mansion expert would soon emerge, his followers knew they might not live to see that day. The Capital Immortals Dao also had a Purple Mansion Realm master. What retribution would they face in the future if they didn't surrender now?

Thus, during their decline in the wilderness, the Profound Peak Gate not only lost a great number of loyal scions from allied families but also had its ranks of common disciples utterly gutted.

'Alas!'

The Profound Peak Gate, once one of the great Three Sects and Seven Gates, was now reduced to a handful of nobodies. Such a small group wouldn't have been enough to even establish a single hall in the sect's former glory. Li Zhouluo could only remain silent.

Kong Guxi asked tentatively, "I have seen many independent cultivators on the eastern shore. The Profound Peak Gate was hoping to send someone to see about recruiting a few disciples…"

The eastern shore had always been the Li family's territory, so Kong Guxi naturally did not dare overstep. He couldn't recruit from the local clans, so his only option was to try his luck with the unaffiliated cultivators.

"That should not be an issue," Li Zhouluo replied. "However, Sect Master, you must be careful. The character of these independent cultivators is hard to discern. Do not tarnish the name of the Profound Peak Gate."

Kong Guxi nodded repeatedly. He found this new Family Head of the Zhou generation to be more approachable than his predecessors, and a wave of relief washed over him. Having received permission, he hadn't even fully expressed his gratitude before he produced a jade box from his sleeve.

"The Profound Peak Gate has lost nearly all its members, leaving many of our Dharma artifacts unused," he said respectfully. "They are wasted in our hands, and with the recent surge of demonic cultivators, our defenses are strained. I thought it best to deliver them into the hands of your clan's cultivators, where they can be put to good use."

"What is the meaning of this, Sect Master?" Li Zhouluo demurred as a matter of politeness.

Kong Guxi immediately gave him an out. "I have no other intention. My sect is all but empty, and my few remaining juniors cannot unleash the full power of these artifacts. They are constantly getting injured, and I fear for their futures. If we could ask your clan's Foundation Establishment cultivators to wield them, each artifact would be used to its full potential. This is merely a measure to ensure the safety of my young ones."

He pressed on, "And I heard that the lake was planning to send experts to help us defend against the demonic cultivators. This makes me feel even more indebted… We can't let your clan's cultivators make the trip for nothing…"

Li Zhouluo went back and forth with him for a while, feigning that he was being worn down by the old man's persistence, before finally relenting. Kong Guxi eagerly opened the jade box, revealing a chain of glittering, crimson jade fragments.

The old man supported the base of the box with one hand and with the other, he lifted the strand of fragmented jade beads. He draped it over four fingers, his trembling index finger coming to rest against his middle finger. "This is an heirloom of my sect," he said with a smile, "the Crimson Orb Jade. Worn around the neck, it can invigorate one's blood and Qi and protect the body. It is quite formidable. It was once an ancient Dharma artifact, capable of transforming into a crimson jade chain to suppress enemies, but it can no longer do so."

Noticing Li Zhouluo's expression, he quickly explained, "It was shattered in a battle long ago… A Daoist Master later pieced it back together, so it no longer qualifies as an ancient Dharma artifact… but it is still powerful…"

He placed the necklace back and lifted the false bottom of the box. Beneath it lay a small, transparent glass vial containing a gray, scale-like object. "This was left behind by my sect's Daoist Master," Kong Guxi said. "He once answered the call of another Daoist Master to slay a demon in the sea and obtained this spiritual item. It is a scale from a Purple Mansion demon beast. While not a true Purple Mansion-level material, it can be considered a resource for one… If your clan has need of it, it would make for excellent armor."

"I once overheard the Daoist Master say that if forged properly, the result might not be inferior to an ancient Dharma artifact."

Besides the glass vial in the center, there were two other Foundation Establishment Dharma artifacts, one on each side. Their quality was average, hardly worth mentioning, with only a jade slip beside them for identification. After presenting these items, Kong Guxi finally took a pair of small, brightly shining cymbals from his sleeve. They were covered in intricate patterns and looked like two miniature straw hats.

His voice choked with emotion. "This last item… was prepared for Fellow Daoist Chenghui's descendant… But I heard he passed away in his prime, without even leaving behind a bloodline. I am overcome with shame. I can only ask the Family Head to accept this on his behalf… as a token of the Profound Peak Gate's gratitude!"

Li Zhouluo could see clearly that these cymbals were forged from Geng Metal combined with the essence of another lineage—he couldn't tell if it was True Qi or Purple Qi—and it radiated a sense of unified, balanced power. Not only were they formidable, but even an injured lightning cultivator could wield them without the slightest discomfort. It was clear Kong Guxi had put a great deal of thought into this…

But Li Zhouluo himself cultivated the path of Geng Metal. Whether this gift was truly for some supposed descendant or intended for him was, frankly, debatable.

'What a clever man, this Sect Master Kong,' the young man thought.

He set the jade box aside and singled out the cymbals. "Since this is a gift for an elder's descendant," he announced, "Someone attend me!"

A Jade Court cultivator stepped forward.

"Take this item and deliver it to the clan treasury," Li Zhouluo commanded.

He had the cymbals taken away right in front of Kong Guxi, who showed no sign of awkwardness. The sect master simply nodded repeatedly. "Such artifacts are rare these days and extremely useful in battle… The functions of all the items are detailed in the jade slip in the box. I shall take my leave now."

As the sect master hurried out, Li Zhouluo returned to his seat. The court guard returned, knelt on one knee with his head bowed, and presented the cymbals with both hands.

"Reporting to the Family Head, the grade of the treasure has not been determined. I do not know which treasury to store it in."

Slightly surprised, Li Zhouluo looked at the artifact in the man's palms. "Quick-witted. Which family are you from?"

"This servant's surname is Dili, with the given name Guang," the guard replied. "I am from the royal house of the Northern Mountain Yue."

'Dili… once a lowly surname among the Mountain Yue, and now they are royalty…'

Li Zhouluo gave a slight nod. The royal house of the Northern Mountain Yue sounded impressive, but in reality, they were nothing compared to the likes of the An, Chen, Dou, and Xu families—only slightly better than a humble clan.

Dili Guang had a sharp mind and had sought confirmation, but Li Zhouluo truly had no intention of coveting the artifact. "It is a peak-grade item for the Foundation Establishment realm. Send it to Mount Qingdu for the venerable elder to appraise."

Just as Dili Guang was about to leave, Li Zhouluo stopped him. "You are on duty on the twenty-second… For the next two years, serve in the main hall. After that, you will attend me directly. I've received word from the venerable elder and must go see him now."

Before he could even leave the great hall, a messenger announced that Chen Yang was waiting outside. Li Zhouluo held his elder brother's capable subordinate in high esteem and gestured for Dili Guang to depart.

A young man in soft armor entered the hall, a broad smile on his face. He knelt as soon as he was inside, observing all proper etiquette before speaking.

"Chen Yang greets the Family Head!"

Li Zhouluo nodded. "Congratulations. Your breakthrough comes as a great relief to the clan in this pressing time!"

Chen Yang remained kneeling as he listened, only rising after the Family Head had spoken. A fierce light glinted in his eyes. "Family Head, I've heard that a number of demonic cultivators are causing trouble on the eastern shore. At a time like this, how dare one or two of them target Moongaze Lake? Please, allow me to make a trip and give them a taste of our strength!"

This was exactly what Li Zhouluo had in mind. Among his trusted followers, Chen Yang possessed a high-grade Immortal Foundation and was skilled in combat. "That is precisely why I've called you," he said. "I need you to go. The Profound Peak Gate has just delivered some Dharma artifacts under the pretext of aiding the eastern shore. Take them with you. It will both enhance your strength and serve as a response to them."

Li Zhouluo immediately took the Crimson Orb Jade from the box, along with a shield and a small pagoda from the lower compartment, and placed them in Chen Yang's hands.

"Take your pick between the shield and the pagoda, whichever you find more suitable. Take the Crimson Orb Jade as well. With these two artifacts, head to the eastern shore…" he said in a low voice. "Your priority, as always, is self-preservation. With your strong foundation and powerful artifacts, a few demonic cultivators should not be able to trouble you. Just be careful."

Chen Yang picked up the jade slip and read it, a thoughtful expression on his face. He then picked up the shield, a hint of doubt in his eyes. "Family Head, at this point, I find it unlikely that these demonic cultivators are acting on the orders of some Purple Mansion master. After all, those who should have been offended have been, and those who wished to stay out of it have long since extricated themselves. If it were simple robbery, one or two incidents would be reasonable, but so many demonic cultivators… several at the Foundation Establishment Realm, even. What could they possibly hope to plunder on the eastern shore?"

Li Zhouluo frowned. "What are you suggesting…"

"I am not yet certain," Chen Yang replied softly. "It seems they have ulterior motives, yet it doesn't feel like they are targeting our family specifically. The eastern shore and the wilderness have no clear border; their territories are deeply intertwined. I will investigate once I arrive. If the Capital Immortals Dao on

the wilderness side has also been attacked, it's possible these demonic cultivators are someone else's subordinates, and we have merely been caught in the crossfire."

"I'll leave this matter in your hands."

Finding merit in his reasoning, Li Zhouluo entrusted the task to him. Chen Yang quickly departed. Ever respectful of his elders, Li Zhouluo remembered Li Xuanxuan's summons and flew directly toward Mount Qingdu without a moment's rest.

Crossing the lake, he soon saw the vibrant glow of the Five Waters Imperial Heaven Array. He descended from the sky, landing on a side peak. An old man, dressed formally in blue and black robes, sat silently within a pavilion.

Li Zhouluo landed at the edge of the courtyard and walked the rest of the way. The venerable elder's seniority was so great that even his own father would have to approach on foot. Upon entering the pavilion, he bowed deeply.

"Greetings, venerable elder."

"Come."

Li Xuanxuan smiled kindly upon seeing him and had someone serve tea. He waited for Li Zhouluo to be seated before dismissing the attendants on both sides. Only then did he ask, "I heard you gave an Essence Gathering Pill to the third boy?"

The moment he heard this, Li Zhouluo instinctively knew something was wrong. He steeled himself. "That is correct, venerable elder."

Li Xuanxuan hesitated for a moment before speaking, his voice aged. "The Essence Gathering Pills are, after all, precious. Every single one that is used is known to the clan elders. I made a special inquiry with Jiangxia and learned that he requested it for a friend…"

"This matter… you acted without sufficient thought."

The words struck Li Zhouluo like a physical blow. He began to sweat. It was only because Li Xuanxuan had always been protective of the younger generation, never airing dirty laundry in public. But with the elder's prestige, that single sentence was enough. From now on, it wouldn't matter if Li Zhouluo managed the family well or poorly—in the eyes of many, it would be poorly.

"Please, elder, enlighten me!"

He responded, and Li Xuanxuan only sighed. "A single pill is not a great matter, and we need not be so calculative. The problem lies in taking it for private use. you have only just taken charge of the family and have yet to establish your prestige. This affair reflects poorly on you…"

"That Pei Xie is said to be a first-rate fighter. You should have at least organized a competition, invited all the unaffiliated cultivators at the peak of Qi Refining to participate, and awarded it as the grand prize. That way, everyone would have been convinced… You have no prestige of your own, and the pill did not come from your own resources… How could this be appropriate?"

The old man seemed anxious. His withered hand repeatedly pressed down on his teacup, then lifted, then pressed down again. "But your order has already been given, and the clan elders are aware. I cannot simply stop you…" he said, his voice raspy. "You have just taken this position. If I were to block you like this, you would never be able to accomplish anything in the future…"

Having never lacked for resources in his life, Li Zhouluo had subconsciously never considered an Essence Gathering Pill to be anything extraordinary. Even Dharma artifacts that others would kill for were just objects in his eyes. He had agreed without a second thought, but now, with the elder's gentle prodding, he understood. "I will return at once… and deduct… deduct the pill from my own personal allotment… to demonstrate fairness."

Hearing this, Li Xuanxuan's brow finally relaxed. He spoke earnestly, "These few words are spoken behind the closed doors of my own courtyard. Whether it is your fifth brother, or you, or even Han'er… I watch over each and every one of you, and I will not let these matters spread outside. However… managing a family is not as simple as becoming the master of Mount Qingdu. You must remember this lesson for the future!"

At that moment, Li Zhouluo felt a genuine surge of emotion. He had always seen the venerable elder as a figure of authority, someone to be respected, but now he felt a true sense of affection. "Rest assured, venerable elder," he said in a heavy voice. "Though I may be slow-witted, I will come to you often for guidance in the future to ensure the peace of our home."

Aside from Li Zhouwei, Li Xuanxuan was counting on him to have some administrative ability, so he did not reprimand him further. "Go… go… everyone is

watching you at this time. Don't linger here too long. Just treat this as a simple visit to pay your respects."

Li Zhouluo understood. He kowtowed once before exiting. Li Xuanxuan sipped his tea, sighing to himself.

'That third boy is truly formidable… With this move… Luo'er has to give up his own pill to support him. Now, everyone will think that the Family Head, Li Zhouluo, favors Li Jiangxia…'

Chapter 779: Inquiries

The Funan territory.

The arrays set upon the mountain peaks were already undergoing repairs. The land, once choked with black smoke, had begun to look orderly once more. The Golden Tang Gate had been forced to come, but they had no desire for wanton slaughter. The mortals below had suffered little damage and were now gathered at the foot of the mountains, rebuilding their flattened villages.

A streak of golden light sped through the air, transforming into a young man with the appearance of a scholar. His face was etched with worry as he flew, coming to a stop at the edge of the Funan territory.

Cui Jueyin had been searching for over half a year. Ever since Ding Weizeng vanished, he had scoured the entire region, but the jade pendant at his waist had shown no reaction. His search had taken him west to the Great Desert and east to the Eastern Sea; he had even secretly traveled north into the territories of the Golden Tang Gate and the Capital Immortals Dao, but there was no trace of him.

He had no choice but to fly back, his heart half-frozen with dread.

Cui Jueyin knew Ding Weizeng well and held him in high regard. More importantly, both men had been personally elevated by Li Ximing and were the Daoist Master's trusted aides, standing on the same side. He was a pillar among the Foundation Establishment cultivators, and Cui had no intention of slacking in the search, giving it his absolute all.

He returned to the Funan territory, his spirits low. Not wanting to return to the lake just yet, he landed on Funan's main peak. The cultivators below did not know him well, but they recognized his face and hurried to greet him.

"Lord Cui, the lake sent Lord Qu to manage the cleanup. He has been sorting out the spiritual fields and is currently free in the main hall."

Hearing this, Cui Jueyin turned toward the hall. Moments later, he saw the old man sitting within, draped in a rather magnificent robe and holding a box of soil, which he was examining intently.

"Senior Qu!"

Cui Jueyin offered his greeting. Qu Bushi immediately rose and strode forward to meet him, sighing.

"Lord Cui, we've been anxiously awaiting you. Things at the lake have been busy… Any sign of Weizeng?".

Qu Bushi was actually very close to Ding Weizeng, often referring to him as 'Weizeng' as one would a junior, and he was deeply agitated by the matter. His first question was for news. When Cui Jueyin shook his head, the old man's expression turned grim.

"He should be alright…" Qu Bushi murmured. "After all, his life jade at the lake has dimmed, but it hasn't changed. As long as a Purple Mansion master didn't strike him down, Weizeng is likely in seclusion somewhere."

Cui Jueyin mused, "I have one more idea… The Northern Brocade River King… is there any news of him? Demons infest the three rivers; perhaps we can ask him to make some inquiries".

At the mention of this demon, old man Qu sighed again. "We already thought of him. But that old demon, whether by cunning or by chance… went off nearly two years ago to celebrate the birthday of some Thread River Demon King and hasn't been seen since. Our messengers… their messages are just piling up in his river palace with no reply".

"The Thread River Demon King?".

Cui Jueyin, having come from overseas, immediately caught the significance of this name. He frowned. "I know of this Thread River Demon King. He supposedly visited Chongzhou Island with the Dragon King once. I never heard he was one for extravagance. A banquet lasting a year and a half ought to be over by now. I will go and ask".

He had a feeling he knew what was happening. Taking the command token from Qu Bushi, he immediately sped toward White river Creek. After covering most of the distance, he submerged himself and descended to the riverbed.

'A figure as important as the Thread River Demon King is cooperating with this,' he thought. 'Using a birthday celebration to move him out of the way… they must be afraid of dragging the Northern Brocade River King into this mess. When it comes to inland affairs, the dragon lineage ultimately chose not to get involved…'.

Cui Jueyin saw the truth clearly. While the dragon lineage was signaling its withdrawal, this did not mean the rumored connections were imaginary. On the contrary, the connection had to be real for them to mobilize a Purple Mansion demon like the Thread River Demon King to coordinate this…

'If the rumors were baseless, the Northern Brocade River King could have just stayed put and ignored any requests for aid. Why else would he go to all this trouble?'

'Our only hope of finding the Daoist Master and the Family Head… rests with this flood dragon!'

With this understanding, his actions became more assured. As he approached the river palace, a fish demon emerged. Cui Jueyin had some experience dealing with demons and explained his purpose clearly.

"My King only just returned this morning and was about to send a reply," the demon said. "Please, Lord, come in".

Cui Jueyin strode confidently into the palace. It was a scene of shimmering gold and brilliant splendor. Demons had no sense of restraint; the steps leading to the high throne were an extravagant mix of gold and precious spiritual materials.

Upon reaching the main hall, he saw a tall, stately man dressed in a magnificent brocade robe of slate-blue cut silk and a cape of white fur embroidered with an azure sea. If not for the shimmering, sapphire-blue scales on his neck, he could have passed for the master of any great sect.

"This humble cultivator, Cui Jueyin, pays his respects to the Northern Brocade River King!"

He bowed his head and stated his name. The man flicked his robes and descended the steps, smiling.

"Chongzhou Island?".

"Indeed!"

One was a demon, a servant of the dragon lineage; the other was from an overseas family, a descendant of Chongzhou. Neither man lacked for worldly knowledge, and both knew many secrets. They were, in fact, both subordinates of the dragon lineage. As the man and the demon met each other's gaze, a volume of unspoken secrets passed between them.

The Northern Brocade River King, Ying Hebai, gestured for him to take a seat. "Chongzhou is also under the protection of the White Dragon lineage," he said in a low voice. "Years ago, the Dragon King brought my own King along to accept this charge, forging a bond. My connection to Thread River is also close. We are all one family".

"Naturally."

Cui Jueyin replied with an easy smile, inwardly noting that Ying Hebai seemed to know a great deal.

"I only learned of Brother Chenghui's fall after I returned to the sea," Ying Hebai continued, his voice low. "But even if I had been here, I could not have changed anything… I must ask you, Lord Cui, to speak a few good words on my behalf".

"I am, after all, a minor player on the periphery. I can help pass a message or two, but I cannot do more. I was waiting for you… From now on, any dealings must be counted as a private friendship between us."

Cui Jueyin naturally nodded. "The lake sees the situation clearly. This was always coming. When Situ Tang achieved the Purple Mansion, he still faced the calamity of having his mountain besieged. When Xiao Chuting attained his divine ability, he was likewise trapped in the Eastern Sea. Moongaze Lake could not expect to be an exception. That the Daoist Master was able to escape overseas is already the best possible outcome."

Seeing Ying Hebai nod, he lowered his voice. "We have been targeted recently. My only true concern is the matter of the White Qilin entering the sea. Has His Majesty heard any news?".

Ying Hebai shook his head. "There is no need to worry. Since he used the Sword Gate's rigid morality to preserve his life, he has slain Situ Mo and fled to the Eastern Sea. It is unlikely any further harm will come to him. The one in an awkward position now is Cheng Yan. I heard from my Demon King that the man has a terrible reputation—reviled by everyone. With Changxiao gone, he would never dare pursue anyone into the Eastern Sea".

Cui Jueyin immediately understood, and a great weight lifted from his heart. He then changed the subject. "What of the Daoist Master?"

Ying Hebai's response was immediate. "I was in the Converging Heaven Sea at the time. I know no details of the matter".

Whether he knew or not, he must have heard something. His eagerness to avoid the topic was a clear signal. Cui Jueyin tactfully shut his mouth, clasping his hands. "Then I must ask the Demon King to help the lake with another matter, to search for a certain Fellow Daoist…"

A smile finally touched Ying Hebai's lips. "On that, I have good news for you. Fellow Daoist Ding is right here in my river palace, healing from his injuries!".

Although Cui Jueyin had suspected he might know Ding Weizeng's whereabouts, he never imagined the man was in the palace itself. No wonder he couldn't find a single trace. He was instantly overjoyed. "My deepest thanks to you, Your Majesty!"

Ying Hebai led him down through layers of coral, soon arriving before a palace of azure bronze. Cui Jueyin waited only a moment before a burly man with the whiskers of a tiger rushed out from within.

Ding Weizeng's aura hadn't changed significantly, but his eyes were filled with anxiety. The large man rushed up and seized Cui Jueyin's hands.

"Is there any news of the Daoist Master?!" he demanded.

Cui Jueyin, stunned that this was his first question, uncertainly shook his head.

Ying Hebai smiled. "Fellow Daoist Ding fell into the creek. My little sister found him and brought him back, placing him in my palace's Pristine Water Pool, which healed his wounds. Any slower, and he would have been left with permanent internal injuries that nothing short of a Purple Mansion cultivator could have fixed."

Cui Jueyin nodded slightly. Ding Weizeng spoke in a low voice, "The Golden Tang Gate besieged me. I used my Immortal Foundation to escape but was severely wounded. I originally fled to the desert, but I was worried about Chenghui. I tried to come back, but I delayed too long, and the injuries were too severe. I fell somewhere in the west."

"I was unconscious for a long time. I was awakened by several mortals who were fleeing here from the Golden Tang Gate's territory. Once I was awake, I secluded myself for half a day, then continued flying east. Halfway here, I ran into demonic cultivators. I killed them, but the effort triggered my wounds, and I fell into this river…".

Ding Weizeng made it sound simple, but to repeatedly lose consciousness was no small matter. A Foundation Establishment cultivator's injuries would not cause them to lose their senses unless they were truly on the brink of death. If not for the tenacity of his Immortal Foundation, he would have long since perished.

Cui Jueyin let out a deep sigh. "Since you were here healing, why didn't you send a letter back? You have caused me a bitter search."

But Ding Weizeng replied in a low voice, "When Miss Ying brought me back, I didn't know the situation. But I inquired about the present state of affairs and learned the lake was not in danger. I only wanted to use this treasure-land to heal as fast as possible, so I could go to the Eastern Sea and search for the Daoist Master…"

Cui Jueyin understood. The man before him was genuinely worried about Li Ximing. This man felt little belonging to Moongaze Lake itself and had no interest in the clan's power; his loyalty was to Li Ximing, and to him alone.

"Alas… how can a single Foundation Establishment cultivator find what several Purple Mansion masters cannot? Even if you found him, what help could you be? You should return with me to the lake. We must stabilize the situation at home first."

Ding Weizeng shook his head. "That is not necessarily true. If the Daoist Master is injured and has no one attending him, there is certainly risk. As for whether I can find him… even if I just search outwardly, I might draw the attention of those with ill intent. That, too, would be good for the Daoist Master!".

'Draw the attention of Purple Mansion masters… He's willing to throw his life away!'

Cui Jueyin, though loyal to his duty, knew he was incapable of sacrificing his own life in such a way. He sighed inwardly. Seeing that Ding Weizeng was about seventy or eighty percent recovered, and hearing his tale of grievous injury—all healed in merely half a year—he instantly understood that Ying Hebai must

have used considerable spiritual treasures. The clan now owed a debt. He could only bow.

"On behalf of the lake, I thank His Majesty!"

Ying Hebai laughed and waved his hand, escorting the two men out of the palace. He nodded as they parted. "I heard that Daoist Master Zhu Gong from overseas has recently been a frequent guest at the Purple Smoke Gate. There may be more changes coming. It would be best for the lake to be careful."

Moongaze Lake, Vermillion Bud Pavilion.

The lake water rippled under a perfect sky. The light from the bluestone lanterns had been extinguished. The woman in the pavilion, wearing a long skirt with several talismans affixed to her sleeves, had one hand covering a cloth map marked with dozens of notations, while the other rested on an azure jade mortar.

"Three qian of ochre, three qian of metal essence, five fen of White Origin, one and a half qian of roasted golden silkworm… There should be no issue. It's strange, why won't it manifest…"

(TŁNote: Qian is 5 grams, Fen is 0.5 grams)

She observed the half-gold, half-black powder at the bottom of the mortar. When it stubbornly refused to turn platinum, she cut off her spiritual qi and set the jade pestle down.

'Could it be because of the current spiritual environment, Inward Heart Surging Profundity?' she mused. 'Metal is the child of Earth, and this aura damages Earth. There is not enough gestational energy, so the child cannot be born. If I add another half-qian of ochre, I can try again.'

She pulled a jade box from her sleeve, revealing chunks of crimson ochre spirit stone. Just as she was measuring it, a cultivator reported from outside the pavilion.

"My lady, the Third Young Master has arrived."

"Please, show him in!"

Li Quewan quickly put her things away and stored the cloth map. As expected, the tall figure of Li Jiangxia strode up the corridor. He clasped his hands with a smile.

"Greetings, Sister!"

"Third Young Master."

Li Quewan invited him to sit. The young man raised an eyebrow at the jade mortar on the table. "I don't often come to visit, so it's rare to see you. My apologies for the interruption."

Li Quewan picked up the mortar, her voice gentle. "It is nothing important. A branch of the clan obtained a new cultivation art from the Metal Virtue. The problem is, the spiritual item they need for Qi Refining is not produced in Northern Yue; it comes from the Western High Plateau. They put in a request to the clan. I figured that since it's only a Qi Refining item, it wasn't too precious, so I'm trying to adjust the properties of other materials to create a substitute".

Li Jiangxia nodded. He hesitated a moment, then slid a box out from under his sleeve. "I came today because I have something I need you to look at," he said softly.

He placed the stone box on the table and gently opened it. Inside lay a dark, metallic stone. A subtle brilliance flowed across its surface, which was cut as smooth as a mirror, reflecting their faces.

She picked up the metallic stone, tested its weight, and observed it carefully. Surprise filled her face. "Where did you get this? This isn't Reflecting Metal or Geng Metal… it must be Wandering Metal! This is extremely rare in the south; it's much more common in the north. I do not know its name, but this is without a doubt a Foundation Establishment-grade Wandering Metal spiritual item".

"The north…"

Li Jiangxia silently processed this. 'It seems Brother Pei's legacy must have been left by a cultivator from the north…'.

He was about to ask more when someone hurried up from below, bowing respectfully.

"My lords! A message from the main island! Please come quickly!"

Li Quewan immediately stood and handed the stone back. “Do they say what it is about?”

The messenger bowed. “Many people have arrived at the main island on a spirit-vessel, trailing Purple Qi. The vessel is incredibly lavish. It has already docked at the island’s edge.”

Hearing this, Li Quewan understood at once.

“It must be the sisters,” she said to herself, “returning from the Purple Smoke Blessed Land!”.

Chapter 780: Good Tidings from Purple Smoke

Swirls of purple qi permeated the air as an ancient, long boat hovered silently. The lake below reflected its violet hue. Standing on the deck was a girl in a pink skirt, gazing into the distance. Her face was round, her ears small and delicate. This was Li Queyi, the second young lady of the Jiangque generation.

Li Queyi stood upon the deck, surrounded by the other young girls who looked to her as their elder sister. They had clearly failed to gain entry to the sect; their spirits were low, and they kept their heads down, afraid to speak.

As Li Queyi felt the spiritual boat move beneath her feet, her own anxiety grew. They were returning from the Purple Smoke Blessed Land, personally escorted by the sect itself—an impressive honor. But the significance of this spirit boat was complex. Where it chose to land—hovering over the lake versus settling upon the isle—was a delicate matter of protocol. With the Li family's Purple Mansion expert missing, their clan could not afford any further loss of prestige.

As Li Queyi fretted, another girl at her side—this one possessing a slightly colder demeanor—spoke up. She looked to be only eleven or twelve; though her features had yet to fully mature, their refined beauty was already apparent. Head held high, her face beaming with undisguised pride, she whispered to a companion:

"So *that* was the Purple Smoke Blessed Land… What an incredible place! I doubt even the cultivation grounds of celestial fairies or divine maidens could be any better than this!"

Li Queyi shot her a nervous glance before quickly turning her gaze forward again. She didn't relax until the spiritual boat finally settled upon the isle, landing softly on the ground. When she saw the Purple Smoke Gate cultivators disembark on their own, making no demands for a formal reception, she finally

breathed a quiet sigh of relief. Lowering her gaze submissively, she followed them off the boat.

"Greetings, fellow Daoists!"

An elderly man dressed in dark blue robes moved forward to receive them. The young cultivator leading the Purple Smoke delegation didn't recognize him. Confused as to why the Li hadn't sent a Foundation Establishment expert to greet them, he nonetheless maintained a welcoming smile and offered enthusiastic congratulations. "Senior! This is wonderful news! Your esteemed clan having two disciples accepted by our gate is truly a joyous occasion."

The elder seemed momentarily startled, but his face quickly broke into a broad smile. The children were ushered forward, dispersing like running water, until only two girls remained before the hall: one older, perhaps seventeen or eighteen, and one barely past her tenth year.

The girl in the pink skirt was, naturally, Li Queyi. Li Xuanxuan wasn't surprised; among the girls of her generation, Li Queyi's talent was second only to the eldest, Li Quewan. The family had pinned their hopes on her. He nodded, smiling in approval.

The second girl, however, was unexpected. She was the young daughter of a remote lineage within the First Branch, dressed in white robes that matched her aloof temperament. Li Xuanxuan had met all the candidates; he recognized her as Li Quexi. Because she had been brought in from outside the main isle, her generational name had been added later, and it didn't adhere to the standard conventions of the four main branches.

"Excellent! Excellent!" Li Xuanxuan was genuinely delighted.

The cultivator opposite him, however, froze. Someone in the delegation had clearly recognized the elder and was stunned that Li Xuanxuan himself had come. Unsure how to properly address him given the circumstances, they hesitated for several breaths before pushing Ling Yanzi forward.

This man was ancient. Years ago, after being hunted by the Changxiao Gate, he had fled until Li Tongya saved his life. He had visited the Li family then, and now he was here to accept a disciple.

Li Xuanxuan bowed deeply. "Senior… I trust you have been well since we last met."

Ling Yanzi's hair and beard were snow-white, and he clutched a simple wooden staff. His eyes filled with complex emotions as he nodded silently.

He had met the members of the Xuan generation before. He remembered the youthful Li Xuanfeng and Li Xuanling, how they had joked with him. Back then, Ling Yanzi had just escaped death and was recuperating on Mount Lijing. He vividly recalled the steady strength of the middle-aged patriarch and the vibrant, ambitious energy of the youths. Now, looking up, all that remained before him was this frail, withered elder.

"You are… Xuanxuan… the eldest brother…" Ling Yanzi mumbled.

Li Xuanxuan nodded softly. "The old senior still remembers. Of those who were on the mountain that day, I am the only one left."

"I remember," Ling Yanzi's voice was hoarse with age and memory. "A brush with death… how could I forget?"

The two men looked at each other, seeing both a stranger and a familiar ghost. Their attempts at pleasantries felt hollow, lacking genuine warmth, laced instead with a subtle, shared dread. They were two souls who had barely clung to life against the ravages of time, each terrified the other might speak a memory that cut like a needle.

An awkward silence stretched between them. Seeing this, Li Zhouluo, standing just behind, quickly stepped forward. "Esteemed elders, please continue your conversation," he said respectfully. "This junior can handle the arrangements here."

Li Xuanxuan indeed had matters to discuss with Ling Yanzi, and the two elders made their way toward the main hall. Just then, Li Quewan and Jiangxia arrived, riding the wind. They began arranging accommodations for the Purple Smoke disciples. The Foundation Establishment expert who had led the delegation smiled amiably at Li Zhouluo. "This one is Wen Wu, a cultivator from Mu Zuo Peak. I specifically requested this mission to meet the Clan Head, as there is a particular reason…"

He clasped one hand behind his back, walking casually as he chatted with Li Zhouluo. It was rare to see a male cultivator from the Purple Smoke Gate. "The situation is rather interesting," he smiled. "Your disciples originally came to Ziqi Peak seeking apprenticeship. Your Li Queyi, despite being slightly older, is already condensing Qi—specifically, Jade True Qi. Since our sect has several

compatible cultivation methods, it wasn't considered a conflict, and she earned Senior Ling Yanzi's approval."

"But then, unexpectedly, after Li Queyi had been accepted, my own master—Peak Lord Qian Lizi of Mu Zuo Peak—happened to visit. She saw Li Quexi and immediately took a liking to her. She petitioned the Gate Master directly and accepted her as a disciple."

Wen Wu looked vibrant, and his eyes, which seemed enhanced by some ocular art, flowed with light. A clear joy was visible in his gaze as he spoke softly. "This is truly a wonderful stroke of fate. As the Eldest Disciple of my peak, I felt it necessary to come to the isle personally. First, to inform the Clan Head and observe the proper etiquette. Second, I needed to meet her family members and explain the situation clearly."

Li Zhouluo instantly understood and nodded inwardly. "This is wonderful news," he smiled. "Since Senior is being so considerate, I will personally guide you to meet them on the isle."

Mu Zuo Peak was clearly in a different league than Ling Yanzi's Ziqi Peak, which had nearly seen its lineage severed multiple times. Peak Lord Qian Lizi was a renowned Foundation Establishment expert, known by the title "Treasured Vase." The fact that this Eldest Disciple, Wen Wu, was himself at the late stage of Foundation Establishment spoke volumes about the peak's strength.

Furthermore, despite the chaotic reception, Li Zhouluo had clearly observed that Ling Yanzi—a Peak Lord and a sect elder—had walked half a step *behind* Wen Wu. The other Purple Smoke cultivators all deferred to Wen Wu as their leader. Clearly, this Eldest Disciple's status was exceptionally high.

'I wonder if a Daoist Master intentionally arranged this… Regardless, having one more disciple accepted is undoubtedly a good thing.'

This was the first good news Li Zhouluo had received in days, and he felt a weight lift from his shoulders. Beside him, his elder sister, Li Quewan, held Li Queyi with one hand and Li Quexi with the other. Her thoughts, however, took a darker turn.

'From what I know of Ling Yanzi's disciples… every one of them has either shallow cultivation or has hit a bottleneck they can't surpass. I suspect the only reason that old man chose Queyi is because her talent is high *and* she's already at

the Qi Refining realm. If he'd taken an Embryonic Breathing novice, he'd likely die of old age before she ever reached Foundation Establishment.'

'Looking at how powerful Mu Zuo Peak is now, and how pathetic Ziqi Peak has become… Ling Yanzi doesn't have many years left to protect anyone. In the future, the lives and treatment these two sisters receive… I fear they will be separated by a gulf as wide as heaven and earth.'

Chapter 781: Settling Matters with Purple Smoke

Li Zhouluo walked ahead, introducing Wen Wu to several of the isle's cultivation spots. Wen Wu was exceedingly gracious, nodding repeatedly.

"I have heard of this place!" he said. "Rumor has it that this was once a market city. My master cultivated here in her youth and often told me what a fine place it was. She said its key locations were no worse than those in our Blessed Land."

Li Quewan listened intently, but she noticed that Li Quexi, at her side, was walking with hurried steps. The girl was nearly a full body length ahead of her, trying to stay close to Wen Wu.

"Eldest Senior Brother," she asked with great curiosity, "how does this place compare to Mu Zuo Peak?"

Wen Wu chuckled and gave a vague reply.

"Mu Zuo is the second peak of the Blessed Land. Its spiritual energy is so abundant it ranks among the best in all of Jiangnan. However, according to my master, back when she cultivated in the market here, the most expensive location was every bit as good as Mu Zuo Peak."

Pingya Isle was an excellent place, its spiritual energy far more balanced and potent than the surrounding lakeshore. But Li Zhouluo knew it was no match for the Purple Smoke Blessed Land, let alone one of its immortal peaks.

Wen Wu's words were diplomatic. The isle may have been comparable in the past, but after the great war to eradicate the Chen Clan remnants and years of suffering under a great sealing formation, it had long since lost its former glory.

"There is no comparison, of course," Li Zhouluo said with a smile. "The Blessed Land belongs to the Green Pine Supreme Yang Dao Lineage, a heritage a thousand years strong. My family falls far short!"

Since Li Zhouluo had stated it so plainly, Wen Wu could only swallow the awkwardness and reply, "Your noble clan rose from humble beginnings. The bearing and ambition of your ancestors are things we at Purple Smoke have long admired."

The younger girl had now moved a full step forward. As she was not the primary host, Li Quewan couldn't very well walk ahead of their guest. The angle became awkward, and she had to release Li Quexi's hand, holding only her sister Li Queyi's.

Soon, they arrived at Li Quexi's family home. Li Zhouluo and Wen Wu led the girl into the small courtyard, where they were met with a chorus of joyful laughter and effusive compliments. Li Quewan, holding Li Queyi, stopped outside, deciding not to enter. She straightened her younger sister's collar and spoke softly.

"Your sister Quexi is still young and doesn't understand many things. A girl not yet of an age to wear hairpins… this is a time of vanity. You can't expect her to handle things perfectly. In the Blessed Land, she will have few to guide her. If you get a chance to see her, you should offer her some reminders."

"Elder Sister…"

Though Li Queyi had a sweet appearance, she was older and understood the subtleties of the situation. "I saw the Blessed Land on our way," she said tactfully. "Ziqi Peak is not faring well… For them to form a connection with our family, the immortal gate likely felt they couldn't neglect the favor owed to the Daoist Master. Quexi's acceptance was genuine; mine was merely an excuse to round out the deal. Once we enter the gate, our statuses will be very different. I'm afraid I will be the one needing her to remember the bonds of sisterhood and help me. Even though I am a few years older, it would not be my place to lecture her."

Although the Purple Smoke Gate honored ancient customs and did without the formal division of inner and outer disciples, the distinction between the strong and the weak was everywhere, giving rise to countless differences in status. Li Quewan understood this perfectly and sighed to herself.

'Sister Quexi is still a child, after all. She believes her talent is exceptional, that she is different from ordinary people, and that she earned the favor of a great cultivator through her own merit. She has no idea it was all because of the Daoist Master's connections… If Queyi had been born three or five years later, this opportunity would never have been hers.'

Li Quewan waited for a moment before raising her head. She had cultivated an ocular art, and her vision was superb. She spotted Li Xuanxuan and Ling Yanzi strolling not far away, clearly having followed them.

She quickly pulled her sister along to greet them. "Greetings, esteemed Senior! Greetings, esteemed Elder!"

Ling Yanzi nodded repeatedly. Li Queyi also greeted him as "Master." Seeing the heavy atmosphere between the two old men, Li Quewan, ever the elder sister, quickly tried to smooth things over.

"For my sister to receive the esteemed Senior's guidance is truly her great fortune. If she faces any difficulties within the sect, or if our family fails to provide sufficient cultivation resources, she is young and shy and may not speak up. I ask that Senior please write to us."

Normally, once a disciple entered a sect, the family's provision of resources was carefully considered; there was no logic in giving too little or too much. But Ziqi Peak was so poor that Ling Yanzi had to fight for his own Foundation Establishment resources. By having her family supply Li Queyi's needs, she could share with her fellow disciples, which would naturally earn her their goodwill.

The suggestion to "write to us" was also a way to offer Ling Yanzi a graceful exit, so he wouldn't lose face by asking a disciple for resources. He could simply request them from the Li family directly. Ling Yanzi understood perfectly and nodded slightly.

"Her senior brothers and sisters are all good people. Queyi will not be wronged on my peak."

Li Xuanxuan walked beside them with his hands behind his back, his earlier joy having completely vanished. Li Zhouluo soon returned to escort Ling Yanzi and Li Queyi to meet her family elders.

When all the arrangements were finally settled, Wen Wu and his contingent prepared to return to their sect. After tearful goodbyes between the two families, Wen Wu walked briskly to Li Xuanxuan's side.

"Venerable Senior, please join me in the hall for a private discussion," he said with a smile.

Li Xuanxuan understood at once. He dismissed his attendants and entered the hall with Wen Wu.

"Venerable Senior," the man began politely, "Daoist Master Zhaojing left a Purple Mansion formation with my master. He was to provide medicinal pills, and in return, she was to come to the lake to set up the formation. But now that the Daoist Master is away, this matter has been delayed…"

"A Purple Mansion formation?!"

The words caught in Li Xuanxuan's throat, and his heart pounded. His grandson had not communicated much with the family since becoming a Daoist Master; he had no idea he had secretly arranged for such a powerful defensive array. The old man's voice trembled with surprised delight.

"The Daoist Master's meaning is…?!"

Wen Wu lowered his voice. "My master inquired about the situation. Seeing that Daoist Master Zhaojing has not returned and knowing this is a critical time, she thought to find an opportunity to come to the lake first and set up the formation for you."

Li Xuanxuan was now truly overcome with a mixture of shock and joy. "My family's Daoist Master… has been gone for so long, he cannot fulfill his promise," he hesitated. "For Daoist Master Tinglan to show such profound generosity, Moongaze Lake… is both deeply grateful and terribly anxious. I do not know how we can accept!"

Whatever deal Li Ximing had struck with Tinglan, the alchemy was surely part of it. For her to offer to set up the formation first was completely unexpected. Li Xuanxuan voiced his disbelief, and Wen Wu replied:

"This matter… has long been on my master's mind. That day, I was with her when she met your Daoist Master. She sighed repeatedly, saying that Changxiao's actions were unexpected and that it was her own miscalculation that she could not help him. Setting up this formation first is her way of making amends."

"My Purple Smoke Blessed Land follows the righteous path; we are not like those who have migrated from overseas. Venerable Senior, please do not worry."

Seeing the old man nod, Wen Wu continued, "There is just one thing I must make clear. My master is currently occupied with an urgent matter. It will take about a year. After that time, the Capital Immortals Dao will have retreated."

With this information, Li Xuanxuan finally felt a sense of security.

"Now that the two young ladies have entered the Blessed Land," Wen Wu went on, "the gate's rules are clear. Since they are women, their entry does not prevent them from continuing your immortal clan's lineage. However, the matter of their marriages will be decided by them and our Blessed Land. They are now people of the Purple Smoke Gate, and we will not permit them to be engaged in arranged alliances."

"That is only natural," Li Xuanxuan's voice was low and hoarse. "Ever since the example set by my own sister, our lake has largely abandoned that practice. Unless it is by mutual consent, I have put a stop to any such notions. Later, when Qinghong and Minggong succeeded in their cultivation, we had their examples to follow, and the clan no longer placed limits based on gender. It is only because the Veiled Yin is not prominent that we naturally have fewer female cultivators, making it seem as if the men are more numerous."

Li Xuanxuan knew that Purple Smoke was a sect led by female cultivators and chose his words with extra care. Wen Wu nodded gently, clearly already aware of this.

"Although the Blessed Land follows ancient customs, most things must still be earned through one's own efforts. The young ladies will inevitably face some hardships. I ask for your understanding."

His words were not directed at anyone else but Li Queyi. The two of them walked out together. The spirit boat was waiting for Wen Wu alone. The deck was silent, with no sign of impatience. Li Queyi stood to one side with Ling Yanzi; since he was familiar with the Li family, her position was even better than on the journey there. Li Quexi, meanwhile, stood at the prow. Her eyes were red, but she was the center of attention, a figure of glory.

As the purple mist drifted away, most of the cultivators left behind looked on with envy. Only Li Zhouluo glanced once before turning back. He followed Li Xuanxuan into the hall, and once they were alone, he frowned.

"Elder, it seems to me that the girl Quexi is a bit too frivolous. Now that she has obtained a Dao lineage, I do not know if it is for better or for worse."

Li Xuanxuan, in his old age, had seen it all quite clearly. But the news of the Purple Mansion formation had put him in a good mood. "It is human nature," he said in his weary voice. "Do not be too harsh. It's not just Quexi. Which of our juniors, having received such favor, wouldn't hold their head a little higher standing on that prow? It's just that she appears a little too eager."

Li Quewan added in a gentle tone, "I think we must treat her well from now on. Regardless of whether she cares for the family, the family must be good to her. Even if she becomes a high-level cultivator of the Purple Smoke Gate, her name will still begin with Li."

The other two nodded in agreement. The old man asked about family affairs.

"All is peaceful," Li Zhouluo reported. "We received news from the Xiao family. The Yushan branch wished to return for a visit, but that area has been unstable recently, and they have been unable to make the trip."

"Qingxiao… tell her to take care of herself."

Seeing they were alone, Li Xuanxuan recounted what Wen Wu had told him. The other two were equally overjoyed. Li Zhouluo paced around the hall twice before whispering, "Another year or two… I wonder if it's because Changxiao has yet to reveal himself… I only hope we can pass this time safely."

Li Quewan offered her thoughts. "Since the Capital Immortals Dao is retreating, the wilderness they vacate should be returned to the Profound Peak Gate. Our family has done all we can in this matter and should not interfere further. In this junior's opinion, we should place them back in their original territory and let them re-establish their sect. Let this matter be concluded. We should not waste any more effort on it."

"Agreed," Li Zhouluo replied. The Profound Peak Gate was endlessly grateful, and the Li family had profited greatly from their decline. But with their own Daoist Master missing, they had grown fearful of further entanglement, regardless of whether Li Ximing's disappearance was intentional or part of some deeper plan.

As the three were talking, a shout came from outside. Li Zhouluo dispelled the privacy formation and frowned. "What is happening?"

The newcomer was Dili Guang. He dropped to the ground in a deep bow, his voice filled with joy.

"My Lord, Elder Lord… Lord Cui has returned to the isle with Protector Ding!"

"Excellent!"

With the return of these two powerful, Foundation Establishment-level combatants, Li Xuanxuan felt a great weight lift from his heart. Li Zhouluo strode forward, beaming.

"Have them come in at once!"

A moment later, the magnificently robed Cui Jueyin entered. Following behind him was a burly man with the jaw of a swallow and the whiskers of a tiger. He was powerfully built, his eyes sharp and imbued with a mysterious power that sent a chill down the spine of anyone who met his gaze.

It was Ding Weizeng.

"Excellent, excellent!"

Li Xuanxuan, hearing one piece of good news after another, descended from the dais. Cui Jueyin immediately bowed his head in a deep salute, while Ding Weizeng moved forward to gently support him.

"With the two of you back," Li Xuanxuan said, "the lake has nothing to fear!"

Ding Weizeng looked slightly awkward, but Cui Jueyin recounted the full story of their experiences. Hearing it, Li Xuanxuan's old eyes grew red. "As long as you returned safely…"

But Ding Weizeng dropped to his knees with a thud. "Reporting to my lord! This subordinate has returned only to make adjustments. Once I have prepared enough pills and resources, I will immediately depart for the Eastern Sea to find the Daoist Master!"

"What?"

Li Xuanxuan was stunned, momentarily thinking the man meant to abandon them for another clan. Cui Jueyin had to explain his intentions. The old man sighed repeatedly, but Ding Weizeng remained kneeling stubbornly.

"Protector Ding," Li Quewan tried to persuade him, "if you go to the Eastern Sea and someone traces you back to the Daoist Master, won't your good intentions backfire?"

Ding Weizeng shook his head gently. "Weizeng is not of the lake's bloodline, so I cannot be easily traced. The Daoist Master would not meet with me. But if I venture determinedly deep into the sea, I can draw the attention of other Purple Mansion cultivators, easing the pressure on him."

Li Quewan was about to say more, but the old man stopped her. Li Xuanxuan stroked his beard. Though he worried for his grandson, he understood that Ding Weizeng's journey to the Eastern Sea would, in all likelihood, stir up immense turmoil. It could not only cost the man his life but also cause untold trouble.

'If Ximing can escape, what need has he of him? If he cannot, what use is he?'

'Judging by the soul lamp, Ximing is not yet at death's door. The Eastern Sea is vast. Where would one even begin to look for him?'

He spoke with a calm voice. "Did the Daoist Master leave any orders for you?"

"He did not…" Ding Weizeng hesitated slightly.

"Since you received no orders," Li Xuanxuan continued, "how can you know he is truly injured? Could it not be that he is feigning injury, hiding in the sea to lure out his enemies? If you rush to the Eastern Sea and ruin the Daoist Master's plan, what crime would that be?"

At these words, understanding dawned on Cui Jueyin's face. Ding Weizeng was shocked speechless. Even Li Zhouluo and Li Quewan stood frozen in place, the hall falling into a sudden, deep silence.

A cold sweat broke out on Ding Weizeng's back. He bowed low, his voice trembling with lingering fear. "Thank you for your guidance, my lord! If not for the Elder Lord's prudence, Weizeng would have made a grave mistake! From now on, this subordinate will focus solely on protecting the lake and await the Daoist Master's return!"

On the Purple Qi Spirit Boat.

The Purple Smoke Gate's spirit boat was quite spacious, its interior much larger than it appeared from the outside. While it couldn't compare to the Azure Pond Sect's world-famous Heavenly Glow Dawn Cloudliner, it was still a luxurious Dharma Artifact of the highest order.

It departed from the lake and soon reached the untamed wilderness. After seeing to the other passengers, Wen Wu returned to the prow, where his new junior sister, Li Quexi, was leaning against the railing, watching the scenery.

Wen Wu clasped his hands behind his back and strolled over. The girl immediately looked up, her smile as innocent as a child's, reminding him of his own daughter. "Eldest Senior Brother!" she chirped.

Wen Wu nodded slightly. "Junior Sister, why aren't you with your sister?"

Li Quexi lowered her voice. "I am not very familiar with my sister. I was only brought to the main isle when I was nine and my talent was deemed sufficient. That was the first time I met her. We only exchanged simple greetings. So many people flocked around her back then; I never joined the crowd. We've barely spoken a few sentences."

Chapter 782: Purple Mansion

When Wen Wu heard this, he leaned one hand on the boat's railing, thinking for a moment before replying.

"Junior Sister, once you are inside the sect, this elder sister of yours is your closest kin. You must remain close with her; having someone looking out for you in the sect, having an extra sister, gives you an extra path in all things."

"You and Queyi won't be returning to Moongaze Lake often, but you must maintain your family relationships. You cannot discard them."

Li Quexi nodded distractedly. Her senior brother smiled and retrieved a pair of talismans from his sleeve. One depicted a tiger, the other a dragon; one shimmered golden, the other shone brilliant white.

He lowered his voice. "These are treasures bestowed upon me when I first paid respects to the Daoist Master. The gold talisman is a treasure of Geng Metal; it can change its form at will and overwhelm other cultivators. The white talisman is a remnant of the Jade True lineage; it can protect the user. While not as mighty as the gold one, it possesses its own divinity."

Seeing that he had her attention, Wen Wu smiled. "You have these artifacts as well."

Li Quexi blinked, confused, as Wen Wu continued:

"The Purple Smoke Sect and Mu Zuo Peak are your gold talisman. They are undeniably powerful. But the Moongaze Immortal Clan is your white talisman, and it, too, has its divine uses. Have you seen me throw away my white talisman just because I acquired the gold one? Even if the white talisman's power doesn't compare to the gold, if you threw it out, tens of thousands of cultivators would fight to the death for it."

"This is obvious when looking at Dharma Artifacts," he said, "but people often lose clarity when it applies to themselves."

The girl fell silent, gripping the hem of her robes as she nodded.

Wen Wu pressed on. "Your surname, 'Li,' and your generation name, 'Que'—those two words alone are the envy of countless others. Even if you feel no emotional attachment, you must perform the etiquette and maintain the relationship perfectly. When you eventually hit a bottleneck in your cultivation, those two words might win you an opportunity. If you fall into mortal danger, those two words might fight for your survival. You never know!"

"Even if you feel you have 'used up' those two words, if Moongaze Lake is ever in crisis and comes to beg you for help, the power will still be in your hands. With the gold talisman backing you, whether those two words become a burden or not… won't that be entirely up to you?"

Li Quexi was only half-understanding, lost in his logic. She mumbled, "Junior Sister doesn't understand these things. I will have to learn from Senior Brother in the future."

Wen Wu placed both hands on the railing. The glow of the Purple Smoke blessed land was slowly appearing on the horizon. The man weighed the two talismans, tucked them back into his robes, and let out a breath, shaking his head.

"Don't learn from me. I've been stationed overseas for so many years, I learned long ago how to be crooked. The Master has reprimanded me several times. You won't learn anything good from me… don't learn from me."

"Besides…" A smile spread across his face, and he let out a laugh. "You're a member of the Li family. An Immortal Clan that clawed its way out of that pit of vipers at Azure Pond. Why would you need to learn from me? It's more likely I should be learning from you."

Li Quexi didn't know how to respond and could only pretend not to hear. After some time, the spirit boat stopped amid the vast purple qi. A group of cultivators came aboard to make arrangements. Wen Wu, without a second glance, disembarked with his hands clasped behind his back.

He rode the wind straight toward the towering jade platform at the very center of the Purple Smoke blessed land. He passed several pavilions, ascending the heights on foot. A female cultivator in white Daoist robes, holding a jade vase, was waiting to the side. On the main seat sat a Daoist Master dressed in robes the color of autumn-yellow satin, currently studying a jade slip.

Wen Wu bowed his head, not daring to meet her gaze, and said respectfully, "Greetings, Daoist Master. Greetings, Master. Wen Wu has returned from the lake. The requested message has been delivered."

Tinglan glanced at him. "How did the Li family respond?"

Wen Wu replied respectfully, "Li Xuanxuan is managing affairs at the lake. The old man agreed to everything, one by one. He seemed genuinely unaware of the matter and appeared pleasantly surprised. After receiving the reply, he saw me off."

"As for the Bright Yang signature," Wen Wu continued, "it was not obvious. The lake has many female cultivators. Although power is concentrated, it is not the tyrannical despotism of the ancient Wei. Not everyone cultivates Bright Yang. On the contrary, their paths are quite complex; most cultivate Jade True, Pit Water, True Fire, and Cold Qi. Even their direct lineage divides their cultivation among various Daos."

Hearing this, the white-robed woman beside them breathed a sigh of relief. Tinglan leaned back against the purple jade throne and smiled.

"Good. I have met Zhaojing, and he doesn't strike me as a Bright Yang cultivator, nor does he have the arrogance of the Wei or that other Li branch. If anything, he resembles the Cui family more. Perhaps his divine ability is analogous to the remnants of the Heavenly Radiance lineage, and he does not walk the path of worldly contention. Li Zhouwei is the same… Although he strongly resembles a White Qilin, he lacks that vicious aura and extreme temper."

The Daoist Master murmured, "Neither is vicious enough. Perhaps this branch intermarried with the Cui Clan and needs not be bothered."

Wen Wu, having bowed, remained silent. Only then did the Peak Lord of Mu Zuo Peak, Qian Lizi, respond:

"This disciple simply cannot see clearly. Capital Immortals Dao has this attitude… acting all harmonious now. Our sect is a Supreme Yang Dao lineage, of the Supreme Yin Immortal attribute, and holds the Purple Qi inheritance. They cannot afford to offend us, so they are naturally respectful. But now they are also weak toward the Li family… This smells of bowing to the powerful after initial arrogance."

Wen Wu kept his head down, but his ears pricked up. Daoist Master Tinglan merely smiled faintly.

"Zhaojing hates Changxiao to the bone. Do you imagine Yehui does not? Even if Yehui could tolerate Zhaojing hating him by association after escaping, he absolutely cannot tolerate removing an enemy *for* Changxiao. He will not let Changxiao seize a great opportunity while he himself is left holding the blame…"

Tinglan paused meaningfully before changing the subject. "Are all of Daoist Master Zhu Gong's subordinates settled?"

Qian Lizi quickly nodded respectfully. "Daoist Master Zhu Gong has already given instructions, and all the cultivators have been arranged nearby. She went to Profound Peak Gate this morning. Daoist Master Yehui must have shown her around, and most matters have been discussed. She just returned… however…"

Tinglan raised an eyebrow. Qian Lizi continued with a look of half-embarrassment and half-disgust:

"Daoist Master Zhu Gong's subordinates are, after all, Eastern Sea cultivators. Those at Foundation Establishment, along with the crowd of Qi Refining disciples below them, have awful tempers. Under the guise of 'scouting the terrain,' they went out pillaging. Raiding the wilderness and Shanji Prefecture is permissible, but a few of them went all the way to the eastern shore of Moongaze Lake… It has made the Moongaze Immortal Clan extremely nervous."

Daoist Master Tinglan seemed to have expected this and dismissed them both.

Moments later, a young girl appearing sixteen or seventeen, dressed in red, materialized on the jade platform, her hands clasped behind her back. Tinglan, who looked seven or eight years her senior, gave a slight bow.

"Sister, you have arrived."

Daoist Master Zhu Gong stepped forward. "Sister, judging by Yehui's attitude, Kong Haiying is dead. This was Zhaojing's plot, disguised as Fu En making a delivery. You said Zhaojing was sincere and magnanimous, a stable personality. I disagree. If another Li Zhouwei shows up, won't they think they own the heavens?"

"He is truly dead…" Tinglan pondered this, then shook her head. "This matter requires deliberation. In any case, since Li Ximing is recovering in the Eastern

Sea and Changxiao is missing, you must give the Li Clan some face. I will handle the Profound Peak matter. Sister, you need only maintain propriety."

"Fine…" Daoist Master Zhu Gong nodded with a smile.

"The Kong Clan has a Kong Qiuyan," Zhu Gong continued. "I happen to have a clan nephew. And that younger one, Kong Xiaxiang… I also have clan members for him to choose from. By showing such grace in their time of crisis and treating the Kong Clan with such ceremony… sending charcoal in a snowstorm is invaluable."

"This is an open and honorable move. The Kong descendants will be indebted to us for generations. Below, it will unify the hearts of Shanji; above, it will help cure these demonic Dao habits of theirs."

The wind atop the jade platform grew stronger. Tinglan poured her tea. With a single sentence, Zhu Gong had arranged the marriages for the entire Kong Clan, and in her unspoken words, the very lives and deaths of several other Kong members seemed faintly visible.

Tinglan offered a reminder, "Mount Jingyi still has Kong Gumo. I hear Xuanyi favors him. You and Xuanyi have always been close; do not go too far."

Zhu Gong hesitated, putting down her tea. "That… is indeed a problem."

Sea's Cape.

Flames surged within the earth's veins. Water and fire clashed violently, sending white steam everywhere. Li Ximing sat cross-legged in the center, flames exiting his nostrils with every breath, spreading outward.

The longer The Sangyu Merging Nine Profundities Art remained in his body, the more ferocious the surrounding black flames became, roasting his physical form until it crackled like stressed glass, covered in minute fissures. Li Ximing still refused to guide the fire into his Juque Palace, which would waste all his previous efforts. He could only intermittently take out the Serpent Origin Spirit Water.

But to his alarm, as the art's flames burned, they gradually developed a resistance to the Serpent Origin Spirit Water. Its effects were diminishing.

'If I weren't an alchemist…' Li Ximing mused, '…with a precise grasp of my own injuries and a deep understanding of fire, this technique would be truly impossible to resolve. The Encompassing Profundity tradition… I must be careful of them in the future.'

He snapped his eyes open. His spiritual sense shot through the earth's surface, faintly hearing a clamor. A particularly effeminate voice stood out:

"You, surname Xia! Is the place right here?"

"Reporting to milord, yes, this is it…"

Excitement finally flared in Li Ximing's heart. 'Good, good, good! This Xia woman is truly useful. She is, after all, just a local cultivator from the ends of the earth, completely without background. How could she possibly recognize complex traps… The Foundation Establishment cultivator brought his entire crew!'

The thrill passed, and he immediately began chanting internally, activating the scouting ability of the Immortal Mirror. He scanned the surrounding Great Void, ensuring not a single Purple Mansion cultivator was lingering nearby before looking up.

He saw a massive swarm of demons—shrimp, snakes, turtles, and crabs, some humanoid, some not—crowding around an effeminate man holding a folding fan and riding a giant turtle. They were slowly approaching from the sky.

The woman, Xia Shouyu, looked wretched. She was suspended in mid-air, both her calves bitten clean off, revealing the stark white ends of her bones. Disheveled and covered in blood, she still had to force a fawning smile onto her face.

Suppressing the urge to fly out, Li Ximing observed the situation. When the effeminate man glanced at the hot spring, the surprise of a Foundation Establishment demon flashed in his eyes.

"You! And you! Get down there and look immediately."

Two lesser demons eagerly dove into the water. Xia Shouyu cried out pitifully, "My lord! If you can break the seal below, I beg you, please spare my life…"

Li Ximing understood the situation. The demon clearly didn't trust the woman's words. She had probably changed her story several times and was

only believed after being tortured to this extent. Hearing her still shouting, he cursed inwardly.

'You reckless fool. I am a Daoist Master… not a True Monarch. Missing limbs are a trivial fix for me, a wave of the hand. But if you die of your injuries right here, all I can do is set up a tombstone for you…'

While Xia Shouyu shrieked above, the two small demons rapidly approached his position. Though Li Ximing had not coordinated with her, his mind moved. He allowed the white skeleton and the storage bag on the ground to become visible again.

Since Li Ximing was fishing, he naturally couldn't let these minions steal the bait. He released a pulse of fire. The two small demons couldn't stand the heat and scrambled back out, yelling, "Great King! It is true, just as the human said!"

The demon leader was instantly ecstatic and scrambled off the giant turtle. He lived at the edge of the world, poorer than dirt, and could count the number of techniques he knew on one hand, let alone possessing any real Dharma Artifacts. Hearing there was likely something good in the flames, he rushed in, not forgetting to "shoo" Xia Shouyu down from the air.

Xia Shouyu's face was ashen. The demon was impatient. "Lead the way, quickly! If you force me to search your soul, you had better worry about your little life!"

'Like hell you can,' Xia Shouyu thought. 'If you were capable of soul-searching, you wouldn't need me.'

She had been terrified of this local demon, who had intentionally leaked some information before. The demon had tried soul-searching on others and killed them, losing the clue. Otherwise, why would she, Xia Shouyu, have needed to risk her own skin?

Now, inside the fire, the effeminate man saw the skeleton and rejoiced, but suspicion remained. He yelled, "You! Go and retrieve it!"

Xia Shouyu cursed him internally. She had no lower legs, the flames here were ferocious, and she couldn't even ride the wind properly. She flew halfway before tumbling to the ground. She lifted her head, staring blankly at the skeleton.

'Old thing, aren't you going to make your move? Don't tell me this old bastard can't even beat this guy!'

Li Ximing clearly read the exasperation in her eyes. The demon was already a turtle in a jar. He was merely observing the demons outside to make sure they hadn't wandered off to eat the local savages. Slightly embarrassed, he stood up, adjusted his posture, and spoke in an eerie, evil-filled laugh:

"Jie jie… Little friend, however did you get yourself into such a state?"

Watching the skeleton rise to its feet, the effeminate man looked as if he had seen a ghost. He frantically tried to activate his Immortal Foundation and pull a talisman from his sleeve, but his vision went white. Fire flashed, heavenly light bore down, and he let out a scream.

"Aiya!"

In an instant, the man dissolved, reverting to his true form: a shimmering blue, segmented sea earthworm. It flopped onto the flames, writhing in agony. He knew instantly he had encountered a truly terrifying existence. His main body, lacking a mouth, pulsed from its abdomen as if an infant were drumming inside, producing insane, muffled cries for mercy:

"This lowly… this base demon did not recognize the Daoist Master's presence… I offended the Daoist Master… Please… please…"

One couldn't blame the demon for being stupid. The circumstances were just too absurd. Even in the near seas, no sect disciple would ever imagine that a mighty Purple Mansion cultivator would be hiding in a cave, waiting for someone to walk into their trap.

Li Ximing didn't even glance at the demon. He lifted the woman and, just as before, blew a breath of air at her.

Shua!

Two pale, tender calves sprouted like green onions. Xia Shouyu stood steady but still hadn't processed what happened. She stammered blankly, "You… you…"

She knew this demon was no match for the skeleton, but this was a Foundation Establishment demon! It was one thing for her, a Qi Refining cultivator, to be as fragile as tofu before him, but this Foundation Establishment expert was weaker than a baby chick—at least grabbing a chick required you to reach out your hand.

'A divine ability… so this is a divine ability…'

The sea worm flopped on the ground like a piece of meat. The exhilarating rush of vengeance vanished from Xia Shouyu, replaced by sheer terror of a being who could incinerate her with a single breath. The woman collapsed to her knees, trembling violently.

"Con… congratulations, Daoist Master!"

Chapter 783: Profound Adamant Essence Gathering

Xia Shouyu collapsed to the ground, kneeling, as the demon general writhed on the cave floor, screaming hoarsely.

"Daoist Master… Daoist Master, spare me…"

Li Ximing found him noisy. With a mere thought, the sound was muffled, sealed away from his senses. He smiled at the woman.

"Little Friend Xia, you chose well. This fellow is undoubtedly of the Valley Water attribute. Does he have any significant background? Any powerful friends or relatives? I would rather not make too large a disturbance and attract outside attention."

Xia Shouyu understood the implied meaning immediately. This old monster wanted to lie low and heal. Old monsters like this often had enemies, most likely powerful champions of the orthodox path. If she caused trouble that drew them here, she would be crushed like a bedbug.

She nodded repeatedly. "Daoist Master! This creature is just a demon general of Sea's Cape known as King Qiu. This area is simply too remote; even the Dragon-kin of the Admirable Sea never venture here. His only connections are with the few other Foundation Establishment demons that have passed through over the years and some local small-fry. Even if this whole group died, it's unlikely anyone would notice…"

Li Ximing didn't fully trust the words of a mere Qi Refining cultivator.

'This lesser demon has some brains,' he thought. 'Although he didn't march here with drums and banners, he still brought his trusted subordinates. If they all die here together, it will certainly draw unwanted gazes. It is better to keep the ripples small.'

Seeing his silence, Xia Shouyu feared he was hatching some scheme and would use her as his vanguard. Hoping he would choose discretion, she quickly added in a low voice:

"This demon is manageable. But I have heard that if you travel due west from here, across the sea, you reach the Peacock Sea. Within that sea is Nine Mounds Mountain. A great power with divine abilities resides on that mountain, one whose might is infinite, capable of making the dead speak and the living ascend. An emissary from that mountain came to Sea's Cape over sixty years ago to accept disciples… so they are clearly still paying attention."

"Oh?"

Li Ximing deduced this must be a Purple Mansion cultivator, the closest one to this edge of Sea's Cape. "What is his name?" he murmured. "What does he cultivate? What else is he known for?"

Xia Shouyu quickly kowtowed. "This lowly one does not know! I only hear that a great power often travels to and from that immortal mountain. That great power possesses a gourd. More than a decade ago, a golden talisman lit up the sky above Sea's Cape, and shimmering light rained down like gauze. A gourd the size of a mountain appeared. It must have been him sparring with another great power."

Li Ximing had never heard of any expert with a gourd, but he noted the location warily. He waved his hand for Xia Shouyu to stop, then looked down at the sea earthworm.

"You monster. You just had to run straight into my hands. Who do you truly serve?"

The demon general wailed, "My lord! I am from the Zhu South Mansion Water! Daoist Master! I offended you unintentionally, please, on behalf of the Mansion Water… spare this lowly demon's life!"

As the demon shouted, he untied the storage bag from his waist and dumped everything out. A flashy, pathetic pile of junk spilled out, pathetically poor and sparse, mostly items corrupted with blood-qi. The worthlessness of the hoard was breathtaking; he was poorer than a standard Qi Refining disciple from a major Jiangnan sect.

Trembling, he plucked a single jade bottle from the mess and offered it up miserably. "This is something this lowly one acquired by chance. I offer it to the Daoist Master!"

"Haha!"

Li Ximing glanced at it. It was an ancient-method pill; there was no telling if it was even still effective. He found the situation laughable. He had intended to listen to the demon's pleading and see if he could be utilized, but he couldn't be bothered with such a clumsy lie. He lifted the lump of flesh, slightly relaxed the pressure of his divine ability to allow the demon to regain its humanoid form, and snapped:

"Utter nonsense! The Zhu South Mansion Water is far south of the Vermillion Sea. This is the Eastern Sea's Cape! It would take you a year and a half just to fly here from there, and you dare feed me this garbage!"

Li Ximing's own Zongquan Island was near the Zhu South Mansion Water; he knew the region far better than this demon. The effeminate man broke out in a cold sweat, trembling.

"Reporting to my lord! This lowly demon… once served under Lord Yun Shaozi in the Mansion Water. Later, I left to seek my fortune and eventually ended up here at Sea's Cape…"

"Enough!" Li Ximing cut him off, a mocking smile playing on his lips. "Call your subordinates down. Tell them you need to study this formation in detail and are dismissing them. Have them return to your mansion to stand guard. Leave two behind to watch this island, and let no one know you are here."

A thousand calculations and ten thousand schemes might have raced through the demon's mind, knowing his death was imminent, but he was completely powerless. Even if he wanted to furrow his brow or mouth a silent warning to his men, faced with a divine ability, he could not manage a single superfluous expression.

He could only meekly give the orders to the demons waiting above. Li Ximing, augmented by the Immortal Mirror and supervised by his divine ability, watched everything clearly. The demon general was unable to cause the slightest disturbance. The crowd of demons, suspecting nothing, departed together.

Using the Immortal Mirror to scan them from afar and confirming the group showed no abnormalities, Li Ximing returned to the cave. He retrieved a pitch-black alchemy cauldron from his storage bag. It landed with a thud. It was covered in complex patterns of ocean waves and fierce beasts, standing firmly on three legs.

The River-Center Cauldron.

In truth, now that Li Ximing had advanced to the Purple Mansion Realm, a cauldron was no longer essential for his alchemy. This was especially true for the River-Center Cauldron, which wasn't even a Foundation Establishment artifact. But this was a life-saving pill he was refining; he had to be exceptionally cautious.

The demon's face was ashen. In an instant, he reverted to his true form. Li Ximing lifted the carcass, commenting idly, "Yun Shaozi, really? That old cloud-octopus has been dead for years!"

The gap in information between a Jiangnan Purple Mansion cultivator and a Sea's Cape Foundation Establishment demon was simply too vast. What this demon general considered his most secret information was nothing but a joke to Li Ximing. As he inspected the carcass, he saw its dharma power churning violently, emitting pinpricks of gray qi. Li Ximing couldn't help but click his tongue.

'Such fine Valley Water potential, yet he failed to nurture it properly. He stuffed his cultivation with this much blood sacrifice.'

He pondered for a moment, adjusting his plan. He set aside the Serpent Origin Spirit Water he originally intended to use, replacing it with the Malevolent Earth Coldspring and adding Clear Dusk Spirit Flower to neutralize the immense demonic qi in the body. Most of the Li family's valuable spirit items were on his person, so he quickly assembled the ingredients.

He opened the cauldron and began refining. Purple fire raged, casting his silhouette onto the stone wall, the shadow leaping and dancing. Xia Shouyu, still kneeling, grew increasingly uneasy. Her eyelids twitched, uncertain of the magnitude of the evil she had just facilitated.

'How long will this old monster refine this pill… If he buries his head in alchemy for ten or twenty years, I'll miss my chance… I'll be trapped in this place until I die.'

She knelt in the bright firelight for two full days and nights. Then, the flames unexpectedly began to recede. Xia Shouyu was astounded. She suddenly saw the old monster slap the cauldron lid.

"Rise!"

Instantly, a clear, pure fragrance permeated the cave. Xia Shouyu felt she had never smelled anything so wonderful. The rich medicinal aroma flooded her senses, rushing to her mind until she felt ecstatic, unsure of where she even was. Then she heard a dull *thud*.

Bang!

The cauldron lid flew high. A string of seven pills shot out, each one a blue-white orb etched with luminous purple patterns. They fell, one by one, obediently into Li Ximing's palm, chiming against each other with the crisp sound of glass.

"Success!"

A sudden joy surged in Li Ximing. Seeing seven pills, he couldn't help but laugh aloud. With a flick of his finger, all seven pills rolled neatly into a jade bottle.

'A joyous surprise!'

What Li Ximing had just refined was not based on some long-existing recipe. He had used the Profound Adamant Heart-Sutra Pill as a foundation, combined it with the profound Valley Water spirit pill method he had read about in the Purple Smoke sect—Heavenly Oneness Essence Extraction—and tailored it perfectly to his own injuries. To refine seven pills in a single attempt was proof that his Alchemy Dao had already leaped beyond the bounds of the Xiao Clan lineage. He could truly be called a Purple Mansion Alchemist.

"Good… Based on the Profound Adamant (Xuánquè) refining method and gathering essence (Yùncuì) using the Heavenly Oneness technique… I will call it the Profound Adamant Essence Gathering Pill!"

He roared with laughter, terrifying Xia Shouyu, who immediately began kowtowing like a pestle pounding garlic. "Congratulations, Daoist Master, on the creation of this divine medicine! Congratulations, Daoist Master, on taking another step forward!…"

Li Ximing found her praise bizarre and somewhat inauspicious. He stopped laughing. Without giving the woman another glance, he silently retrieved one

pill. The purple patterns on its surface were still glowing faintly, exquisitely beautiful.

The moment the pill entered his stomach, pure Valley Water power began to circulate. Under Li Ximing's guidance, it surged entirely toward his Juque Palace. The Juque Palace, acting as the "Valley", allowed the pill's nurturing, latent power to disperse instantly, bringing a cooling sensation throughout the palace.

At once, the rushing gray water of the curse rose from within the Juque Palace, surrounding the technique-fire. Li Ximing seized the opportunity to suppress the external flames on his body. The Sangyu Merging Nine Profundities Art resonated inside and out, and the internal black fire immediately flared.

He sat cross-legged. The technique-fire that had been burning relentlessly on his Dharma body for so long was finally extinguished, transferred completely back into the Juque Palace. There, it was immediately suppressed by the Profound Adamant Essence Gathering Pill, unable to spread.

Witnessing this, Li Ximing finally let out a long, heavy breath. When he slowly opened his eyes, the colorful light of a divine ability flashed within them. He exhaled slowly.

"Finally suppressed!"

The pill worked. This meant Li Ximing no longer had to walk around wreathed in flames; he could finally move freely. The Profound Adamant Essence Gathering Pill was still slowly consuming the fire within his Juque Palace. While one pill wouldn't last forever, Li Ximing had six more. They could support him for a year, perhaps a year and a half. He might not even need to refine subsequent pills; the technique-fire might be completely extinguished by the combined efforts of his divine ability and the pills alone.

BOOM!

With the flames gone, the cave became vast and pitch-black. The black water vein on the ground was still erupting with a violent roar, and the spring water from the surface above began to pour back in, mingling green and black in a dazzling, chaotic display.

Li Ximing grabbed Xia Shouyu and flew out of the cave. The lake's temperature had already dropped. The vibrant green of Pristine Water rapidly faded to the black of Mansion Water water.

The two lesser demons were still standing guard dumbly by the lakeside. Li Ximing knew these two certainly captured humans to satisfy their cravings on normal days. He swept his gaze over them, and both demons' heads fell to the ground. He tossed Xia Shouyu down.

"Collect their things. And move the people off this island."

Xia Shouyu was confused. Now that this devil was out of seclusion, eating everyone on the island—human and demon alike—would require less effort than speaking a sentence. She could only obey, packing up the two demons' remains, and said respectfully, "There are so many savages… I cannot move them alone… I must return and ask for help to transport them."

Li Ximing himself was poor and didn't even own a spirit boat. He waved his sleeve dismissively. "Fine, then! Forget it. Just lead the way…"

'Lead the way where… where else could we go… Naturally, to my lineage's home, Qingxu Temple…'

Xia Shouyu's heart hammered with anxiety. She glanced up and realized the old monster had grown facial features. His glabella shone with heavenly light, like a true immortal. His face was balanced and proper, his eyebrows smooth, but his eyes were a pale, unsettling gold.

What could she say? She was the one who had released this terrifying master of divine abilities. Was there a second path for her to walk now? She silently began to lead the way, her expression a mask of terror she couldn't control.

Li Ximing, however, felt refreshed and invigorated. Standing in the wind, the sea breeze had never felt so crisp. He took out the jade bottle the demon had given him.

Li Ximing studied it for a moment, his resolve hardening.

'I will absolutely not return to Jiangnan until this injury is healed! This Sea's Cape has a truly ancient feel. I will wander a bit and find a way to get news from home.'

Li Ximing possessed the Immortal Mirror. In a desolate place like Sea's Cape—where in some areas the Great Void didn't even exist—he feared no one. If Changxiao dared to chase him here, the Immortal Mirror would deal with him in a single exchange. His confidence was absolute.

As for the pill in his hand, it was worthless. However, the refinement technique was ancient, seemingly involving the gathering of the essence of heaven, earth, sun, and moon. Li Ximing saw this clearly and felt a stir of interest.

'The refinement method for this… I wonder if it still exists at Sea's Cape. If I could obtain a recipe for refining lunar essence into pills, that would be an infinite, endless supply of resources…'

A method for refining lunar essence into pills would, of course, require more than just moonlight. But Li Ximing considered himself a Purple Mansion Alchemist now. With such a recipe in hand, he could devise countless modifications. Even just using lunar essence to replace one or two key spirit items in other recipes would be an enormous gain.

Xia Shouyu did not dare to delay. After flying over the sea for some time, a peak rose from the ocean surface, crowned by a large complex of temples. Li Ximing raised an eyebrow and murmured, "Oh? A temple?"

Xia Shouyu felt a chill shoot straight to her brain. This man was clearly a great demon; he most likely despised Buddhists. Fearing a misunderstanding, she rushed to explain:

"Reporting to Daoist Master! My lineage is Qingxu Temple! We once worshiped a great divine power known as Xu Xiang, hence the temple… We are not related to the Modern Buddhists or the Ancient Buddhists! Please, my lord, see clearly!"

'Comprehending Profundity's Xu Xiang!'

Li Ximing was familiar with the name. Sumian's profound Dao lineage revered Xu Xiang of Comprehending Profundity as its patriarch. He nodded slightly.

"Ah, the lineage of the True Monarch of Treasured Earth. Rare indeed."

Xia Shouyu clearly had not expected Li Ximing to recognize the name. Her heart skipped a beat as she mentally filed away the title 'True Monarch of Treasured Earth.'

The demon-like master raised an eyebrow.

"You also know of Ancient and Modern Buddhists?"

Xia Shouyu said respectfully, "Reporting to Daoist Master, there are Ancient Buddhist lineages at Sea's Cape, but few Modern Buddhists stop here. Most of

the lineages at Sea's Cape are temples, but they worship ancient great powers, not many actual Buddhist figures."

Li Ximing nodded at her words, a strange look in his eyes. He wondered if that flock of grasping Buddhists disdained coming here, or if they *could not* come here. He smiled.

"The Modern Buddhists are mostly shameless cowards who bully the weak and fear the strong. Since you all worship an Immortal Dao True Monarch, I suppose they don't dare to go too far."

He stood in the clouds, looking down at the layout below with keen interest. Xia Shouyu waited respectfully by his side, watching as the cultivator smiled.

"Shouldn't you go down first and prepare everyone? If I descend from the sky just like this, I'll frighten everyone in your lineage unconscious. That probably wouldn't be a good thing."

Chapter 784: Qingxu

As soon as Li Ximing finished speaking, Xia Shouyu nodded eagerly and ducked back into the temple. Li Ximing, meanwhile, rose on the wind, concealed his figure, and began a wide circuit of the island.

The island itself was unremarkable. While its spiritual energy might be considered exceptional here at the Sea's Cape, in Jiangnan it would only rival their ancestral lands at Mount Lijing. The earth vein was substantial, but the land was barren, completely lacking mineral deposits; it possessed neither a fire vein nor a water vein.

'No wonder Xia Shouyu is considered an accomplished cultivator in this place, yet her robes are still a patched-together mess.'

A barren, spirit-dead mountain dominated the center of the island, much like the Western Mountains back at the lake. It was a place where one couldn't even find purchase in the Great Void—a sheer mass of inert earth and stone occupying the terrain. Someone had dug two small caves into it. It seemed the monks of Qingxu Temple were engaged in a generational effort to move the mountain, planning to excavate it entirely.

The temple compound held no surprises. Arrays were pitifully scarce; their poverty was appalling. Only the highest shrine held anything of note: a Daoist statue sculpted from a spiritual item of Treasured Earth, a 'Wondrous Life Stone.' Judging by the aura, it was indeed meant to be Xu Xiang of the Profound Wonder Temple, though the craftsmanship was even cruder than the statue there. This version was standing, not riding his customary donkey.

Having completed his survey, Li Ximing had a clear picture.

'True Monarch Xu Xiang belongs to the Comprehending Profundity. If the Profound Wonder Temple was founded upon receiving a direct branch of Xu Xiang's legacy, then this Qingxu Temple was, at best, established by some tangential disciple who barely grazed the true teaching. It is far too crude.'

He returned, treading on light, to the space above the temple, just as an urgent bell began tolling, its clangor echoing across the entire island. A flood of monks in yellow robes, their feet in white bindings and black shoes, came rushing up the mountain path, covering the slopes like a yellow cloud. They lined both sides of the path, gradually filling the space with kneeling figures. The yellow-robed monks pushed and shoved; several weaker ones tumbled from the narrow edge, falling down the slope and striking their heads, drawing blood. Still, those behind them continued to press forward, fighting for a place to kneel. Above them, several Qi Refining cultivators zipped through the air, shouting stern reprimands at the chaotic crowd.

Li Ximing swept his gaze over the scene below. Everything was arranged—a sea of bowed yellow robes and heads of all sizes. Xia Shouyu emerged supporting an old man dressed in simple hemp robes, followed closely by two other middle-aged men. The group knelt before the temple entrance, their voices rising in unison: "We humbly welcome the Daoist Master! This small temple at the Sea's Cape is overwhelmed by your presence and eternally grateful!"

The old man's voice drifted through the air. The sheer scale of the reception was excessive, forcing a frown from Li Ximing. He immediately descended as a beam of light, materializing before the four of them.

The sudden appearance of the white-and-gold-robed Daoist Master made the old man shudder, and he pressed his forehead firmly to the ground. Even seeing this, he struggled to believe it. 'Why would a master of such profound power visit the Sea's Cape? Could it be a Foundation Establishment cultivator in disguise?'

But whether Foundation Establishment or Purple Mansion, Qingxu Temple could afford to offend neither. The old man kept his head bowed. Li Ximing had no intention of bullying a mere Qi Refining cultivator. "What is all this ceremony for? Dismiss them. Just lead me inside."

Xia Shouyu immediately took the lead. The temple's interior paths were narrow corridors carved from the rock, supported by numerous wooden beams. No sunlight penetrated this deep; only the steady glow of dharma lamps kept the passages from true darkness. The old Temple Master hurried to catch up, his voice still trembling. "Daoist Master…"

Li Ximing waved him off. "Which lineage is this? Where does it trace back to?"

The old man and Xia Shouyu exchanged a glance. Drawing on fragmented memories from ancient texts, the old man, Xia Sui, hurried to explain. "Reporting to the Daoist Master! This lowly one is Xia Sui, the unworthy master of Qingxu Temple. Our lineage originates from the Shu region. We were once subordinates of the Xumi Palace. After an upheaval within the palace, it fractured: Qingxu fled east, Qingkong fled south, and Qingzhen fled north. The three temples scattered, eventually settling by the Ju Sea.

"Later, the world changed, as did the ancient rules of Dragon-kin 'sea-herding.' The Ju Sea was seized by Daoist Master Caichi, who renamed it the Peacock Sea. His oppression grew heavier, forcing our ancestors to flee again, finally settling here at the Sea's Cape."

This 'sea-herding' they spoke of was indeed an ancient matter. Once, all seas were the domain of Dragon-kin. Beyond the major oceans like the Converging Heaven Sea and the Vermillion Sea, countless smaller seas existed. Various dragon clans received fiefdoms within these waters, taking turns overseeing the different oceans in a practice known as 'sea-herding.' Today, the Dragon-kin are largely reduced to the Eastern Sea and their numbers have dwindled, but other seas, like the Admirable Sea and the Crimson Reef Sea, are still ruled by dragons bearing the title of Dragon King. Their territories have simply become fixed and hereditary, and the term 'sea-herding' has fallen from common use.

" 'Such an ancient origin… surviving has not been easy for you. Qingkong Temple…' "

Li Ximing recognized the name; it was familiar. There had been a minor sect by that name back in the Wu state, a place where Elder White Ape had once concocted medicines. He wondered if it was the same branch. That sect, however, had been annihilated during the demonic calamity.

"Qingkong Temple was destroyed decades ago," he said softly. "The north, furthermore, is the territory of Buddhist cultivators. It is likely that of the old Xumi Palace, your lineage is the only one left. Treasure what you have."

Seeing his knowledgeable demeanor, the old Temple Master Xia found himself mostly convinced. Yet, the man before him was a fiend of immense power, and the words of such beings could rarely be trusted. He could only nod meekly in agreement, offering no real response.

Li Ximing smiled. "Come, show me around."

The two hurried to lead the way, but Li Ximing walked faster, moving as if he knew the temple better than they did. He proceeded directly to a small pavilion. The two middle-aged men behind them lowered their heads and exchanged a nervous glance. Xia Shouyu nearly tripped over herself scrambling to keep up, rushing ahead to open the door for him.

As the pavilion door swung open, the meager collection of scrolls and sutras stored within was revealed. Li Ximing did not step inside, but smiled. "I have heard that the Sea's Cape preserves many unique alchemy techniques, most derived from ancient paths, though they say few are usable today. I happen to be an alchemist. Might I be permitted to study them?"

Xia Shouyu's heart seized in terror. 'Does he even need to ask? I already know he's an alchemist… He refined that Great King with nothing but a breath!'

She scrambled to retrieve the few alchemy manuals they possessed, clutching the pile tightly as she offered them respectfully. "The Sea's Cape is remote, and our alchemy Dao is withered. Our lineage possesses no usable recipes… These are all relics from antiquity. With our meager cultivation, we have long been unable to make use of them."

'Truly destitute,' Li Ximing realized. Qingxu Temple didn't have a single functional alchemy recipe. The massive pile Xia Shouyu held was just a collection of ancient, defunct formulas used to pad their archives. He took them and flipped through a few, finding them filled with nonsensical concoctions fabricated by later generations.

"…"

He paused, silent for a moment, then said in a low voice, "Your Qingxu Temple will collect ancient recipes from the surrounding areas for me. If any formula seems suspicious or unique, acquire it."

"Yes…" Xia Shouyu agreed immediately, but the old Temple Master, who had not witnessed the events in the cave, hesitated at the implied cost.

Li Ximing simply turned and walked away. Xia Shouyu hurried after him, only to feel a sudden weight drop into her sleeve. Several jade vials had appeared.

"Consume these resources," Li Ximing's voice transmitted to her. "Polish your cultivation to its peak as quickly as possible, so that you may consume an Essence Gathering Pill."

Joy flashed in Xia Shouyu's heart. She saw that the old Temple Master and the two middle-aged men were oblivious. She nodded silently. When they returned to the main courtyard gate, the group stood respectfully by his side.

The Daoist Master turned back to them, the Profound Light between his brows flashing. He smiled. "You must understand, that pill was of great use to me. You rendered significant aid both before and during the process, and you were badly injured. Allow me to offer you a reward."

Xia Shouyu and the old Temple Master were overjoyed at his words, but the woman immediately dropped to her knees. "To have aided the Daoist Master and witnessed the birth of an immortal pill is this lowly one's greatest fortune! How could I dare ask for repayment?"

Li Ximing ignored her protests. With a gentle shake of his gold-and-white sleeve, he issued his command: "Instruct everyone in the temple. Order them all to remain within the temple grounds. For the next seven *shichen*, they are to burn incense and chant sutras. No one is to leave the temple. There will be no cooking or lighting of fires, no riding the wind or striking bells, no gathering or refining of Qi, and no use of any gold or silver implements."

(TŁNote: Shichen converts to "Two Hours)

Though Xia Shouyu did not understand the decree, she immediately sent the two middle-aged men to relay the orders. The men were clearly unaccustomed to taking commands from her, their expressions showing anger they dared not voice. Li Ximing noted this, then pointed at her. "You, and the old Temple Master," he said softly. "The two of you will remain here, in this courtyard. Do not leave."

Xia Shouyu and the old Temple Master exchanged a look and agreed. The Daoist Master in white-gold robes had already vanished.

A creeping dread settled over the two as they sat down in the courtyard, facing each other in silence. After one *shichen* passed, a frigid wind began to howl, whistling through the cracks in the courtyard gate. The cold was bone-piercing. A while later, the ground beneath them began to tremble violently, as if an eruption of malevolent qi was surging from below. Xia Shouyu's vision blurred black and gray as dust and debris rained down from the roof beams.

"Aiyooo!" The old Temple Master, barely a Qi Refining cultivator, lost his footing completely. He rolled on the ground, wailing in despair. "It's over! Fiends

are man-eaters by nature! How could we trust his words! He must have been injured before and couldn't act, and now he's going to devour the entire temple! We invited this doom upon ourselves!

"I heard people on the next island say that masters of great divine ability have entire worlds inside their stomachs… All this commotion… if he isn't moving us into his belly, what else could it be? Aiyooo… we're going to spend eternity living in the dark inside his guts!"

Although Xia Shouyu was equally terrified, she clung to the memory of him sparing the islanders. She forced a shaky smile. "Great-Grandfather, what nonsense are you sprouting? The Daoist Master commands the Profound Light; his stomach must surely be brightly lit. At least we'll save money on lamps…"

A short time later, they heard the sounds of shadows moving outside and a chorus of terrified screams. The two were horrified and clung to each other, weeping, but they still dared not leave the courtyard. They waited until the sky began to lighten at dawn, only then did they hear ecstatic shouts from beyond the gate.

"Temple Master! Madam! You must come out! Quickly!"

The voices were brimming with joy. 'The environment inside his stomach must be quite pleasant,' Xia Shouyu thought wryly.

The two finally opened the gate. They were met by bright daylight and two yellow-robed monks kneeling before them. Their robes were covered in dust, but their faces were masks of ecstatic shock. "Madam!" one cried out. "The mountain! It's gone!"

"What?"

Xia Shouyu and the old Temple Master froze in unison. Exchanging a look of disbelief, they both rose on the wind.

It was true. The spirit-dead, barren mountain was completely gone. The massive peak that had dominated the island and blocked their view had vanished, replaced by a vast, open plain stretching as far as the eye could see. Shrouded in the morning mist, the new expanse of flat land measured thousands of acres.

With a bubbling rush, clear spring water erupted from the new ground. The old Temple Master's legs gave out, and he collapsed onto the fresh earth. A moment later, he scrambled back up, ran to the spring, and grabbed a handful of dark

soil, bursting into tears. "It's good… it's good… From now on, we don't have to dig the mountain…"

Xia Shouyu wiped away her own tears, the memory of the screams returning. She turned to the two monks. "Why did we hear screaming during the night?"

One hurried to answer. "In the middle of the night, the malevolent qi was overwhelming. Some of the bolder disciples disobeyed orders and went out to look. A few were burned in the eyes by the Qi, and several had their legs broken by falling rocks. There was also one idiot who lit a fire in private to smoke some leaves; a stray spark ignited something, and the blast took off his hand…"

"Haha." Xia Shouyu let out a cold laugh. "Serves the idiots right. A whole vine of lazy, idle fools. It's fortunate they didn't jeopardize the Daoist Master's work, otherwise beating them to death would have been too lenient!"

The old Temple Master was still kneeling on the new earth, completely mesmerized. Xia Shouyu had to shake his shoulder forcefully. "Great-Grandfather! The ancient recipes! The alchemy recipes! We must send people immediately! We cannot delay!"

This finally snapped the old man out of his stupor. He nodded frantically, his voice trembling with residual fear and newfound awe. "Men! Everyone, assemble!"

When the remaining monks had gathered, the old Temple Master dispatched them all with frantic orders. Afterward, he stood in the main hall, wringing his hands and muttering to Xia Shouyu, "I have heard that Foundation Establishment lineages possess mountain-moving arts. But even those require complex arrays, rituals, and months of effort! Who has ever heard of leveling an entire mountain in just seven *shichen*? This is a master of great divine ability, without question! He must be one of the figures from Nine Mounds Mountain! If we serve him well… this is an opportunity most people could never dream of!"

Xia Shouyu already knew the 'old fiend' was terrifyingly strong, but she hadn't realized he was capable of *this*. She lifted her chin, a touch of pride in her expression. But she was keenly aware of the Foundation Establishment path Li Ximing had promised her. She kept this guardedly to herself.

'He also promised an Essence Gathering Pill… I cannot let the old man know about that. There are too many fawning men in this temple. I manage every-

thing for you fools day and night. I let you skim resources here and there, but this supreme opportunity? I will not let any of you steal it from me.'

Meanwhile, Li Ximing toured the surrounding sea. Treading on light just beneath the waves, he found the seabed was relatively shallow. Sunlight pierced the depths, illuminating the water in a clear azure hue—the distinct color of Converging Water.

He searched the area. It was just as impoverished as the island, holding nothing but coral and white sand. He eventually located one undersea cave with a trace of spiritual energy, but the demon beast dwelling within—having had nothing substantial to hunt—was surprisingly full of clear spiritual qi. He waved his hand and chased it away.

Relying on his current cultivation base and the power of the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger, his ability to move mountains—while perhaps not equal to Changxi's Bound Earth divine abilities—was certainly not lacking. Furthermore, the barren peak had been spirit-dead, unconnected to any water or spirit veins and only loosely tied to the main earth vein. It was little more than a pile of inert rock sitting on the land, making its removal exceptionally easy.

'Everyone in Qingxu Temple has average talent at best… only Xia Shouyu is outstanding. She's usable. Her background is clean—dirt poor—and she knows how to act…'

To earn a rating of 'outstanding' from Li Ximing, her innate talent was naturally excellent. One had to understand that in a desolate place like the Sea's Cape, resources were pitiful. Even as a high-ranking member of the temple, her access to resources was incomparable to cultivators within the inner seas. To reach the late stage of Qi Refining here, relying on almost nothing, was a genuinely difficult achievement.

Since he had promised her the path to Foundation Establishment, he intended to follow through. If she succeeded, she would gain the ability to cross the seas to major lands like Hetian or Vermillion Sea. She certainly wouldn't remain at the Sea's Cape. Why would he waste an Essence Gathering Pill otherwise? Of course, the plan was to bring her back to the lake for his own use.

He already had a role planned for Xia Shouyu. Taking out an array disk, he casually set up a perimeter array within the empty undersea cave. He retrieved the Profound Adamant Essence Gathering Pill.

'While I wait for them to collect the recipes, I can continue suppressing the flame, repairing my dharma body, and finding ways to gather intelligence… There is no hurry to return. The Sea's Cape is infinitely safer than Jiangnan right now.'

Li Ximing suddenly understood why Xiao Chuting spent so much time running off to the Northern Sea. That Daoist Master was partly plotting his own advancement, but he was also using the isolation to avoid countless overt and subtle probes back home.

With that thought, Li Ximing cleared his mind and entered seclusion.

Chapter 785: Two Letters

Pingya Island.

Li Zhouluo, dressed in black robes, was hunched over his desk, brush in hand. The lamps in the hall cast a dim, waning light. Dili Guang stood below the dais, silent as a statue.

An old man was ascending the steps, his back held ramrod straight. His features were proper, but his cheeks were gaunt, making him appear exceptionally frail. His expression was heavy, and the dark, forbidding sword at his waist inspired a natural sense of awe.

Li Zhouluo raised an eyebrow in surprise. Seeing the man arrive before the dais, he quickly set down his brush and rose.

"Elder Donghe," he said in a low voice. "Why did you come without sending word? We have troubled you to make this trip."

Chen Donghe had aged rapidly in recent years, growing thin and ever more silent, becoming a shadow of his former self. His skin seemed draped over his bones. He stood in the hall, completed his salutations, and spoke, his voice hoarse. "This old man is advanced in years. I am rigid and obsolete, and I dare not speak much in the hall. I merely came to see the Clan Head."

Li Zhouluo rarely wore the formal robes of the Clan Head, reserving them only for the most official occasions. He would only retrieve and wear that particular robe when he absolutely had to; the times he had worn it in recent years could be counted on one hand. His daily attire was, as always, his preferred black robes.

Chen Donghe's gaze swept over him just once, taking in the precise style of those black robes.

Li Yuanjiao.

The last person in the clan who had habitually worn black robes was Li Yuanjiao, the man to whom Li Tongya had entrusted everything just before his death. He

was also the man the Fourth Branch considered its founding patriarch, the one who had finally held the branch together. Although Li Yuanjiao also carried the status of having been adopted from the First Branch, he was, at that time, considered a member of the Fourth Branch.

'This young Clan Head before me,' Chen Donghe mused, 'is likely using this attire to declare his own legitimacy, to express his intent to emulate and learn from the past. As for how much ability he truly possesses… he likely cannot be compared to Li Yuanjiao.'

Just as Chen Donghe finished his assessment, Li Zhouluo spoke with a smile. "Elder Donghe is too humble. The clan is in dire need of capable hands. Chen Yang has repeatedly earned merits on the eastern shore, repelling the demonic cultivators several times. He even turned a retreat into an advance and nearly captured one of them alive. We must congratulate you, Elder."

"The congratulations belong to Moongaze Lake," the old man replied flatly, then asked, "I have heard in the last two days that Fei Chingyi of the Fei family intends to break through to Foundation Establishment. He has come to the main hall to pay respects, hoping to acquire an Essence Gathering Pill. Is this true?"

This was a headache for Li Zhouluo, and the rumors had indeed been swirling wildly. It was true. He nodded. "Correct. Every vassal family has its eyes on this pill. He is currently staying in the side hall, waiting to see me."

Chen Donghe's prestige within the clan was immense. For several years now, he had not held any practical positions of power, nor did he often see people. If this news hadn't caused such a commotion, it never would have disturbed him. Yet, the old man did not press for details about the Fei family. Instead, he said, "I hear… that we are short-handed on the lake. Now that Fei Chingyi is preparing for seclusion, I find I cannot sit still. I have hurried here to see if the lake has any task for me."

Li Zhouluo was instantly overjoyed. The position overseeing Mount Qingdu was, after all, still vacant, and they lacked a suitable candidate. With Jiangxia having returned to the eastern shore, Chen Donghe, with his high prestige, was the perfect choice to reassure everyone.

"The Elder's righteousness is profound," Li Zhouluo said. "I will entrust the affairs of Mount Qingdu to you. I shall draft the documents immediately. We are troubling you, senior!"

Chen Donghe closed his eyes briefly and bowed respectfully before departing.

The stewardship of Mount Qingdu was a thankless job, one guaranteed to offend people. Chen Donghe's willingness to support him solved an urgent crisis for Li Zhouluo.

'I fear the Old Ancestor himself had to personally persuade him to come and help me… *Sigh*.'

Li Zhouluo had no time to dwell on it; the matter of the Fei family still demanded his full attention. He picked up a letter from his desk. It was from the Pavilion Master of the Azure Pond's Heaven-Probing Pavilion—his own grandfather, Li Xizhi.

The letter mentioned many people, filled with heartfelt care. It also mentioned that Li Xizhi himself had gone to the Southern Sea to suppress demonic cultivators and could not return home often, but he had some news to pass along as a reminder.

"Fei Qingyi… within the sect, she has grown gradually closer to Peak Master Qin Xian of Siyao Peak. It seems they intend to finalize a betrothal soon…"

Although Fei Qingyi appeared to stand aloof from worldly affairs, she was no simple character. Several days ago, she had sought out Li Xizhi, stating that both her parents were deceased and she had no elders left in her family. She hoped Li Xizhi might act as her senior elder to accept Qin Xian's marriage proposal. Her words had been utterly sincere.

In his letter, Li Xizhi had specifically noted that this Qin Xian was a trusted confidant of Tantai Jin, and the two were extremely close. And Tantai Jin had always been the primary representative of the Si family's interests. How much of this proposed match was genuine emotion and how much was calculation was very difficult to say.

Viewed against this backdrop, Fei Chingyi's push for Foundation Establishment suddenly became… interesting. With Fei Qingyi having secured such a powerful connection, the entire Fei family took on a different cast. If Fei Chingyi also became a Foundation Establishment cultivator, Li Zhouluo felt a deep sense of unease.

He mulled it over and finally gave the order. "Let Fei Chingyi come in."

Dili Guang immediately withdrew. Before long, a man in white robes entered the hall. His face was handsome and elegant, with rounded features. The space between his brows and eyes was narrow, and his lips were red against white teeth—a sight that drew admiration. He bowed. "Qing'yi pays his respects to the Clan Head!"

This was Li Zhouluo's first time seeing him. He couldn't help but remark, "Qing'yi, what a handsome appearance. It is often said that the men of the north-shore Fei family are the most comely, and it is indeed true."

Fei Chingyi replied respectfully. Li Zhouluo then asked about the Fei family's recent situation: the spirit-rice harvest, and whether the cultivators dispatched by the Li family to manage their prefectural peaks were diligent.

The Fei family had only been vassals for a single generation, and the Li clan treated them gently. The stewards sent were either Fei family members themselves or individuals known to be friendly toward them. Naturally, in Fei Chingyi's telling, everything was perfect. After circling the topic, Li Zhouluo adopted a serious tone.

"Breaking through to Foundation Establishment is a matter of life and death. Since you are preparing for this, your family must be informed. Have you sent a letter to Azure Pond? What was the reply?"

At the mention of his sister, the young man clearly hesitated for a fraction of a second before answering, "I have sent a letter. Sister's meaning is… that I should not rely on family connections. I must follow the standard process, report to the lake, and then submit the application to Azure Pond. As for the Essence Gathering Pill… that, too, must be handled according to the lake's rules."

It was clear that regardless of whether his sister, Fei Qingyi, *could* procure a pill for him, she certainly did not dare to do so directly. Her attitude toward her own family was strictly professional. After hearing this, Li Zhouluo asked, "Your sister's wedding is approaching; we certainly should not bother her. The lake will make arrangements for this matter. You cultivate Cold Qi. This Essence Gathering Pill will be allocated according to merit, but the slot must also be discussed by the peak masters. It is not a decision I can make alone. You must first go and pay respects to the Old Ancestor and hear his opinion."

Fei Qingyi nodded repeatedly, but then the young man hesitated. "Wedding?"

The look in his eyes was one of pure, unadulterated shock. That startled, disbelieving expression did not seem feigned, and seeing it, Li Zhouluo's own heart shook.

'Fei Qingyi never even mentioned her marriage to her own family! This…'

Right now, Fei Chingyi was staring blankly at the floor, his pupils dilated. Li Zhouluo felt a flash of awkwardness. He instantly realized that the distance and avoidance between Fei Qingyi and her vassal family was not entirely an act. And the avoidance was not just for his, Li Zhouluo's, benefit.

While handing a small missive requesting an audience—just delivered by Dili Guang—from Ding Weizeng, Li Zhouluo spoke with deliberate hesitation. "It seems my information traveled a step faster. I heard it was a joyous occasion. I only heard whispers, but it seems Fellow Daoist Qingyi and a certain Peak Master in the sect have formed a deep bond and are very much in love."

As he spoke, Fei Qingyi's expression shifted from shock to joy. He was just about to ask for more details when Dili Guang stepped forward, bowing respectfully and interrupting. "Clan Head, Guest Elder Ding has an urgent report."

"Good! Bring him in quickly!" Li Zhouluo replied, his voice bright with relief.

Fei Chingyi was perceptive enough to take the cue. Despite his burning curiosity, he knew he had to withdraw. Just as his hurrying figure vanished down the side-hall corridor, the look of relief vanished from Li Zhouluo's face.

"Show Ding Weizeng in," he said in a low tone.

Dili Guang withdrew, but the next sound was a chaotic rush of footsteps. To Li Zhouluo's surprise, Chen Yang was the first to burst wildly into the hall. His dharma robes were torn and ragged, and a shallow red scratch marked his neck, but his expression was one of absolute delight. He bowed deeply.

"Clan Head! The Capital Immortals Dao has retreated!"

Li Zhouluo shot up from his seat, his expression electrifying with hope. "What?! Where are the cultivators from Profound Peak? What about the territory?"

Chapter 786: The West Bank Blood Petition

Chen Yang's face lit up with joy. "The Capital Immortals Dao retreated overnight! They've vanished completely. The entire wilderness is empty. We weren't stopped until we reached Shanji Prefecture. It seems both Shanji and the Profound Peak mountain gate have been occupied by someone else."

"Kong Guxi and the others were overjoyed and returned to the wilderness. They left only two people behind to reorganize their forces. The rest followed Kong Guxi here to the lake to offer their congratulations and thanks. They are waiting outside the island."

"Excellent!" Li Zhouluo stood up, beaming.

Chen Yang bowed, equally full of smiles—the two actually bore a slight resemblance in that moment. Chen Yang presented a jade box. "Clan Head, both Dharma Artifacts are inside, returned to the clan as requested."

He offered the jade box first, then retrieved a dark, black pearl from his robes, reporting respectfully, "Clan Head, some days ago, demonic cultivators came to raid us. I, the Kong family members, and Lord Ding worked together to set an ambush. Although we were unlucky and the demonic cultivator escaped, we had an unexpected gain."

"This is the Dharma Artifact that cultivator used to cover his retreat. It was originally intended to self-detonate, but unexpectedly, Sect Master Kong summoned a spiritual mountain and barely managed to suppress it, allowing the artifact to survive…"

He knelt with profound respect, hands raised, presenting the black pearl in his palms. "This item is called a [Mishui Pearl]. It was forged from extremely pure Mishui Cold Iron. While the material itself isn't extraordinary, the refinement technique is brilliant. It is a Dharma Artifact of Cold Qi."

This was also exceptionally good news. Li Zhouluo nodded cheerfully. The Li Clan rules were strict; he could not immediately inspect a tribute item himself. He had Dili Guang take the pearl and examine it while he asked, "I often hear that these demonic cultivators travel in small groups. It's surprising that Protector Ding acted and still let them escape. They must not be simple characters. Did you notice anything else?"

Chen Yang nodded repeatedly. "The Clan Head sees clearly. Protector Ding and I both attacked, only to find that while they were covered in demonic aura on the surface, their cultivation underneath was extremely pure. We fear they aren't rogue demonic cultivators, but rather practitioners from another Dao lineage in disguise. Fearing trouble, even though we had a chance to encircle and kill them, we only forced out this Dharma Artifact and let him go."

"These people are formidable. They weren't using their full strength in the previous raids, but we cannot identify their lineage. Protector Ding and I discussed it; they are most likely cultivators from overseas."

Li Zhouluo nodded slightly and glanced at Dili Guang. The Northen Yue youth replied, "Clan Head, this Dharma Artifact is indeed exceptionally pure. There are no traces of blood-qi refinement."

Only then did Li Zhouluo speak. "The clan will render a decision on this matter later, but your merit has been recorded. As for the Capital Immortals Dao retreat, it must be the result of calculations among the Purple Mansion ancestors. They must have negotiated the handover of Shanji Prefecture… You have worked hard, Protector. Several elders wish to see you. For now, please send the Kong family members in."

Chen Yang bowed and retreated. Li Zhouluo waited a moment before Kong Guxi hurried in from outside the hall, hiking up his robes as he ran.

"Greetings, Clan Head!"

Kong Guxi's eyebrows were arched high, his eyes shining brightly, and the wrinkles on his face had smoothed out. His aged face seemed a perfect barometer for Profound Peak Gate's fate, now radiating a bright, excited vigor. He knelt solidly on the floor, proclaiming respectfully, "The Capital Immortals have withdrawn! Congratulations, Clan Head!"

Kong Guxi had no regard for saving face. Despite being a mighty late-stage Foundation Establishment cultivator, he dropped to his knees before Li

Zhouluo without hesitation. This forced Kong Qiuyan, standing behind him, to kneel as well. Where previously this woman had always kept her head bowed and eyes nearly shut in the presence of the Li family, she now looked up, her gratitude unmistakable. Beside them, Fu Yuezi knelt like a stone statue, his eyes calm, as if this concerned him in no way whatsoever.

Li Zhouluo helped the sect master up, smiling. "This is a joyous occasion for you as well, Sect Master. All of Profound Peak Gate's former institutions in the wilderness will be returned to your control. The agreement between our two families remains in effect. The Lake will not occupy a single inch of Profound Peak Gate territory."

Kong Guxi agreed obsequiously, but the Li family clearly wanted nothing more to do with this mess. Li Zhouluo said gently, "Since the enemy has retreated and the wilderness is back in your hands, you cannot let the hearts of your people scatter any longer! The banner of Profound Peak Gate must be raised again as soon as possible… Sect Master, you should delineate your territories, recruit a new batch of disciples, and rebuild Profound Peak Gate immediately!"

Hearing this, Kong Qiuyan was stunned. There was no such thing as a free lunch in this world. They had received such an immense favor; she expected they would have to leave behind most of their Daoist texts and send away all their guest elders just to escape Moongaze's grasp. She thought freedom would come at an unimaginable price, yet here it was, laid out before them. She stared at Li Zhouluo, lost in confusion and shock.

Even Fu Yuezi moved for the first time; the face beneath the golden mask seemed to quirk into a smile.

Only Kong Guxi remained kneeling blankly, answering nothing.

To the other two, those words were heavenly news. But to Kong Guxi's ears, they meant something entirely different.

'The agreement between your ancestor and our Daoist Master has been fulfilled. My family has done more than enough. Our Daoist Master is still missing; how can we spare the effort for you? We are handing the wilderness back. Rebuild your sect quickly. After this, Profound Peak Gate's affairs are yours alone!'

The fate of the Profound Peak Gate mountain gate was still unknown, and the Capital Immortals Dao was still watching like a tiger. The Kong family had only Fu Yuezi, who excelled at combat. What could he possibly accomplish alone in

the wilderness? Raising the sect banner now was undoubtedly an extremely dangerous proposition…

Looked at another way, Profound Peak Gate had nothing left for the Li family to exploit. Their mountain gate was gone. Their Purple Mansion spiritual artifacts and resources had been presented to the Li family. Their Purple Mansion Grand Array was lost. All that remained was the 'Fool's Mountain Chase' Dao lineage, a handful of Foundation Establishment treasure medicines, Dharma artifacts, and basic supplies—things the Li family probably wouldn't even want.

He could only bow and say, "The wilderness is currently in chaos and ruins. We must reorganize thoroughly before we can consider rebuilding the sect."

Although Li Zhouluo was also waiting for news from Shanji Prefecture, his attitude remained firm. "Sect Master, you needn't be so modest. My family has no intention of interfering with the Profound Peak Gate Dao lineage. The territory in the wilderness will be transferred to your sect. The resources stored on our mountain will also be returned by the Jade Court Guard, not one item missing. All subsequent arrangements are entirely up to your sect."

Kong Guxi's expression was awkward and uneasy. Unable to remain stubborn, he said shamefully, "I ask only that the Clan Head grant us some time…"

Li Zhouluo nodded, lowering his voice. "Rest assured, Sect Master. Focus on cleaning up the wilderness. With the three great mountains moved from Shanji, Profound Peak Gate's foundation still remains."

Hearing this exchange, Kong Guxi estimated the Li family wasn't forcing him to establish the sect *immediately*, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Li Zhouluo didn't waste any more words, gave his instructions, and politely dismissed him. The other two, however, seemed to be in high spirits as they followed Kong Guxi out of the main hall.

Li Zhouluo ordered someone to investigate the situation in Shanji Prefecture. The Capital Immortals Dao, a weight pressing on his mind, was gone, and the Profound Peak Gate clan, which had been stuck to his hands, was about to be sent away. His mood soared. "I heard Xinghan just returned from the west. I have good news for her. Hurry and send her in!"

Dili Guang left immediately. Before long, Li Xinghan entered the hall, travel-worn and carrying a sword on her back. She announced respectfully, "Greetings, Clan Head!"

"Sister, please rise!"

Li Xinghan had indeed just returned from the great desert. She had also heard the news of the Capital Immortals Dao's retreat and was overjoyed. After congratulating Li Zhouluo, he looked at her and asked, "How are things in the desert?"

Li Xinghan knew her brother had likely already been briefed, but he wanted to hear it from her, who had participated personally. She sighed. "There are numerous demonic cultivators. Protector An mentioned that the desert never used to have so many; they've only increased in recent years. We expelled them, but that section of the city wall has completely collapsed. We can no longer harvest Qi there."

"What a pity." Many of the Li family's Bright Yang cultivation arts relied on harvesting Qi from that ancient wall. With the Purple Mansion ancestor gone and the source now severed, it was a serious problem. "I also received reports," Li Zhouluo lamented, "that the desert outpost is separated from us by the Western Mountains, making it difficult to maintain. The family has always seen it as a hardship posting; the direct descendants all dislike going. Now that the wall is down, everyone is saying we should just abandon it."

Li Xinghan frowned at this. "Clan Head," she advised, "our market has been delayed because of the conflict with the Capital Immortals Dao. It's ninety percent complete but sitting idle in the dense forest. While now isn't the right time, we will eventually open it. If we can hold the desert outpost, the increased traffic will be highly beneficial for the market."

"The talk in the family is just elders worrying about their descendants. We don't need to heed it." Li Zhouluo laughed aloud. "I heard you brought something back for Fifth Brother, is that true?"

Li Xinghan wasn't surprised. She had acquired the White Falcon Gold openly, exchanging her own resources with the clan stores to get it, so of course, Li Zhouluo knew. "That's correct," she replied. "I obtained seven liang of White Falcon Gold in the desert. It's for Fifth Brother. I already sent someone to deliver it."

Li Zhouluo shook his head. "You send it over today, and in a month, it will probably be a hairpin on some beauty's head. You don't know his personality. He asked me for various types of metals several times in the past few years… He's useless at most things, but he has a real talent for forging hairpins."

Li Xinghan sighed at this. "I suspected it was for such a purpose. But this was the first time he ever asked me for anything; I couldn't just ignore him. It's not a critical item anyway. Consider it material for him to practice his craft."

Li Zhouluo, still in good spirits these past days, chuckled and shook his head. He picked up a black scroll with silver borders from his desk. "But let's not talk about him. I have some excellent news for you."

He smiled. "A few days ago, several of the clan elders were talking and you were mentioned. The Old Master brought up the topic of your Dharma Artifact. Since the Daoist Master isn't currently in the clan, and your sword requirements are very high, he suggested that you inherit one of the family's blades."

Li Xinghan loved the Way of the Sword. Hearing this, she grew visibly excited. "Heavens… Which one could it be?!"

Li Zhouluo untied the scroll in his hand, slowly unfurling it as he smiled. "Three chi, nine cun, and three fen long. Ninety-two jin and twelve liang heavy. Bright as flowing water, pure as white frost…"

'Hanlin!'

Li Xinghan knew the dimensions of every artifact-sword in the clan by heart. The moment Li Zhouluo recited the length, she knew. She was simultaneously stunned and overjoyed. "How… how can it be Hanlin?"

Many in the Li clan practiced the sword, and Hanlin—known as the sword "Colder than Winter Snow, Sharp as the Autumn Harvest"—was highly revered. Its previous owner, Li Xijun, had managed the clan's affairs, lending the blade an extra aura of authority. Since Li Xijun left no heirs, it had remained in the treasury… This sword held a unique weight among the clan's blades. Excluding the sword on Li Zhouluo's desk—Coilling Dragon Pillar—which was more symbolic than practical, Hanlin was second only to Qingchi.

Li Xinghan had imagined that Li Zhouluo might get a new blade and pass the Xushi sword down to her, or perhaps that Li Chenghuai would give her his Dark-sea Serpent. She had never dared to covet Hanlin. She stood frozen in place.

Li Zhouluo gave a long sigh. "When Grand-Uncle Xijun fell, the Old Master took this sword back. No one from the Second branch was qualified to take it. Thus, the Old Master overruled all objections and decided to entrust it to you first."

Li Xinghan accepted the scroll with both hands, her head bowed low. This kind of precious artifact could not be transferred by proxy; she would have to take the scroll and retrieve it herself. Her eyes reddened. "I must go thank the Old Master personally."

Li Xinghan was part of the First branch. If any other elder from that branch had tried to designate Hanlin for her, it would have invited gossip and criticism. Only the Old Master, Li Xuanxuan, could make such a decision with absolute authority, beyond all reproach.

Li Zhouluo nodded, watching her leave. He processed affairs in the hall for the better part of the day, his mood excellent, realizing he hadn't rested in days. Sighing, he finally decided to allow himself a short walk.

He had barely stepped out of the hall when he saw several of his uncles waiting before the palace, all wearing bitter expressions. He stopped immediately, frowning. "What is it?"

Dili Guang shook his head.

Li Zhouluo had learned well the tenacity of these clansmen in recent days. When it came to begging for resources or positions, each was more shameless than the last, yet they were all his elders. Seeing them gathered like this could only mean trouble. "We'll use the side hall," he said darkly. "Do not let them see us."

He had just turned when Li Wen approached with a steady stride. Li Wen bowed before the hall. "Clan Head, the Jade Court Guard has received word. A large group of cultivators ascended Mount Qingdu to submit a report. They presented a joint blood petition, claiming that the leaders of the Four Prefectures of the West Bank are colluding, deceiving their superiors and oppressing the populace. They plead for Mount Qingdu to intervene and administer justice."

Li Zhouluo's heart seized. The joy vanished from his face, replaced by utter disbelief. "What?! The Four Prefectures of the West Bank?!"

He froze, asking in a low voice, "Where are they now?"

"They are all on Mount Qingdu," Li Wen replied. "It coincided with several elders emerging from seclusion. Even Lord Chengzhi has been summoned up the mountain. The matter has blown up."

Although Li Chengzhi was a mortal, he was the Daoist Master's direct son, so the loyal Li Wen still referred to him as 'Lord'. Li Zhouluo suddenly broke out in a cold sweat. The Li family consisted of Sixteen Prefectures, Two Peaks, and One Mountain; the West Bank accounted for four of those prefectures. To put it bluntly, nothing this serious had happened at Mount Qingdu since the prefecture system was established, let alone a blood petition from all the cultivators of the West Bank!

He gritted his teeth. "No wonder that crowd was waiting at the entrance…"

The names of the Sixteen Prefectures, Two Peaks, and One Mountain were all clear in Li Zhouluo's mind. He immediately identified the individuals responsible: "An Xuanxin, Ren Ting, Li Chengpan, and Li Hun… They went to Mount Qingdu, not the Jade Court Guard… This means Li Chengpan and Li Hun are the ones pulling the strings…"

The West Bank was populated by the scattered, minor clans left behind from He Jiumen's era. They had always lacked a voice within the Li family, ignored by every major faction. Yet, the region was rich in spiritual ore, and its prefectures were always carved up as spoils by the different cliques…

"An Xuanxin represents the Huayu faction. Ren Ting's Ren Clan belongs to the Lijing faction. Li Chengpan is a direct descendant who was pushed into his position, and Li Hun is from a branch family… Good. Everyone's involved."

He closed his eyes briefly. "I'm heading to Mount Qingdu immediately… You've heard the details. Is the evidence conclusive?"

Li Wen replied respectfully, "It's about eighty or ninety percent certain."

"Are Mount Qingdu and the Jade Court Guard blind…"

Li Zhouluo felt this news was a bolt from the blue. He rushed over, listening as Li Wen replied earnestly, "My lord, the situation is complex. I didn't understand it all. It is better if you hear the details on the peak."

Li Wen was honest and loyal, but it was precisely this honesty that frustrated Li Zhouluo now. He had no chance to slow down and prepare on the way. He could only steel himself and fly over. Moments later, he landed on the summit of Mount Qingdu. As expected, it was crowded everywhere.

"The Clan Head is here!" Cries rose from all over the peak.

The main hall at the highest point was already full. The elder Chen Donghe stood off to the side, while the white-robed An Siwei stood with his head bowed. The others seated were all seniors—some with cultivation, some without, some looking ancient beyond measure—all occupying the head seats.

Li Zhouluo's gaze swept the room, landing on the key figures.

First on the left was the Daoist Master's direct son, the aged Li Chengzhi, who looked terribly weak and seemed to be slumped in his chair. Standing beside him, powdered and painted, was his own Fifth Brother, Li Zhouming.

Below them sat the elder Li Chenghao. This man was the uncle of his elder brothers, Li Zhoufang, and had recently broken through to Qi Refining, granting him new status in the clan. Middle-aged and strong, his hair only lightly grayed, he stared intently at Li Zhouluo.

On the other side sat elders of an even higher generation: the gray-robed, severe-faced Elder Li Xi'e, who was Li Cheng's father and held immense status. Slightly below him was the rounded, pale-skinned Li Xixuan, the father of his aunt, Li Minggong.

'This is a disaster.'

Among the oldest generation of elders, these four were the only ones who really mattered. Li Zhouluo sighed internally. Fortunately, Li Xuanxuan's expression remained normal, which calmed his nerves slightly. He walked to the main seat amid the greetings and only then noticed someone kneeling on the floor.

The man appeared to be a minor family head from the West Bank, surnamed He, distantly related to the He Jiumen of old. He must have been the one who led the petition. But he had no right to speak here. Chen Donghe had already presented the silk document.

The first item listed accused Li Chengpan and the others of soliciting bribes when collecting spiritual grain and ore, amounting to a staggering thirty percent cut.

This wasn't unheard of; such things happened in every prefecture and peak. The Jade Court Guard was spread thin across the lake prefectures and mostly just monitored the final year-end collections. After being caught a few times, most officials learned to steal small amounts—one or half a percent—during normal times, unlike Li Chengpan, who was blatantly arrogant.

"It's only because the West Bank has no backing… they are just lambs to the slaughter."

Li Zhouluo skipped past that line. The next accusation was far more severe: The He family accused Ren Ting of tyranny, abuse of power, and forcing a woman of the He family to become his concubine.

The final item concerned the West Bank's mineral veins, which were complex and shifting. New branch veins often appeared, sometimes changing monthly. An Xuanxin and the others had colluded to conceal these new veins and embezzle the ore… They had sent people from the East Bank to do the actual mining, but someone with intentions had recorded it all.

He finished reading, set the letter down, his heart sinking. 'These four… their connections run too deep…'

Before he could speak, the rounded, pale Li Xixuan said in a low voice, "Clan Head! The Jade Court Guard already investigated the matter regarding Ren Ting. The He family sent that girl over themselves! Now they're turning around and slinging mud… We have the marriage contract and the letters. The man's fawning words are written right on them. We can bring them out for confrontation!"

Li Zhouluo looked at the stack of letters presented to him and paused. The Ren Clan was part of the Lijing faction and also part of the First branch. Li Xixuan's wife—Li Minggong's mother—was surnamed Ren. This Ren Ting was Li Minggong's biological uncle…

The others remained silent, clearly confident in their own positions, waiting for him to deal with the letters. Li Zhouluo could only brace himself and question the kneeling Clan Head He.

The old man just lamented, "Those above us are Immortals and officials. When they give us so much as a look, what choice do we have but to fawn over them?"

His words left Li Zhouluo speechless. Nearby, Li Chengzhi hesitated, but Fifth Brother Li Zhouming smiled. "Clan Head, the matter of An Xuanxin's mines is also suspicious. All records have been retrieved from Yuting. Those minerals *were* delivered to the island."

Li Zhouluo finally found an opening. "Why did they not follow standard procedure?"

Li Zhouming hurried to explain, "At that time, we were in the middle of the war with the Capital Immortals Dao. There was no reply from the island for days, and that branch vein was about to shift and disappear. An Xuanxin feared the resources would be wasted. He submitted a separate letter after the excavation, which the family did review at the time."

Li Zhouluo did recall these items. But such reports came in every year; minor branch veins that appeared outside the main records were impossible to verify. Whatever amount they reported was the amount recorded. Before he could respond, the displeased-looking Li Chenghao spoke up: "I personally trained Li Chengpan! Everyone in this family knows his character! He is incapable of doing such things!"

This was the uncle of his elder brothers, the Li Zhoufang brothers. Li Zhouluo was already feeling numb. "There is evidence for every matter. How can this be settled with a simple 'impossible'?"

Of the group, only Li Chenghao's father, the gray-robed Elder Li Xi'e, had not spoken. Now that all his allies had said their piece, everyone turned to look at the old man. Li Xi'e coughed once and said quietly, "We ask the Clan Head to investigate clearly."

"..."

The entire group of elders stared at him. Li Zhouluo studied the letter, suppressing his irritation.

'Father is already in seclusion, otherwise, I would fetch the Talisman Brush and test these people!'

Li Chengzhi and Li Zhouming, as direct Purple Mansion descendants, likely couldn't be tested accurately, and Li Xixuan was probably the same. But he didn't need to test the elders. Li Zhouluo ignored their words and simply ordered, "Bring the four individuals in question up."

A "Yes" echoed from far below. The four men entered the hall and knelt one by one. Li Chengpan knelt at the very front. He was Li Zhouluo's clan-uncle, and handsome enough, but he kept his head down and said nothing.

Among the three behind him, the one with the highest status was An Xuanxin. The young man's answers were fluent; according to him, every single mine vein had been reported, and he could even pinpoint the exact date for each.

Li Zhouluo asked a few more questions. The four either remained silent or stubbornly stuck to their stories. The atmosphere in the hall finally grew awkward. The elders fell silent, carefully listening to Li Zhouluo's interrogation.

Li Zhouming, who had been looking around enjoying the show, seemed to wake up as if from a dream. He finally sensed the shift in the atmosphere. He stood up straight, studying the expressions of everyone present, and muttered internally:

'Aren't they just making things difficult for Fourth Brother… What are these elders plotting…'

Chapter 787: Making a Scene

Li Zhouluo hesitated for a moment, lifting the letter. Every eye in the hall was fixed on him. An Siwei, a Foundation Establishment cultivator of the An family, stood beside An Zheyan but remained silent.

Matters concerning the ore veins were notorious for exploitation. An Xuanxin, the man in charge, was someone Li Zhouluo had personally summoned before. Both the young man and his elder brother, An Xuantong, were renowned geniuses of their generation. Li Zhouluo was familiar enough with them and quickly formed a strategy.

'The An family is illustrious; they have no need to skim a few minerals. Besides, the daily ledgers all balance. They didn't take anything. These four individuals represent ninety percent of the influence on the lake. I must divide them.'

He set the letter down and spoke in a conciliatory tone. "Elders, please, do not be anxious. All matters must be handled reasonably. I have personally reviewed every daily report Xuanxin has submitted. This issue regarding the shifting branch veins is precisely why we are finalizing new regulations. I was just about to consult with him on this. Naturally, there has been no misappropriation or theft."

Having offered an exit, he gave a subtle signal. Dili Guang immediately moved to help An Xuanxin to his feet. As the kneeling An family members rose, the elderly An Zheyan, face flushed red, began a long tirade about his failure in disciplining the youth, only to be pulled back by An Siwei. The middle-aged Foundation Establishment expert turned, fixed An Xuanxin with an icy glare, and declared:

"However, the West Bank is in turmoil. An Xuanxin is guilty of negligent oversight! I shall apprehend him immediately and deliver him to the Jade Court for interrogation!"

He seized An Xuanxin, hauling him up from the floor, and led the other An members straight out of the hall. They had made a clean retreat.

As soon as the An family departed, Li Chengzhi —who had been reclining weakly in his seat—immediately bowed his head. Li Zhouming, who had previously spoken in support of the Ans, felt a growing sense of unease. While he excelled at little else, his many years as a rake, dedicated to deciphering the hearts of women, had made him an expert at reading expressions. Watching the clan elders, the infamous wastrel grew uncomfortable. With a *snap*, his fan closed, and his grip tightened around it.

Most people only offered him superficial respect; privately, none took him seriously. Li Chenghao, his hair gray, watched the An family depart before turning to ask in a low voice, "Are Zhoufang and Zhouyang still not here?"

The fathers of those two—the eldest and second eldest of the 'Zhou' generation—had perished, making their uncle, Li Chenghao, their closest relation. They were usually completely obedient to him, yet they were conspicuously absent. Without the backing of those two, and the other elders being mere mortals, Li Chenghao felt a surge of insecurity.

Li Zhouluo, having temporarily settled the An Xuanxin matter, focused on the remaining petitioners. One was Ren Ting, the maternal uncle of Li Minggong. The other was Li Chengpan, his own clan-uncle. Each was more difficult to handle than the last. He decided to squeeze the softest target first. "Li Hun!" he called.

Li Hun's seniority placed him outside the main lineage. He only carried any weight because his father, Li Anshuo, managed affairs on the North Shore and had married into the Chen family. In this main hall, however, that prestige meant nothing. He was huddled near the back, shrinking away. At Li Zhouluo's summons, the middle-aged man trembled, shuffled forward two inches on his knees, and stammered, "This lowly one is present!"

Li Zhouluo suspected the three petitioners had coordinated their stories. He began the interrogation: "You oversee the spirit rice. A thirty-percent bribe must have passed through your hands. I am currently summoning the various families of the West Bank and all peak officials for cross-examination. Confess now who ordered you… Otherwise, the moment the truth is exposed, I will execute you first."

Li Hun kowtowed. "Reporting to the Patriarch! There was such an arrangement. But this lowly one was only following orders! I was instructed to collect the payments in two separate portions. The directive came from Guest Elder Ye of Nine

Gates Peak. He said it was an order from the Nine Gates Peak Supervisor… These matters… they have always been handled by the Nine Gates Peak Supervisor."

The hall fell silent. Li Zhouluo froze. The Nine Gates Peak Supervisor… was An Xuanxin, the very man who had just walked free.

"Where is this Guest Elder Ye?" Li Zhouluo demanded.

From the side, Chen Donghe replied: "I looked into him. Several months ago, he reported achieving peak Embryonic Breathing. He registered his status with the family and has already departed to seek an opportunity for a breakthrough."

'A convenient escape,' Li Zhouluo thought. He glanced at Li Hun, who looked genuinely terrified and likely knew nothing deeper. He gave a low command: "Dili Guang. Go retrieve An Xuanxin and the woman from the He family. Then proceed to the shore and begin interrogating the peak officials. Bring every waiting family head up the mountain, one by one."

Chen Donghe answered quietly, "Patriarch… the He family woman has already taken her own life."

The words made Li Zhouluo grit his teeth. Suddenly, the pale, plump Li Xixuan knelt forward, sighing dramatically. "Patriarch! These underlings are nothing but insects, scheming and lying! It is impossible to discern the truth! I beg you… please ask Li Chenghuai! Let him use a Dharma Art, and this whole mess will be understood instantly!"

This demand caught Li Zhouluo completely off guard, stunning him. Li Chenghao immediately seconded the request, dropping to his knees. "The boy's reputation cannot be ruined like this! Please, Patriarch, summon our brother to ascertain the truth!"

Li Chengzhi remained seated in silence. The final elder, Li Xie, stirred. He was an old man with thinning white hair and a kind face, but he merely closed his eyes, refusing to join the petition.

Li Zhouluo fell silent, his gaze sweeping across the petitioners. Li Chengzhi, who clearly wanted to protect An Xuanxin, had been forced to open his eyes at the mention of the "Nine Gates Peak Supervisor," yet he remained silent. Of the four, this uncle seemed the most reluctant participant.

That left Li Xixuan and Li Cheng—the only one with a cultivation base—as the most insistent. Li Chenghao's father, Li Xie, had built his entire reputation

on the martyrdom of his own sons; he clearly prized his standing and now appeared deeply conflicted.

'This is obviously a coordinated effort… Why are they so insistent that Father break his seclusion?'

Unable to grasp their true motive, he gritted his teeth. "Father is injured. It is not appropriate for him to break seclusion over such a minor issue."

Li Xixuan sighed, his pale, plump face a mask of regret. "We were hoping the family could make this decision together. We must ask Li Chenghuai to come. This concerns the honor of the entire clan. An investigation would take less than half a day… Otherwise, Chengpan's life is utterly ruined!"

Li Xixuan had blocked every rebuttal. In the center of the hall, Li Chengpan remained silent, head bowed, the very image of patient suffering. The pressure shifted entirely back to Li Zhouluo. But before he could respond, a furious shout echoed through the hall:

"Did you esteemed elders not hear the Patriarch's decision?"

The public roar stunned the assembly. Everyone looked up, astonished to see a young master in flowing red robes striding forward, his face a mask of fury.

It was Li Zhouming. He couldn't restrain himself any longer. The direct grandson of the Purple Mansion patriarch, seething with anger, slammed his fan down and shouted:

"If it cannot be investigated now, then lock them all up and wait a year or two! One of you is browbeating, the other is sighing in despair. What exactly are you trying to pull?"

The hall was struck dumb. People exchanged confused glances, whispering amongst themselves. 'What madness has seized this young master now?'

Li Xixuan was stunned speechless by the outburst. He was the father of Li Minggong; who dared treat him with such contempt? His pale face instantly flushed crimson. "You…" he sputtered.

Li Zhouming's anger had been simmering throughout the entire proceeding. His red robes trembled as he advanced another step. "I only call you 'Elder' out of respect! If you hadn't sired a talented daughter, what the hell would you be? I may be a wastrel, but at least I know how to stay down! What do you

want? What?! You're taking advantage of the Daoist Master's absence to bully us juniors, aren't you! You… you… you son of a…"

Even fouler curses were about to spill forth when Li Chengzhi, shocked out of his deathbed stupor, sat bolt upright. He grabbed Li Zhouming's sleeve, roaring, "You animal! Are you trying to stage a rebellion?"

The hall descended into chaos. Li Zhouming was known as an impulsive wastrel, but his temperament was usually predictable. No one had anticipated this sudden explosion of madness. As the direct grandson of the Purple Mansion patriarch, no one dared truly provoke him, so they all scrambled backward. Only his father, Li Chengzhi, leaped to his feet—back no longer aching, legs suddenly strong, brimming with vigor—and seized him, screaming insults.

Yet his father was only a mortal; he stood no chance of restraining his son.

Unreliable though he was, Li Zhouming was still at the third level of Qi Refining. Of the four elders, only Li Chenghao possessed a cultivation base, and he was a level weaker. When this wastrel went berserk, he was like a bull. Terrified of being slapped to death, Li Xixuan lost all decorum, scrambling backward in a panic as Li Chenghao and two younger relatives rushed frantically to shield him.

"Wicked beast!"

Li Zhouming tuned out his father's screaming. He finally understood. He realized the speech his family had fed him earlier was *also* part of this scheme to pressure Li Zhouluo. A wave of hot, resentful fury washed over him. The surrounding chaos—the shouting, the gasps of alarm—made his head spin. For the first time in his life, his eyes widened not in petulance, but in genuine rage. He roared, "Shut your damn mouths!"

He infused the roar with spiritual energy. It exploded like sudden thunder. Cultivators merely flinched; the mortals in the hall nearly had their eardrums rupture. Every gaze snapped toward him.

They saw a young man with sharp features and strong brows. His usual, indifferent demeanor had been utterly burned away by rage. A shimmering radiance—the light of Bright Yang —welled up around him. With his eyes wide in fury, he stood center-stage, hands clasped behind his back.

As the echo faded, the hall filled with the rustle of robes as nearly everyone dropped to their knees.

Li Zhouming was, after all, the biological grandson of Li Ximing. Despite the garish red robes, despite the powder and rouge, the resemblance in his brow and eyes was undeniable. Standing there radiating Bright Yang, his glare burning, he looked exactly like the Clan Head. He was only thinner and lacked the spark of Profound Light between the brows. The sight terrified the assembly. Even the Foundation Establishment guest elders had to avert their gaze, exchanging a look before kneeling.

"Daoist Master…"

Even his own father, Li Chengzhi, felt his heart leap into his throat. He released his grip as if he had touched hot coals. The insult "beast" died on his lips. His legs gave out, and he nearly collapsed.

The courtyard was utterly silent, broken only when points of red light materialized beside Li Zhouming. A powerful, stocky man clad in crimson battle armor instantly appeared at his side.

The man radiated a ferocious, baleful aura. He had a strong jaw and a bristling mustache, and his eyes cut like swords, forcing everyone to lower their gaze. He held two short clubs, his chin slightly lifted, standing guard by Li Zhouming. His expression was so dark it looked ready to bleed.

The Palace-Yang Tiger: Ding Weizeng.

Only at this moment did everyone—both on the mountain and below—finally remember exactly who he was: the direct grandson of the Purple Mansion patriarch. They fell silent as winter cicadas, daring not even to meet another's gaze. The hall was filled with kneeling figures, most pressing their foreheads to the stone floor.

"Your Highness…"

Hearing the trembling calls from below, Li Zhouming seemed to snap out of a trance. He tossed his fan aside, stepped back, and waved his hands frantically. "My apologies for troubling Protector Ding!"

He stumbled back to his seat, looking dazed. No one dared approach him. Ding Weizeng nodded, the radiance of his immortal foundation faded, and his armor dissolved back into a simple Daoist robe as he silently retreated to a corner of the hall.

Li Xixuan, who had collapsed weakly to the floor, now became the focus of all attention. Mortified, he struggled back to a formal kneeling position, remaining silent.

The hall felt as if a violent storm had just passed, shattering the tense, aggressive atmosphere. Li Zhouluo kept his gaze lowered to the letter, but through the slit between his fingers, he watched the stunned Li Zhouming return to his seat. It was the same powdered, painted face as always, but Li Zhouluo felt his own eyes begin to sting.

'Good Fifth Brother…'

He had no time to dwell on it. A soft *thud* echoed in the hall.

Li Chenghao had dropped to his knees. He was one of the last remaining cultivators of the Chengming generation. His eyes were red-rimmed as he spoke, his voice heavy. "Chengpan is the youngest of his brothers. From the day he was brought from the lake periphery to the inner territories, I have guided him. The boy has been diligent since childhood, earning praise wherever he went. He served on the West Bank for years without a single complaint. Now, he suffers this sudden slander. If we cannot clear his name, where is the justice in this clan? Patriarch, I only ask that you summon our elder brother. If Chengpan is found to have the slightest stain on him… I am willing to share his punishment!"

His plea was heartfelt, making Li Zhouluo grip the letter tightly. He closed his eyes, his resolve wavering. He knew the truth: his father, Li Chenghuai, wasn't seriously injured. He *could* leave seclusion…

At that moment, Li Xuanxuan, who had sat motionless watching the entire drama unfold, finally spoke. The old man's voice was dry and aged. "Li Chenghuai is in seclusion. He is not to be disturbed."

The old patriarch's single sentence silenced the hall. The petitioning elders froze. Li Zhouluo thought he heard a muffled sob. It seemed Li Chengpan, still kneeling in the center, had finally broken. The young man kept his head bowed, but his shoulders began to tremble.

The sound of weeping hammered at Li Zhouluo's conscience, leaving him confused and conflicted. The letter in his hand suddenly felt impossibly heavy. "Regarding the West Bank," he announced, his voice low, "the Jade Court and Mount Qingdu will both dispatch personnel to investigate. Chen Donghe and Li Wen

are ordered to the West Bank. Both peaks will conduct a joint interrogation. A final judgment will be rendered after."

"The situation remains unclear, but the families of the West Bank are in turmoil and require an answer. Ren Ting is stripped of his duties, effective immediately, and will be imprisoned in the dungeons of Mount Qingdu. Li Chengpan is guilty of negligent oversight; he will be returned to the main isle for interrogation."

Li Xuanxuan had blocked the path to summoning Li Chenghuai, and Li Zhouming had thrown the hall into chaos. Li Chenghao and Li Xixuan could only remain silent. They watched as Li Zhouluo folded the letter and declared calmly, "Li Hun accepted bribes and has confessed. Execute him."

Li Hun's head snapped up, his face a mask of terror. Before he could scream, guards seized him. Li Zhouluo watched the man being dragged limply from the hall. "I apologize for troubling you elders today," he said. "Within ten days, this matter will have a definitive conclusion. I will inform you all then."

He could no longer bear the atmosphere. Rising quickly from the main seat, he bowed deeply to Li Xuanxuan and walked out without a backward glance. No one else moved; they avoided looking at Li Zhouming. Only after the wastrel finally left, taking Li Chengzhi with him, did half the assembly begin to disperse.

Li Chenghao, his expression grave, hurried after the escort taking Li Chengpan back to the main isle. Only outside the hall did he encounter the belated arrivals—the eldest and second brothers of the Zhou generation. He gave them a cold, silent stare. Embarrassed, the brothers explained softly, "Uncle… just now, we were summoned away by sister Xinghan…"

Li Chenghao was no fool; he understood their excuse perfectly. He suppressed his fury and stalked away, leaving the utterly humiliated Li Xixuan behind. As Li Xixuan turned to leave, a middle-aged man blocked his path.

This was Li Shuya, the brother of Li Quewan. After losing his ship on the lake, he had remained by Li Xuanxuan's side—a blessing in disguise. He bowed deeply. "My lord. The Old Master requests your presence."

Li Xixuan looked uncomfortable but followed Li Shuya to a side peak. He entered a small, immaculate courtyard where Li Xuanxuan was calmly preparing tea at a square table. Seeing the old master's peaceful expression, Li Xixuan relaxed slightly. He moved forward and knelt respectfully. "Grandfather."

The tea in Li Xuanxuan's cup was scalding, hissing white steam. He set the cup down, raised one wrinkled hand, and carefully rolled back the sleeve on his other arm. He reached forward and slapped Li Xixuan hard across the face.

Smack!

The blow wasn't heavy, but it was shockingly loud. The pale, plump man instantly broke into a cold sweat. He dropped forward, pressing himself to the ground at the old master's feet, not daring to utter a sound.

Chapter 788: The Sacred Writ Gate

Li Xuanxuan retracted his hand, leaving the pale-skinned man prostrate on the ground, afraid to rise. Only then did the old man's fury become apparent. He ignored the tea, letting it sit untouched on the table, and spoke in a rasping voice:

"This incident… exactly how much was Li Chenghao involved?"

Li Xixuan remained pressed to the floor, kneeling obediently. "Grandfather… why would you say such a thing?" he whispered.

Li Xuanxuan gave him a dark look. "I know. Li Chenghuai's 'divine insight' implicated a crowd of people. None of you have had a moment's peace since, and worse, it terrified the external clans and minor sects. That is why I persuaded him to withdraw. Now Li Chenghuai is in seclusion, yet you demand his return. Did you prepare some new shamanic trick to test him? Or devise some convoluted ploy to bypass his judgment? All while ensuring Zhouluo suffers a catastrophic loss of prestige… Is *this* how you conduct yourself as an elder?"

Li Xixuan whispered, "It was only for the sake of Chengpan's good name."

Li Xuanxuan laughed, a sound devoid of humor. His eyes flashed, his aura suddenly turning vicious. "I don't care what schemes you plotted. The investigation would inevitably conclude that only Li Hun was guilty of a capital crime. A perfect scapegoat! Li Chenghuai may not dare investigate you personally, but do you think *I* don't? There is no one else here. I will summon Li Chenghuai this instant."

Li Xixuan broke. He shuffled forward an inch, tears streaming down his face as he choked out his words. "Grandson just feels the clan is too cruel! Zhouluo, Xinghan, and you, Old Master, you live comfortably on the main isle, but have you ever once considered what life is like for the other bloodlines?

"The direct-line mortals of other immortal clans live as local emperors, or at the very least enjoy boundless wealth and servants. But our family! Our proud direct bloodline! The moment my children were found to lack spiritual apertures, they were relegated to farming! Mount Qingdu provides just enough food to survive, while every other aspect of their lives is monitored with demonic scrutiny, endlessly harsh. If *my* children are treated thus, what about the others? Our clan boasts a century of glory, but how many direct-line tears are shed in the shadows?"

"Those with outside surnames face no scrutiny from Mount Qingdu; they live quite comfortably. Meanwhile, the number of clan members with cultivation bases grows, both on the isle and off, yet our unity fractures day by day. Have you ever wondered why? Chengpan is one of the loyal ones. Old Master, do you want to see how much attachment those brought in from the periphery truly feel for this clan? Before they awakened their talent, you demanded they eat chaff and wild vegetables. Now that they have spiritual apertures, you demand they dedicate their lives to the lake and the common folk. How can the world be so convenient!"

"I watched this, and my heart ached. I did what I could, privately looking after the younger generations. Then Li Chenghuai took charge of Mount Qingdu. He was so incorruptible. He arrested several clan elders, and all avenues of support were severed. The lake was 'cleansed.' But do you know, Old Master, how many people wept beneath that cleansing? We are all of the Moongaze bloodline! The main isle acts with such heartless indifference!"

He slammed his head against the floor. *Thud, thud, thud.* "I am an old man with few days left!" he wept. "Grandson *is* selfish! I want my sons to live a decent life! But I also cannot bear to watch our clan tear itself apart, growing more alienated by the day. Of the younger generation, Zhoufang and Zhouyang see it most clearly. They have constantly fought to secure shelter and privilege for the children of the elders, only to be repeatedly rejected by Mount Qingdu. If this continues… the clan faces certain disaster!"

Li Xuanxuan's breathing grew ragged. "What?" he snapped. "You want our family to implement a caste system? You want everyone named Li to be a first-class citizen, enjoying wealth from birth until death? When other families decline, they can till the fields, but someone named Li is forbidden?"

Li Xixuan prostrated himself again, weeping bitterly. "Old Master… the Azure Pond Sect belongs first and foremost to the Chi and Si clans. The Purple Smoke

Gate belongs first to the Kan and Wen! Even Myriad Radiance belongs first to the Cheng! Old Master, the world *is* built on ranks! The first class belongs to high cultivators and their descendants! It is common talk that sects are rife with power struggles, yet they *still* have a first class sitting at the top. Our family carries the name Li! Why are *we* forbidden from being first class?"

Li Xuanxuan's face flushed crimson with rage. He shot up from his seat, drew back his foot, and kicked Li Xixuan squarely in the head, sending the man rolling several meters. "You…" the old man roared. "You read all those books on Mount Qingdu for nothing!"

Li Xixuan's pale face streamed with blood. "It is *because* I read those books!" he screamed. "Old Master! This affair was only meant to prove that even divine insight can be flawed! It was to free those clan elders and rally our family's spirit! Li Chenghao didn't know the full plot… I know he only joined because he pitied Chengpan and I dragged him in, but he understood the stakes and he helped me! His daughter Xingsai just died… and Li Chenghao, her father, did not utter a single word of complaint! Yet now, even *he* stepped forward to help me! This shows where the hearts of the clan truly lie! It was Xie and Li Chengzhi who treasured their reputations and retreated! Old Master, can you still tell loyalty from treason?"

Li Xuanxuan, burning with fury, descended into a coughing fit. The violent sound terrified Li Xixuan, who swallowed the remainder of his defense. The old man violently flung his sleeve. "Get out!" he snarled, teeth gritted. "Get! Out!"

Li Xixuan kowtowed three times and retreated, looking utterly broken. Li Xuanxuan coughed violently for some time before sinking back into his seat. Li Shuya, eyes red with alarm, nervously brought him the tea.

He remained seated late into the night. Finally, he retrieved a wooden box from the courtyard, took out a jade slip, and rubbed it thoughtfully. It contained the writings of Li Tongya. He reviewed the contents again and again, remaining silent in the darkness.

Moongaze Lake.

Li Zhouluo returned to the lake and interrogated the West Bank families through the night. As expected, the evidence still pointed back to Li Hun and Ren Ting. Whoever gave the orders from above remained unknown, but all the actual crimes had been executed by Li Hun. Li Hun had been sentenced to death and was still being held in the main hall.

The interrogation revealed that all four petitioners believed they were genuinely committing crimes. Ren Ting hadn't even realized he was being bribed; in his memory, the He woman didn't even have the surname He. Li Hun, meanwhile, despite sensing something was amiss, directed all blame toward An Xuanxin.

'If Father used his art, the results would show the four petitioners as innocent and the West Bank families as guilty. But if I investigate closely, the West Bank families are also innocent… The intermediaries are either dead or have fled.'

He faintly sensed the outline of a conspiracy. Just as he was drowning in work, Li Zhoufang entered the hall and bowed respectfully. His eldest brother already wore a long beard, looking thoroughly middle-aged. Li Zhouluo quickly set his work aside. "Thank you, Elder Brother."

Li Zhoufang looked exhausted. He shook his head slowly. "This incident left Uncle Cheng humiliated. I could not sit by; I refuse to bear the reputation of an unfilial nephew. I came seeking the Patriarch for a reason… My uncle's daughter, our sister Xingsai, who perished… she left a child behind…"

Li Zhouluo's grip tightened on his brush; he knew exactly what the next sentence would be. He was saved by the sound of urgent footsteps. A Jade Court Guard hurried in.

"Patriarch! An urgent report from the wilderness! Lord Cui has arrived on the isle with the Kong family!"

Li Zhoufang was meticulous about protocol, and matters of familial privilege could always wait. He shook out his sleeves and immediately took his leave. Li Zhouluo, granted a moment's reprieve, felt his anxiety about the East sharpen.

"Send them in!"

Cui Jueyin strode in, clad in Daoist robes. He and Ding Weizeng were now ranked as the Li family's two greatest combat strengths and were highly respected. Li Zhouluo descended from his seat to meet him. Cui Jueyin bowed and spoke concisely:

"Reporting to the Patriarch: the reason for the Capital Immortals retreat has been confirmed. An overseas Dao lineage, the Xuanquan Great Dao of the Matron, emerged from the river, invaded Shanji Prefecture, and forced the White Ye Immortal Sect to flee. They have occupied the Profound Peak Gate!"

"Daoist Master Zhu Gong of that lineage has established a new sect in the mountains, claiming to be the inheritor of the Comprehending Profundity. They established a branch called the Profound Immersion Sacred Writ Dao, or the 'Sacred Writ Gate' for short. Under the banner of 'aiding the weak and distressed,' they are integrating the Profound Peak Gate, which they also claim as part of the Comprehending Profundity. They have renamed the mountain Mount Muquan and formally declared their dominion!"

Li Zhouluo was deeply shaken. Cui Jueyin continued, "Three months from now, Daoist Master Zhu Gong will host a banquet on Mount Muquan for all cultivators. We have heard that cultivators from the Purple Smoke Gate ascended the mountain just today. Even Daoist Master Tinglan of the Purple Smoke blessed land went personally."

Unlike Li Zhouluo, Cui Jueyin was not entirely surprised. He had, after all, accompanied Li Ximing to the Purple Smoke Gate and had gathered several oblique hints during his long conversations with their cultivators.

Li Zhouluo absorbed the report. "How did the Kong family react?"

The Sacred Writ Gate was claiming the legacy of the Profound Peak Gate under the guise of "aiding the distressed." This instantly turned the Kong family's marginalized status into a sensitive political crisis. Li Zhouluo had seized upon the crucial question, and Cui Jueyin had clearly anticipated it.

"Most of the Kong family members are confused and distraught. Two of their juniors tried to gather information about the Sacred Writ Gate but were severely reprimanded by Kong Guxi. As of now, the Profound Peak survivors have shown no intention of contacting the Sacred Writ Gate, and the Sacred Writ Gate has made no attempt to contact them."

Li Zhouluo breathed a sigh of relief, grateful his own position hadn't yet become awkward. Just then, Chen Yang rushed in. "Patriarch! An envoy from the Sacred Writ Gate has arrived on the isle! He claims he is here to deliver an invitation!"

This news signaled a friendly attitude from the new sect. Li Zhouluo brightened. "Bring him in immediately!"

A young man in ornate gold and azure robes entered the hall. He had fair skin, a wide smile, and was followed by a figure in plain robes and a wide bamboo hat that obscured his face. The young man bowed. "Dai Jinquan of the Profound Immersion Sacred Writ Dao greets the Patriarch. With joyous events approaching, we congratulate the immortal clan on its evergreen prosperity, enduring for countless generations…"

He rattled off a long string of pleasantries. Li Zhouluo forced a smile in return. "We have often heard of your immortal Dao's great name. To relocate within the seas and acquire such a treasured land is truly a joyous occasion…"

The Li family was, after all, harboring the Kong clan. The Sacred Writ Gate's occupation of their mountain was an awkward topic. Hearing Li Zhouluo's neutral response, Dai Jinquan's smile widened. He retrieved a gold-and-azure invitation from his sleeve. "I trust your noble clan has heard. Three months from now, our Daoist Master will host a banquet on Mount Muquan for all cultivators. We sincerely hope the immortal clan will grace us with its presence…"

His purpose achieved, Dai Jinquan offered one more platitude and fell silent. The man in the bamboo hat stepped forward and removed it, revealing an energetic, familiar face.

It was Wen Wu of the Purple Smoke Gate!

Wen Wu produced a purple-gold token. "I am Wen Wu of the Purple Smoke Gate," he said solemnly. "We have met before, Patriarch. I have taken advantage of the Sacred Writ Gate's journey to deliver a message from my Daoist Master."

At these words, Cui Jueyin immediately activated an ocular art to verify him. Wen Wu presented the token, and a plume of purple smoke—a divine ability—streamed from it, coalescing in the center of the hall. Everyone started in alarm, and Li Zhouluo quickly descended from his seat to bow.

The smoke solidified into the image of Daoist Master Tinglan. She scanned the hall, and upon recognizing Cui Jueyin, she raised an eyebrow. "Jueyin. Your Daoist Master Zhaojing already made the arrangements; he discussed this with

me at Purple Smoke. The Profound Peak Dao lineage belongs to the Sacred Writ Gate. Out of consideration for Moongaze's reputation, Zhu Gong will not make the first move. Your family should handle the arrangements quickly. It will look better for both sides."

Cui Jueyin bowed respectfully. The apparition vanished. Dai Jinquan and Wen Wu, still kneeling, completed their farewell salutes. Only then did everyone else rise. Wen Wu replaced his hat, and the two envoys departed without another word.

Li Zhouluo had Chen Yang personally escort them out. He released a quiet breath of tension. "Send the Profound Peak contingent up."

'Profound Peak is also part of the Comprehending Profundity? It's not impossible…'

There was already one Comprehending Profundity lineage in Jiangbei: the Profound Wonder Temple, entrusted to them by Changxi. Sumian had always claimed descent from the Comprehending Profundity's Xu Xiang lineage. Li Zhouluo began to ponder.

'Profound Wonder Temple starts with *Profound*. Profound Peak Gate starts with *Profound*. The Sacred Writ Gate's full name is the Profound Immersion Sacred Writ Dao… it also starts with *Profound*.'

While he was lost in thought, Kong Guxi hurried into the hall. The sect master looked distraught, his face streaked with tears. He bowed deeply.

"Patriarch… our ancestral mountain has been *stolen* by the Sacred Writ Gate…"

He used the word "stolen" to make his position clear. Li Zhouluo, hiding his own suspicions, adopted an expression of shared grief and indignation.

"Sect Master Kong, I heard the Sacred Writ Gate claims your sect is part of the Comprehending Profundity Daoist tradition… How is it we have never heard you mention this?"

At this question, Kong Guxi's expression filled with resentment and sorrow.

"Patriarch," he bowed, "the Comprehending Profundity Daoist tradition is an ancient one, and it is indeed connected to our own Fool's Mountain Chase technique. When our founder established the sect, he registered our lineage under

the Comprehending Profundity banner, calling ourselves the 'Great Dao of Profound Light Moving Mountains.' But… because our inheritance was incomplete, we could not even name our specific progenitor. We were never recognized by the main tradition. Eventually… we stopped using the title."

"While our Founder was alive, he worked day and night seeking recognition for that title, but it came to nothing. And now… now that it has come to this… purely so they can annex us, *now* they suddenly recognize the connection!"

Li Zhouluo nodded gravely. He stepped forward and solemnly helped Kong Guxi to his feet. "Sect Master Kong, we have discussed this matter thoroughly. Although the Capital Immortals sect has retreated, there is no guarantee they will not strike south again. Our own Daoist Master is absent, and the wilderness is fraught with peril. I fear… I fear we can no longer guarantee your sect's safety."

"As it stands, the Sacred Writ Gate has driven off the White Ye Immortal Sect, and Daoist Master Zhu Gong is protecting the Profound Peak disciples. We hear they are searching throughout Shanji Prefecture to gather all the survivors. Sect Master, perhaps you should take your people there. You will be safe from the White Ye Immortal Sect's assassins, and you can preserve your Dao lineage!"

Kong Guxi's heart turned to ice.

From the moment the Sacred Writ Gate announced they were "aiding the distressed," his hopes of rebuilding his sect had turned to ash. The Sacred Writ Gate was already "saving" and "merging" the Profound Peak lineage. If another Profound Peak Gate suddenly appeared in the west, how would that be interpreted?

The sect master had only hesitated to leave the Li family's protection because the time was not right, not because he intended to abandon his lineage. It was impossible for him not to despise the Sacred Writ Gate, a fact his earlier outburst had made perfectly clear.

But Li Zhouluo's meaning was undeniable. The great tide of events was moving, and it was not something the Kong clan—or even the Moongaze Li clan—could stop. Kong Guxi went limp, collapsing back to his knees in a stupor. "Pa… Patriarch…"

Chapter 789: The End of the Line

Li Zhouluo remained silent, watching the Sect Master Kong collapse to the floor. Dili Guang, seeing this, shut the great hall's doors tight. The hall first fell into dimness before the lamps within flickered to life. Kong Guxi muttered, "Clan Head… Clan Head… Daoist Master… Daoist Master, he! I… *Ai*!"

This was, after all, a monumental event, so Li Zhouluo did not press him. He stood for a while, waiting until Kong Guxi finally seemed to regain some clarity. The old man brushed at his own hair, which had turned stark white in just a few short years, and bowed.

"The Ancestor is dead, and the Profound Peak Gate has crumbled. For years… one refused aid, another watched with folded arms. We were fortunate to receive the help of the Immortal Clan, allowing a few juniors in the clan to survive. This kindness… this old man has etched it into his heart. The entire Kong Clan has etched it into their hearts…

"Now, the clouds have parted to reveal the moon. The Comprehending Profundity has come to our rescue, delivering us from the sea of suffering and allowing us to return to our mountain gate. However, our Dao lineage ends here. From this day forward, there is only the Kong Clan. There is no more Profound Peak."

"Senior Kong Tingyun is still out there… Rest easy, esteemed elder…"

Li Zhouluo offered a few words of comfort. Kong Guxi listened respectfully before replying, "Since the Profound Peak Dao lineage ends here, there is no longer any talk of Daoist scriptures. I have already brought the *Profound Light Mountain-Moving Sutra* of the Fool's Mountain Chase. Please… Moongaze… accept it!"

He retrieved a jade-yellow slip from his sleeve, knelt with a thud, and offered it up with both hands clasping either end. Li Zhouluo rushed to help him up,

but his cultivation was far inferior to the other man's; naturally, he couldn't lift him.

Kong Guxi choked back a sob. "Since we are going to the Sacred Writ Gate , the *Profound Light Mountain-Moving Sutra* must be returned to the Profound Immersion Sacred Writ Dao lineage, returned to the sect. In the future, my descendants will have meager fortunes and shallow fates. We may not be able to continue cultivating the Great Dao of Profound Light Moving Mountains… Please, Moongaze, keep a copy!"

He snapped his head up, his eyes bulging wide. His already gaunt face looked doubly aged beneath that intense stare. He stared deeply at Li Zhouluo, clutching his sleeve tightly, and moaned incoherently, "Leaving it with your esteemed clan is good… leaving it here is good. This is a fine cultivation method, one with a long history. Fifty years… a hundred years from now, they can take a look, yes…?"

The sentence was disjointed, the "they can take a look" seemingly referring to the Li family. But his eyes, bulging as if they might fly from their sockets, and his pleading gaze had their intended effect. Understanding struck Li Zhouluo like lightning.

'Returning the *Profound Light Mountain-Moving Sutra* to the Profound Immersion Dao lineage is a certainty. They will surely have methods to sever the inheritance. Whether the Kong family can borrow it to practice in the future… remains unknown…

'He is leaving a copy of the *Profound Light Mountain-Moving Sutra* at Moongaze Lake, waiting. Fifty or a hundred years from now, when the Sacred Writ Gate lowers its guard, someone from his Kong clan might have the chance to come and view it. They will not have their Dao path completely severed, left with no chance to ever rise again!'

He placed his hand over the old man's. In a voice that was both soothing and deliberately ambiguous, he said, "The Daoist Master is concerned… Why stop at only a hundred years?"

The words worked. Kong Guxi pressed the jade slip into his hands, whispering, "The *Profound Light Mountain-Moving Sutra* is here… it's just a Purple Mansion Dao lineage, nothing more. My gratitude is endless. This is just a small token…"

His face was a deathly white as he remained kneeling, trembling as if having just survived a terrible danger. He quickly took his leave. The *Profound Light Mountain-Moving Sutra* felt heavy in Li Zhouluo's sleeve, compelling him to hurry back to the main seat.

He inspected it with his spiritual sense. It was indeed the *Profound Light Mountain-Moving Sutra*. Not only that, it also contained *Viewing the Pavilion Terrace, Forged in Fire* and another manual, *The Art of Wondrous Earth and Moving Treasured Mountains*, which detailed the art of shifting and moving mountains.

Li Zhouluo placed the jade slip quietly on the table. The image of Kong Guxi's eyes still lingered in his mind. After witnessing the plight of the Profound Peak Sect Master, he suddenly felt his own situation wasn't so troublesome. He gave an order:

"Ask Protector Cui to make a trip… personally escort the members of Profound Peak back to their mountain gate. Ensure all courtesies are perfectly observed. We must not allow others to misunderstand."

Dili Guang immediately departed. A woman in white robes, carrying a sword, entered the hall and waited below. Li Zhouluo dismissed the contingent of the Jade Court Guard, then lowered his voice. "Xinghan…"

Li Xinghan hadn't been able to attend the meeting in Qingdu Hall, but as the current eldest sister of the First branch, she knew a great deal. Her expression was grim. She stepped forward and cupped her hands. "Those elders are all too accustomed to using public office for private gain. They have made things difficult for you, brother."

Li Zhouluo gave a dry laugh. "Right now, I'm thinking about Xingsai. Zhoufang and the others still feel it isn't enough. They don't just want compensation; they want shelter…"

He explained the lengthy affairhow to provide these people with care without breeding new problems. Every detail had to be calculated. Li Xinghan listened, sighing inwardly.

Putting herself in his shoes, given Li Zhouluo's family status and background, he lacked neither resources nor Dharma Artifacts. He had only taken the position of Clan Head because there was truly no one else left…

Li Xinghan also knew clearly that Li Zhouluo, representing the Fourth branch, was the sole heir, and his maternal clan influence here was weak. With Li Chenghuai in seclusion, one could even say Li Zhouluo *was* the Fourth branch. He lacked the natural support of elders and core pillars that the First and Second branches possessed when they held power. He was inherently at a disadvantage.

Seeing him in such a difficult position, she could only listen quietly. Li Zhouluo finished his tirade, paused, and asked, "How is Fifth Brother now?"

At the mention of Li Zhouming, a hint of a smile touched Li Xinghans lips. "I just came from his place. Didn't you give him that White Falcon Gold? He came down from Mount Qingdu and didn't even change his clothes, just rushed back to forge hairpins. Who knows which songstress he's trying to please this time…"

Their opinion of Li Zhouming had clearly changed. Normally, such words would carry a tone of helpless exasperation, but now they held more amusement. Li Zhouluo shook his head. "Elder Chen will meticulously note this down against him again. Ive only just realized that hes the one who truly sees things clearly. Anyone else in the clan gets a demerit recorded at Qingdu and they look like theyre attending a funeral. Only himhe gets noted down, gets punished, and makes the exact same mistake next time."

They both chuckled. Li Xinghan replied, "I need to set off again soon to enter the mountains and train my sword. But before I leave, I'll see Uncle Cheng and have a good talk with him."

Li Zhouluo nodded repeatedly. "Cheng" was Li Xinghan's direct uncle; her words carried immense weight. He said quickly, "Thank you, sister!"

Li Xinghan cradled her sword and departed briskly. Li Zhouluo busied himself in the hall. Only half a quarter-hour passed before Chen Yang entered unexpectedly. The man bowed and said respectfully, "Clan Head, wonderful news! Wang Quwan has successfully broken through and forged the Floating Cloud Body!"

Li Zhouluo's eyes lit up. He strode quickly out of the hall and looked up. Sure enough, floating clouds obscured the sun in the north. He asked, "Excellent! The Essence Gathering Pill the Daoist Master gave him was not wasted. He truly did not disappoint. Where is he?"

Chen Yang replied, "Judging by the celestial phenomenon, he has just broken through. He is almost certainly on his way to pay respects! His seclusion spot isn't far from here. The floating cloud has been rising for some time. I reckon he'll arrive at any moment."

"Good!"

Wang Quwan was not just anyone. For one, the man represented the clans of Jiangbei. The Wang Clan had mobilized their entire clan to help the Li family defend Jiangbei. Furthermore, he had been personally promoted by Li Ximing. His significance was extraordinary.

Moreover, Wang Quwan's sword Dao cultivation was not weak, and he had long held a reputation. That Floating Cloud Body was no simple lineage; it represented an immortal foundation of the Body Divine Ability, and it was highly compatible with artifact refinement. This man's future was truly bright.

Li Zhouluo hurried back to the main seat, pulled out a jade slip from the side, glanced at it, and said, "I hear he is also a sword cultivator. It is only right to reward him with a Dharma sword. Protector Chen, what artifact does he currently use?"

Chen Yang replied, "I am told it is a common, low-grade Qi Refining item."

Li Zhouluo nodded immediately. "A Foundation Establishment artifact cannot be bestowed lightly, but a peak-grade Qi Refining Dharma sword possesses both value and significance… Let me check the treasury… There is still one peak-grade Qi Refining Dharma sword, obtained during the North-South conflict. Quickly, bring it for inspection."

Wang Quwan would certainly come to pay respects immediately. Dili Guang understood time was tight and hurried off. Chen Yang said, "Clan Head, I will go outside the island to greet him!"

Li Zhouluo watched him go, feeling a quiet sense of relief. He waited only a moment before a man stepped forward to pay respects. This man had average features, trod upon clouds, and carried a sword on his back. His gaze was resolute, his steps steady. He bowed. "Wang Quwan of Jiangbei greets the Clan Head!"

The man was unremarkable in appearance, yet held quite the reputation. Li Zhouluo smiled and helped him up. "Congratulations, Quwan! It is truly not easy for Jiangbei to produce a sword cultivator such as you."

Dili Guang returned at the perfect moment, holding a jade box. Li Zhouluo took it with one hand and opened it. Inside lay a longsword. The blade shimmered with intersecting gold and blue light, emanating a pure aura. One glance confirmed it was of the highest grade.

Li Zhouluo smiled. "This sword is three chi, one cun, and two fen long. It weighs fifty-two jin and one liang. Its base is Jinghai Cold Iron, forged with Golden Essence from the bottom of the Great River. Its color resembles the waters of Jinghai, and its patterns depict the Golden Beast of the Clear River. Its name is…"

This sword had been seized as spoils. Although the materials were discernible, no name was engraved on the blade. Li Zhouluo paused slightly, then bestowed a name ripe with meaning.

"Jingxi Qing!"

Wang Quwan was a sword cultivator; no sword cultivator dislikes Dharma swords. The "Jingxi Qing," as a peak-grade Qi Refining weapon, was even higher quality than Li Xinghan's previous Northern Jade. Although Wang Quwan was now the head of the Jiangbei clans, he had relied on his Wang surname and his own two hands to fight for his position; he did not come from a prominent background. He immediately bowed. "Clan Head! This is too precious!"

Li Zhouluo shook his head. "Your family exerted great effort defending Jiangbei. This is a reward you deserve. From now on, it also represents the status of your Jiangbei Wang Clan at White river Creek. How can we speak of its value? If we must speak of value, this sword is worth less than that Essence Gathering Pill."

Since Li Zhouluo insisted, Wang Quwan could only accept the jade box with both hands. His gaze toward the Dharma sword was filled with an undisguisable affection. He clutched it to his chest as if it were a priceless treasure, thanking him repeatedly.

Li Zhouluo knew this man's reputation; he was definitely reliable and capable. That he had emerged from seclusion and immediately received a sword personally bestowed by Li Zhouluo was deeply significant. This solved an urgent problem for Li Zhouluo. He wasn't in a rush to put the man to work, simply asking smilingly about matters in Jiangbei.

After inquiring for a time, Li Zhouluo learned that Wang Quwan's elder brotherthat Alchemist of the Wang Clanhad gone missing on an outing years ago and hadn't been heard from since. The one managing the family at home was his younger brother, Wang Quyu. Li Zhouluo had heard of this man; he too was talented, and though his aptitude was inferior to Wang Quwan's, his methods were formidable.

He studied Wang Quwan's expression and asked, "How… is your sword Dao cultivation? With your sword qi already formed, sword essence should not be far off, yes?"

This was, naturally, flattery. Sword essence was exceptionally difficult to achieve. As expected, Wang Quwan shook his head. "Sword essence is nowhere in sight; I hit a bottleneck long ago. I am merely hoping to borrow and read the sword Dao scriptures from around the lake, hoping they resonate with the sword Dao of Jiangbei, and see if I can walk my own path."

According to custom, Wang Quwan still needed to pay respects to Li Xuanxuan, Ding Weizeng, and the others. Li Zhouluo let him go, his mood greatly improved. He ordered the small windows on both sides of the main hall opened. The hall brightened instantly, morning light spilling inside, illuminating the tabletop in brilliant light.

The dawn light climbed the jade racks, flowed over the glistening scales of the Coiling Dragon Pillar near the table, and reflected onto the main seat. It passed over Li Zhouluo, casting faint, shimmering scale patterns across the far wall.

After Kong Guxi left the hall, he returned to the island, lost and desolate. His elder brother, Kong Guli, was waiting below, looking preoccupied. When he saw Kong Guxi's expression, the old man already anticipated the answer and covered his face in silence.

Kong Guxi didn't say an extra word. He took a few steps, only to see Fu Yuezi approach and bow respectfully. "Gate Master."

Hearing this title, Kong Guxi felt a hundred conflicting flavors well up in his heart. He was about to speak when he noticed a vast swathe of floating clouds surging on the northern horizon. They were white and misty, reaching straight to the heavens, blotting out the sun.

"Someone else has reached Foundation Establishment."

He shrank into himself, forgetting even to close the courtyard gate, simply watching Kong Guli and Fu Yuezi pack their things… In truth, there was nothing to pack. They were merely waiting for the Li family to escort them. To avoid looking like they were just sitting and waiting for their fate, the old men kept themselves busy with pointless tasks.

After about fifteen minutes, the sound of urgent footsteps and horse hoofs suddenly echoed from the streets and alleys, followed by the sharp, crackling explosion of firecrackers. Several people were shouting in the alleys:

"Great joyous news! Great news! Lord Wang Quwan of the Jiangbei Wang Clan has forged an immortal foundation! Great news… great news! Come and share in the good fortune, collect your rewards and gifts… Come, come…"

One auspicious shout followed another. The two Profound Peak disciples guarding the gate also received immortal rewards and joined the congratulations, starting to laugh. For them, joining the Sacred Writ Gate and ending their lives of wandering and dependency was naturally a good thing. They hadn't thought too deeply about it. Now, they too were cheerful, and the courtyard was filled with thunderous, joyous laughter.

The laughter rang out for a long time before a clear voice finally intervened. "Everyone disperse. The honored guests are resting inside. It is not good to be so rowdy."

It was Cui Jueyin's voice. He always spoke gently, and he understood that Kong Guxi inside was not feeling well. A trace of pity moved him to disperse the crowd. The people finally scattered.

The sounds of joy and laughter faded as they spread out in all directions. Cui Jueyin raised his eyebrows slightly, catching the sound of heavy, suppressed crying from the courtyard. He could faintly make out choked sobs:

"Gate Master… Gate Master!"

"Fu Yuezi… go join the Li family… Go and join the Li family! In any case… in the end, following me to the east will just be more suffering…"

"Gate Master! What are you saying…"

"Brother… rising and falling, such is the way of the world. Outside, the gongs and drums celebrate; inside, we grieve our end. A twenty-year-old minor

branch is just beginning its rise; a three-hundred-year-old immortal clan is reaching its demise. Our luck has run out! Our fate has reached its end… Let us go to the east!”

Chapter 790: The Three Profundities

Sea's Cape.

The coral cave was brilliantly lit. Seawater churned, rolling up plumes of fine white sand that flowed from the cave like a waterfall, drifting and settling in layers on the seafloor. A large school of white shellfish shuttled through the sand, stirring dazzling reflections in the water.

The Daoist in white-gold robes sat with his hands on his knees. With every breath, roiling spiritual qi of the Bright Yang surged, and faint, violet flames intermittently flew out to circle beside him.

Li Ximing had refined three Profound Adamant Essence Gathering Pills in succession, suppressing and grinding away more than half of the flames raging within his Juque Palace. His situation immediately improved.

He still possessed a good number of spiritual items and treasure medicines, and even more spiritual water. Applying the right remedy, he used the "White Waterfall Cold Water" he had received at the Purple Mansion Dharma Assembly, along with his own clan's "Taiyun Flower," to refine a cauldron of pills. He swallowed them all in one go. The scorched, glazed color on his Dharma body slowly returned to normal.

More than a year passed in a flash. Estimating that sixty to seventy percent of his injuries had recovered, and that Qingxu Temple had likely gathered most of what he needed, Li Ximing finally opened his eyes. A flash of light filled the cave. He took out the jade pendant from his sleeve and checked it; nothing major had happened at home.

"This single jade pendant, nourished and enhanced by my divine ability, was secretly given to Grandfather. It has not yet been crushed… meaning the clan has not yet faced a crisis of survival."

He casually collected the array plate in the cave and passed outside. Li Ximing found that the seawater was still azure, but the seabed was completely different.

As far as the eye could see, it was covered in fine white sand. He could faintly see several Embryonic Breathing realm white shellfish busily working the sea floor.

"Curious…"

Li Ximing understood with a single glance. He was clueless about formations and couldn't seal his divine abilities. A Bright Yang Purple Mansion cultivator practicing here had instantly altered the spiritual mechanics of the location. The coral cave should have spewed out Radiant Sky Stone day and night, but the spiritual mechanics at Sea's Cape were insufficient, causing it to spew only layers of white sand.

Even so, it had been enough to make passing demonic beasts stay and settle. Seeing this, it looked like it was about to become a small spiritual land. Li Ximing scanned the area. There were one or two traces of excavation nearby; he didn't know if it was Qingxu Temple or some other group that had come to harvest.

'It's not easy… In Jiangnan, Radiant Sky Stone is used to construct palaces… the bigger the block, the better… This is the first time I've seen anyone collect it as spiritual sand.'

Since fate had brought it about, and there was a rare stretch of vibrant life beneath his feet, Li Ximing simply stretched out his hand, brought two fingers to his lips, and spat out a mouthful of Bright Yang Purple Fire.

The purple fire hovered before him. Li Ximing then took out a jade pot. It was merely a Qi Refining item, kept purely for drinking tea. He formed a seal and cast an art, using his divine ability to leave behind three to five strands of inheritance, before locking the purple fire inside.

Li Ximing's control over fire could only be described as terrifying. The jade pot immediately transformed into a violet-red color, searing hot, radiating waves of bright solar brilliance. With a casual toss, he threw it back into the cave.

The stalled waterfall of white sand began to flow once more. Li Ximing estimated that this mouthful of purple fire, slowly dissipating, could keep the process running for seventy or eighty years. Struck by inspiration, he lifted a brush and wrote:

"Valley Wind."

He flicked his sleeve, and his figure vanished. Crossing a hundred li, he reappeared above Qingxu Temple.

He saw a vast, fertile plain of wheat blowing in the wind, the monastery buildings scattered elegantly within. Only a year had passed, but Qingxu Temple was completely different. The monks in yellow robes no longer seemed to cover the mountains and fields; instead, they were dotted amongst farmers in coarse, short clothes.

He descended on his light, materializing in the highest monastery courtyard. The area seemed empty. The monks of Qingxu Temple had indeed dwindled; presumably, they had all removed their monastic robes to reclaim the wasteland.

Li Ximing sat down at the stone table in the courtyard. He was just hearing the sound of footsteps when Xia Shouyu's accusatory voice arrived first. The woman was highly displeased, snapping, "It's just one pill recipe! It's been half a month and you still haven't gotten it?! How much skill do those people even have that you're finding it so difficult?"

"Shouyu… even the cleverest housewife can't cook without rice. Without resources… what are we supposed to exchange?"

This was followed by a clamor; clearly, many people had arrived. Xia Shouyu dealt with them, annoyed, and sneered, "No resources? You think I can't see through your petty schemes? You're just after those few pills the Daoist Master gave me. I'd dare to give them… but would you little nobodies dare to accept?"

The men following her were clearly all from the Xia family. Their expressions varied. The leader glared, wanting to curse her, but swallowed his words out of fear. He retorted, "Your words are meaningless. We don't even know when the Daoist Master will return… How can the temple have that many resources to use?"

"Pah!"

Xia Shouyu pushed the door open, but the curse on her lips died in her throat. She saw the courtyard was filled with light. The man in the white-gold Daoist robe was sitting at the stone table, holding a pill manual, reading it distractedly. The Profound Light in the center of his brow flickered, striking terror into the heart.

Thud!

Xia Shouyu had only managed to get half a foot into the courtyard before she dropped to her knees. The expressions of the men following her also changed drastically. One after another, they fell like rolling gourds, collapsing in a heap.

In an instant, the area outside the courtyard, inside the courtyard, and on the steps was filled with kneeling figures. One had slipped on the threshold, his rear end stuck high in the air, yet he didn't dare move. The ground was covered in figures, still as statues.

Clearly, neither the island-protecting grand array of Qingxu Temple nor the arrays within the courtyard existed for this Daoist Master. Xia Shouyu truly felt as if half her life had been scared out of her. She trembled. "The Daoist Master's immortal chariot has arrived… this lowly one failed to welcome you from afar… please forgive this offense…"

Li Ximing sat in the seat of honor. His gaze shifted from the pill manual in his hand. He gave a noncommittal nod. When dealing with these overseas cultivators, one couldn't afford to be too polite. He just raised an eyebrow. "The pill recipes."

Pill recipes!

Xia Shouyu kowtowed, immediately retrieving a jade box from her storage bag. She turned to look at the trembling crowd behind her. Every last one of them was now behaving, frantically pulling pill recipes from their sleeves and passing them to Xia Shouyu.

She shot the men a venomous glare before turning back. She presented everything respectfully in her hands—a thick stack of beast-hide scrolls piled atop the jade box. Xia Shouyu shifted an inch forward and said respectfully, "This lowly one has spent the last year sending out every cultivator from the temple, searching everywhere. Everything within sight of Sea's Cape, anything famous or rumored… we have checked it all. The harvest is right here."

Li Ximing picked them up one by one to read. No one on the ground dared to move. Soon, the old Temple Master Xia also rushed over, saw the scene, and didn't dare speak, hurriedly kneeling on the ground.

Li Ximing flipped through them. As expected, most were fabricated nonsense. Only three recipes looked reliable, all using ancient spiritual items and resources.

"One from the Azure Proclaimation lineage: 'Treasured Manifestation Divine Mountain Pill,' using 'Supreme Concealed Origin' as the main ingredient. One from the Supreme Yin lineage: 'Single Qi Heart-Overwhelming Pill,' using 'Clear Yin Womb Herb' as the main ingredient. And the last one, from the Capital Guard lineage: 'Purple Water Immortal Marsh Pill,' refined using Crimson-Headed Profound Soul and 'Immortal Pure Qi'."

He had to admit, ancient cultivators were truly wealthy. Not one of the spiritual items listed here was below the Purple Mansion level. Among them, "Supreme Concealed Origin" was a supreme treasure of the Azure Proclaimation lineage. Who would actually use it for alchemy?

As for the "Clear Yin Womb Herb," he had never even heard of it. "Immortal Pure Qi" was a Purple Mansion spiritual item of the Pure Qi lineage, and Crimson-Headed Profound Soul was almost certainly also a precious spiritual item of the Capital Guard lineage…

The only one Li Ximing held any hope for was the "Single Qi Heart-Overwhelming Pill." If he substituted the core ingredient with "Supreme Yin Lunar Essence," perhaps with some tinkering, it might produce some effect.

Just as he was reading the recipes, someone hurried up from below. Not daring to approach, the person only handed up a jade slip, which was passed along the line of kneeling cultivators until it reached Xia Shouyu.

Xia Shouyu recognized it at a glance: it was the very pill recipe they had just been haggling over. It had clearly been acquired long ago; they were just dragging their feet, demanding one of her pills in exchange, obviously intending to pocket it themselves.

Though furious inwardly, she could only present it respectfully. Li Ximing's eyes lit up. With a thought, the jade slip flew into his hand.

There was one reason for his interest: of all these ancient pill recipes, this was finally one recorded in a jade slip!

He scanned it. The jade slip was not newly inscribed; it looked like an original. It recorded the "Heavenly Heart Oneness Pill Art," a lineage of the Secret Enclosure Sect.

Although this Secret Enclosure Sect (Mìfán) sounded similar to the Secret Diffusion (Mìfàn) Monastery of Xiaoshi Mountain, this lineage was no newcomer. It already had a reputation in Jiangnan. The Secret Enclosure Sect Ruins in the

Eastern Sea were famous; both Li Encheng of the Azure Pond Sect and the Chi Clan Ancestor, Chi Wei, had benefited greatly from the Water Wall Pearl found there.

But when he looked at the jade slip in his hand, suspicion immediately arose. He raised an eyebrow. "Since you bought this from someone else… shouldn't you have transcribed a copy? Why bring the original back?"

A man behind Xia Shouyu shuffled forward on his knees, trembling. "G-Great… Great Lord… that person also stole it… His alchemy skills are crude… This jade slip is mysterious and vast. Lowly cultivators like us… our heads spin just looking at it, let alone trying to copy it…"

Li Ximing narrowed his eyes. "Oh? And he was willing to sell it?"

Being questioned like this, the man was so nervous his calves cramped. He cried out, "T-Truly, Daoist Master! He already tried to refine it according to the steps. This pill art is already ineffective. That's why he sold it!"

Li Ximing slowly sat upright, solemnly immersing his spiritual sense into the slip. Sure enough, he saw the vast, ocean-like text within.

"At the dawn of heaven and earth, Yin and Yang formed first. The Heavenly Lord established his world, and the Five Virtues were thus born, bestowing the Three Profundities, which became the First Dao Archive. Around the Three Profundities, the Four Daos supported them. Below the Three Profundities, only then came the Twelve Mansions… The Secret Diffusion lineage inherits the Encompassing Profundity…"

Sudden realization struck Li Ximing.

"The Secret Enclosure Sect is already an extremely ancient lineage, yet it's also part of the Encompassing Profundity Daoist tradition… That is unheard of… With such a massive background as the Encompassing Profundity Daoist tradition, it's no wonder that just one or two opportunities from it could produce figures like Changxiao, Yehui, and Guo Shentong…"

He now valued this "Heavenly Heart Oneness Pill Art" even more. He began reading it on the spot. The more he read, the stranger and more regrettable it seemed. Finally, he slapped the jade slip against his hand, unsure what to say.

The "Heavenly Heart Oneness Pill Art" was extremely bizarre. This art didn't follow the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao path of "seeking the pill through

nature"; instead, it advocated "seeking the pill through destiny." It was exceedingly complex. Li Ximing gave it a rough overview; the difficulty was extremely high.

'No wonder the Sea's Cape cultivators couldn't refine it. Even I would be extremely strained trying to refine this. Sea's Cape is filled with cultivators of the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao… how could they possibly succeed? Even if they learned everything… they would end up refining their own destiny away…'

He looked at the jade slip, his mind racing.

'If that's the case… perhaps there is a reason why Guo Shentong and Changxiao were the most ruthless in their attempts to harm the one favored by fate. Those two must have obtained some technique from the Encompassing Profundity Daoist tradition, perhaps they were also scheming for this aspect.'

'Changxiao was plotting against our clan's Scion this time, too… Unfortunately, I didn't expect him to be so decisive, so ruthless. He's the head of a Purple Mansion-level power, yet when he struck, he aimed to create a mortal enemy…'

It was a pity that he only held a pill art. He couldn't even glimpse the actual Dao lineage of the Secret Enclosure Sect, let alone the even more ancient Encompassing Profundity Daoist tradition. Stowing the jade slip, Li Ximing fell into thought.

"The Three Profundities. Encompassing Profundity is already one. I wonder if Comprehending Profundity can reach that level. That leaves one more, I wonder whose it is… The Green Pine Dao Lineage dominates Jiangnan. Perhaps tracing it upward, it too is one of the Profundities."

He remained silent. Xia Shouyu and the others kneeling below were suffering, waiting anxiously. Finally, Li Ximing raised his gaze and ordered, "You stay. The rest of you, scatter."

The courtyard emptied as if swept by a gust of wind, leaving only Xia Shouyu kneeling. Li Ximing studied her and asked, "What lineage do you cultivate?"

Xia Shouyu hurriedly replied respectfully, "This lowly one practices the *Art of Suppressing Fire and Expelling Cold*. The immortal foundation it builds is called 'White Li Heart.' As for what lineage it is, no ancestor has ever succeeded in cultivating it, so we do not know what it is."

She immediately presented the cultivation art. Li Ximing scanned it. It was indeed an unranked ancient art. Judging by the contents, it wasn't particularly profound, most likely third or fourth grade. He raised an eyebrow. "How rare… it's actually Blazing Fire. This is truly a lineage seldom seen in Jiangnan… Good, good. An unexpected delight!"

Li Ximing had long intended to bring Xia Shouyu back to the lake. Every Dao lineage has its own strengths and weaknesses. The lineage she cultivated was, naturally, the more different from the Li family's, the better. Even if this woman failed her breakthrough, this *Art of Suppressing Fire and Expelling Cold* was a rare lineage manual in itself.

He smiled and nodded, considering the medicinal pills.

'Unfortunately, I don't know the principles of generation and restraint for the Blazing Fire lineage. I only recall descriptions of it 'calming dampness,' 'expelling rain,' and 'transforming cold into heat.' I should avoid the Water Virtue and Cold Qi. Choosing the Fire Virtue is safest.'

He raised his gaze. "Are there any demonic beasts nearby that spit fire and wield flames? I promised you the Great Dao of Foundation Establishment; I should deliver."

Hearing this, Xia Shouyu was practically overwhelmed with joy. She kowtowed repeatedly, her head striking the ground. "This lowly one cannot repay this grace in nine lifetimes! If you have any command in the future, I will die ten thousand deaths to fulfill it…"

She didn't offer too much fawning praise, only saying respectfully, "I have only heard that the Peacock Sea to the east has many islands and many peacocks. Each one is as large as a courtyard, swallowing metal and spitting fire, ferocious and intimidating. The sea also holds single-horned ox-demons. They are all demonic beasts that spit fire and wield flames."

Li Ximing recalled that the Peacock Sea was also home to a Purple Mansion power, Nine Mounds Mountain. Logically, he could pay them a visit. But looking at this clever woman, a plan formed in his mind:

'Zhouming is… he might not even succeed at Foundation Establishment… His reputation has never been good, making him easy to manipulate. I cannot let him marry a direct descendant of some Purple Mansion clan! This Xia Shouyu

is intelligent, clever, and exceptionally talented. Her background is clean… and she is very beautiful… She is perfectly suitable.'

As for Li Zhouming's own opinion, Li Ximing wasn't worried. That child was an incorrigible lecher; he wouldn't have any complaints about marrying her. Thus, he said, "Prepare yourself well. Once you achieve your immortal foundation, another opportunity will await you."

His figure dissipated like flowing light. The sky was already dimming, and the courtyard instantly grew dark. Xia Shouyu's eyes, however, glittered brightly. She stood up, thinking to herself:

'As long as I have the chance to leave this destitute place… as long as I don't have to be trapped on this desolate island until I die… this is a heaven-sent fortune!'

Dramatis Personae

Li Ximing [Purple Mansion]

Xia Shouyu [Qi Refining Level 9]

Chapter 791: Great Divine Ability

The Peacock Sea.

The waters of the Peacock Sea were unique, a deep brown tinged with green luminescence. Many stretches of the surface were an iridescent mix of coppery-purple and verdant-violet, glittering with ten thousand colors, dazzling to behold.

Upon this jewel-like, shimmering sea, a cultivator in white-gold Daoist robes pierced through the Great Void and materialized.

Li Ximing estimated he had arrived at the Peacock Sea and began to walk across its surface, a sigh of emotion rising in his heart:

'The Sea's Cape is truly distant…'

Li Ximing had traversed the Great Void to get here. His original plan had been to ride the winds all the way from the mortal world, collecting spiritual materials along the route. Who would have thought that even flying for days at his Purple Mansion Realm speed, he hadn't even managed to fly out of the Sea's Cape region? Beyond the waters controlled by Qingxu Temple, there was nothing but an endless, mundane sea, utterly cut off from spiritual qi.

Such places had no connection to the Great Void; within that higher dimension, they were but a single, almost nonexistent point, bypassed in a flash. For an ordinary cultivator, flying that distance would take months, if not years. No wonder no one was willing to travel to the Sea's Cape.

He had merely found a spot with a bare minimum of spiritual qi, entered the Great Void, and this time, he reached the Peacock Sea almost instantly. Gazing back at the boundless ocean behind him, he couldn't help but marvel:

"What a desolate and impoverished place. If a cultivator ever managed to fight their way out from a land like that, they would be a truly world-shaking talent."

He flew along the Peacock Sea for a while. The spiritual qi finally grew dense. Several of the barren islands he passed possessed spiritual qi on par with Qingxu Temple. Flying and stopping intermittently, he soon spotted several large peacocks with vibrant, colorful wings soaring through the air, bringing with them a rolling wave of heat.

The largest of these peacocks was the size of a courtyard, its back broad enough to carry a building. Even the smallest was powerfully built, larger than a bedframe, its feathers a riotous blaze of purple, red, and green. Flames churned around it—a truly majestic sight.

Li Ximing glanced over and thought he saw human figures on the peacocks' backs. He immediately dismissed the idea of attacking and traversed the Great Void again, materializing over a massive island bustling with a noisy, lively crowd below.

This place was nothing like the Sea's Cape; concealing his tracks was necessary. Li Ximing casually altered his face and retracted the aura of Profound Light from his robes, erasing every trace of his Bright Yang divine ability.

He grasped his hand, and the jade-bead-like Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger materialized. Pinching it in his fingers, he used the spiritual tool's authority to transform his entire aura into that of the Bound Earth Dao lineage, suppressing his cultivation to the late Foundation Establishment Realm.

Taking a step forward, he transformed into a middle-aged cultivator wearing brown robes.

Li Ximing was utterly clueless regarding the Dao of Transformations. This series of changes couldn't fool a Purple Mansion cultivator, nor even a Foundation Establishment cultivator who specialized in such arts. Unfortunately for them, the island was filled with nothing but Qi Refining and Embryonic Breathing cultivators, all of whom prostrated themselves the moment they saw him.

The one leading them was the island master. He was similarly dirt-poor, but at least slightly better off than Qingxu Temple; the man wore a Qi Refining-level magical sword at his waist. He kowtowed and said:

"I do not know where the Master comes from? My land is humble and may stain your noble feet…"

Although the archaic customs here weren't as pronounced as at the Sea's Cape, they still retained the "Master" form of address. Li Ximing asked:

"What place is this, and whose domain are these seas?"

The island master bowed. "Reporting to Master, this is Gaoxuan Island. The Peacock Sea is the territory of the Grand Dao of Tai-Tao and the Nine Mounds. About two thousand li east of here, there is a Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain, where the Daoist Masters reside."

Inquiring here at the Peacock Sea was far more convenient. This single sentence was infinitely more useful than the vague information Xia Shouyu had provided. Li Ximing lowered his voice:

"I have heard there is a great divine ability user in the Peacock Sea. Might I ask which Daoist Master cultivates here?"

The man hurriedly bowed again. "Reporting to Master, on the Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain resides Daoist Master Yuandao, a possessor of great divine abilities. The entire Peacock Sea venerates him alone. He is kind and charitable. Not only do people from all the nearby sea regions come to seek his teachings, but even Daoist Masters from the unreachable Jiangnan come to pay their respects…"

'Daoist Master Yuandao…'

Li Ximing had never heard the name. He frowned, forced to ask, "Do you know what lineage the Grand Dao of Tai-Tao and the Nine Mounds is… What is the surname of their direct line?"

The man was only at the Qi Refining level; how could he possibly know anything about lineages? Terrified of offending the powerful cultivator, he broke into a cold sweat, racking his brain.

"This lowly one is in a remote place and knows nothing of lineages… or direct lines… I have never had the opportunity to ask…"

Just as sweat poured down his face, his eyes suddenly lit up. "However… when this lowly one was young, I followed my father once to the Peacock Sea Market. The lord administrator of that market had come down from the mountain. All the cultivators called him… Lord Tantai…"

'Tantai?!'

Enlightenment struck Li Ximing. He thought inwardly:

"Someone from the Tantai family! Tantai Jin of the Azure Pond Sect is from that family… This Daoist Master Yuandao must be Si Boxiu's friend!"

"Well, well. So the Tantai family is in the Peacock Sea… and they command such prestige! Daoist Master Yuanxiu truly found a powerful backer for his descendants…"

With this understanding, he felt an unexpected surge of delight. He raised an eyebrow. "I see… Are all the peacocks in this sea from the Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain? Who normally governs the demons here?"

The man didn't know why the topic had suddenly shifted to demons, but he replied, "You may not know, sir, but the Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain is located in the southwestern part of the Peacock Sea, which is also where the largest clusters of islands and landmasses are. The peacock lords are all in the northeast… stretching continuously northward, there is a Great Bestowal Temple of Bronze Splendor. It is where the peacock lords cultivate. They all read sutras and strike wooden fish. They are said to have blessed lands within their bellies and have saved many people."

This piqued Li Ximing's interest. He asked, "The Peacock Sea once had a Demon King, and now its descendants are studying Buddhist cultivation? For the Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain to tolerate them, they must have someone backing them."

The island master naturally didn't know the details. "They are indeed the descendants of that great one. I've heard that these lords, with their myriad colors, are connected to many Dao lineages within the sea. They often share life and death with those great figures…"

Li Ximing understood. The Merciful Ones of the mainland frequently came here looking for mounts. He mused internally:

'If I'm going to hunt demons, hunting these sutra-chanting peacocks would be the most satisfying. Unfortunately, my condition is not optimal, and I don't know who stands behind them, so it's not wise to make a move. Still, I can memorize the location…'

"In the future, if I need sacrifices for a ritual or ingredients for alchemy, I can swing by this flock of peacocks and 'reap an autumn harvest.' After all, demons without backing are hard to find, but the peacocks in this temple are both fat and plentiful."

Thus, he asked, "Do you know of any area that is more chaotic, where demons run rampant?"

The man replied, "Further south, there is the East A-Wang Sea. The dragon-kin have withdrawn and no longer govern those waters, so it's in total chaos… Everyone is planning to go there to make a fortune."

Li Ximing nodded. He casually tossed the man two medicinal pills and traversed space. Being so close to the Sea's Cape, the Great Void was extremely efficient. He quickly arrived at this East A-Wang Sea. Peering through the Great Void for a moment, he tracked the spiritual qi fluctuations and broke through. Sure enough, he saw battles raging everywhere in utter chaos.

Not far away, a great black-feathered bird with crimson eyes was flying, wreathed in roaring flames. Two groups of people were scattering in panic. The flame-spewing bird blotted out the sun, its fire scorching the surroundings white as it stretched its neck, swallowing cultivators one by one, leisurely pursuing the fleeing crowd.

"Yo! Better to arrive at the right time… than to arrive early."

Just as the demon was reveling in its power, a cultivator in white-gold robes appeared from thin air beside it. He reached out one hand and seized the majestic demon by the neck, lifting it casually. In an instant, all the flames vanished. The bird, struck by the divine ability, was forced back to its original form, shrinking to the size of a common wild goose. Its legs stuck out rigidly, unable to move a feather.

The sea was instantly plunged into silence, broken only by the hysterical, heart-wrenching shriek of a lesser demon below:

"The Great Demon King of the Primal-Parting Treasured Pagoda who Burns the Heavens has been captured!"

Li Ximing frowned at the name, suspicious. He held the vicious demon like a dead bird, grabbing its tail and holding it upside down. He slapped its beak, forcing the dead-seeming bird to open its mouth wide, and gave it a few shakes, emptying everything from its stomach.

He glanced at the pile. Not a single item was noteworthy. Realizing the demon was worthless, he frowned.

"What corner of the wilderness did this demon crawl out of? Utterly ignorant. With such shallow cultivation, how dare it take such a magnificent title. Anyone who didn't know better would think a Demon King was here…"

He untied his belt, looped it around the bird's neck, tied it off, and fastened it to his robe, looking just like a Daoist descending a mountain after buying a chicken from a farmer. He then turned and left.

He left behind a crowd of cultivators and lesser demons, all standing frozen on the spot, staring dumbly at each other. Faintly, they heard cries that "The Great Demon King… has fallen!" One cultivator raised his head, his face a mask of indelible shock and the profound relief of having survived. He whispered, "A great divine ability user… This is nothing less than a great divine ability!"

A cultivator next to him, wearing similar attire, let out a heavy breath and replied, "Let's go… Brother Li. This place is not safe. Elder Shihai is already on his way. We must rendezvous quickly."

…

Moongaze Lake.

The rainy season had passed. Without the bother of the rain, the stone steps of Mount Qingdu appeared even cleaner. The moonlight swept across the courtyard, year after year, just as it always had.

The small courtyard was quiet. An old man stood with his hands clasped behind his back, pacing the yard. Li Shuya, dressed in brown, stood to the side holding a jade tray, waiting. As the bell tolled the midnight hour, Li Shuya took a step forward and said softly:

"Old Master… it is midnight."

In the jade cup on the tray, a clear tea had already been poured. This was brewed from the treasure medicine "Cleansing Cloud Floating Leaf," an item Li Ximing himself had ordered years ago to help Li Xuanxuan recuperate, to be consumed along with his medicinal pills.

Li Xuanxuan understood this was Li Shuya's duty and didn't make it difficult for him. He drank it quickly, finally unable to hold back his question:

"Xixuan has been locked in the ancestral hall. How… how is he now?"

Li Xixuan had been confined to Mount Qingdu ever since his argument with Li Xuanxuan and had not yet been released. Li Shuya, however, misunderstood the question and replied respectfully:

"The entire island and the shore are using this as a cautionary tale. Progress on the western bank has also sped up considerably…"

Li Xuanxuan fell silent for a moment, then asked:

"Minggong is in seclusion… and Xixuan is confined to the courtyard by me. The Yuanwan branch must be in an uproar. Has no one come to plead for him recently? Are there any other movements?"

Li Shuya shook his head, hesitating. "This junior does not know… The Yuanwan branch has not formally split the family. Only one branch with a few Spirit Aperture members split off. Later, it was only after Lady Minggong reached Spirit Aperture that Lord Xixuan's side was established as its own branch. Right now, the five or six households are extremely anxious. Some have even tried to persuade this lowly one, hoping I can convince the Old Master to calm his anger…"

Li Xuanxuan asked again, "What is the island saying about this matter?"

Li Shuya paused, then said haltingly, "All the clan members are very… emotional…"

"Emotional?"

Li Xuanxuan knew exactly what they were feeling. He sighed, his voice weary. "They are all wringing their hands in sympathy for him, aren't they… Xixuan championed the greater good, fighting to secure them shelter… going so far as to defy me… How could I, his grandfather, not see what these children are thinking? Let him be confined for now. We will see how many people jump out later."

He paced the courtyard another round, then looked up. "It's getting late. You should rest. I am going to see the clan head."

Li Shuya was, after all, a mortal. Worrying day and night alongside Li Xuanxuan during this period had taken its toll. The old man dismissed him to rest and flew up on the wind alone, landing on the continent shore shortly after.

He saw a scene of bright lights and revelry. Several brightly lit red pleasure barges, burning candles and lamps, drifted lazily across the lake's surface.

Waves of fragrant perfume and song drifted from the barges, floating over the water.

These were clearly not transport vessels, but a new form of entertainment and pleasure. The trend had begun in Lijing Prefecture, confined only to the rivers. Later, as the Li family cultivators grew in number, the restrictions on luxury and pleasure-seeking had loosened somewhat. They all moved out onto the lake, making the scene even livelier.

The pleasure barges were filled with high officials and nobles. The direct descendants of the Li family naturally did not frequent them; they were mostly places of enjoyment for those with other surnames or from minor clans. Therefore, Li Xuanxuan did not find the scene decadent; rather, he found the bustling atmosphere relaxing.

'One, it diverts the idle thoughts of these cultivators. Two, it keeps the lake from looking dead and dreary… A bit more open celebration means a bit less hidden debauchery…'

After Li Ximing reached the Purple Mansion Realm, the interactions between the island and the shore had grown closer. Many of these things seemed to have sprouted from the cracks in the rules, but in truth, they had been permitted successively by both Li Zhouwei and Li Jiangqian. The old man looked around, shaking his head and sighing to himself:

'It is very prosperous… No wonder those on the island are envious.'

But just as the old man shifted his gaze back toward the island, he spotted a youth in red robes secretly landing, seeming to have just returned from outside the island. He cleared his throat and flew over in pursuit, calling out:

"Li Zhouming!"

Li Zhouming jumped in fright. Seeing who it was, his first instinct was to run. He took one step back before realizing it was too late. He put on an obsequious smile.

"So it is the Old Master… I haven't had the chance to visit you these past few days…"

Li Xuanxuan sized the boy up. "Where did you go?"

Li Zhouming gave an awkward smile. "I met a lovely girl on the shore. She just reached the second layer of Embryonic Breathing. I saw her family was struggling and couldn't afford any Dharma Artifacts, so I had a hairpin made… Yup… I just delivered it tonight."

Although Li Zhouming was a wastrel, his one redeeming quality was that he never lied to Li Xuanxuan; otherwise, the old man wouldn't have such a crystal-clear understanding of his debauchery. Li Xuanxuan just frowned.

"Which family's girl is it this time… You fall in love every three days and replace her every six months. Don't you dare do anything disgraceful!"

Li Zhouming bowed with his hands clasped. "Old Ancestor… this junior is just appreciating her, I haven't tried any dirty tricks… The family rules are so strict, if I even had such a thought, they'd surely force her on me. Then I'd never be able to look at beautiful women again…"

Li Xuanxuan was often helpless against him. He shook his head and sighed. "Behaving like this… it is not good for the girl's reputation… You should interact less…"

Li Zhouming quickly said, "Rest assured, I have my ways of handling Mount Qingdu… It will never come to that, otherwise how would I have muddled along until today? This is my only hobby. If you cut this path off, you'll be taking my life…"

"Scram, scram!"

Li Xuanxuan could only let him go. He walked quickly toward the main hall. Only after the old man was gone did Li Zhouming straighten up. His two attendants looked at him as the wastrel muttered:

"Those few families do nothing but wail and mourn all day, acting like a little confinement is a death sentence! One wants to go farm, the other wants to go pole a boat. I heard it all from little sister Xinghan! They've secretly taken who-knows-how-much wealth from Aunt Minggong… I bet they have so much money they don't know how to spend it!"

"Aunt is kind-hearted and afraid they'll be punished, so she keeps quiet about it, and now they've bothered the Old Master himself! Let's go, let's go…"

The two couldn't help but look up. "Your Highness…"

Li Zhouming's face turned serious. He flicked his sleeve, snapping his fan open with a *shua*, and declared:

"Didn't those families spend all day staring at me just to report me to Mount Qingdu? Damn it, they can't even figure out how to sneak around and enjoy themselves properly, they just spend all their time being jealous of me. Today, we're going to their courtyards, and we're going to pick out the laziest crybaby, the foulest bird in the nest, the whiniest dog looking for fun… and curse them out before we leave…"

"At the very least, we'll vent some anger and piss them off. Let's see how sincerely they can keep crying then!"

Brimming with enthusiasm, he stalked off, damning his two attendants, who were sweating in terror. They scrambled after him, trying and failing to dissuade him, whining miserably:

"Little master! You can't just go cursing people… everyone on the island is watching… Aiyo…"

Chapter 792: Purple Geng Broad Valley

Li Xuanxuan arrived at the main hall. The lamps within were blazing brightly. Li Zhouluo was still present, having apparently just finished handling administrative affairs, and was now cultivating a Dharma Art. He formed a seal, and five or six dazzling golden rays circled his fingers, emitting a piercing shriek.

The moment the elder arrived, the young man opened his eyes, halted the Dharma Art, and descended from the main seat.

"Elder, you've arrived," he said respectfully.

Li Xuanxuan nodded, coughed, and replied, "You've worked hard these days… The West Bank affair is troublesome. You are caught between several branches with no one you truly trust. It's a difficult position… Have you heard about Li Xixuan's situation?"

Li Zhouluo bowed. "This is this junior's duty. As for the elder's matter… there have been some grievances on the isle recently. However, they are not directed at you, Elder. Most of the blame is aimed at Mount Qingdu, claiming it harbors treacherous villains who are sowing discord in the clan."

He led Li Xuanxuan to a seat nearby. "I have read the letter you sent me a few days ago, Elder. The situation is indeed thorny."

Li Xuanxuan shook his head. "When the ancestors set the rules, they decreed that if main branch disciples lacked spiritual apertures, they could not serve as officials or merchants. But the isle is rich in spiritual energy, and the main branch holds a respected status. These children do not separate from the family and continue living on the isle. They want to maintain their main branch status while also gaining favor to enter official posts… I've thought it over and over. These two prohibitions cannot be relaxed. If they enter the shore territories carrying the title of a main branch direct descendant, even a fool sitting in that post would have people lining up to deliver money… to say nothing of the harm a few cunning ones could do. That would be ruinous."

Only after Li Xuanxuan had firmly stated his position did Li Zhouluo speak in a low voice. "Junior has also reflected on this recently. The isle is indeed too idle. Everyone is living right under Mount Qingdu's watch, which isn't comfortable. Those two rules absolutely cannot be relaxed. But we can compensate elsewhere. We can loosen the oversight on finances… It's hard to criticize them for receiving some wealth from their cultivator siblings. Yet, the competitive methods used against external families cannot be applied to them, or it will harm the peace between the four branches. They are mortals, after all. There is no harm in letting them enjoy some comforts."

Hearing this, Li Xuanxuan replied in a weary voice, "You must not underestimate mortals. These people are the future parents of cultivators. I fear we are fostering a trend of extravagance… The clan rules must be changed, but they cannot be changed by you… You are the sole seedling of the Fourth branch. If you offend the clansmen, your entire branch will be isolated."

Li Zhouluo hadn't considered that point. He nodded slightly, listening intently as the elder continued.

"The plan now is to placate them for a few years and ensure you can step down from your post intact, preferably having earned a benevolent reputation. This is crucial so that the Fourth branch can maintain close relations with the other three branches in the future."

Dili Guang had already withdrawn. Li Zhouluo personally served the elder tea as Li Xuanxuan continued.

"How many people are currently receiving favor?"

Li Zhouluo replied, "I have strictly followed the clan rules and not granted favor easily. I only granted it to the orphans of a few uncles and brothers who died in battle. The remaining mortal clan members pleaded relentlessly. My heart softened somewhat, and after careful consideration, I arranged some very minor official posts for them…"

He did not expose Zhoufang and his brother, claiming only that his own heart had softened. Li Xuanxuan sipped his tea and replied:

"Tomorrow morning, you will bring men to my courtyard to plead on Li Xixuan's behalf. Make sure to bring Zhoufang; I see he has been very anxious lately… After pleading, you will retrieve Li Xixuan."

Li Zhouluo respectfully agreed. The elder continued, "Once you bring him back to this hall, you will announce that you cannot bear to see your brothers and sisters suffer and have already considered the matter of granting favor and promoting mortals."

"Let Mount Qingdu handle the selection. Use a secret inspection method. Assess candidates based on their character, their parents' merits, their knowledge, and their loyalty and piety. Promote the descendants and observe them for three years. Announce the list at the sacrificial ceremony three years from now."

Understanding dawned on Li Zhouluo. The elder continued, "Do not mention the number of positions in the list. First, keep them settled for a few years. After three years, having promoted individuals from every branch, you can step down from your position. Earning their reputation is enough. Then we wait for Li Jiangqian to come out and play the villain… That child is fierce, ruthless, and clever. He isn't afraid of offending anyone. They will have their hands full."

Li Zhouluo felt complete admiration for the elder. Few in the clan understood his awkward predicament. Li Xuanxuan was, as always, the one elder who genuinely considered his welfare. Deeply moved, he replied, "Thank you, Elder."

Li Xuanxuan nodded. "Although the isle is united in intent, few are willing to take the lead. Of the four who troubled you that day, Li Chengzhi and Xi'e are easily pacified. Li Xixuan is currently locked up. Only Li Chenghao is stubborn. He cares deeply for the clansmen and acts with seasoned cunning. It would be best to send him away. The rest will then be a dragon without a head."

"Although I arrived in secret, I have already shown my face. The isle will soon know. You understand what to say… I don't need…"

He was halfway through his sentence when the sound of hurried footsteps came from outside the hall. Dili Guang's voice was urgent. "Patriarch, an urgent report from the isle."

Li Zhouluo glanced at Li Xuanxuan, who nodded. "Bring it in."

Dili Guang strode forward, bowed to both men, and reported respectfully, "Young Master Zhouming has arrived on the isle. He went to the courtyard of the Yuanwan Branch and caused a huge disturbance. Tonight, the clansmen invited elders from other branches, and they were wailing in the courtyard. The Young Master cursed them until they fled in all directions. The several elders are extremely embarrassed."

Li Zhouluo was stunned. Li Xuanxuan, however, showed no surprise. He rose from his seat and said flatly, "That monster stirs up trouble everywhere. You and I will go and capture him right now."

Li Zhouluo understood the elder was going over to back Zhouming up. He nodded. "Elder, please…"

The two rode the wind together, swiftly descending upon a residence on the isle. It was a large, antique-style complex. The central courtyard was in chaos. Several middle-aged men stood there, their faces flushed red amid the uproar.

Zhouming, dressed in red robes, was instead sitting calmly in the main courtyard, his fan resting beside him, a faint smile on his face. Surrounded by the furious yet silent expressions of the crowd, he truly looked the part of a dissolute aristocratic scion.

When Li Xuanxuan and Li Zhouluo landed in the courtyard, a wave of exclamation erupted. Everyone dropped to their knees. Zhouming also leaped from his seat and bowed. "Greetings, Ancestor! Greetings, Patriarch!"

Li Xuanxuan swept his gaze over the scene. "You're causing trouble again! With so many elders present, what right do you have to speak? Yet here you are, lecturing your brothers."

Zhouming quickly replied, "Ancestor, I was just passing this place when I heard weeping from the courtyard. I suspected that perhaps Grand-uncle Li Xixuan was advanced in age and this was a funeral. Only after listening did I learn that Grand-uncle Li Xixuan has gone to live on Mount Qingdu…"

He crossed his arms and said angrily, "When I saw them rushing to divide the family property, holding a funeral mourning in advance, this fire in my heart… I just couldn't stop it…"

"You… You're spouting venom!" a middle-aged man nearby flushed crimson again.

Zhouming laughed. "It's not dividing property? Then what is it?"

Chaos erupted. Li Chenghao immediately stepped forward, pulling the two sides apart and silencing them. He glared at the surrounding people until everyone in the courtyard finally shut their mouths.

Li Chenghao was one of the few remaining cultivators of the Chengming generation. Besides the two at the Foundation Establishment Realm, he had the

highest cultivation. His two brothers had gone with him to the river, but he was the only one to return. He had even lost an arm, which Li Ximing had later restored.

Now, his daughter had also died in Funan. He was a man of great hardship and merit, seasoned by the vicissitudes of the world. He was beyond comparison to this group of people who only lived on the isle.

'The Elder is playing favorites. Arguing with Zhouming will achieve nothing; he'll just turn the questions back on us. I must seize the current situation.'

He raised his brows and bowed. "Elder, Young Master Zhouming has caused a disturbance in the courtyard without reason, insulting his elders and clansmen. I request he be handed over to Mount Qingdu."

But Li Xuanxuan was even more cunning. He immediately nodded and replied, "Correct. Come… escort the Young Master to Mount Qingdu."

Dili Guang quickly stepped up and escorted Zhouming away. The young man snapped his fan shut and departed resentfully.

Li Xuanxuan coughed, reaching out to help Li Chenghao up. He spoke warmly, "It's good you are here, child. I was just looking for you. I have an important clan matter to entrust to you."

Although Li Chenghao was stubborn, he deeply respected Li Xuanxuan. Hearing this, he quickly rose and followed him out respectfully, leaving the courtyard full of people exchanging glances. Some wanted to leave, some turned to Li Zhouluo to plead their case, and others began apologizing for the trouble.

Li Xuanxuan had dissipated the storm in the courtyard with just two sentences. Taking Li Chenghao out was also not a spur-of-the-moment decision.

Once outside the courtyard, the elder walked for a moment and sighed. "Child, Li Minggong and Li Chenghuai are both in seclusion. There aren't many elders left in the clan, so many things must fall on your shoulders… The Profound Peak Gate has relocated, Cui Jueyin has returned to the isle, and the various families of the Eastern shore and the wilderness beyond are all in Jiangxia's hands. The authority of the Milin Mountains to command the Eastern shore cannot be left vacant. I must ask you to make a trip and take charge of the palace affairs in his stead."

This was a task that was both demanding and offered little reward. But Li Chenghao flicked his robes and dropped to the ground with a thud. His voice was exceptionally low. "If the Lake commands, Chenghao will not shirk death! But Ancestor, please do not send me away just to stabilize the island…"

He knocked his head heavily on the ground. "When my clan uncle made his move, this junior only acted to protect Chengpan. But this situation in the clan is definitely wrong, and it must be changed. Our Moongaze Li clan is raising a flock of idle mouths on this isle, a bunch of Purple Mansion immortal descendants who only farm! What decency is there… It must be changed, Elder…"

Li Xuanxuan helped him up. "I know your heart. You also grew up in the courtyard with Li Chengliao and the others. Otherwise, you wouldn't have fought so desperately in the north back then. No one of the Chengming generation is a coward. This is what I am thinking… Take the younger generation of the clan… those who dare to fight, especially those without elder backing, take them all with you. Let them follow you, learn, and see the world…"

"Thank you, Elder!" Li Chenghui nodded repeatedly.

Li Xuanxuan offered a few more words of comfort and sent him off. He stood there, clasping his sleeves, taking a breath and releasing it. He leaned against a lacquered wooden pillar of the corridor, gazing at the night scenery. Patches of purple qi were visible at the horizon. Just as he was wondering, he saw Dili Guang rushing up.

"Elder," Dili Guang reported, "People from the Purple Smoke Gate have arrived! It's a large, lively procession, and they are insisting on seeing you."

"So soon!" Li Xuanxuan was both shocked and overjoyed. For a group from the Purple Smoke Gate to arrive at this specific moment, demanding to see him by name, it must be about the formation. He immediately hurried off. Dili Guang's cultivation was lower, and he broke into a sweat trying to keep up.

They reached the main hall in moments. Wen Wu was already waiting, chatting warmly with Li Zhouluo. Seeing Li Xuanxuan, his face lit up with a smile. He retrieved two carp-shaped wooden boxes from his sleeve and laughed. "Senior is as kind and gentle as ever. It warms this junior's heart just to see you… The two children from your clan are doing very well. Li Quexi asked me to bring a letter. I figured since the children are so filial, I made a special trip to Ziqi Peak and brought Li Queyi's letter as well!"

Wen Wu had a very agreeable way of doing things. He passed the letters into Li Xuanxuan's hands. The elder smiled and accepted them. As a late-stage Qi Refining cultivator, he didn't even need to weigh them to feel the significant difference in weight between the boxes. He put them away with a flick of his sleeve and replied, "We have truly troubled you, sir… The children from my family are slow. We must trouble Senior Brother to guide them well."

Wen Wu laughed heartily. "Senior, you may not know, but our Purple Smoke Blessed Land holds an annual competition, with contests separated by cultivation level. Little Junior Sister's Dharma Arts are profound and her reactions are extremely fast. She delightfully secured sixth place in the Embryonic Breathing division and received an award!"

"Everyone in the sect knows she is from the Moongaze Immortal Clan. They all give her a thumbs-up, saying she has the same flair Shen Yanqing had back in the day…"

Li Zhouluo nodded repeatedly and asked, "I wonder how Li Queyi…"

Wen Wu picked up smoothly. "She is also striving hard! Within the sect, the coordination between Dharma Arts and cultivation methods for Qi Refining cultivators is already well-established, and their Dharma artifacts are very powerful. Among all the early-stage Qi Refining cultivators, Li Queyi placed thirty-first, just missing the top thirty. Though regrettable, her 'Celestial Moon Sword Arc' stunned the audience and even made the Peak Lord of Qi Sword Peak raise his eyebrows!"

Wen Wu selected only the pleasant news to share. Li Zhouluo was also pleasantly surprised. "The Purple Smoke Blessed Land is truly formidable. She never grasped it at home, yet she masters it immediately after joining."

Li Xuanxuan smiled and brought the topic back, pointedly ignoring Li Queyi and praising Li Quexi instead. Wen Wu paced and nodded, the pair of gold and white talismans at his waist clinking together.

"Senior," Wen Wu said, "I have come this time regarding the Daoist Master's affairs. I heard from my Peak Lord that the Daoist Master from your esteemed clan entrusted our Blessed Land with a Purple Mansion Grand Formation. After all, the Daoist Master's skill in formations is exquisite. The original plan was to ask the Daoist Master to set it up personally, but a Purple Mansion formation is not the work of a day or two, so we came over first."

He observed the expressions of the two men and continued formally, "The matter of a formation concerns the continuation of a Dao lineage. It is often said it cannot be lightly taught to others. Our Paradise also considered this, which is why we dared not come to build it rashly. Our dispatch this time is to first forge several components related to the formation platform. This timing should allow us to wait for Daoist Master Zhaojing's return. He can inspect everything personally before we proceed to the next step."

His words perfectly displayed the grace of the Supreme Yang Dao lineage. He retrieved a heavy, purple-gold scroll from his sleeve, patterned on both ends with deer, birds, and scripture symbols. He tucked it into his robes first, saying:

"For this task, the Muzuo Peak, Tianzhen Peak, and Cuiging Peak of the Purple Smoke Blessed Land have joined forces. We have dispatched five Foundation Establishment Realm cultivators, twenty-seven late-stage Qi Refining cultivators, two master refiners, six artisan refiners, one formation master, and four formation artisans, for a total of thirty-two members, led by myself, Wen Wu , first disciple of Mu Zuo Peak."

He presented the purple-gold scroll to Li Xuanxuan. "Senior, this grand formation requires thirty-two 'Purple Geng Broad Valley Mountain-Piercing Profound Nails.' Each must be one hundred and eighty *ren* long and three *zhang* and two *chi* in circumference. All specifications, runes, and spiritual materials are recorded in this scroll. Please verify them, Senior."

Chapter 793: Purple Mansion Forethought

'One hundred and eighty *ren* long, and three *zhang* and two *chi* in circumference!'

Li Zhouluo quickly made the calculation. The main hall on the isle was three hundred and eighteen *chi* long. A single one of these "Purple Geng Broad Valley Mountain-Piercing Profound Nails" was as long as four main halls. Stood on end, it would be taller than twelve Inherited Clarity Gates stacked together…

And a circumference of three *zhang* and two *chi* meant it was as wide as a small hut. Furthermore, these Profound Nails certainly wouldn't be made of ordinary metal; they would require an admixture of spiritual items. The materials needed had reached terrifying levels!

Li Xuanxuan was also visibly shocked. He accepted the scroll with both hands and looked at the densely packed list of spiritual materials, a chill rising in his heart. His expression remained calm as he asked, "These thirty-two Mountain-Piercing Profound Nails… what is their main component? What is their approximate value?"

Wen Wu cupped his hands. "The main body only uses iron essence and copper essence. The Eastern Sea has plenty of those. My Purple Smoke Gate has markets in the Eastern Sea and several small mining islands. We will deliver it in batches; Senior need not worry."

"As for the cost, it is not excessive. The iron and copper essences just require labor, and your esteemed clan can smelt them yourselves. Our people will handle the runes, formation patterns, and forging for your clan. Only the other spiritual materials need to be procured by your clan. I estimate… around ninety spirit stones."

He paused, then added, "Per nail."

Li Xuanxuan scanned the scroll back and forth, picking out several materials required in large quantities to study. He spoke in his aged voice, "We don't need to trouble the Blessed Land for everything. Many of these spiritual materials can be sourced from our own Lake."

"Qingwu, Wuhui Spirit Molybdenum, and Mishui Cold Iron are three minerals abundant at the bottom of the lake. Both production and reserves are vast, and we have been excavating them regularly over the years. Shu-White Copper, Fufu Lapis-Iron… these eight types are all produced on the Western shore. The Eastern shore also has Cuiyuan Copper Essence and other such items. Most of these can cover the requirements."

Li Xuanxuan was no longer managing the clan's assets, so while he knew the inventory list, he didn't know the specific quantities. There was also "Yecai Stone" produced on Zongquan Island, but the amount required wasn't large, and Zongquan Island wasn't public knowledge, so Li Xuanxuan didn't mention it to him.

As soon as he finished speaking, Li Zhouluo had already started calculating. He nodded slightly. "We produce these items in-house. The remaining cost can be lowered to sixty or seventy spirit stones. Also… please wait a moment, you two."

He retrieved a jade slip from the desk, checking it against the purple-gold scroll. A strange look crossed his face. "There are some… heirlooms left by the ancestors, and some spiritual materials gathered from the wilderness. These match up. They match up perfectly. I will give the list to you later…"

Wen Wu nodded cheerfully, seeming entirely unsurprised. He bowed. "These thirty-two Profound Nails are very troublesome, especially the materials. Bulk procurement will cause prices to soar, so we cannot rush it. It probably won't be finished even in three to five years. I must ask the Patriarch to designate a resting place on the isle for our Blessed Land's cultivators. Many sect cultivators will be traveling in the vicinity or journeying back and forth from the sect for handovers. We will have to trouble your clan."

"But please rest assured, everyone from my sect has sworn a spiritual oath. They are all elites and will absolutely maintain secrecy. Not only will the formation patterns be drawn separately and the components forged separately, but they will not even know the names of the components or the formation itself."

"How can you say that? It is Moongaze that must thank the Blessed Land."

The two exchanged pleasantries. Wen Wu also had spiritual materials and pills to deliver to Li Quexi's family, and the Purple Smoke cultivators on the isle still needed arranging, so he departed early.

The great doors of the hall closed tightly. Li Xuanxuan frowned. "Zhouluo, what 'ancestral heirlooms' and 'wilderness materials'? Those are just one or two items. How can they be used for the immense quantities needed for the Mountain-Piercing Nails? How much could that possibly save?"

Li Zhouluo no longer concealed the strange look on his face. "Elder, this will save at least twenty spirit stones in expenses! Twenty per nail, times thirty-two nails… that's six hundred and forty spirit stones!"

Li Xuanxuan was thoroughly shocked. "Where did this come from!"

Li Zhouluo looked somewhat awkward. "This… Elder, you don't know. Back when the Profound Peak Gate collapsed and Kong Guxi moved his mountain into the wilderness, he was terrified of a sudden raid by the White Ye Immortal Sect emptying his vaults. He stored a large amount of spiritual materials with our family…"

"Later… the wilderness was also gone. Kong Guxi packed his valuables and came to the Eastern Shore, but the materials remained stored with us. Finally, the Profound Peak Dao lineage vanished. Kong Guxi didn't even want to take back the large batches of Embryonic Breathing and Qi Refining materials. He only packed up the treasure medicines. The rest… he either gifted away or sold cheaply, currying favor with many factions…"

"The bulk of the materials was enormous. Selling it suddenly would crash the price, and selling in batches would have taken five or ten years… After all, no single family was willing to buy it all. So, half-selling and half-gifting, he gave it all to our family as a favor."

Li Zhouluo looked bewildered. "Now, reading this scroll and checking it, I find that nearly eighty to ninety percent of the items listed are things produced or stockpiled by the Profound Peak Gate! And this is *after* the Profound Peak mountain gate was lost and Kong Guxi took a batch of materials back with him. If we had obtained the complete assets of the Profound Peak Gate, we might not have had to spend a single spirit stone to forge these thirty-two Profound Nails!"

Only then did Li Xuanxuan understand. He hesitated, then sat down in the hall. "This matter was arranged in advance by the Daoist Master. Given the Profound

Peak Gate's current situation, they have probably figured things out. Otherwise, where would this formation design suddenly come from…"

The elder's expression grew wary. "The matter of the 'Purple Geng Broad Valley Mountain-Piercing Profound Nails' must remain secret. The name, especially, must not be leaked. Since the Purple Smoke side is maintaining secrecy, it's even easier for us. Do not mention the mountain. Do not mention 'Geng'. It's best not to even mention 'Profound.' If anyone absolutely must ask, just say they are called the 'Thirty-two Prefecture Purple-Broad Spirit Needles.' "

Li Zhouluo respectfully agreed. The elder coughed. "Let Cui Jueyin handle the matters regarding the spiritual materials and the Blessed Land. His cultivation is high, he acts decisively, and he's more capable than the others on the isle."

The elder gave instructions for a while longer, then left the main hall. He took out the carp-shaped wooden boxes from his sleeve, found a seat in an empty side hall, and opened them.

The first box was from Li Quexi. The child had clearly worked hard in the sect; her handwriting was much more elegant. She generally asked about family affairs and Li Xuanxuan's health. It was three pages long. At the very end, she added a note:

'Purple Smoke has many strange and rare spiritual items. Junior received an award in the competition and also has a quota for requisitions. If the family is in urgent need of anything, you can ask junior.'

The elder put the letter down. Li Queyi's letter was clearly much thicker. Compared to her sister Li Quexi , who had Wen Wu personally deliver her family letter, Queyi had piled letters for everyone here. Li Xuanxuan picked out his own. The girl offered greetings, then specifically asked if her father, Li Zhoufang, was still seeking favors all day. The rest of the letter beat around the bush for a long time before asking if the family could send her three types of cultivation resources.

Li Xuanxuan looked at it for a moment. He had two of the three resources in his own storage bag, and the last one wasn't hard to collect. He decided to just cover it himself. He also took out several medicinal pills to send back, packed everything together, and wrote a reply for someone to deliver.

He sorted the remaining letters to be delivered to the others, tucked both sisters' letters into his sleeve, and returned to Mount Qingdu alone via a side corridor.

'This world really turns things upside down,' he thought. 'Li Queyi was diligent and reached Qi Refining early, yet she ended up on Ziqi Peak. If she had slacked off in her childhood and been one step slower, Mu Zuo Peak definitely would have taken her… Li Quexi is aloof and proud, her talent less obvious, yet because she was born two years later, she ended up on Mu Zuo Peak.'

'That fellow Wen Wu knows how to teach and is willing to teach. Li Quexi also seems willing to learn… Her flaws in temperament are being corrected. From resources to background, the difference between them is like clouds and mud. She is poised to soar to the heavens…'

Li Xuanxuan was old and had seen many things. He had a vague premonition about the future. Seeing these two letters from the sisters left him feeling extremely conflicted.

Li Xuanxuan returned to Mount Qingdu , but Pingya Island was bustling. Li Zhouluo quickly arranged matters, settling the Purple Smoke Gate cultivators on the isle in the eastern sector. He then gave instructions to summon Cui Jueyin. For a time, the area was bright with lamps and filled with clamor.

The western courtyards, however, were quiet and dark. Ding Weizeng was just riding the wind back down into his courtyard. The burly, tiger-whiskered man looked anxious. Seeing the maidservant at the door, he asked, "How is the mistress?"

The maidservant lowered her head. "The mistress has had a poor appetite these past few days and often complains of stomach pain…"

Ding Weizeng had married his wife, Mistress Ma, in Jiangbei. Back then, Ding Weizeng was just a minor Qi Refining cultivator. Later, he submitted to the Purple Mansion Immortal Clan, and his status rose like a boat on the tide. Prestigious families often offered him their women, but Ding Weizeng refused them all, remaining loyal to Mistress Ma. It was already difficult for cultivators to bear children, even more so when both parents were cultivators. They had finally managed this one pregnancy. Now three months along, the burly man treasured it dearly.

He went in to check on his wife and helped regulate her body. He was preparing to return to Mount Qingdu immediately when his nephew came up to report.

"Wang Quwan requests an audience."

Ding Weizeng froze. The clan had not assigned any new tasks. His current duty was to patrol the lake and protect Li Zhouming and his father. His movements were irregular. Logically, they shouldn't have run into each other. He immediately grew suspicious. "Such a coincidence?"

His nephew replied, "Lord Wang has been coming every single day recently. But sir, you said you would see no one, so the message was never presented. Lord Wang seems to have urgent business; he has been waiting on the isle for you."

"So that's how it is." Ding Weizeng wanted no part in the various factions' struggles and had always refused all visitors. But Wang Quwan was an exception. This man had also been promoted by Li Ximing and was very important. "In that case, let him come up."

Before long, a middle-aged man strode into the courtyard. He had an extraordinary bearing, with a blue-gold treasured sword hanging at his waist, giving him a heroic look. Ding Weizeng laughed.

"Fellow Daoist Wang, you've arrived! I haven't yet had the chance to congratulate you… That 'Jingxi Qing' sword of yours has made all the cultivators in Jiangbei and Funan sick with envy… They are all praising you as the foremost sword cultivator in Jiangbei now!"

"Senior jests… I was merely favored by the Daoist Master and seized the initiative… managing to come out on top, that's all."

Although Ding Weizeng now called him Fellow Daoist, Wang Quwan remained polite and observed the etiquette of a junior. "Senior's affairs are important, and Quwan does not wish to delay clan business. However, I have encountered a thorny and confusing matter related to Jiangbei, and I have come specifically to ask for Senior's guidance."

Ding Weizeng indeed did not want to waste time. He made an inviting gesture. Wang Quwan said gravely:

"After this junior broke through to the Foundation Establishment Realm and paid respects to the seniors on the Lake, I received the clan's order to stand guard in Jiangbei. After I passed the Funan border, I heard considerable unrest among the cultivators there. Upon careful inquiry, there is a rumor… a rumor that an opportunity is about to manifest in Jiangbei…"

"Haha, and I wondered what it was." Ding Weizeng shook his head, explaining with a smile, "Anywhere… as long as there is spiritual activity, don't rumors fly every other day? Did Quwan hear some specific news?"

Ding Weizeng also hailed from Jiangbei and was naturally familiar with his homeland. Too many cultivators had fallen in Jiangbei during the past north-south conflicts. When he was young, every ten or fifteen days there was a new rumor about some cultivator obtaining someone's Dao lineage. It was common. Wang Quwan was a highly reliable man; he wouldn't bring this up without conclusive evidence. Sure enough, when asked, Wang Quwan spoke obliquely.

"The Wang clan migrated to Jiangbei back during the Ning State era. Our relatives are widespread. Although my branch declined and I was born of humble means, I still have two relatives… further north."

Ding Weizeng's gaze sharpened. He cut him off: "The Golden Tang Gate or the Capital Immortals Dao?"

Wang Quwan said quietly, "The Revering Radiance Gate!"

Seeing Ding Weizeng nod thoughtfully, Wang Quwan continued, "I heard… two cultivators from overseas sought refuge with the Revering Radiance Gate and brought news. That ancient lineage from the Jiangbei region, the Wanling Upper Sect, has an underground palace. It is located right beneath the Chengshui Marsh. This palace is a complex maze with many entrances… and they hold three profound stone tokens that are the keys to opening its formation…"

"Oh?" Ding Weizeng watched him intently, saying only that. Wang Quwan retrieved an object from his sleeve.

"I obtained this when I intercepted a demonic cultivator."

Wang Quwan lowered his gaze. In his hand lay a small, exquisite token, displaying an ink-wash pattern of black and white. On it were carved the two ancient seal characters: "Wanling." Gently turning it over, the back read three words:

"South Seventh."

He presented the token to Ding Weizeng with both hands. The burly man held it up, feeling an icy chill on contact. He gripped it suddenly with five fingers, but the token didn't budge.

This token didn't seem like a powerful Dharma artifact, yet he couldn't discern its grade. It secretly held the radiance of a divine ability and was abnormally sturdy. Ding Weizeng gently placed the token on the desk.

"This position of mine… I cannot move or leave it. I naturally have no opportunity to break away. If Quwan is looking for me to accompany him, I'm afraid I must disappoint you… I wonder what Quwan's intentions are…"

But Wang Quwan rose and bowed deeply. "I request that Senior submit this to the main clan on my behalf, and let the masters handle it!"

Ding Weizeng was stunned. He frowned. "This is *your* opportunity…"

Wang Quwan shook his head. "One only does what one's abilities allow. I am just a minor character who has barely broken through to the Foundation Establishment Realm. How could I participate in the games of such an ancient Dao lineage? I only hope to offer it to the main clan, that it might provide an advantage in the contests between the great families. That would be making the best use of it."

His words made Ding Weizeng noncommittal. Wang Quwan was at the Foundation Establishment Realm and a sword cultivator, personally promoted by the Daoist Master. As long as he didn't lose his mind and try to touch Purple Mansion level benefits, making a huge profit wouldn't be difficult. This was likely a feint—retreating in order to advance.

Ding Weizeng replied, "Moongaze is not a stingy main clan. If this is truly an opportunity you found, no one on the Lake will steal it… At most, I will go up and ask about this matter for you. It would be best to probe for more details to facilitate your trip north."

This response truly exceeded Wang Quwan's expectations. He was, after all, only an external Foundation Establishment cultivator. He assumed that once the opportunity was submitted, it would go to some young master or Ding Weizeng himself. He truly hadn't thought it would have anything to do with him. He stammered, "This…"

"This what?" Ding Weizeng held the token, laughing. "The Lake has always been fairest toward external clans, guest retainers, and protectors… You don't stay on the isle often, so you don't know. Even a direct descendant of the dignified

Purple Mansion wouldn't dare insult a Qi Refining guest retainer without reason. I have even less interest in taking your opportunity… Let's go to the main hall together. It will also put your mind at ease!"

Chapter 794: Visitors from the Southern Sea

Li Zhouluo sat in the main hall. He had spent the morning dragging Li Zhoufang along to "bitterly plead" with Li Xuanxuan, putting on a masterful performance. Only now did he finally have time to manage the clan's affairs. He set his brush aside, deep in thought.

'Phoenix Tail Stone is exceptionally rare in the northern regions… The main deposits are all within the territory of the Azure Pond Sect… I need to write a letter and ask. Grandfather mentioned he has a disciple on duty in their market; he would be the best one to help.'

The Purple Geng Broad Valley Mountain-Piercing Profound Nails were a precious Purple Mansion Realm formation base. Even with Moongaze Lake's wealth, the clan's own vast mineral savings, and the materials added from the Profound Peak Gate, the remaining deficit was still around fifteen hundred spirit stones.

The Li clan's spirit stone reserves were down to about six hundred. Yet, Li Zhouluo was not worried about the cost. The more pressing issue was that casting this item wasn't just about having enough spirit stones; it required procuring massive amounts of spiritual materials. This item was scarce, that one in short supply. Even if they had the spirit stones, they couldn't spend them.

'The price of spirit qi within the family is also being driven higher and higher… Several clan members have come to complain… Cultivators from humble backgrounds can no longer afford it, relying solely on the few portions the prefecture allocates to geniuses each year…'

This was an all-too-common problem. The cost of spirit qi suitable for Qi Refining throughout Jiangnan had been inflated to twenty or thirty spirit stones per portion precisely because it was so scarce. The Li clan's rise had granted

Moongaze Lake a formidable, organized capability for gathering qi. However, the resulting flood of new cultivators mastering Embryonic Breathing had not alleviated the shortage of Lesser Clear Spirit Qi; it had perversely intensified the demand.

Even more interesting was the fact that without a corresponding cultivation art, this basic qi was useless in one's hands. The Li clan's rise had brought an unexpected change: as the number of cultivators practicing the "River-Center Clear Qi" art increased, that very resource—unheard of and worthless on the market a century ago—gradually acquired value.

The Li clan, controlling the entirety of Moongaze Lake, could produce a significant amount of River-Center Clear Qi annually. Setting aside the obscene profits of sixty spirit stones per portion made by the Azure Pond Sect's Qi-Plucking Peak, the price of this local resource had climbed to over thirty spirit stones. Without this supply of River-Center Clear Qi, the number of non-clan Qi Refiners in the region would be cut in half.

'The northern shore also has snow mountains near the great river. In the future, we must station people on the river permanently. The River-Center Clear Qi there is even more abundant than at Moongaze Lake… It would be best if we could find a Mansion Water qi-gathering art suitable for lake cultivation.'

He was pondering this while drafting the letter when Dili Guang arrived with a report. Hearing that his two most capable subordinates, Ding Weizeng and Wang Quwan, were reporting, Li Zhouluo felt a jolt of surprise and immediately had them brought in.

"Greetings, Clan Head!"

Ding Weizeng bowed first and explained Wang Quwan's situation. Li Zhouluo listened with great curiosity. The token was passed only to Dili Guang , allowing the Eastern Yue man to inspect it carefully.

Li Zhouluo set his brush down, his expression doubtful.

"The Wanling Upper Sect is indeed a formidable lineage. As for some 'earth palace'… I doubt it is a virtuous place. Immortals and Buddhists died all over Jiangbei, their conflict shaking heaven and earth; how could it not have been discovered then? If it were re-emerging, why now? Why didn't it appear back

when blood qi was rampant, spiritual opportunity was boundless, and the eighteen Buddhist masters fell, dyeing the riverbanks pink? Why wait until today, when the spiritual opportunity has gradually calmed and settled?"

Li Zhouluo's highborn status meant he understood nearly ninety percent of the truth behind the war between the north and south, and he knew the true principles by which ruins manifested. Suspicion bloomed instantly. He felt it improper to leave two Foundation Establishment Realm cultivators bowing, so he rose from his seat, helped both men up, and said softly:

"Currently, the Daoist Master is away, and the elders are in seclusion. I fear this item brings trouble."

Wang Quwan was a clever man and understood the subtext. He replied, "Thank you, Clan Head, for the guidance. I acquired this token as spoils of war and am here to submit it to the clan. I ask only that the clan elders examine it before making a decision."

Li Zhouluo frowned and shook his head. With the clan's own Purple Mansion Realm expert away, his standing policy was that less trouble was always better. He wouldn't be tempted even if the earth palace contained Purple Mansion Realm spiritual items. He replied:

"The item remains yours. Hold onto it for now and quietly observe the situation. I will report this to the clan elders, and when there is news, I will summon you."

Dili Guang had already handed the token back. Wang Quwan looked slightly stunned and opened his mouth to speak, but Ding Weizeng, quick-witted, accepted it on his behalf. Li Zhouluo turned the conversation:

"The Wang Clan in Jiangbei is suppressed by the major families and has struggled these past years. Wang He of the Capital Immortals Dao is your Wang clan's leader. Has he made any troublesome moves?"

Wang Quwan quickly bowed and replied, "Reporting to the Clan Head, Clan Uncle Wang He has repeatedly sent people over with condolences and has also sent many spiritual resources as aid. However, my younger brother refused them all. These matters have all been reported to the clan…"

Li Jianglong submitted reports monthly, so Li Zhouluo was naturally aware of this. But the matter was important, and he couldn't help but probe one more time. He shook his head.

"Although Wang He is far senior to you and his cultivation is higher, his innate talent is simply abysmal. He is a nobody in the Capital Immortals Dao, entirely incomparable to you. Naturally, he will do everything he can to curry favor."

Wang Quwan bowed low. Seeing Ding Weizeng nod beside him, he said respectfully, "Reporting to the Clan Head, the loyalty of the Funan Wang Clan is beyond reproach!"

"I am aware! The Milin Palace has resumed operations. The Wang Clan may send two disciples to enter. Quwan, seeing your own bearing, I trust your disciples will not be lacking. They will certainly achieve great things."

Both men had duties to attend to and quickly took their leave. Li Zhouluo turned his thoughts back to the letter for Li Xizhi's people, deciding to include this matter as well. He was buried in work. As soon as the letter was sent, the situation he had set in motion earlier that morning had finished simmering. It was time to release Li Xixuan.

Li Zhoufang was already waiting outside the hall, the man visibly restraining his anxiety. Seeing Li Zhouluo, he hurried to follow. Li Zhouluo nodded gravely.

"Since the Old Master has agreed, let us go and invite the elder out."

"Thank you, Clan Head!"

Li Zhoufang nodded repeatedly. "Only the Clan Head, by stepping forward to plead this case… could have made the Old Master relent. No matter what, Grand Uncle Xixuan is still Aunt Minggong's father. How can we just lock him in the ancestral hall! If he cannot overcome this… and something dreadful happens, what will the family do in the future?"

Li Zhouluo and Li Zhoufang were both Qi Refining cultivators; they covered the short distance in moments. They unfastened the Dharma artifacts from their waists, handing them to a nearby Mount Qingdu cultivator. Removing their shoes, they entered the hall. There, they saw the pale, plump Li Xixuan dressed in a single layer robe, reading at a desk.

Seeing the two enter, Li Xixuan acknowledged the Clan Head, Li Zhouluo, with a slight nod before immediately sitting back down.

"Congratulations, Grand Uncle! The Clan Head pleaded bitterly with the Old Master and has finally secured your release…"

"Oh…"

Li Zhoufang, his face bright with joy, invited the old man to leave, but the elder merely seemed listless and utterly disinterested.

The drama staged by Li Xuanxuan and Li Zhouluo might have fooled ninety percent of the clan, but it could not deceive elders like Li Xixuan and Li Chengzhi. Li Xixuan immediately recognized the duet; his own biological grandson, Li Zhoufang, was the one truly left on the outside. He sat desolately by the desk.

With the old man refusing to cooperate, Li Zhoufang could only pace anxiously. As the eldest brother, caught between both parties, he was in an impossible position. Li Zhouluo smiled.

"Big Brother, please wait outside for a moment. I would like to chat with Grand Uncle alone."

Li Zhoufang immediately retreated. Li Xixuan leaned weakly against the desk. He watched as the young man personally poured him a cup of tea.

"Grand Uncle," Li Zhouluo said softly, "your courtyard holds nineteen children and nephews, and over a hundred grandchildren. The Yuanwan Branch possesses only this single manor in the prefecture. You are struggling under the burden of managing these hundred people. The Old Master… he sees this."

At this mention, Li Xixuan's spirits suddenly revived. He shook his head heavily. "Do you, who sit in the high halls, truly understand this bitterness? These children of mine… they possess no spiritual apertures. The very moment the family divides, they become minor branches. One day they are descendants of immortals; the next, they are packing their bags to go perform hard labor by the shore. If I split the family just like that, will they not hate me? Will they not hate the clan?"

He sighed deeply. "This old man does not dare to divide them… Not dividing means over a hundred people remain squeezed into a single manor. Relatives, you see… they are useless when at the far ends of the earth, and merciless when pressed right before your eyes. Only when they are neither too far nor too close, a presence that almost isn't, are they comfortable. Right now, a friction starts in the east, an argument breaks out in the west… does this not wound our kinship? What can I do? This old body doesn't have many years left. The moment I die, they *will* split the family. The few main lineages will be comfortable, but those cast out will begin to hate. Is this not an omen of our decline?"

"Keeping them trapped in the courtyard now, letting them resent one another, is still better than dividing them later and having them unite in their resentment of the prefecture. This old man can understand you all, but you… you cannot understand this old man. Perhaps this truly is the difference between immortal and mortal…"

Li Zhouluo remained silent. He had heard whispers of Li Xixuan's situation. He poured the elder another cup of tea and said only this:

"The prefecture's patronage quotas have been set. There are several positions. Mount Qingdu and the Jade Court will conduct the evaluations jointly. I will make the final ruling."

Li Xixuan's eyes flew wide, staring round. His entire demeanor shifted in an instant. His back straightened, and he leaned forward urgently.

"The Clan Head means…"

Li Zhouluo spoke in a low voice, "The evaluation criteria are largely the same things Mount Qingdu monitors daily. This was not supposed to be announced for another month… The prefecture has many clan members who study diligently, work hard, and have received commendations from Qingdu. Grand Uncle should begin preparations early."

Li Xixuan was a shrewd old man. His expression became animated. He nodded repeatedly, "I understand… I understand… What are the ranks of these positions, and how many are there?"

Li Zhouluo merely smiled, shook his head, and rose to his feet. Li Xixuan shot up from his seat, his eyes suddenly turning red.

"Thank you, Clan Head… Thank you, Clan Head, for pleading with the Old Master… The Yuanwan Branch has many good children. They are counting on this… this is their salvation…"

Li Zhouluo didn't seem like someone who possessed such authority on his own. Li Xixuan knew that this "patronage" was ninety-nine percent the work of his own grandfather (Li Xizhi). But the final right to rule lay in Li Zhouluo's hands. Li Xixuan seized the step down that had been offered. Hiking up his robes, he hurried out the door, only to see the utterly baffled face of Li Zhoufang.

"Clan Head!"

Seeing Li Zhouluo was already departing, Li Xixuan urgently grabbed Li Zhoufang. "Quickly, Eldest! Get me back to the prefecture!"

"Oh, oh, okay!"

Li Zhoufang, completely bewildered, pulled him along as they rushed toward the prefecture center. Li Xixuan slapped his own thigh and hissed:

"I need you to run another errand. Find those few bastards who are sneaking around idling in the prefecture and call every last one of them back…"

While the two hurried back to the prefecture, Li Zhouluo landed before his own hall. Dili Guang was pacing frantically, like an ant on a hot skillet. The moment he saw Li Zhouluo, he cried out:

"Aiyo… Clan Head! People from the Azure Pond Sect are here! They have been waiting in the side hall. You left so suddenly, I couldn't find you… I notified the Old Master, and he just arrived himself…"

Li Zhouluo quickly pushed the doors open. Sure enough, Li Xuanxuan was standing in the middle of the hall, looking anxious. Seeing Li Zhouluo, he said immediately, "Quickly, invite them in!"

Li Zhouluo straightened his robes just as two figures walked quickly up the outer steps. The one in the lead wore silvery-white attire, draped in a magnificent, embroidered red cloak. He had a round face and large eyes. The man following him was handsome and slender, with fair skin and a sword at his waist.

Beside them trailed a guard-like figure, dressed in black robes, tall and thin, with a sinister and vicious aura. It was the Hooked Serpent , Li Wushao. The demon snake, who had been stuck at the peak of the late Foundation Establishment Realm for a long time, bowed to both Li Xuanxuan and Li Zhouluo.

The red-robed youth in the lead bowed, his round face breaking into a handsome smile. "Quan Yuduan of the Heaven-Probing Pavilion greets the Clan Head!"

The youth behind him glanced around the hall's decor with open curiosity before following suit with a bow. "Si Xunhui, of the Heaven-Probing Pavilion, greets the Clan Head…"

"Please, please rise…"

These were Li Xizhi's own disciples. Li Zhouluo felt an instinctive warmth toward them. He hurried to help them up. "Esteemed cultivators, are you resting at our lake by coincidence, or are you here bearing instructions from my grandfather?"

The instant he said the word "grandfather," the way Quan Yuduan looked at him changed completely. He quickly took a step back and bowed respectfully.

"So it seems you are the Young Master! My Third Junior Brother and I rushed here from the Southern Sea, entirely unaware that the Young Master was managing the household…"

Quan Yuduan had assumed Li Wushao's bow had been for Li Xuanxuan; only now did he realize it was for this young man. He nodded, overjoyed. "The Young Master's cultivation speed is astonishing! Excellent, excellent… truly worthy of this bloodline…"

Beside him, Si Xunhui raised an eyebrow, his gaze filled with envy.

There were few family backgrounds in all of Jiangnan capable of making Si Xunhui envious. This was the first time Li Zhouluo had been addressed as "Young Master," and it felt awkward. He looked up. "My grandfather… how is he now?"

At the mere mention of Li Xizhi , Quan Yuduan's face lit up, and he beamed.

"The lake must not have heard the news… My Master's reputation as the Heavenly Pavilion Heavenly Glow now shakes the entire Southern Sea! From Lufang to Danrong Wuluo, everyone knows his name. Never mind those demonic cultivators… even the Clan Head of the Thunder Island's Miao Family came to spar and was no match for him! He was beaten until rosy light overflowed his body. If my Master had not intervened to dispel it… that old man would have perished on the spot!"

"Master now governs all nineteen islands of the Azure Pond Sect in the Southern Sea, and he has swept the entire sea region clean of demonic cultivators! The sacrificial resentment arts that the Lingu Family couldn't eradicate in three generations have now been almost completely severed at the root. The four directions are at peace, and the market's reputation and resources have multiplied several times over, filling all the deficits from the previous years…"

Li Xuanxuan threw his head back and laughed. Si Xunhui, also clearly moved, added softly:

"My own Daoist Master also met my Master. After they discussed Dharma arts, he called him a heaven-sent genius. He later told us juniors… that my Master's attainment in the Heavenly Glow Dao already far surpasses the Lingu Xia of old, and has perhaps even eclipsed the very Daoist who first adapted the Dawn Dew Gathering Technique… He called him the undisputed foremost practitioner of Heavenly Glow arts in the last three hundred years!"

Li Zhouluo was filled with astonishment. Li Xuanxuan, stroking his beard, let out a long, deep sigh and couldn't help but ask, "Where were these words spoken? Has this news already spread throughout the Southern Sea?"

Si Xunhui quickly shook his head. "This was heard in a private conversation. I only repeated it to my Senior Brother. It has not spread… Master instructed me to remember this but not to publicize it… It is only because I am meeting the elders today that I could not help but share the joyous news."

"Good, good, good!" Li Xuanxuan's eyes grew moist. "Zhi'er is truly formidable… To have walked this far, all alone in the sect… his path was no easier than any of his brothers'… Good… This is truly wonderful…"

Chapter 795: The Roaming Rampart Lapis Pagoda

As Si Xunhui finished speaking, Quan Yuduan immediately stepped forward and lowered his voice.

"Master sent us this time for two reasons. First, a sect mission required me to escort Junior Brother here. Second… I have something extremely important to deliver."

Li Zhouluo understood at once. With a lift of his chin, Dili Guang led the contingent of guards out, and the hall fell empty in an instant.

Quan Yuduan spoke softly, "Master is guarding the Southern Sea. He has completely overturned the blood-essence resentment system that the Chi and Lingu clans ran for over two hundred years. He simultaneously eradicated the demonic cultivators throughout the entire Shitang Island system under his jurisdiction. With the disciples of the five peaks he leads acting as a barrier, he transformed the islands under his rule into territories filled with smaller sects, minor islands, and lesser factions…

"From then on, they used those islands as their foundation. Several nearby demonic sects, large and small, came to raid. But as soon as they made a move, Master slaughtered virtually all their high-level cultivators… Since then, the entire Shitang Island system has been peaceful. The markets are also a cut above. Southern Sea cultivators are now willing to travel several extra days and nights just to visit the Shitang markets…

"Now, all commerce in the northern Southern Sea flows toward Shitang. This has, consequently, offended Thunder-Hearing Island. Fortunately, Daoist Master Yuanxiu is at the height of his prestige, so Master is naturally fine. He just warned the family to be careful, as he fears someone might retaliate."

Li Xuanxuan nodded silently, his heart sinking. Li Zhouwei had spoken to him about the Southern Sea. Most of those demonic cultivators were actually fostered by Thunder-Hearing Island. This was probably about far more than just grabbing market profits.

'Daoist Master Yuanxiu likely did this intentionally,' the old man thought. 'Transferring Zhi-er to the chaotic Southern Sea and then ordering him to reorganize the markets. The Si Clan gets all the profit, while Zhi-er is forced to bind himself even tighter to them…'

While his mind was turning, Quan Yuduan retrieved a colorful, glazed pagoda from his sleeve. It was only the size of a finger, small and exquisite. He held the pagoda in his palm and said in a low voice:

"Master specifically had me bring this artifact back. It is called the Roaming Rampart Lapis Pagoda. It was an artifact from an ancient Southern Sea sect that resurfaced a few years ago, and Master spent enormous effort to acquire it."

Li Wushao took the item and handed it to Li Xuanxuan. Though the object was merely thumb-sized, the old man felt it sink heavily in his hand, almost dropping it. He looked at Quan Yuduan.

"Young Master, this Roaming Rampart Lapis Pagoda is an extremely special and wondrous artifact that can be used to temper disciples. It has twenty-four levels. Every sixth level has a doorway, which, when opened, unleashes water, fire, wind, and thunder. From bottom to top, they are respectively: Supreme He Fire, Crop-Injuring Wind, Autumn-Perishing Water, and Northern Palace Thunder."

"As for the remaining twenty levels without doorways, each has a considerable capacity and can be used to store related spiritual items. When locked within, the pagoda can be connected to a spirit vein to preserve the spiritual items. It is extremely useful."

This looked like an artifact meant to guard a sect gate, the equivalent of a foundational treasure. If it were a Dharma Artifact, it would be something that anchors the sect's destiny, even for major lineages like the Azure Pond Sect or the Golden Feather Sect.

He shook his red robes and explained:

"Master checked carefully. This should be a replica of a pagoda created by an ancient lineage to help disciples avoid the 'Three Disasters and Nine Calamities'.

But even if it's a modern lineage's replica, to us, it still comes from an extremely ancient past…

"Nowadays, there is no longer a need to avoid any 'Three Disasters', so this ancient artifact's effectiveness is greatly reduced, but it remains a rare treasure, integrating punishment and tempering into one."

His eyes filled with admiration as he praised it endlessly.

"The Supreme He Fire refines True Essence. Within that doorway are three types of potent Merging Fire that have been highly refined and neutralized. The Crop-Injuring Wind expels distracting thoughts; its doorway holds six types of spiritual wind, all possessing clarifying abilities. The Autumn-Perishing Water washes away vanity; its doorway contains twelve types of spiritual waters from the Pristine, Converging, and Pit Water daos…"

It truly was an incredibly wondrous artifact. Li Zhouluo knew immediately it was ancient; only ancient cultivators were this extravagant. The spiritual items sealed within, if dismantled and sold, would likely represent more than half the entire savings of an old Foundation Establishment family.

But Quan Yuduan stopped abruptly at that point. Li Zhouluo couldn't help asking, "But isn't there still the Northern Palace Thunder at the very top?"

Quan Yuduan hesitated for a breath, then nodded.

"The Northern Palace Thunder… erm… it can also kill… in combat. This doorway contains twenty-four types of lightning… Contrary to the previous ones, these twenty-four types are all Profound Thunder, specifically pointing toward the four divine abilities of Profound Thunder…"

"It's very convenient for killing people. If it strikes the body, it can blast them directly into ash."

"This…"

Li Zhouluo and Li Xuanxuan exchanged a look. The old man nodded. "So the highest doorway is for defense and killing enemies. Truly profound and wondrous."

Si Xunhui chuckled. This was his Master's grandfather, after all; he remained very respectful. He cupped his hands.

"My lord, according to the Daoist Master, the creator of this artifact was deeply dissatisfied with the Thunder Palace. The first three doorways, though agonizing, all leave a sliver of life, and one can even receive various benefits. But this top doorway exclusively uses Profound Thunder. Not only is there no benefit whatsoever, but it also refuses to stop until the person is struck dead… The Daoist Master said the specification of twenty-four paths is extremely high… He said that person… must have been struck miserably when they broke through to the Purple Mansion Realm…"

"…Oh… haha…"

Since it was a joke from a Purple Mansion Realm Daoist Master, even if it wasn't particularly funny, the two men in the hall had to laugh. Li Xuanxuan coughed out a few laughs, beautifully admiring the thumb-sized pagoda in his hand.

'This is an excellent artifact to suppress Mount Qingdu,' he thought. 'In the past, when the family punished those cultivators, we just docked some merits or, at worst, sent them to the periphery. Actually killing them was too much… We lacked anything truly intimidating. With this artifact, it is beneficial in many ways.'

The Li family's Milin Mountains already had an ancient artifact suppressing it called Stray Fragrance, an incense burner that could regulate the ley lines and store spiritual energy. For the last ten-odd years, the spiritual energy had been flowing in and out of Milin.

Quan Yuduan smiled. "Old Ancestor, don't be hasty. I have more."

He took a storage bag from his sleeve and explained, "Inside are four stalks of treasure medicines. They are Azure Reverence Flower, Zi-Wu Vine, Profound-Patterned Yellow Viper Fruit, and Untraceable Grass. There are also three Foundation Establishment spiritual items, and over one hundred and fifty spirit stones, to subsidize the family."

Li Zhouluo took the heavy storage bag and secured it. Quan Yuduan then retrieved a letter from his sleeve, his expression turning solemn.

"This… Master entrusted this to me, requesting that I personally deliver it to Chenghuai and bring back a reply. I was wondering…"

Li Xuanxuan frowned, hesitating. "Chenghuai is in seclusion. Since it is so important… I will send someone to ask him."

When Quan Yuduan heard this, he quickly waved his hands and replied, "The matter is important, but it is not urgent. If he is in seclusion, we can certainly wait. I will finish the business I have on hand, and I still have to pass by the lake on the way back. I can see the young master then. It will not be too late."

"Right now, there is another critical matter. Back when Daoist Master Zhaojing visited Revering Radiance Gate, it was decided that Moongaze would have a share of the Xiaoshi Mountain Dao Repository. Has your clan's cultivator reached the Foundation Establishment Realm? The time is near. I also came today to escort my junior brother there."

He nodded slightly and stepped aside. Clearly, the next words were not his to say. Even as the senior disciple of the Heaven-Probing Pavilion, he could not speak on behalf of the Si Clan. Si Xunhui stepped forward, cupping his hands.

"Since your clan's cultivator is also going, we ask that you trouble yourself to bring this junior along."

'The Xiaoshi Mountain Dao Repository?'

Li Zhouluo looked thoughtful and glanced up, but Li Xuanxuan stopped him. Li Zhouluo didn't know the details of these matters, but the old man knew much more. His aged voice sounded:

"There is a Foundation Establishment sword cultivator on the lake. He was raised from obscurity by Daoist Master Zhaojing himself. His Immortal Foundation is the Floating Cloud Body, which is precisely from the Xiaoshi Mountain lineage."

"He already reached Foundation Establishment!"

Si Xunhui was startled. Neither his Si Clan nor the Li family were Purple Mansion powers who had known about this firsthand; they had joined the endeavor much later. After all, it was hard to find a suitable Embryonic Breathing candidate, and even if they found one, it was difficult to raise their cultivation level in a short time. He mulled this over internally:

'And he's an outsider. That's good. If it were truly a relative of Master, some uncle or elder, it would be extremely awkward when we had to compete for things… An outsider is good. Daoist Master Zhaojing isn't greedy.'

Thus, the Si Clan direct descendant replied, "It is indeed the Floating Cloud Body. With your clan's senior here to watch over things, this junior also feels at ease."

Li Zhouluo immediately went personally to summon Wang Quwan. Li Xuanxuan, meanwhile, stroked his beard and asked, "I read the clan reports. It said Revering Radiance Gate captured two cultivators, and an underground palace appeared beneath Chengshui Marsh. Is this true? According to the report, the palace is a ruin of the ancient Wanling Upper Sect…"

Si Xunhui shook his head silently. Quan Yuduan, however, was far more impulsive and direct. He replied:

"Of course that's just what Revering Radiance Gate spread themselves! It's true they caught cultivators, but they just used them to lure out the Xiaoshi Mountain cultivator, thereby fulfilling the conditions to open the Dao Repository."

"As for some underground palace, I've never heard of it! What kind of lineage is the Wanling Upper Sect? If they really built an underground palace, anyone entering would just be seeking death. If you ask me… Revering Radiance Gate built it themselves!"

Si Xunhui's information was clearly more comprehensive. He spoke softly, "It is highly likely Revering Radiance Gate built it themselves. One reason is to provide a training ground for their own disciples. Second, collecting blood qi everywhere is inconvenient. If they suppress the families under their command for too long, resentment inevitably builds. This palace is much more useful."

"And they can sell talismans and pills on the side, making their sect's legitimate business easier… After all, their items are crude and simply cannot compete with Jiangnan. Using this method, they can continuously and reliably profit from the local area."

Li Xuanxuan understood and nodded. Li Zhouluo had already returned, bringing Wang Quwan up from outside the hall. The middle-aged man still wore his sword, his expression grave. Li Zhouluo smiled.

"Protector Wang, this is the First Disciple of the Heaven-Probing Pavilion, Quan Yuduan… And this… is Young Master Si Xunhui of the Azure Pond Si Clan."

These two names might not sound too terrifying to the current Li family, but in Wang Quwan's eyes, they were absolute top-tier young masters. The Si Clan now

ruled the Azure Pond Sect. He quickly moved to bow, but he heard Si Xunhui call out:

"Greetings, Senior. We… will be troubling you this time."

Li Xuanxuan nodded lightly and spoke. "These two disciples from the immortal sects are heading to that underground palace and were passing through. Since you also received the opportunity, you will go together."

"How can this be permissible?… Such an opportunity should go to the direct line of Moongaze…"

Wang Quwan's first reaction was panic. He tried to bow lower, but Quan Yuduan understood the situation. He gave a meaningful look and smilingly interrupted:

"The scenery of Moongaze Lake is beautiful. We brothers will take a stroll on the lake and return later."

He pulled Si Xunhui away. Li Xuanxuan waved his hand, and Li Zhouluo also retreated, leaving only the two of them in the hall. Wang Quwan knelt firmly. Li Xuanxuan helped him up, speaking softly:

"Quwan, rest assured. You are not being sent as a pawn. Although Si Xunhui is a young master of the Azure Pond Sect, this time you are not meant to protect him… If they really needed protection, why wouldn't Azure Pond just send two Peak Lords?"

This sentence startled Wang Quwan. He quickly raised his eyebrows. The old man before him was smiling and nodding.

"This time, you are representing the Moongaze Li Clan. Although I do not know the situation in the underground palace, few families should trouble you right now. Foundation Establishment cultivators have their own opponents. Protect yourself, and see what opportunities you can fight for."

"As for Si Xunhui, do not fear him too much. Whatever should be shared, you take your rightful share. Unless it is a spiritual item of the Purple Mansion level—in that case, you must let him take it, so that you can stay alive…"

Wang Quwan finally nodded, his voice respectful. "This subordinate will remember the Old Master's instructions and will do my absolute best…"

Li Xuanxuan continued, "As you head out, go find Zhouluo. Get the Hundred-Stone Spirit Shield and the Crimson Orb Jade of the Profound Peak Gate from him. After all, the palace is filled with the direct descendants of Purple Mansion lineages. We are not asking you to gain great prestige, but with these two items for protection, at least you will not be completely suppressed by a single artifact."

These were two complete Foundation Establishment artifacts. The Hundred-Stone Spirit Shield was of ordinary quality, but the Crimson Orb Jade was an exceptionally rare treasure. Wang Quwan nodded heavily, finally saying:

"Quwan will remember the main family's grace. I will certainly bring both of these artifacts back fully intact from this trip north."

Only then did Li Xuanxuan see him out, instructing Li Zhouluo to equip him with the artifacts. Wang Quwan, however, set the items down, stating solemnly:

"This matter is significant. Please allow this subordinate to return home first and instruct my descendants. I will then return to retrieve the two artifacts."

He rode the wind toward Jiangbei. Si Xunhui and Quan Yuduan, who said they were going to tour the lake, flew a circle. Li Wushao returned early.

The old demon still wore his middle-aged appearance, wearing a sword at his waist. Upon seeing Li Xuanxuan, he bowed, his voice low and hoarse:

"Wushao greets the Old Master!"

Li Wushao's appearance greatly resembled Li Yuanjiao. Li Xuanxuan stared, dazzled, and quickly helped him up, tears welling in the corners of his eyes.

"It has been many days…"

Li Wushao saw this and cupped his hands. "Old Master! I'm having a great time at Azure Pond! In that damn place, everyone calls me Lord Li. But if I take a trip to the Eastern Sea, and they don't recognize me, shit, they might even try to capture me for alchemy… Haha…"

The old man couldn't help but laugh, shaking his head. "You still speak so crudely, even after entering an immortal sect… You can't shake those Eastern Sea habits. People will talk about you…"

"Can't learn! Won't learn!"

Li Wushao said, "They have to say I'm 'frank and passionate,' 'unrestrained and free.' I say it's all bullshit… Anyway, I've returned and taken a look around, so I have something to report back to the Pavilion Master. The young master isn't married yet, is he?"

Chapter 796: Peacock

When Li Wushao asked, Li Xuanxuan immediately shook his head and replied:

"Naturally, nothing is settled. Back then, Chenghuai's marriage was arranged when Zhi'er and Yang Xiao'er returned home to visit family. Now, we only have this one child, and no news has come from the sect. The clan can only set the matter aside…"

"Moreover, Zhi'er is not who he used to be. He is a major figure in the Southern Sea. This matter requires even more caution…"

When Li Xizhi and Yang Xiao'er had returned home to visit those few times, the Foundation Establishment grand array on Qingdu Peak hadn't even been constructed. It couldn't compare to the current state of a Purple Mansion Immortal Clan, to say nothing of Li Xizhi holding such status now. After the old man finished speaking, Li Wushao nodded:

"Master and Mistress said that in the past, they only hoped the Young Master could grow up safely and continue the family bloodline, so they specifically selected the Ding clan. Now that Zhouluo is grown, his marriage is especially critical. Several families and sects have shown interest. Some have even paid Master a visit. In the years the Young Master has been head of the family, they've come even more frequently…"

Li Xuanxuan nodded repeatedly. He certainly hoped Li Zhouluo would find a good wife. The old man said, somewhat tactfully, "We must also pay attention to mutual affection… If things turn ugly later, we will end up offending people."

"That is only natural."

Li Wushao, perhaps not fully understanding his meaning, cupped his hands.

"Master's intention is this: before Young Master Zhouluo reaches Foundation Establishment, he should first make a trip to the Southern Sea. He will live with Master for a period, meet the young ladies from several prominent families and sects, and cultivate some feelings. He will marry right there. Once everything is arranged and he breaks through to Foundation Establishment, he can decide if he wishes to return."

Li Xuanxuan was flabbergasted. "This… isn't that putting on too many airs? What if it makes all the families unhappy…"

"Haha!" Li Wushao laughed and shook his head.

"It is not excessive in the slightest! Old Master, you are not in the Southern Sea, so you do not know. Today, wherever Master goes in the Southern Sea, he is the guest of honor. Zhouluo is the master of a direct line Purple Mansion Immortal Clan, the Daoist Master's grand-nephew, of Yue royal blood, and the grandson of the Heaven-Probing Pavilion Master. He himself is a first-class talent. Which family wouldn't be rushing to present themselves?"

Li Xuanxuan understood the calculation. He mused internally:

'Ximing said that Yang Tianya is still lurking in some dark corner. That means he (Zhouluo) also has the bloodline of that Yang family Daoist Master. Indeed…'

Li Wushao continued without stopping:

"Besides this matter, there is the issue of Qi-Plucking Peak. The current Peak Lord is Peak Lord Lin Wuning. When she heard I was coming to the lake, she visited me repeatedly, asking me to carry a message. She said that the Azure Pond Sect harvests five types of 'Qi' from the lake, three of which cannot be found anywhere else. Now, damn it, they're being all polite, saying they hope to establish a place with the Moongaze Immortal Clan to serve as a foothold for the Azure Pond Sect. This way, when they come to gather Qi in the future, they'll have a proper procedure to follow."

His mouth split into a grin. "So the Azure Pond Sect has this day too. How satisfying."

Li Xuanxuan pondered this and knew it referred to things like the Golden Autumn in the Lake Qi. Most were unique to the Azure Pond Sect. The Moonlake Autumn Reflection Technique was very famous. His own family possessed

the Supreme Yin Lunar Essence, but they didn't dare use it. It was quite the dilemma.

A thought struck him, and he asked, "What kind of people usually gather this Qi? They probably wouldn't send Foundation Establishment cultivators. They have all sworn the Profound Scenary Spirit Oath…"

"Correct."

Li Wushao had clearly learned a thing or two at the Azure Pond Sect and understood the subtle meaning. He pulled him into the hall and lowered his voice.

"Old Master, this Qi-Plucking Peak naturally doesn't send Foundation Establishment cultivators to gather Qi. The Dao of Qi-gathering is always treated as a top priority. The key to the Golden Autumn in the Lake Qi is the Summoning Radiance Technique. Unless one were to search their souls…"

Li Xuanxuan actually chuckled and replied, "There is no rush. Just let their people come and gather the Qi."

Li Wushao nodded heavily. Soon, he saw Quan Yuduan and the other disciple return. However, these two Azure Pond disciples deliberately avoided the other side as they returned, seemingly unwilling to run into the cultivators from Purple Smoke Gate. Their tour had not been enjoyable; they seemed constrained and awkward.

Wang Quwan was already waiting on the lake. Li Xuanxuan could only take Li Wushao out to see them off. Quan Yuduan saw the two from afar and smiled.

"Old Ancestor, we will head out now. We will return to see the senior when our business is concluded."

Li Xuanxuan nodded. "Be careful in all things."

The group headed north together. Li Xuanxuan saw them off past the lake. The sky darkened again. The lake was wrapped in silence. The Purple Smoke Gate cultivators, who had been hiding on their isle, also emerged. Several streaks of purple qi pierced the air and flew away lightly.

Peacock Sea.

The further north one traveled, the more magnificent and iridescent the waters of the Peacock Sea became. By the time one reached the Great Bestowal Temple of Bronze Splendour in the far northeast, the seawater beneath the sacred bronze mountain already displayed a fantastical, shifting, five-hued brilliance, changing colors repeatedly with the sunlight. Patches of coral floated on the surface, moving like living fish and snakes.

Looking down from the sacred bronze mountain, one could still see several black dots squirming on the sea's surface, kowtowing with every single step as they approached the mountain. Coral naturally rose up to support them, allowing them to walk upon the sea as if on flat ground.

But the mountain was full of peacocks leaping and hopping, chasing each other playfully. When several mortals finished kowtowing and reached the foot of the mountain, the peacocks swarmed them and pecked them viciously. These people were already sallow and emaciated; how could they withstand such torment? Covered in blood, they fell back into the sea.

At this, several acolytes attending the peacocks watched with great relish and began to laugh.

"Their minds are unstable. They truly deserve it! Kowtowing every step is meant to nurture the Buddhist heart. If they cannot abandon self-respect, self-love, and their own independent thoughts, how can they be called pious? How can they seek emptiness?"

Just as they were laughing, a wild wind swept across the flat ground. These acolytes possessed little cultivation and were instantly swept up by the gale, along with the mortals on the ground. All of them landed upon a multicolored, feathered surface. Before the acolytes even landed, they were laughing in ecstasy.

"We have been chosen by the blessed land!"

"The Seven-Colored-Language Peacock Back! This is one of the highest blessed lands!"

The acolytes quickly settled themselves on the peacock's back and began piously chanting sutras. The dozen or so mortals, sallow and suffering from broken limbs from the fall, saw this and began chanting along, and astonishingly, they no longer felt any pain.

The massive peacock spread its wings and flew east. Splendor flowed in its dark, gem-like eyes. The Eastern Sea was vast, and the peacock was truly bored by the flight. After a while, it snatched up one person and "received" them, eliciting a cheer from those on its back.

The acolytes had the best "flavor" and were being saved for last. Seeing the mortals enter the "blessed land" first, they grew indignant. Suppressing their jealousy, they used every ounce of their strength to chant the sutras.

The peacock flew onward until it reached the Sea's Cape. Its snacks now finished, it transformed into a dignified and benevolent-looking woman clad in a five-colored robe. She dove deep into the seabed, executed an art, tunneled into the earth, and flew into a karst cave, finally arriving before a pool of turquoise water.

She smiled slightly and whispered, "Greetings, Great Daoist Master Buzi!"

The water in the subterranean pool rippled slightly, and a weak voice emerged, sounding ancient and weary:

"Fellow Daoist Yuse, my thanks to you this time… Did you bring the Blood-Jadeite Treasure Pearl?"

The Merciful One Yuse smiled and nodded. "You are a great cultivator who has entered the Purple Mansion Realm; you need not be so polite. To be able to help a Great Daoist Master in this dire place is also due to fate. I only hope you recover from your injuries and capture that great demon!"

"I only hope… to see that flower first."

The green pool rippled, and Chi Buzi's voice emerged: "As it should be."

At this, the water stirred, and a bright white flower floated up from the pool's surface. The eyes of the Merciful One Yuse lit up, and she smiled. "This truly is a rare Supreme Yin treasure! Worthy of the Supreme Yang Dao… It truly opens the eyes of a minor cultivator like me from the poor countryside."

She looked at it closely, just as a clear, smiling voice sounded right by her ear:

"Beautiful, isn't it? It should be!"

Yuse's heart seized in shock. She whipped her head around. Behind her, seated on a large rock, was a green-robed cultivator with unbound hair, smiling

warmly at her. A deathly chill shot through her heart. "Daoist Master… what is…"

Before she could finish her question, she saw a spray of crystal flying toward her. The hairs on her body stood on end. She formed a hand seal, and layers of colored light flew up to block the crystal, only to find her vision blurring, immersed in a piercing, icy cold.

An icy sensation radiated from beneath her feet, the cold touch of ripples. She was already standing in the green pool.

Chou-Gui Hidden Form!

The Merciful One Yuse was only recently promoted. In a fight, she was no match for Chi Buzi. She immediately formed a seal and spoke with urgency:

"Great Daoist Master! My fate is held in the hands of the Shanjia Maha! Killing me will create binding karma! I urge you to act with caution!"

Yuse never imagined Chi Buzi would attack her. The Shanjia Maha was already in his ninth incarnation. Furthermore, Chi Buzi was not some vengeance-fueled Buddhist. Killing her, Yuse, offered him no benefit whatsoever!

Both Merciful Ones and Mahas were Buddhist cultivators who had attained the "Non-Retrogression Stage," equivalent to the Purple Mansion Realm. The greatest difference between them lay in that stage. A Maha's Non-Retrogression Stage resides on their own Maha "seat"—their position, form, and thoughts never regress. Unless their True Spirit is locked away, they are equivalent to immortal.

But a Merciful One's Non-Retrogression Stage is "hung" beneath a corresponding Maha's seat, the highest being beneath the Golden Lotus Seat—once also called the Lotus Seat or the Great Pu-Sa Dixit Seat. Their form and thoughts do not regress; even if their Dharma Body is shattered in the outside world, they can completely recover upon returning to the Buddhist Pure Land.

A Merciful One of this level already possesses the potential to attain the Maha realm; the conditions are just extremely strict.

The system of the Buddhist cultivators was extremely wondrous; otherwise, how could they have emerged from the ancient chaos of immortals and demons and seized the entire north during the turmoil? There was a reason why the

seven paths of Buddhist cultivators and the northern mortals were pathologically obsessed with the Pure Land—it was simply far more convenient and infinitely safer than seeking one's own nature…

Although her, Yuse's, Non-Retrogression Stage was not yet certified under the highest Golden Lotus Seat, she had reached the secondary Developing Wisdom Seat. Her spiritual thoughts would not regress and could retreat to the Pure Land. More importantly, as a descendant of the Peacock, her status in the Way of Compassion was unusual. If she died, the Shanjia Maha himself would personally attend to the matter!

Killing her would only shatter this Dharma Body, offend the Ninth-Incarnation Shanjia Maha, and anger the entire Peacock clan, yielding Chi Buzi absolutely no benefit. Otherwise, why would she, Yuse, dare to recklessly contact Chi Buzi?!

Even as events spiraled far beyond her imagination, Yuse remained calm. She pointed out the stakes while forming seals, watching the green-robed man lounging on the rock. He smiled.

"Little Peacock, I won't kill you! I'm just borrowing you for a while."

The Pristine Water at her feet rippled. Facing Chi Buzi of the Pristine Water Dao, Yuse had already lost most of her fighting spirit. She still wanted to immediately move and leap out of the green pool. She circulated her magic and stepped forward, only to find that the pool followed her like a shadow, staying directly beneath her feet.

Chi Buzi raised an eyebrow, observing her, and said casually:

"You are a peacock, after all. Yao are inherently inferior to humans. You cultivate as a Merciful One, yet you don't even have a single divine ability and clearly haven't learned any decent Dharma arts. If you had run into someone else, they would have slapped you to death in two hits!"

He appeared to be sitting casually on the rock, but he was toying with a small cauldron that radiated a shimmering green light. A powerful sensation of stagnation filled the carefully arranged cave, so thick that a faint green mist began to rise. He was clearly primed and ready to strike.

A descendant of the Peacock was still a Purple Mansion bloodline. Although not equal to a Dragon or Luan-Phoenix, she was certainly not worse than others. Unfortunately for her, she had met Chi Buzi, the greatest genius of the Chi family in three hundred years. The green pool below and the green mist in the air

combined to bind her, preventing her escape into the Great Void. Yuse barely maintained her polite facade:

"I wonder what the Daoist Master requires? You could have simply told this junior. Why must you be so aggressive…"

Yuse's *thoughts* were non-regressing, not all three aspects. This Dharma Body and her Merciful One status were extremely precious to her. Knowing he couldn't, and had no motive to, kill her, she was ultimately reluctant to fight back.

Chi Buzi raised an eyebrow, glanced at her, and smiled.

"I have been cultivating a specific Dharma art these past few years. It requires peacock blood, peacock feet, and peacock feathers. I came this time, Fellow Daoist, to borrow your Dharma Body."

Yuse immediately relaxed. After all, these things, no matter what, were nothing compared to her entire Dharma Body. But if she weren't trapped here, she naturally would be unwilling to give them. The request now felt reasonable. She lowered her voice: "My…"

Rumble…

Before she could finish speaking, the small cauldron in Chi Buzi's hand had already appeared above her head. The intense, dense power of Pristine Water pressed down. In the single instant that Yuse hesitated, the green pool beneath her feet erupted with complex, glowing array patterns.

A sudden, deadly chill seized Yuse's heart. But Chi Buzi had been accumulating power in that cauldron for who knows how long. As it descended, it suppressed her, scattering her dharma power and rendering her completely immobile.

Chi Buzi remained seated on the rock, unmoving, his eyes filled with mockery.

'Fell for it once and it wasn't enough, she had to fall for it again. Truly stupid. The Pure Land only raises these kinds of idiots…'

Even though Chi Buzi was a Purple Mansion Realm cultivator, Yuse was not someone he could kill with a mere flip of his hand. In this short time, he could only stun her, force her back to her original form, and trap her above the green pool.

Yuse was suddenly horrified. This was her moment of weakness, unable to move. If he sacrificed any Dharma Artifact now, he could easily wound her. Her mind was still reeling:

'At the absolute worst, he just covets my entire Dharma Body… Could he possibly pull out a Dharma Treasure and actually kill me?'

In that fleeting instant of thought, the grand array beneath her feet flared with a blinding white light. Yuse's figure abruptly faded. A dignified Merciful One from the Developing Wisdom Seat vanished just like that, leaving only the flow of colored light in the empty cave.

Chi Buzi's eyes darkened. He felt the slow, creeping sensation of weightlessness and understood.

'It can 'receive' Yuse even like this… and it clearly wasn't *Him* who acted. There are multiple True Monarchs in the 'Heavens Above'…'

'Dharma Artifacts have no effect. I wasn't even inside the array, yet I can still be pulled into that Grotto-Heaven… I fear I couldn't hide even if I fled to the ends of the earth. The 'Heavens Above' is not only much higher than the Buddhist Pure Land of Compassion, but it's fundamentally not in the Great Void. It is… beyond Heaven…'

'Peacocks really are stupid and dull… If I loop around, I might be able to trap one here again. Ugh, but that means I have to see that chatty moron of a donkey again…'

Chapter 797: Seeking the Dao

The long steps were translucent, and white mist churned. From a small pavilion at the edge of the heavens, the faint, clear chime of music drifted over. Inside, a row of emerald chimes sat by the inner hall. Two celestial attendants were playing, their long robes trailing the ground, hidden within the white vapors.

At the front was a long table where a woman in tea-white iridescent robes rested her chin on one hand, writing with a brush held in the other. She possessed an air of clear, otherworldly detachment. A pipa lay beside the table, faintly reflecting the light.

Shaohui had stood guard at the edge of the heavens for many years. Immortal traces rarely reached this place. Even the celestial attendants in the pavilions were spirits dispatched by the Palace of the Supreme Yin. They could not speak and were only capable of simple tasks; once they memorized a rhythm, they could strike the chimes.

She was responsible for eight courtyards and pavilions. The surrounding four courtyards housed minor functionaries and attendants, while the immortal officials from three of the four immortal pavilions had been assigned elsewhere. On normal days, none of them bothered her.

Shaohui was happy for the leisure. She had the patience for quiet cultivation. Furthermore, the immortal officials in these courtyards and pavilions were not her direct subordinates; this was, after all, someone else's territory. Zhengao had found her this quiet post, so she naturally avoided interfering. Only the official from the one remaining immortal pavilion occasionally visited her, and he was dreadfully talkative.

The brush in her hand paused. This manual on Lesser Yin arts was seventy percent complete. Setting the brush down, she looked toward an attendant maiden who entered and bowed in the center, reporting respectfully:

"Reporting to Your Excellency, Dangjiang has arrived."

Shaohui frowned slightly, looking rather helpless. Counting the days, it had been exactly thirty. The man had timed his arrival perfectly. She had no choice but to nod.

"Let him up."

The maiden attendant withdrew. Soon, a person strode in from outside the pavilion. He had the appearance of a youth, with a broad forehead and thick, flourishing hair and beard. He shook out his wave-patterned sleeves and bowed.

"Collating Immortal Official of the Profound Seven Pavilion, Dangjiang, pays respects to the Lord of Lesser Yin Wu-Gui."

"You're here again."

A stark white circular marking dotted Shaohui's brow. She looked over, her eyes weary.

"You. Instead of properly collating scriptures and correcting errors in the east, why do you keep coming here? What is it this time?"

Dangjiang had long since figured out Shaohui's temperament. Though her words were sharp, it was just complaining; she had no real intention of punishing him. Aside from her aversion to conversation, she was an excellent superior. He was currently riding a wave of success and replied:

"If only I were *actually* collating. Your Excellency knows I can't keep my mouth shut. I'm only checking the texts, not comparing them against copies. I'm constantly worried I'll make a mistake in the cultivation methods…"

Collation required two people comparing texts; Dangjiang was just looking for company. Shaohui knew he would just complain about being bored, so she cut him off rather than letting him ramble.

"Get to the point."

Only then did Dangjiang retrieve a token from his sleeve. It was the length of a forearm, pure white, and inscribed with the silver-white sigil of the Supreme Yin, which was currently glowing. He presented it with both hands. "I am here on official business. I must ask Your Excellency to escort me!"

Shaohui raised an eyebrow. She finally stood up, gathered the pipa from the table into her arms, and gracefully drifted down. "After all this time," she commented idly, "you finally have some real work to do."

"Hehe."

Dangjiang chuckled, then hesitated before speaking again.

"That subordinate of mine in the mortal realm… although he's nowhere near my level, he does have some skill. He contacted me at the turn of the year and said he could capture a peacock this time! And it's no ordinary peacock. I hear it cultivates the arts of the Northern Buddhist Lands… I wonder how much merit this one is worth, compared to the last demon…"

A tea-white cloud rose beneath Shaohui's feet, lifting him up as well. As they flew south together, she replied softly:

"That subordinate of yours… is he called Chi Buzi? The last demon he caught, how much merit did the palace record for it?"

Dangjiang quickly replied, "Three hundred immortal merits."

"Oh?"

Shaohui nodded lightly. "Then this peacock might be worth around three hundred and fifty immortal merits."

Dangjiang quickly looked up. He had been enjoying his days, but he hadn't forgotten his promise to Chi Buzi to seek out a path to the Golden Core. He had been holding it in, waiting to ask Immortal Official Liu.

But Immortal Official Liu had left and never returned, leaving his supposed connection useless. With the fire burning his eyebrows, Dangjiang could only turn to Shaohui. He hesitated, "My subordinate cultivates the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao. He cultivates his own nature and has already passed the 'Comprehending Purple' stage. He only lacks the final Dao lineage. However, the mortal realm's Fruition Attainment for Pristine Water is already occupied…"

Shaohui reacted quickly, immediately making some deductions. "Occupied is occupied… but I fear the one holding that Fruition Attainment is unwilling to let him achieve the Dao. That makes things difficult. Why not seek the Metallic Essence first? What is the status of that Pristine Water cultivator?"

Dangjiang shook his head. "His condition is poor. He is currently engaged in combat outside the heavens and has no time to spare. This is exactly why I am anxious. Whether it's proving the final Dao of 'Purging Dew,' receiving the Supreme Yin's guidance, or abandoning this path entirely, a decision must be made now. If we wait for that True Monarch to return, there won't be many options left."

"I see."

Shaohui was quite interested. Although her previous incarnation had been an early-stage Purple Mansion Realm demon, condensed from a wisp of Lesser Yin, and her memories retained the influence of many immortal arts, solving this matter was still problematic.

"Since he's your subordinate, why not ask Zhengao? Although Pristine Water is in the mortal realm, there might be an Immortal General of this Dao in the heavens. You could inquire."

"I wanted to!"

Dangjiang couldn't travel far. He wouldn't see another soul for ten days or half a month. He couldn't even find anyone to swap the two male attendants in his courtyard for female attendants, much less inquire about something so important.

'That dog Chi… your cultivation path is truly a dead end.'

Shaohui clearly understood. She paused, then replied, "Just request an audience with Zhengao and ask him properly. Although it will cost quite a bit… Zhengao appears cold but is kind-hearted, and his cultivation is profound. He won't make things difficult for you."

"But… this lowly one has humble words and little influence… What path do I take to find the Lord…"

At Dangjiang's question, Shaohui nodded. "I also need to make a trip to the Supreme Yin Palace this time. Since you asked, you can just accompany me then."

Having secured a path, Dangjiang was overjoyed. Offering profuse thanks, he stood waiting atop the clouds. The vast, magnificent hall appeared once more, twelve white jade bridges arching across the sky, spanning a golden lake.

This time, Shaohui also descended from the clouds, and they proceeded deeper into the hall, eventually arriving outside that same courtyard. From a distance, Dangjiang saw the two attendant maidens still standing outside. The one who previously held the white-rimmed jade pipa now held a Pure Cloud Jade Vase, while the other still carried a flower basket. When they saw him looking, they even returned a polite courtesy.

'…'

He strode to the front of the courtyard, keeping his eyes fixed forward. Behind him, Shaohui stopped. Dangjiang scanned them with his peripheral vision. This time, the attendant's basket was filled with glistening little fruits, the kind of goods that looked like they could bankrupt a person.

Terrified that Shaohui would remember he still owed her a [Moon Laurel Golden Branch], Dangjiang practically fled into the courtyard. The four lamp stands within the yard were blazing brightly, and the central round pool had already turned a shimmering white. He quickly formed a hand seal and activated the token.

"Activate!"

The figure of a man in green robes materialized above the pool. Dangjiang was still somewhat distracted. Chi Buzi stepped out of the pool, glanced around, and noticed the idiot spacing out by the poolside. He frowned.

"What are you losing your mind about?"

Dangjiang laughed in exasperation and shook his head. "That 'souvenir' you suddenly demanded last time. You *will* compensate me for it!"

Dangjiang had suffered a huge loss that time and still held a grudge. He had mentioned it to him two years prior, but Chi Buzi had merely treated it as a joke. Hearing it again now, he laughed and replied:

"Serves you right."

He hadn't come here to argue with Dangjiang. Before the other man could erupt, he immediately frowned.

"I caught that peacock for you. Do you have any news on your end?"

Dangjiang raised an eyebrow. He noticed that Chi Buzi was not only completely unscathed but also radiating a powerful aura. It seemed he hadn't even expended much dharma power this time. Dangjiang was secretly impressed but remained stubborn with his words.

"Just based on the few things you've caught so far… your efficiency is pathetic. These one or two demons are just minor figures in the Purple Mansion Realm. Why don't you take a piss and look at your own reflection? Yet you have the nerve to rush me for news?"

Chi Buzi sneered. "Give me a break. With you trying to get something for nothing, the fact that I'm willing to catch *anything* for you means I'm giving you face. Do you have news or not? What 'connection'? Don't tell me you were just bluffing."

This remark set Dangjiang off. He cursed, "You ungrateful wretch! Do you have any idea how I've schemed and managed my relationships these past few years? I haven't slept properly for nights! Do you know how much I've spent out of my own pocket… just to get you this chance to meet an Immortal General? And this is the thanks I get…"

Hearing this, Chi Buzi raised his eyebrows slightly, surprised.

"Meet an Immortal General?"

Chi Buzi didn't believe for a second that this idiot was capable of any grand "scheming." When they corresponded two years ago, the man had been vague, clearly lacking any confidence. He probably hadn't made any progress at all. His claims of maneuvering now likely meant he'd just stumbled into some dumb luck and gotten it done.

'As long as it got done… it's a good thing. I'll meet this Immortal General first and see… Still, I should probably praise the idiot.'

Chi Buzi affected an expression of amazement, offering a few words of thanks that sounded like he was conceding against his will. As expected, Dangjiang burst out laughing, looking incredibly smug. After chatting for a moment, the man seemed to remember something and said grudgingly:

"Did you ever find Immortal Official Li?"

Dangjiang had tasked him with this some time ago. But unlike the Golden Core lineage, this matter had no definite leads. Chi Buzi was also far cleverer than Dangjiang and just smiled.

"So what if I found him? So what if I didn't? Am I supposed to explain the matter of reincarnation to him? If that messes up the arrangements of those Above, who gets punished? You or me?"

This shut Dangjiang up completely. He truly didn't want to keep toiling like an ox and a horse every day. He sighed for a long time before replying, "In any case… just look for him. If he has his memories, just ask around for me."

To Chi Buzi, this was utter nonsense, but he firmly committed this information to memory.

What family was the reason he, Chi Buzi, first came into contact with [The Heavens] and Dangjiang? The Li Family of Moongaze! And what was Moongaze Lake? It was the foothold of the Moonlight Origin Mansion back then…

Everything about [The Heavens] was related to the Supreme Yin. Although it bore no resemblance to the Moonlight Origin Mansion's [Donghua Heaven] mentioned in the records, there was no way the two weren't connected!

If this "Immortal Official Li" had been ordered to reincarnate under his original surname, Chi Buzi's first reaction was that it had to be Daoist Master Donghua, Li Jiangqun!

Daoist Master Donghua just fit too well… possessing transcendent Dharma Art techniques, astonishing sword intent and cultivation, *and* operating under the name of the Moonlight Origin Mansion. How deep did these waters run? Although the Chi family had experienced it firsthand, Chi Buzi hadn't received the details due to the prohibition on recording Golden Core matters. But he wasn't stupid enough to go probing into the reasons!

He brushed the other man off with a single sentence. Dangjiang, meanwhile, lifted his chin, speaking proudly.

"First, I'll take you to meet my current superior, the fairy who holds the position of Lesser Yin Wu-Gui. Try to suppress that stench of mortal dust on you. Don't pollute her immortal aura."

Chi Buzi was eager to meet more people. He followed Dangjiang to the front of the courtyard. Dangjiang took the token from his sleeve and placed it in Chi Buzi's hand.

"You don't have immortal registry, so you must hold this token. There are many important figures on the path. Don't look around carelessly."

This surprised Chi Buzi. Logically, since Yingze hadn't appeared in so many years—even ignoring the Mirrored-Mirage Grotto-Heaven of the Green Pine Temple —there should be *fewer* great cultivators here. Otherwise, they wouldn't have dispatched an idiot like Dangjiang to receive him.

He hesitated briefly but ultimately followed him out of the courtyard. Sure enough, the woman in the tea-white iridescent robes was waiting outside, holding her pipa, the stark white circular marking on her brow. She was looking right at them.

"Greetings, Lord of Lesser Yin Wu-Gui!"

Chi Buzi bowed, immediately assessing her.

'A great cultivator of Lesser Yin. She also possesses a Divine Ability… she must be at the peak of the Purple Mansion Realm…'

Before him, however, Shaohui froze, a doubt rising in her mind.

'How strange… why do I find him more and more disagreeable the longer I look at him? His appearance isn't that repulsive…'

She showed no sign of this outwardly. With a single glance, she turned and walked away. Dangjiang hurried to follow. Chi Buzi walked at the very back. Although two rows of celestial soldiers lined the path, solemn and imposing, the man in green didn't spare them a second glance, focusing instead on the other cultivators.

'No matter how solemn or imposing the guards are, they could just be puppets, or some kind of divine ability…'

As he walked, many cultivators paused to watch them. A few with higher status even greeted Shaohui. Chi Buzi swept them with a faint gaze, thinking:

'The idiot is just puffing himself up to look important… not a single person acknowledged him…'

The group arrived at a high platform, pristine jade-green and bright, inscribed with bright moon patterns. Frosty snow drifted down, encircled by spiritual water. They waited on the platform for a moment before a handsome Immortal General in silver armor zipped over. Shaohui smiled.

"Fellow Daoist Zhengao!"

Zhengao looked over and nodded in reply.

"Shaohui, you've come."

The two exchanged brief pleasantries. Shaohui was clearly not one for fawning, so she quickly changed the subject.

"Fellow Daoist, you placed Dangjiang in my hands back then. I have a few small matters to consult you about. Firstly, to fulfill my duty as his superior, and secondly, it concerns the affairs of the Supreme Yin…"

Zhengao nodded with a smile, his gaze sweeping lightly over the two of them. He listened as Shaohui finished explaining. The celestial attendant of the Lesser Yin Wu-Gui position then shook out her tea-white robes and cupped her hands.

"I ask the Immortal General to handle the matter. It is not appropriate for Shaohui to remain here."

She retreated gracefully. Dangjiang waited below. Although he had met Zhengao before, those had been private meetings, nothing like the solemn dignity of today. He felt a secret fear growing in his heart.

Chi Buzi, standing to the side, was much calmer. However, the status associated with this place had repeatedly shattered his expectations, and now his own Golden Core Dao path was involved. He couldn't help but feel a flicker of anxiety. Watching Dangjiang standing frozen in front like a turtle pulling its head into its shell, he felt a massive headache coming on.

'That idiot…'

Chapter 798: The Intercalation of Valley Water

Chi Buzi waited several breaths before the anxious Dangjiang finally stepped forward and bowed.

"Reporting to the Immortal General… this man was personally selected by the Honoured Lord back then and permitted to ascend to the heavens to seek the Dao. Now… he has accrued some initial immortal merit and has come specifically to pay his respects. He hopes only for a word or two of guidance from the Immortal General, that he might have some hope of reaching the Golden Core."

Dangjiang knelt obediently, tugging Chi Buzi's sleeve with both hands, signaling him to present the token. Although Chi Buzi was a distinguished Great Cultivator of the Purple Mansion Realm, he knelt just as readily, his expression impeccably natural and respectful.

"This lowly cultivator has successively offered two Demons for sacrifice in exchange for immortal merit, seeking capital for the Dao," Chi Buzi said. "It is all recorded within this token. I only request the adult's guidance."

Immediately, an Immortal Soldier descended from the platform, accepted the token from Chi Buzi, and carried it straight to Lu Jiangxian, who was disguised as Zhengao.

"My lord," the soldier reported, "the token contains six hundred and forty-one merits."

Zhengao gave a slight nod, glanced at the two, and replied, "Go seek an intercalary position."

Dangjiang no longer understood the conversation. Chi Buzi, too, hesitated. His Azure Pond Sect Pristine Water lineage was formidable, enough to overwhelm most cultivators, but it was precisely because his Dao originated from Pristine

Water that his understanding of the Golden Core was surprisingly lacking. Though he had spent years gathering every scrap of information he could find, he was a sharp man. How could he waste an opportunity like this?

He immediately bowed again.

"Milord… this lowly cultivator's lineage is crude, and my cultivation shallow. I am completely in the dark regarding matters of the Golden Core… Only in Anhuai Heaven did I receive the Immortal Lord's pity, granting me this aspiration. The lord's words are too profound; I implore you to elaborate…"

Hearing this, Lu Jiangxian laughed internally.

'He's actually using my name for backing!'

Having read countless volumes and possessing immortal arts as his framework, Lu Jiangxian was far more knowledgeable about the Golden Core than Chi Buzi, whether in practice or theory. He felt quite confident.

This knowledge was a profound secret that could not be transmitted lightly. Chi Buzi was the type who wouldn't act without seeing a reward, but Lu Jiangxian intended to continue using him, so he wasn't stingy.

"Given your current situation," Zhengao said softly, "you cannot attain Fruition Attainment unless that Pristine Water True Monarch is eliminated. You already know this… Yet, you are a descendant of his lineage, and he is watching you closely. He doesn't even want you to secure a surplus position. If you try to confront him directly on the Dao of Pristine Water, you are committing suicide. Only an intercalary position remains viable."

Chi Buzi's breathing suddenly grew heavy. "This lowly cultivator boldly asks… which intercalary position must I attest?" he whispered.

Surplus positions and intercalary positions were ethereal concepts to ordinary cultivators. Even the core disciples of the Purple Mansion Realm merely knew the terms existed. Among the mighty Three Sects and Seven Gates, with their complete Golden Core lineages, not one possessed a cultivation method or scripture that clearly defined how to seek a surplus or intercalary position.

No matter what secrets he had witnessed previously, Chi Buzi always grasped the crux of the problem. The answer to this question carried the weight of a mountain; its value to the entire world was almost unimaginable.

Yet Zhengao replied as if it were a simple matter, shaking his head. "That depends on your Divine Abilities. Pristine Water and Valley Water have an intercalation. Of the five Divine Abilities, Cave Spring's Echo, Heavy Murk, and Chou-Gui Hidden Form are all intercalations of Valley Water. But you… you just had to go and cultivate Clear Dusk Rain. That makes things troublesome."

Chi Buzi's mind raced, his expression shifting several times as the implications of that measured sentence washed over him.

'Pristine Water and Valley Water have an intercalation.'

What did this mean? It meant that he, Chi Buzi, could use this to seek the intercalary position of Valley Water!

His composure, which wouldn't crack even if Mount Tai collapsed before him, finally shattered. His eyes revealed a mixture of stunned realization, doubt, and sudden, blinding clarity.

Based on his own cultivation and the ancient texts he'd collected, Chi Buzi had long harbored suspicions about Valley Water and Mansion Water. He had once gambled by speculating that Yingze was the Mansion Water True Monarch, solely as a show of loyalty.

And now, learning that these Divine Abilities were called "Valley Water intercalations," the fog in his mind mostly dispersed. But just knowing that Pristine Water and Valley Water had an intercalation wasn't the solution. The critical questions remained: which immortal foundation must he use as a supplement? And what method must he find to seek the Golden Core?

Countless thoughts erupted in his mind, but he relied on his profound cultivation to restrain his excitement.

"In the past, the seniors of my lineage only sought the surplus position of Pristine Water, never daring to dream of an intercalary one. By my generation, we understood the True Monarch's intent and had considered seeking an intercalary path… but I never imagined that Clear Dusk Rain had ruined the entire endeavor…"

Zhen'gao had already picked up a jade slip and begun reading it idly.

"If you hadn't cultivated Clear Dusk Rain," he replied, "this Valley Water Dao would have offered a wondrous affinity. But you did. Clear Dusk Rain is the

'evening rain,' the orthodox fruition of Pristine Water. As such, it conflicts with Valley Water."

Chi Buzi finally understood. His clan had possessed Heavy Murk and Cave Spring's Echo. Only Clear Dusk Rain had come from the Azure Pond Sect's inventory. His suspicious nature immediately flared, placing all the blame on Pristine Water True Monarch.

"Now…" Chi Buzi pleaded, "I beg the lord to illuminate the path forward!"

Zhengao stroked the token in his hand, and its radiant light immediately dimmed. Dangjiang watched this, his heart aching at the cost, but Chi Buzi paid it no mind, waiting below with utmost reverence.

"Within the Mansion Water path," Zhen'gao said, "there is one called Morning Cold Rain. Are you aware of it?"

Of course Chi Buzi knew. He answered instantly,

"This lowly cultivator has heard of it. The Mansion Water's Morning Cold Rain is often seen in the Eastern Sea. Many descendants of Pristine Water Demons follow this Dao…"

"If you are to attest another Divine Ability," Zhen'gao said softly, "you should cultivate this one."

Chi Buzi froze, deep unease filling him.

After all, if a Purple Mansion Realm cultivator attested the wrong Divine Ability, their progress would be halted permanently. Cultivators in Jiangnan only dared to supplement their path with an outside Dao for their absolute final Divine Ability, and even then, only after meticulous, agonizing calculations to ensure the abilities wouldn't conflict. It was no simple matter.

Furthermore, telling a Pristine Water cultivator to use a Mansion Water Divine Ability to attest a Valley Water intercalary position was utter madness. If he had heard this idea yesterday, Chi Buzi would have slapped the speaker into oblivion. He couldn't fathom it.

Zhengao raised an eyebrow.

"Morning Cold Rain is 'falling snow meeting the morning light, transforming into chilling rain.' The rain is held within the snow; the snow is the rain's creek valley. Within the Mansion Water path, *this* is the Valley Water intercalation.

The good news is that it can connect upward to those three Valley Water intercalations, and downward to your Clear Dusk Rain. While not as ideal as cultivating the other two Valley Water paths directly… it counts as a road."

The more Chi Buzi listened, the more sense it made. He nodded quickly, a seed of trust taking root.

No matter what, this method still involved four Pristine Water abilities; it remained within the bounds of worldly convention. Even if he failed to breach the Golden Core, his life would at least be preserved. In contrast, Chi Buzi now felt that the alternative—*not* cultivating Clear Dusk Rain, and instead cultivating three Pristine Water abilities followed by two Valley Water abilities—sounded like the real joke.

'The seniors and classics had long made it clear: cultivating even a single Divine Ability outside one's foundational path meant cultivation would halt permanently. Two? Even if you *could* cultivate them, how many days could you survive before your body exploded?'

He weighed the two roads. He would still choose the four-Pristine Water, one-Mansion Water path. In fact, he was suddenly grateful he had already cultivated Clear Dusk Rain; otherwise, he would have had difficulty refusing the other, suicidal suggestion.

"This Morning Cold Rain…"

Chi Buzi wasn't without the Mansion Water cultivation art, but he was completely ignorant regarding these divine intercalary mysteries. Naturally, he had to ask for the sake of security. His tone was hopeful and earnest, desperate for the general to simply hand him a specialized cultivation method.

Lu Jiangxian had been waiting for this exact question. The carrot was dangling, and Chi Buzi would naturally take the bait. Controlling Zhengao, he chuckled.

"That's easy. Morning Cold Rain is, after all, a Mansion Water method. It's best to modify it to better fit your Dao path. If you have sufficient immortal merit, you can go to the Manor and request a copy. The subsequent Gold-seeking method will be the same. Neither is difficult."

Chi Buzi's heart hammered his ribs. Lu Jiangxian knew how capable this man was and felt a flicker of worry; after all, even he needed time to compose the cultivation method. He feared Chi Buzi might pull off a massive sacrifice—perhaps an entire mountain of Merciful Ones—and demand the method when

he couldn't produce it. Faking a Gold-seeking method was beyond his current abilities.

He quickly added a warning: "But I must remind you. My colleagues in the Manor are not as easy-going as I am. They look very unfavorably upon the Purple-Gold demonic path. Stay away from that area. If you need to make a request, have Dangjiang do it for you. The cost will not be low… Work hard."

The excuse was perfectly logical. It even resolved some of Chi Buzi's lingering doubts, lessening his suspicions. He and Dangjiang bowed respectfully and exited the platform. The green-robed man looked utterly refreshed, his spirit soaring.

Dangjiang, however, glanced mournfully at the token in Chi Buzi's hand. Six hundred and forty-one immortal merits were now reduced to a meager forty-one. Chi Buzi didn't care in the slightest.

'What a joke,' he thought. 'The lives of just two Demons? The single sentence, "Pristine Water and Valley Water have an intercalation," is worth the lives of how many Purple Mansion cultivators in my entire lineage?'

Shaohui was waiting outside, holding her pipa. She had always disliked Chi Buzi, but she was an expert at enduring and said nothing, escorting them out. When they reached the courtyard, both men breathed a sigh of relief.

This time, Dangjiang was wary of him, and Chi Buzi mentioned no gifts. He spoke with grave seriousness.

"I am returning this time to slowly accumulate immortal merit. Doing this too often attracts suspicion. The path ahead is one of constant peril, where body and spirit could be annihilated at any moment; it is like treading on thin ice. If I fall, your path of advancement vanishes, too."

"You are safe in the heavens. Please, ask about this cultivation method for me, and what its price is. If you have the chance, gather spirit pills and potent medicines—any aid from the mighty you can find. In doing so, you will also be helping yourself."

"Like I need you to tell me?" Dangjiang spat at him.

Chi Buzi nearly cursed him—*stupid mule*—but restrained himself and vanished from the round pool.

Dangjiang was left staring enviously at the spot, but as he took a step, something suddenly felt wrong.

'Damn it… That Chi dog earns three hundred merits per demon, and I… I'm not even making his spare change! How am I not getting a commission? When a subordinate does the dirty work, shouldn't you skim at least sixty or seventy percent? Otherwise, what's the point!'

Within The Saintly Palace of the Supreme Yin's Luminous and Primordial Purity.

As great snowflakes danced outside, Lu Jiangxian's form slowly materialized by the table. In the center sat a jade pot, filled to the brim with the dazzling, ocean-like Divine Ability that still pulsed like a captured galaxy.

'Chi Buzi basically believes it… At least this will allow him to cultivate to Peak Purple Mansion. He still has two hundred years. He counts as a hidden card.'

Lu Jiangxian hadn't completely deceived him. According to his own calculations, provided the Gold-seeking method was a match, this path—though bizarre and incredibly difficult—was indeed a viable minor road straight to the Golden Core.

"This Morning Cold Rain cultivation method won't be hard to write. Li Ximing was able to break through relying on Talisman Qi, which proves that Talisman Qi is inextricably linked to Divine Abilities. It possesses the power to sense and nurture them. I only need to write the method up to the Foundation Establishment Realm. That makes it much, much simpler."

Lu Jiangxian had gray talismans in spades, and seven white talismans in his inventory. Although the sacrificial method wasn't recorded, the efficacy of the two talisman grades must differ.

"Chi Buzi is highly capable. When the time comes, I'll reward him with one gray talisman and let him grind out the breakthrough himself. The white talismans I'll save for that fellow Li Ximing. It will speed up the cultivation of his Sovereign Treading Peril, so he doesn't keep getting beaten and forced to flee."

He simulated the process using a few created human bodies. As he suspected, once the Purple Mansion Realm was achieved, Talisman Qi could indeed sense the previous Divine Ability and assist in nurturing the next.

"Li Ximing's Heavenly Audience Gate is not yet at perfection. It will be some time before he's useful."

Dismissing the thought, he checked on Chi Buzi's status—all was normal. Only then did he wave his sleeve. A small, exquisite, seven-colored peacock with a golden beak and golden talons materialized on the floor.

The peacock's true form should have been the size of a mountain, but upon entering the Immortal Mirror's domain, it had been suppressed to this tiny form. Lu Jiangxian scanned it and made his assessment.

'It's far inferior to Fuyu. There are flaws in both its body and soul. Although the Mirror forcibly collected its true spirit, it ultimately possesses no Divine Abilities. It's mediocre fodder. Using it will be boring.'

These Merciful Ones had their heads stuffed with nothing but those sutras, and the Dharma Arts they learned were useless outside their Buddhist lands. Only the base instincts of a peacock remained. Even if he nurtured it, it was just an empty-headed mediocrity.

He had intended to take a soul to pair with Fuyu's Lesser Yin Divine Ability to refine Talisman Qi, but this Merciful One had only cultivation, no innate abilities. Lesser Yin, at least, had other uses. In the end, he decided to simply use the entire peacock.

"Come!"

The entire celestial palace instantly froze. Every Immortal Soldier and General solidified like a statue. The massive ocean of golden incense fire suppressed beneath the vast palace erupted, surging across the heavens, all of it flooding toward the seven-colored glass orb in his palm.

The golden lake that Dangjiang and the others had seen beneath the twelve white jade bridges was merely one small corner. The incense fire from millions of mortals, accumulated year after year, had condensed into a massive lake beneath the palace, and it was now draining at terrifying speed.

Previously, when Lu Jiangxian condensed Talisman Qi, he had never experienced consumption like this, nor had he ever considered if his incense fire reserves were sufficient. Now, the cost for a single azure talisman leaped from a measure of ten thousand to one of millions. Only his accumulated reserves from the last fifty years supported the expenditure. The golden lake's surface dropped lower and lower, but ultimately, it held.

A single point of green light emerged before him. Countless profound patterns, resembling a spider's web, spread through the air. The sounds of immortal bells and ethereal strings played from the void. The nascent Talisman Qi bobbed and swayed, seemingly observing its surroundings with curiosity.

Lu Jiangxian casually caught it, pressing it into his palm. All celestial phenomena vanished. The golden lake below rippled, only half of its volume remaining.

"All preparations are complete. As soon as the Li family's ritual passes, I can bestow this using the Talisman Seed."

Chapter 799: Nine Mounds

Pale light bloomed again in the pitch-dark cavern. On the ground, the green pool rippled. The young man opened his eyes once more, the world shifting from a blur into sharp focus.

Drip.

Chi Buzi raised an eyebrow, standing motionlessly. His eyes still held a thick, lingering expression of disbelief and joy. As if waking from a dream, he scanned his surroundings before standing still, sleeves clasped.

"Valley Water Intercalary Position…"

He stood dumbfounded for a long time, still feeling that the answers he received from the Immortal General were worth far more than two Purple Mansion beasts… The first sentence was, "Pristine Water and Valley Water have an intercalary," and the next was, "Cultivate 'Morning Cold Rain' to seek the Valley Water intercalary position." What kind of treatment was this?

'Even the great families like the Wang and the Xie… or the Luoxia and Dragon-kin… do they receive such treatment? If their descendants hit a bottleneck in cultivation and personally went to pay respects to a True Monarch, would they receive this level of guidance?!'

'Four Pristine and one Mansion seeking Valley Water? What an utterly astonishing concept! Yet, coming from that Immortal General Zhengao, it sounded as simple as post-tea chatter… What level of Dao insight is this? What kind of Dao lineage! If you swapped in another True Monarch, could they possibly reach such a conclusion in an instant?'

Chi Buzi's expression flickered.

"Impossible… Even the True Monarchs of the current age, who have cultivated for so many years longer than that… one of them only managed to nurture a single Jade True Monarch. While it's true that my heart for seeking the Dao is resolute, an ordinary Golden Core cultivator surely lacks such miraculous means to turn decay into magic…"

The gap was simply too immense. For a moment, Chi Buzi even began to suspect what kind of place the world beyond the sky truly was. He didn't know if other realms existed, but if this was all real, such a terrifying Immortal Palace could likely command this realm as if it were child's play.

Chi Buzi was naturally suspicious and didn't dwell long on such extravagant fantasies. Instead, he sought the most reliable guess, musing inwardly:

"This level of Dao lineage insight… it must be a heritage from the Middle Antiquity period, at the very least…"

He sorted through his thoughts, gradually grasping the key point as his eyes narrowed.

'It's likely he was taught to say it. A Golden Core cultivator whose lineage is close to the Valley and Pristine Waters might not be incapable of thinking of this method. But this affair isn't just about *thinking* of it. One must be able to produce a true Gold-seeking method for it to be reality.'

'And this Gold-seeking method is anything but simple. Forget all the ancient orthodox techniques, whether they seek Gold through the Five Elements or through Void and Reality—they are all useless here. This must be a method tailor-made specifically for me. Moreover, for such a fantastical, practically impossible Gold-seeking method, the difficulty of creating it is even greater than proving the Dao myself…'

It was the series of statements from the Zhengao that had given him sufficient confidence to believe it. He suppressed the surging joy and anxiety in his heart, returning to his usual calm.

'I still haven't received the Gold-seeking method, so some doubt remains. I'll continue hunting beasts for now. Since I have nothing I can cultivate at the moment, it's the perfect time to hunt these creatures… I must first get that cultivation art and see it for myself…'

His mood lifted considerably. He rode the wind and burst forth from the sea. He felt the world open up and the sea breeze refresh him. Lifting his gaze, he saw the stars shining brightly in the sky.

"One must always plan ahead. I need to make a trip to the World Navel, visit the various Dao lineages, leave a good impression on that Lady, and read more of the Valley Water Daoist scriptures."

The Sea Cape.

The island baked under a scorching sun. The air over the sea held not a trace of moisture, carrying instead an oppressive, stuffy heat. The sky was a spotless, cloudless blue, baking the island's crops until they withered.

A man sat on a large boulder by the sea. He wore white-gold Daoist robes, and a celestial light flashed between his brows as he gazed quietly into the sky.

Li Ximing had returned from hunting beasts and refined the Essence Gathering Pill. He had sent Xia Shouyu into seclusion while he did the same here at the Sea Cape. In three years, he had consumed two Profound Adamant Essence Gathering Pills and cultivated diligently, successfully suppressing all the flames within his Great Juque Court.

Now, his injuries were ninety percent healed. The remaining damage was merely superficial harm to his Dharma Body from the battle's flames. He just needed to find some time to patch it up, and returning to his peak state would be effortless.

Of the seven Profound Adamant Essence Gathering Pills, exactly one remained. Li Ximing tucked it away safely for emergencies.

'If I weren't an alchemist myself, I'd still be trapped in that cursed place, laying low. I might have even had to face that treacherous old bastard again in the future. This last pill is a perfect reserve. If I'm truly struck by that technique again, this can still save the day.'

With his injuries mostly treated and Xia Shouyu successfully breaking through to Foundation Establishment, Li Ximing planned to leave the Sea Cape and head for the Peacock Sea.

'The "Blazing Fire" Immortal Foundation is forged. Rain clouds scatter, and cold turns to heat. It truly is just as the books described.'

Li Ximing's insight was no longer shallow. Since the 'White Li Heart' was 'Blazing Fire' and also utilized 'Li,' it was almost certainly inseparable from the Luan Sparrow. Luan Sparrows command fire and revere 'Blazing Fire' as supreme. The 'White Li Heart' technique should not be weak.

His timing was precise. He waited only two breaths before a bright light shot up from the temple on the island. Reddish flames soared into the sky, accompanied by the faint, bright, and pleasant cry of a bird.

The chirping drew closer as the white-and-red flames sped toward him, resolving into the form of a beautiful woman. Her face was faintly flushed, her eyebrows thin and high. Bearing a smile, she respectfully knelt before him.

"Shouyu greets the Daoist Master! I was fortunate to not fail my mission. I have now forged my Dao Foundation and have not wasted the Daoist Master's precious pill…"

Li Ximing smiled and nodded, extending a hand to lift her up.

"It was not entirely the pill's doing," he said. "To cultivate in this desolate land and reach Qi Refining so early already proves you are a rare genius. Your ability to meet me is also a sign of your deep fortune."

Xia Shouyu nodded repeatedly as Li Ximing continued, "Let's go look around the temple. Once you have your affairs in order, we will set off."

These words sent a thrill of excitement through Xia Shouyu. She immediately bowed deeply and replied, "Your Excellency's grace… this lowly one will carve it into my heart and never forget!"

She knew full well that the Sea Cape was separated from the Peacock Sea, at the very edge of the Eastern Sea, by countless stretches of mortal ocean. Even though she was now at Foundation Establishment, she had no idea how many years or months it would take her to fly across it herself. Worse, once she reached the coast, the Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain might ignore her, but the peacocks certainly wouldn't spare her.

Staying at the Sea Cape meant she could be a local tyrant, but her cultivation would stagnate until she died. The distance separating her from the wealthy Inner Sea and the Converging Heaven Sea was unimaginable… And now, standing before her was a Purple Mansion cultivator. She had found a stable backer!

Li Ximing had already started walking. Master and servant arrived before the monastery to find the grounds covered in kneeling people. Li Ximing did not enter, merely stating casually:

"Handle it all."

Xia Shouyu immediately bowed and stepped inside. She was met by a thunderous chorus of "Your Excellency" and "Gracious Matriarch." There were sounds of old men weeping with joy, middle-aged men begging bitterly for mercy, and soon, inexplicable cries of people trying to make her stay. Only fifteen minutes passed before the chicken-and-dog chaos subsided. Xia Shouyu walked out quickly and reported respectfully:

"Reporting to the Daoist Master, the temple's affairs are all settled. When this lowly one broke through, it caused a three-month drought that harmed the populace. I have already left the resources the Daoist Master granted with the temple, instructing them to send people to purchase rice and compensate the commoners."

Xia Shouyu had clearly already perceived Li Ximing's stance. This action was both a probing stone and a final bit of compensation for her own temple. Li Ximing noted it and nodded slightly. The two mounted a ray of celestial light and soared toward the horizon.

Xia Shouyu remained in a kneeling posture on the light, peering faintly through the illusory glow at the crowds still kowtowing on the ground below. Her heart was filled with complex emotions, but a pool of inky blackness swiftly spread, and the world went dark.

"Great Void!"

As they traversed the Great Void, Li Ximing spoke.

"You did well. I cultivate in Jiangnan and hail from an Immortal Clan; I am part of the renowned orthodox path. Your mind is sharp, but when you arrive at the clan, you must cast aside the temperament and methods you learned in the Outer Seas."

Xia Shouyu let out a breath of relief and nodded respectfully. Li Ximing casually retrieved an outer robe painted with a moon-lake pattern from his storage bag, tossing it along with a pair of silver boots into her hands.

"We are going to meet a guest," he ordered.

Xia Shouyu's current attire was a mismatched, unpresentable mess. While this outer robe wasn't a formal Dharma Robe, it was made of soft, expensive spirit cloth and matched the boots perfectly. Draping it on would cover her shortcomings. The moment Xia Shouyu touched it, she loved it.

'Tsk, tsk, this material… this spiritual qi… This must be authentic Jiangnan goods.'

She draped it over herself, admiring it silently, careful not to disturb him further. Li Ximing, meanwhile, continued to travel through the Great Void, pondering his plan:

"A visit to the Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain is in order. The Tantai family is a good friend of Si Boxiu, and he was the first person I visited back then. My current relationship with the Si family is also amicable, and he is closely connected to the Inner Sea, making him the most accurate source for information. It is worth a visit."

He finalized his itinerary. After traversing the Great Void for a short while, he broke through the void and reappeared. The seawater below was a mix of bronze-green and rainbow-red; they had clearly arrived at the Peacock Sea.

Xia Shouyu, not understanding the principles of Great Void travel, was struck dumb by the speed. Li Ximing, however, frowned. Seeing flocks of peacocks crisscrossing the sky, he immediately concealed their forms.

"Why is this flock of peacocks going insane… searching everywhere like their mothers just died…"

He ducked back into the Great Void. Although he didn't know the precise location of the Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain, he simply flew toward the most perilous-looking place within the Great Void and emerged back into the world. Sure enough, a majestic mountain range materialized from the sea, appearing even more imposing amidst the churning waves.

The entire mountain range was a deep purple-red, covered in maple trees that were a rare sight in the Outer Seas, their leaves rising and falling like waves in

the sea breeze. Li Ximing swept his gaze over it and materialized at the foot of the mountain.

He found himself before a massive, pure-white mountain gate archway that stood well over a hundred zhang tall.

The right pillar bore large, magnificent characters:

Great Wonder Merging Truth Path

The left pillar read:

Spirit-Pacifying Moon-Clear Mountain

Li Ximing glanced at the center beam, which read:

Supreme Mound Nine Daos

Just as the various families recognized the Li family as part of the Wei-Li Dao Lineage and thus targeted them with the Xiqi Daos, all Dao lineages traced their origins as far back as they could. These names held great significance. Li Ximing committed them to memory.

Immediately, a cultivator flew out from the mountain. He looked startled but remained respectful, bowing.

"Greetings, Daoist Master. This lowly cultivator is Tantai Muming of the Nine Mounds Dao Lineage. We were unaware of Your Immortal Carriage's arrival and failed to provide a proper welcome. Please, enter the mountain to rest."

Li Ximing had heard at both the Sea Cape and here in the Peacock Sea that the master of Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain was exceptionally hospitable and had many friends. This Tantai Muming clearly had seen his share of the world; his reception was practiced and natural. His surprise likely stemmed only from not recognizing Li Ximing.

Behind him, Xia Shouyu was still reeling from the shock of the majestic mountain and the colossal archway. However, with her Daoist Master backer standing before her, the surge of inferiority was minimal. Instead, she felt a sense of shared glory and stepped forward slightly, trying her best to appear natural and not disgrace Li Ximing.

Li Ximing gave a slight nod. "Is this the cultivation abode of Daoist Master Tantai? I have long heard of your great name. I had a very pleasant discussion with Senior Yuanxiu last time, and he spoke of the Daoist Master's reputation. As I

was passing the Peacock Sea and found myself with time to spare, I came for a visit."

Li Ximing did not state his own name, but Tantai Muming was visibly pleased.

"So you are a friend of Daoist Master Yuanxiu! We have truly been remiss… Please, Daoist Master, rest in the pavilion for a moment. I will go and fetch my elder."

Although Li Ximing spoke as if they were familiar, Tantai Muming maintained his vigilance and did not rashly invite him fully into the mountain. He sent someone to make inquiries while apologizing, "A few days ago, the Great Bestowal Temple of Bronze Splendour from the north suddenly came to cause trouble. Our sect's Great Daoist Master was invited to Great Bestowal Copper Mountain to discuss important matters with the peacocks and cannot return immediately."

"However… our sect's Daoist Master Lingdu is currently in the sect discussing the Dao with Daoist Master Houfu. They have been at it for three months. I will send someone to ask them."

Li Ximing's eyes lit up.

'Daoist Master Houfu is here too!'

Daoist Master Houfu was from the Great Xiukiu Monastery. That monastery acted with considerable righteousness and had no conflicts with the Li Clan; they had even come to congratulate Li Ximing in the past. With him present, Li Ximing felt much more secure about this visit.

Only a few breaths passed before two Daoist Masters were seen treading through the air toward them.

The one in the lead was ancient, leaning on a wooden staff; this had to be Lingdu. The one behind him, dressed in shamanistic robes, was tall and thin. It was indeed Houfu, whom he had met before. When the two arrived, Lingdu looked slightly perplexed.

"Greetings, Your Excellency…"

Li Ximing offered a smile, but Houfu recognized him. He stepped forward, a faint smile pulling at his lips as he spoke.

"Senior Lingdu, this is a Daoist Master from our Jiangnan: Zhaojing."

Daoist Master Houfu didn't often travel in Jiangnan, but when he did, it was always with banging gongs and drums, in a carriage pulled by spirit beasts. The man loved his pageantry, and the Li family had presented him with congratulatory gifts back then. Li Ximing quickly bowed.

"Greetings, Senior Houfu! I never imagined the Daoist Master would be here. This is truly an unexpected joy!"

Houfu was, strictly speaking, a peer of Li Ximing's generation. When Li Ximing elevated his status this way, his smile broadened slightly. "You flatter me… Zhaojing, you are truly formidable!"

Li Ximing understood the implication. Houfu saw that he was in good condition and was tacitly praising him for escaping intact from a late-stage Daoist Master like Changxiao. But Li Ximing knew better than anyone that his survival had involved far too much luck. He smiled and deflected the praise. The elder, Lingdu, however, looked quite shocked. He studied Li Ximing from top to bottom before praising him.

"So it is the Imperial Scion, Zhaojing. This old man is Cao Xiyan of the Nine Mounds Immortal Dao, titled Lingdu. Greetings, Daoist Master."

"I am unworthy of the title 'Imperial Scion'… it is merely a false rumor spread in Jiangnan."

Li Ximing quickly deflected again. Lingdu kept the smile on his face, clearly not believing the denial. He lifted his sleeve and gestured.

"Zhaojing, please…"

The three rode the wind into the mountain interior. A cool breeze rustled past, sending maple leaves drifting through the air. Beneath the largest maple tree sat an ancient bronze chessboard, where black and white pieces were locked in a fierce, entangled struggle, clearly in the middle of an intense game.

Li Ximing felt a pang of nervousness, glancing at the board.

'…I've lived this long and never even touched a chess piece… Please don't ask me to play.'

Fortunately, Lingdu immediately moved the chessboard aside. Houfu stood behind him, hands clasped, and chuckled.

"Zhaojing… you've certainly made Tinglan search hard these past two years! I just asked this old senior. That woman didn't just ask my Great Xiukiu Monastery; she even came asking the Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain. She is desperate to find you!"

Chapter 800: The Peacock's Old Affairs

'Tinglan is still looking for me…'

Li Ximing doubted Tinglan cared that much about him. Ten to one, she was just anxious to use the pills and worried he would vanish into seclusion for another decade.

'After all, I've already read the Heavenly Oneness Essence Extraction Pill formula, the Profound Peak Gate affair is settled, and she took the Purple Mansion Realm formation. Now that she has the materials, she's too embarrassed—or finds it too difficult—to ask anyone else to refine it…'

He sat down with the two cultivators.

"I promised Fellow Daoist Tinglan we had important matters to discuss," Li Ximing explained, covering for the alchemy. "I was gone for several years and delayed things, so she came looking."

Houfu just nodded and poured tea. Lingdu, however, was quite enthusiastic. The old man smiled.

"Zhaojing's alchemy skills are profound. Perhaps she wants you to refine pills. In any case, it's a good thing. We previously thought Zhaojing was severely injured and in seclusion, so we only put in a token effort to search. Now that we see you are safe and sound, I'm not sure how to reply to her."

Lingdu clearly wanted no part in Purple Smoke's affairs and was using one sentence to ask Li Ximing for a clear answer. Li Ximing understood his intent.

"There's no need to trouble Senior with messages. When I am free and return to Jiangnan, I will naturally find her."

Although Tinglan was from the Green Pine Dao lineage, the Great Xiukui Monastery was no slouch either, being a former subordinate of an immortal

estate. Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain was overseas. None of the factions had any incentive to curry favor with her; it was purely a matter of personal relationships. Since no one here was exceptionally close to Tinglan, the matter was dropped.

Li Ximing took the opportunity. "I spent several years healing in the Eastern Sea and have no news from Jiangnan. I wonder what the current situation is…"

Houfu disliked idle talk, perhaps worried that explaining too much would lower his status. He sipped his tea silently. Seeing this, Lingdu replied:

"Zhu Gong entered Shanji Prefecture and established a new mountain gate called the Sacred Writ Gate, another Profound Enterprise lineage. That noble, Li Zhouwei, fled to the sea. I heard they lost someone who cultivated lightning."

Li Ximing's gaze dropped. He set the teacup down and unconsciously wiped his hands on his robes. "Oh… haih…"

His buoyant mood from recovering his injuries instantly plummeted, replaced by an empty hollowness.

'Li Chenghui left no bloodline… This is all my fault. My planning was insufficient. He should have been a pillar suppressing the clan's destiny, but because of my lack of foresight, he was killed so carelessly.'

The family only had so many pillars, and only a handful were selfless. Li Ximing knew exactly who they were. Grief and sorrow washed over him. It was a testament to his control that he didn't lose his composure, but for a moment, he truly couldn't speak.

Lingdu was experienced and saw at a glance that Li Ximing had lost a prized junior. He shook his head slightly.

"Whether it's clan inheritance or bloodlines, it's all the same. Out of ten juniors, six are mediocre, three are useless profligates, and the one who shows promise has to drag the other nine along. That's bad enough… but the more promising they are, the more we push them into danger to train them."

"We masters and elders all hope that one outstanding junior will be the one to turn the tide in a crisis. If they perish achieving that, it's a worthy death. But more often than not, it doesn't happen that way. It's the abrupt, accidental

deaths that leave a tightness in your chest, a strength you can't use… just bitterness and rage!"

He stamped his foot.

"When I was young, I had a junior with excellent talent and an honest temperament. If he were alive today, he would have reached the Purple Mansion Realm. But he went on a routine trip to a market in the surrounding seas, and in one careless moment, he died in a woman's bed. He didn't even use his talismans or protective treasures."

"We investigated later. You couldn't even blame the kid for being stupid. The woman was just a rogue cultivator. He wasn't manipulated by some supernatural art; it was purely love turning to hate. She just hated him for being a philanderer. It just shows that even for elders like us who have mastered divine arts, when someone's luck runs out… we can't save them in time."

Hearing this, Li Ximing said quietly, "Senior speaks the truth. My family also has a romantic. It isn't necessarily a bad thing, as long as they are clever. It's just that his talent wasn't high, making his future even more difficult."

Of the three, only Houfu was young and childless, and the Great Xiukui Monastery wasn't his problem to worry about. He should have been carefree, yet his brow furrowed at the topic.

"Daoist Master Cao only worries about his own descendants. He doesn't know the anxieties of our sect lineages. You can't divide the inheritance equally. Not only do the disciples below hate their martial brothers, they start to hate you. Our thirty-six peaks have more than fifty factions, all busy promoting their own relatives. It's more than a tangled mess. In the years I've been cultivating, the disciples beneath me have already split into six cliques."

The two offered a word of comfort. Li Ximing tactfully composed himself. Houfu glanced at Lingdu, and the elder from the Nine Mounds lineage finally spoke, smiling.

"Since Zhaojing is here, it must be destiny. Zhaojing, you fought Changxiao… is your Dharma body well? Did you happen to see the silver bottle?"

Lingdu and Li Ximing weren't particularly close. Asking about a Dharma body was taboo. A Purple Mansion Realm cultivator with a worse temper might have stormed off. But the other party's faction was powerful, and Li Ximing had a calm demeanor. He only frowned.

"It still has some damage. I saw the silver bottle. It is extremely formidable."

Lingdu's voice grew grave. "The Encompassing Profundity is powerful. Since you were struck by that bottle, Zhaojing, you must not return to Jiangnan anytime soon… Changxiao will detect you."

Li Ximing's heart pounded, his pupils dilating slightly.

'Why didn't I notice anything?!'

Li Ximing had suspected early on that Changxiao's divine art left a mark, but he hadn't found the slightest trace… and he had specifically used the Immortal Mirror to check!

'Impossible… Something is amiss. How could it evade the Immortal Mirror? That insidious bastard probably guessed I had a way to detect it and deliberately held back… feigning and probing…'

Lingdu glanced at him. "We few lack ocular arts and cannot see clearly. However, my Nine Mounds lineage possesses a Shade-Cleansing Pool that can cleanse a Dharma body…"

He paused briefly, his meaning becoming obvious.

"However, there is a matter I was hoping to discuss."

Li Ximing looked up slightly. Lingdu said softly: "Purple Mansion Realm spiritual fire… I wonder if Zhaojing is interested?"

Li Ximing's heart leaped, but his expression remained neutral. "Oh? Which type might it be?"

The highest-grade Dharma Art of the Li family was undoubtedly the sixth-rank Great Radiance of White Brilliance. This technique had strict requirements: it needed the Purple Mansion Realm Radiant Fire to practice. Li Ximing had coveted it for a long time. Now that he asked, Lingdu seemed caught off guard.

"I do not know which one it is… In short, it is neither Virile Fire nor Blazing Fire."

Having just escaped a perilous situation, Li Ximing was hesitant. "Perhaps you could elaborate."

Lingdu nodded. "Zhaojing has likely heard that something happened at the Great Bestowal Temple of Bronze Splendour. There is unrest everywhere.

Before our Great Daoist Master left, he speculated that a Merciful One from the temple must have perished."

Li Ximing was confused about this. This Great Daoist Master of Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain was a dignified late-stage Purple Mansion Realm cultivator, equal in strength to Maha. He had no need to placate the Great Bestowal Temple of Bronze Splendour, yet it sounded like he had been summoned.

"The Great Bestowal Temple of Bronze Splendour certainly carries itself with prestige."

Lingdu immediately caught his meaning. "Years ago, the Peacock ancestor of the Great Bestowal Temple of Bronze Splendour had connections with our lineage. The previous Temple Master also rendered a great service to our Mountain Lord. He is bound by sentiment to look after the Peacocks…"

"No wonder!"

The Peacock Sea was clearly suppressed by Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain, yet the place was teeming with peacocks. It was rare for Immortals and Buddhists to have good relations. Li Ximing had been suspicious.

Lingdu continued, "Thus, with a Merciful One perishing, he had to go, both for logical and personal reasons. The Great Bestowal Temple of Bronze Splendour has four Merciful Ones. One has fallen, one must report to the Buddhist Pure Land, and another must host the Great Daoist Master. That leaves only one free."

"The item we mentioned is in the Peacock Sea. It is an inheritance left by an ancestor of the Tantai family, deeply related to the Peacocks. It was discovered many years ago, but we feared that any disturbance would force us to split it with the Peacocks. Given his personal ties, the Great Daoist Master couldn't possibly support us, so we never made a move. Now is the perfect opportunity."

Li Ximing mostly understood. He rubbed his teacup for a moment but didn't agree, smiling instead. "Since it is a treasure of the Tantai family, where do I come in?"

Lingdu paused slightly. "First, the formation is difficult to break. Second… that Merciful One will likely sense us and come. We will be below retrieving the item, and we need Zhaojing to block him for a moment."

Now Li Ximing understood. Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain didn't want to tear face with the Great Bestowal Temple of Bronze Splendour. They needed an unrelated person to take the blame. The price was the Purple Mansion Realm spiritual fire from the inheritance.

'It's possible… before I arrived, they were planning to make Houfu the villain. They were just discussing it. Then I suddenly showed up. These two figured that after the Wei-Li incident, I wouldn't fear offending some Buddhist cultivators… so they're using a spiritual fire to push me out front.'

Li Ximing didn't dare believe this was truly left by a Tantai ancestor. But at the least, the two of them spoke of this inheritance as if it were their own backyard, which meant they were confident. Li Ximing was hesitating when Houfu suddenly spoke:

"Zhaojing, if that Merciful One comes, Senior Lingdu cannot face him. Regardless of whether you or I step forward, that Merciful One will fight relentlessly. If we duel and our identities are exposed, it's trouble. Why don't we step out together? Two Purple Mansion Realm cultivators should be enough to intimidate him into retreating. We won't even need to fight, which reduces the risk of exposure by ninety percent."

Houfu had the Great Xiukui Monastery behind him, so his words carried weight. This proposal was much more comfortable. Even if something went wrong, Houfu would be there to share the consequences. Li Ximing was tempted. He specifically asked:

"Is the Great Bestowal Temple of Bronze Splendour backed by the Way of Compassion or the Way of Emptiness?"

"It is the Way of Compassion."

Li Ximing relaxed slightly.

His grand-uncle, Li Xuanfeng, had killed eighteen Master Monks of the Way of Emptiness by the river, destroying a great destiny for that line. If this thing had even the slightest connection to the Way of Emptiness, Li Ximing wouldn't touch it. Pondering this, he nodded.

"We can try it."

"Excellent!"

Lingdu nodded, smiling. "We must trouble Zhaojing to cultivate on the mountain for a time. We will finalize the preparations. When the time comes for it to appear, we will call you. Afterward, we will ask Zhaojing to meet the Great Daoist Master and proceed with the cleansing."

Ultimately, Li Ximing decided he needed the cleansing to ease his suspicions. The three poured tea, acknowledging each other, and the matter was settled.

Moongaze Lake.

The bright moon dominated the lake, its light rolling across the sparkling waves. Around the shore, beams of white Dharma light frequently took flight, speeding toward the central island, heading first to the central hall. After a brief stop, they would shuttle toward the rear halls.

At the head of the main hall still sat a man in black robes, a writing brush in hand. Three years had passed, but Li Zhouluo's face hadn't changed much. He merely handled the petitions with much swifter action, his expression no longer the 'facing a great enemy' look of the past.

He quickly set the brush down and glanced at the sky. It was only midnight.

Ever since Li Xuanxuan had announced the three-year inspection, Li Zhouluo's workload had visibly shrunk.

Those prefectures and peaks that used to submit petitions for every trivial matter had suddenly grown brains, cleverly including their proposed solutions in the reports. Those clan members from certain branches who had been dead as pigs, relying only on connections, suddenly came alive, running diligently about the island every day. The clan members governing the outer territories abruptly became selfless and incorruptible. Meanwhile, the main branch members touring the periphery suddenly became fountains of strategy, spotting corruption at a glance and indignantly exposing waves of dirty officials, resulting in the downfall of a Dou family member.

'Such diligence…'

Li Zhouluo suddenly realized he barely had to lift a finger. Even disciplining a few external families prompted a crowd of indignant clan members to lead the charge. All of this was good, naturally, except that the Qingdu cultivators

had grown slightly cold. Although still respectful, they lacked their previous warmth.

He understood that his handling of the Li Chengpan affair three years ago had been poor. The status and power of the Qingdu cultivators were based on the need for those in authority to suppress the main branch. His favoritism had been too obvious, turning the matter into a confused mess. Later, he proactively established the 'legacy shelter' system, which naturally made it hard to win their affection.

'But… none of that matters…'

Li Zhouluo firmly remembered Li Xuanxuan's words: *Do what you can with the power you have.* He was just here to earn enough goodwill before stepping down. Thinking this, he felt much better.

He pondered a moment. A man in plain robes was waiting nearby. Li Zhouluo finally noticed him and smiled.

"Uncle Chengpan, how are matters in the west?"

This was the same Li Chengpan from back then. The 'blood petition' incident had nearly forced him to imprison the Qingdu contingent. Although the investigation later cleared things up—with only a Li Hun being found guilty—Li Zhouluo could no longer use him in an official capacity, making him an assistant in the hall.

Li Chengpan bowed. "Everything is in order. This year's harvest from the spirit mines has been turned over to the clan."

Li Zhouluo sighed softly. Calculating the time, the legacy inspection wasn't far off.

'The old master said to grant the legacy shelters early. Let them be happy for a while, lest Jiangqian starts playing the bad cop the moment he comes out. That would be too obvious…'

The current spiritual atmosphere was Inward Heart Surging Profundity, which favored Fire-virtue. Li Jiangqian's seclusion definitely wouldn't last long. This matter couldn't be delayed.

Just as he was thinking, a clear breeze seemed to pass through the courtyard, slowly revealing a figure. It was a middle-aged man in a black, feather-like robe,

a two-foot-long ink-jade pendant at his waist. His brow ridges were slightly high, and his eyes held a hint of a smile.

"Father!"

Li Zhouluo startled, rushing down the steps, overjoyed. "You've come out of seclusion!"

Several years had passed. Li Chenghuai's cultivation had stabilized further, a pure, thick gray brilliance circulating in his hair. His features weren't striking, and his Untraceable Presence technique concealed his immortal foundation, making him appear even more unremarkable. He nodded lightly.

"The ancestral sacrifice is approaching, and the family needs someone to oversee the situation. I estimated that Jiangqian was also about to emerge, so I came out. I toured the island. The family is quite lively, and the atmosphere is good. You've done well."

Li Zhouluo knew exactly why this was, and felt ashamed. He lowered his voice. "Father… you misunderstand…"

Chapter 801: Great Scripture of Radiance

Li Chenghuai paused, stunned. Li Zhouluo quickly rose, gathered several reports from the desk, and handed them over, explaining the situation in a low voice. Li Chenghuai's brow furrowed tightly as he read. He raised an eyebrow. "So, this was waiting for me…"

After reviewing the matters of the western shore, he looked over Li Zhouluo's proposed solutions. He glanced at them only briefly before shaking his head. "Summary execution in court. That was poorly handled… You lack the necessary prestige, and you were afraid of wounding the clan's sentiments…"

Finally, he read the report regarding the legacy shelter appointments. He froze for a moment but didn't say much, merely sighing. "Let us go."

With Li Chenghuai out of seclusion, Li Zhouluo felt as if a thousand-pound weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He unfastened his black robe, draped it over his arm, and hurried to keep pace. As they walked, Li Chenghuai asked, "Where is the list of legacy shelter appointments?"

Li Zhouluo had it ready, tucked inside his robes. He presented it to his father. Li Chenghuai scanned it. "You balanced the four branches, so it's not a complete failure. The numbers are a bit high, but since the Old Master will allow Jiangqian to handle this, having a few extra names doesn't matter."

Li Zhouluo didn't mention Li Xuanxuan's intentions, but Li Chenghuai, calculating the timeline, already understood. He didn't press the point and simply walked forward, suddenly asking, "Regarding Brother Cheng's inheritance, there were three candidates in the ancestral registry. What is the status of those three now?"

Li Zhouluo had been monitoring the situation and replied immediately. "The one with the closest blood relation and the most suitable age is Zhoutui. He has

been working diligently on the island, showing great enthusiasm for both his cultivation and the management of the spirit fields…"

"The older one is Li Zhouda, also closely related. He's impulsive and decisive, a whirlwind in action. He currently holds a post in the Jade Court. His only flaw is his temper. Last year, he got drunk and assaulted a clansman… The matter was reported all the way to Qingdu."

He paused briefly before finishing. "There is one more, Li Zhouxun, whose bloodline is more distant. He's the one the elder allowed to stay in the manor before he passed. He seems to have given up hope early on. He didn't take any position on the island; instead, he has used this time to enter seclusion and cultivate."

Li Chenghuai pondered this for a breath, then shook his head. "A difficult choice…"

While Zhoutui's performance was good, his weeping at the funeral had been deeply unsettling. Zhouda's violent temper naturally caused hesitation. As for the last one, Zhouxun—whether out of respect for Li Cheng's lineage or some other reason—he had ultimately withdrawn himself, making it difficult for Li Chenghuai to help him even if he wanted to.

He mulled it over as they paused in the corridor. "What are their cultivation levels?"

Li Zhouluo bowed. "Zhouda is already at Qi Refining; he's quite well-known among the brethren, and the support for him is slightly higher. The other two are still at Embryonic Breathing. Younger brothers Zhoutui and Zhouxun are of similar age and cultivation."

Li Zhouluo didn't state it explicitly, but his meaning was clear. Although the island provided them equal treatment, the resources Zhoutui enjoyed from his parents' generation were far beyond what the unsupported Zhouxun could access. This suggested Zhoutui's talent was inferior. Li Chenghuai understood. He resumed walking and nodded. "I see. You are not to interfere in this matter. After all, the Dao lineage has already been passed down. We don't know who will ultimately reach Foundation Establishment. The Dharma artifacts are being kept safe in the clan vaults. I will find an opportunity to meet Zhouxun. Do not show favoritism to anyone, nor express your approval."

If it hadn't been for Li Xuanxuan's earlier lecture, Li Zhouluo might have been confused by his father's words. Now, however, he understood perfectly. "Your son understood long ago. I have not met privately with any of them in these years."

"Good." Li Chenghuai acknowledged, smiling. "This rare opportunity to temper you for three years has helped you mature greatly."

Li Zhouluo could only offer a sheepish smile. "I finally understand the stakes. If the Old Master hadn't been here, the lake our family spent six generations building would have been ruined by me in just two or three years."

The middle-aged man before him shook his head. "A hundred years of wise governance by the ancestors is only enough to survive one generation of incompetence. And one generation of incompetence is not enough to withstand three years of tyranny..."

He was counseling his eldest son when an apricot-yellow glow ascended into the sky. It drifted lazily toward the horizon, then descended mid-flight, transforming into countless apricot-colored blossoms of Radiant Fire that suddenly blew out over the lake.

These motes of Radiant Fire, large and small, flashed in the air with an ethereal grace, like countless river lanterns being released. The night had not yet fully yielded; in the pre-dawn twilight, the lake's surface reflected the sky full of burning blossoms, drawing nearby cultivators to ride the winds and spectate.

Omm!

The defensive array of distant Mount Qingdu instantly activated. Colors shot toward the zenith as the [Morning Mist] within the formation surged, sweeping across the sky and scouring the stray Radiant Fire clean.

Li Zhouluo's eyes lit up. Li Chenghuai urgently mounted the wind, circling in the air. Just as he expected, he saw a man in crimson robes flying toward them, riding the fire. The robe was worn loosely, revealing a plain white tunic beneath. His black hair was wreathed in apricot-yellow flames.

He was tall and slender, with long, dark brows over a pair of golden eyes. His arms were crossed over his chest, a sword at his hip. In one fair hand, he held a small, round hammer, resting it casually against his shoulder.

Seeing Li Chenghuai approach, the young man smiled, the picture of high spirits. "Greetings, Grand-Uncle!"

"Congratulations!" Li Jiangqian clasped his hands and bowed. Li Chenghuai accepted with a smile. As the others hurried over, Li Jiangqian looked up slightly. His first question was: "How is Quewan?"

Li Zhouluo, having just arrived, smiled at the question. "Quewan also entered seclusion before the new year. She said she needed to harmonize her aura. Her cultivation has reached the peak of perfection; she is just choosing the right day to break through to the Foundation Establishment Realm."

"Good." Although Li Jiangqian's generation was junior, his status was unique. Now that he had forged his immortal foundation, the weight of his words had undergone a qualitative change. He bowed to the assembled elders, and his second question was: "Is there any news from home regarding my father and the Daoist Master?"

Li Chenghuai shook his head as he led him down to the island. Li Jiangqian stood firm in the courtyard. When everyone had taken their seats, he scanned the room and noted one absence: Li Zhouming.

Li Jiangqian waited patiently. After half a cup of tea, a young man in red robes rushed in from outside the hall. Li Zhouming didn't dare meet Li Xuanxuan's gaze, shrinking down as he slunk into a seat on the side.

The old man's eyes were sharp. He noted that although the youth's clothes were tidy, his boots were mismatched and his hair ornament was overly simple. He had clearly worn his flamboyant clothes out riding this morning; nine times out of ten, he was flirting with some girl on the lake shore again.

Only then did Li Jiangqian clasp his hands in a formal bow. "Reporting to the elders: This junior has successfully forged the immortal foundation, 'Great Scripture of Radiance.' The Radiant Fire is now my constant companion. In motion, it can dispel golden gales and consume Horn Wood, burn metal and boil the seas. In stillness, it can stabilize flame and draw the radiant light without startling a sparrow..."

He said only this, and the surrounding elders erupted in congratulations. Li Jiangqian nodded, accepting them. Li Xuanxuan observed this, then cleared his throat. "Let us dismiss for now..."

The old man waved his hand, sending the others away. He pulled Li Jiangqian aside into an inner room and closed the doors. "How is it? You cultivated the sixth-grade technique from the family archives. No one in our clan has ever succeeded with it before. It must possess unusual qualities."

Li Jiangqian helped him to a seat and served him tea, lowering his voice.

"Old Master, I have mastered the Great Scripture of Radiance. This foundation is centered on arts. The foundation itself can store the radiant light, granting extreme speed when riding fire. It connects to the 'First Manifestation of the Heavens,' so it can also dispel evil. Its innate mystery involves compounding medicines using wood; consuming them can extend life, heal wounds, and provide enhancements…"

"Oh?" Li Xuanxuan's eyes brightened. "Compounding medicines? Like alchemy?"

Li Jiangqian shook his head. He extended a hand, pressing two fingers together and bracing them with his thumb at the middle knuckle. *Pop.* A bright, apricot-yellow flame erupted.

This flame was unlike the eager, restless Radiant Fire they usually saw, nor was it like the five types of surging Radiant Fire within the [Yang-Li Crimson Sparrow Banner]. Instead, it rested perfectly steady on his fingertip, utterly motionless.

He smiled. "The unusual quality the Old Master spoke of… I am afraid it is this flame."

"The fire of my immortal foundation is called 'Apricot Li.' Ordinary fire fears earth, but this fire is highly resistant. The inheritance text described it in detail: aside from the two sacred earths of the Jixian Immortal Dao, it fears no other earth. Unfortunately, it is too volatile to be placed in a cauldron and cannot be used for alchemy. My sea of qi is entirely apricot-yellow. Even when I reach the Purple Mansion Realm, I will have no affinity with pill refinement."

"And the medicines compounded by it… most of them can only be consumed by me. Perhaps Luan birds and sparrows could also stomach them."

Li Xuanxuan nodded, indicating he understood. He sighed. "Truly worthy of a sixth-grade Radiant Fire technique. It possesses almost every advantage Radiant Fire can offer, and even manages to squeeze out a healing mystery…"

Li Jiangqian quickly waved his hands. "The division of Dao paths still holds true. Stealth, alchemy, healing others—this Dao path is completely incapable of them. And while my fire-riding speed is fast, the radiant light is too intense, making it difficult to cultivate evasion arts. It's all a trade-off. You gain in one area and lose in another; you cannot have it all!"

The old man nodded repeatedly, his expression full of emotion. He let out a long breath. "Now that you are out of seclusion, I must trouble you with family matters…"

The old man retrieved a small wooden box from the desk. He opened it with one hand, revealing a thick stack of silk cloth inside, clearly covered in detailed records. Puzzled, Li Jiangqian accepted it and began to read.

The young man scanned it, flipping through the stack once with one hand. He read straight to the bottom, then flipped back to the beginning, carefully rereading the section on the west bank. He laughed. "They've eaten the leopard's gall."

Li Xuanxuan's heart tightened when he heard that. Li Xixuan and the others were, after all, mortals; they could not withstand Li Jiangqian's methods. The old man quickly grabbed his arm. "These people are still your elders. Many are highly respected, and many of their children sacrificed themselves for the clan. The island's affairs must be resolved, certainly, but you cannot allow people's hearts to grow cold."

"I understand… I understand!" Li Jiangqian held the silk report in one hand. The long white cloth trailed down, dragging on the floor, stirring gently in the draft. He kept his head bowed toward the text and smiled. "Just leave this matter to me. I'll just have to trouble Uncle Zhouluo to manage the household for a few more months, just to quiet the chatter below."

Outside the hall.

Li Zhouluo exited the main hall, leaving it to the other two. He accompanied Li Chenghuai down. Only then did he remember another matter, and he relayed the news of the letter from Li Xizhi.

Li Zhouluo was clearly proud, his tone slightly agitated. Li Chenghuai's expression, however, remained largely unchanged. He waited for the young man to

finish, remaining silent for a long time before finally saying, "He has always been formidable."

The relationship between his father, Li Chenghuai, and his grandfather, Li Xizhi, was certainly not close. Li Zhouluo hesitated slightly, then continued, "Grandfather's meaning is that he wishes for me to travel to the Southern Sea before my Foundation Establishment. He wants to select a suitable Dao companion for me… and he wants me to make my breakthrough there, in the Southern Sea."

Li Chenghuai actually nodded at this. "That is naturally for the best. Marriage is a critical affair. Having him inspect the candidates for you is much better."

Li Zhouluo studied his father's expression, lowering his voice. "Grandfather also had his disciple, Quan Yuduan, bring a letter back. But at that time, Father was still in seclusion. He stated he must deliver it personally into Father's hands. He returned a year ago and has been cultivating in the wilderness region. I just sent someone to retrieve him."

Wang Quwan and the others had gone north. Letters had arrived earlier saying they had entered the Earth Palace and encountered several other direct lineage disciples, but communications ceased half a year ago. Even Quan Yuduan could no longer contact those inside. Now, three years had passed with no sound from the Dao lineage of Xiaoshi Mountain in the north. They estimated there must be another grotto-heaven hidden below. Quan Yuduan, who had been acting as escort, couldn't wait idly. Unsure if he had even completed his sect mission, he spent the last two years wandering Jiangbei and had only recently returned to the wilderness.

At Li Zhouluo's mention that Li Xizhi had left a personal letter for him, Li Chenghuai finally showed anxiety. He paced the courtyard twice. Just as dawn broke, he saw Quan Yuduan, dressed in brilliant red robes, approaching at high speed under escort.

The young man wore a jade crown. He glanced at the Dharma robes, saw the black jade pendant at his waist, and recognized Li Chenghuai. Visibly excited, he bowed low before him, speaking respectfully. "Greetings, Young Master! Master and Mistress have missed you terribly these past years. They often speak of you… but ten thousand li separate you, preventing a meeting…"

Li Chenghuai awkwardly helped him rise. Quan Yuduan, having said his piece, retrieved a letter from his sleeve. "This letter is in the Master's own hand," he

said softly. "He instructed me that I must deliver it, that all others must be dismissed, and that the Young Master must open it personally."

Li Chenghuai felt the letter. It wasn't thick; it was, in fact, quite thin. It was only wrapped in spirit-cloth, not formally sealed. It was clearly a personal note. He glanced around. Li Zhouluo immediately took the hint, led the others out, and securely closed the hall doors.

Only then did Li Chenghuai raise his hands, break the simple seal, and withdraw the pure white paper. The elegant, flowing script of Li Xizhi met his eyes:

"Written by hand on the twentieth of the spring moon. Your father currently guards the Southern Sea. All affairs are stable. I am presently selecting a wife for my grandson.

If you harbor the ambition to pursue the profound, verify your Dao, and seek transcendent abilities, you may follow Yuduan south across the sea. Mysterious pills, wondrous medicines, Dharma artifacts, and spirit objects; blessed lands and immortal mountains—your father will exhaust his strength to provide you with everything.

If your heart desires only to shelter the clan and live out your remaining years in peace, I have instructed Yuduan to bring my Daoist collection of many years, silks and brocades, fine foods and jade wares. You may listen to the rain from the bridge, sufficient to shelter your descendants, ensuring three generations of honor and nobility.

Written by the hand of Father Zhi."

Li Chenghuai read every single word. Then he turned the letter over. Though he knew the back was blank, he scanned it up and down anyway, turning the paper over and over in his hands.

When Quan Yuduan received no reply, he waited a moment longer before speaking softly. "Reporting to the Young Master, the Master instructed me to bring his Daoist collection. It is anchored by a Purple Mansion Realm talisman, and includes Foundation Establishment Dharma artifacts, spirit objects, talismans, and treasure medicines—everything is included…"

He began rattling off a list of items, but Li Chenghuai seemed oblivious, as if just waking from a dream. He asked hoarsely, "Did he… did he have any other instructions?"

Quan Yuduan grew uneasy at his tone but only bowed respectfully. "Master… Master said that in former years, he could barely protect himself, much less look after the Young Master. He wishes to make amends now."

Character List

- **Li Xuanxuan:** [Qi Refining 9] [Main Branch Direct Lineage]
- **Li Zhouming:** [Qi Refining 3] [Purple Mansion Direct Lineage]
- **Li Zhouluo:** [Qi Refining 8] [Clan Head]
- **Li Jiangqian:** [Great Scripture of Radiance] [Early Foundation Establishment]
- **Li Chenghuai:** [Untraceable Presence] [Early Foundation Establishment]

Chapter 802: The Register

Li Chenghuai listened quietly, tucked the letter into his sleeve, and replied, "I understand. When will Fellow Daoist Yuduan be heading back for a reply?"

Quan Yuduan hesitated. "My junior brother is still in the north, so it should be some time yet. For now, I will remain here cultivating by the shore. The young master may take his time to consider… When you have word, simply summon me from the wilderness."

Li Chenghuai gave a slight nod. Quan Yuduan retreated. As the hall doors opened, the voice of his eldest son, Li Zhouluo, could be heard cheerfully greeting Quan Yuduan. Then, with a creak, the doors shut firmly, sealing all the noise outside.

Li Chenghuai stood rooted to the spot. He kept his hand over his sleeve, motionless, his gaze frozen. He remained that way until the light in the room shifted. Li Zhouluo, having waited outside for a long time, finally knocked and entered.

"Father…" Li Zhouluo called softly.

Li Chenghuai was still clutching the letter in his sleeve. His lips moved, but he avoided the topic, asking instead, "Are you going to the Southern Sea with Quan Yuduan?"

Li Zhouluo was practically vibrating with impatience, wishing the days would fly by. The last three to five years had been nothing but bitter, grueling work, and he was thoroughly sick of it. At the mention of the trip, his voice filled with delight. "Exactly! I'm just waiting for them to return!"

Hearing that tone, Li Chenghuai understood. 'The child is just waiting to follow Quan Yuduan to the Southern Sea to enjoy himself and meet the fairy maidens of the various sects. He's brimming with anticipation.'

It was only human nature. Had Li Chenghuai himself been blessed with such an opportunity in his youth, he too would have been restless and desperate with

waiting. He poured a cup of tea. "Good. You must prepare well. Do not waste this opportunity."

Li Zhouluo could see his father was unsettled and looked like he wanted to stop himself from speaking, likely wanting to ask about the letter. Before his son could voice the question, Li Chenghuai waved him away. Zhoulou had no choice but to depart, albeit reluctantly.

Once the hall was empty, Li Chenghuai finally retrieved the letter. He placed it gently on the table, face down.

He certainly knew the weight this letter carried. To put it bluntly, any one of the choices offered within it would make a cultivator from Jiangnan weep with joy. It was clearly something to be celebrated, yet he could not muster half a smile.

He stood alone in the hall for half the night until, at last, he heard movement at the entrance. An old man in blue-gray robes pushed the door open. Li Chenghuai bowed his head slightly.

"Greetings, Elder."

Only then did he offer the letter. Li Xuanxuan sat down, poured some tea, and began to read it carefully. Li Chenghuai slowly shook his head and spoke.

"What does he owe me… What is there to owe? Those grievances from the days of living under another's roof, without a father or mother… Can those wounds really be mended with these things?"

Li Xuanxuan remained focused on the letter, his gaze profound. Li Chenghuai's expression, however, seemed almost detached as he said softly, "I might as well be frank with you. If this letter had arrived twenty years ago, I would have thrown it right back in Quan Yuduan's face and told him clearly: I don't want either choice."

He let out a short laugh, then sighed. "But it came too late. I, Li Chenghuai, am already a father. Within the clan, I am considered an elder. I have far too much to consider now. How could I bear to throw it away? The days of youthful ignorance are long gone. To put it bluntly, my past resentment can now only be called petulance. That is the only reason I accepted this letter."

Li Xuanxuan nodded heavily. "I understand…"

The old man filled the teacup. "Of the four in the 'Xi' generation… each had their duties back then. Never mind you; Ximing and Chengzhi were in the same position. Chengzhi is always respectful, but I know in his heart, he cannot feel close to Ximing either. This… it is an extremely difficult situation. Don't say he doesn't understand you. In truth, you also do not understand your father."

"At that time, there were far too many compromises to be made…"

The old man raised a hand to his cheek, feeling for a small, hard bump beneath the skin. He motioned for Li Chenghuai to look. "See this? Back then, my inner demons flared up. I sought help all the way to the Hengzhu Immortal Dao. They inserted five golden light pills into my flesh. I can still feel them to this day. The injury healed, but the mark left on my face is… unsightly."

"Your situation is the same mold. Back then, the clan endured humiliation and swallowed its grievances, compromising itself into this state. Now, as you feel the rugged scars of the past, it is only natural to feel that imbalance in your heart. It is reasonable that you want to speak out, to ask questions… Your father is a reasonable man. Write a reply. Speak your mind, make it perfectly clear. You do not need to pretend you can't feel the scars."

Li Chenghuai remained silent for a moment. Li Xuanxuan had already pulled him toward the main seat. The old man pressed the brush into his hand while beginning to grind the ink, urging him, "Come. Write."

When Li Zhouluo emerged from the hall, Quan Yuduan, dressed in his red robes, was still admiring the scenery on the island. Although Li Zhouluo was intensely curious about the letter his grandfather had received, he did not ask. He exchanged a few more pleasantries with Quan Yuduan before returning to the main hall.

As he settled into the main seat, Dili Guang approached to light the lamps. Li Zhouluo smiled. "What are your arrangements for the future?"

Li Zhouluo didn't need to elaborate. Dili Guang was exceptionally sharp; a man like him possessed a natural instinct and could sense that Li Zhouluo's time governing the clan was drawing to a close.

He understood precisely what Li Zhouluo was asking. He replied with deep respect, "Whatever the Clan Head arranges… this subordinate will follow. If I am

fortunate enough to continue following the Clan Head, it will truly be a blessing I have cultivated…"

Only the direct inner circle knew of Li Zhouluo's impending trip to the Southern Sea, but Dili Guang seemed utterly convinced that following him would lead to great benefits. His sincerity was palpable, making Li Zhouluo nod in approval.

Li Zhouluo was reading through scrolls when a report came from outside. Cui Jueyin had arrived to make a report.

In all the years Li Zhouluo had managed the clan, Cui Jueyin had always handled the matter of the Purple Geng Broad Valley Mountain-Piercing Profound Nails with methodical precision, reporting exactly once every three months. A sudden visit meant there was definitely a situation with the Purple Mansion array.

He shot to his feet. "Quickly, bring Protector Cui in!"

Dili Guang immediately went down personally to escort him. Once Cui Jueyin was in the hall, Dili Guang dismissed the other attendants, shut the doors himself, and stood guard outside.

Cui Jueyin looked much the same as he had three years prior. This direct descendant of the Cui family offered his customary humble salute and reported:

"Clan Head, the main bodies of the first twelve of the thirty-two profound needles are more than half-forged. However, the Purple Smoke Gate has already begun packing their baggage. The contingent of cultivators currently on the island is about to return to the sect, to be replaced by another batch. According to what Lord Wen Wu said, this is to prevent too much of the array pattern from being exposed."

'Wen Wu is so slick-tongued he could talk the dead back to life,' Li Zhouluo thought. 'It's impossible to know if he truly fears exposing the patterns or if this is just a scheduled rotation.'

Cui Jueyin continued, "He was mobilized back overnight and did not have time to pay his respects to the Clan Head, so he entrusted me with his apologies… He also asked me to pass on a message… He said that Li Quexi is already preparing to break through to Qi Refining, and the Purple Smoke Gate has prepared all the necessary pills for her."

Li Quexi breaking through to Qi Refining was not surprising; Li Zhouluo actually felt it was slightly overdue. Regardless of whether the other party needed it, the clan had to send its portion. He nodded. "I will dispatch someone to the Purple Smoke Gate at once with a share of cultivation resources for her breakthrough."

"Besides this matter, there is one other urgent affair," Cui Jueyin said respectfully. "A Purple Smoke Gate cultivator, while traveling the region, mentioned that he had been guiding a child from a small household on the lake. Originally, he said he just found the child endearing… but after three to five years, feelings developed. When it was time to leave, he couldn't bear it. This time, he wishes to take the child back to the sect… and accept him as a disciple. He asked me to inquire with the Clan Head first."

This was no small matter. Li Zhouluo was startled. "Which family? What is their surname?"

Cui Jueyin gave a bitter smile. "The Ding clan… A minor branch of the Ding clan that scattered to the lakeside… just a widow and an orphan. The mother has some minor cultivation, but in my opinion, this matter is not entirely… respectable."

'The Ding clan!'

Suspicion immediately rose in Li Zhouluo's mind. "Although this is somewhat abrupt, how is it not respectable?"

Cui Jueyin sighed softly. "That Ding family member died at the hands of the Floating Cloud Cave. Ding Weizeng even knows his name, so the widow and orphan have not had a difficult life. From what I observed, that Purple Smoke cultivator… harbors certain… intentions… toward the widow. He has stayed overnight. It is said that late one windy night, the sounds alerted the neighbors. Fortunately, no one recognized him. The child does not seem resistant to the idea…"

"This… He is a dignified Foundation Establishment cultivator. He didn't even bother to set up a simple privacy array? Such indiscretion…"

Li Zhouluo's expression turned strange. A cultivator from the Purple Smoke Gate could absolutely have concealed the noise. He could only sigh at the man's peculiar habits. He understood the situation now. After a moment of hesitation, he said awkwardly, "This matter requires notifying Ding Weizeng… In any

case, it can be counted as a good thing. What is the status of that Purple Smoke Gate cultivator? Is he known for being a fickle womanizer? My only fear is that he takes them there, and then cruelly abandons them after a few years. That would reflect poorly on us."

Cui Jueyin replied, "The child is named Ding Mu. The cultivator is the master of Bell-Tether Peak at the Purple Smoke Gate. His name is Cao Chu, and his Daoist title is Huxizi. I have not heard rumors of him being fickle, but he already has one wife and two concubines at his peak. If she goes with him, she will also be taken as a concubine."

This left Li Zhouluo with no recourse. Slightly embarrassed, he said, "If both parties are willing… we must still wait for an official representative from the Purple Smoke Gate to make the inquiry. After all, from my perspective, she is the one who stands to lose in this arrangement. This must be handled properly…"

"Indeed!"

Ding Mu was not of the Li lineage, nor from any famous family. His relationship to Ding Weizeng was distant, so the matter wasn't overly sensitive. But they were ultimately under the Li family's protection, so this naturally required official communication between the two Purple Mansion powers.

Cui Jueyin confirmed, "Fellow Daoist Cao Chu has already reported this to his sect. Someone should be arriving soon to negotiate the matter."

"Good." Li Zhouluo let out a slight breath of relief. He watched Cui Jueyin depart, his mind already calculating.

'This Ding Mu will surely be isolated and powerless when he first arrives at the sect. This is the perfect time to provide timely aid. If we handle this well and he matures within the Purple Smoke Gate, we will have secured another stable connection. This is purely beneficial, with no drawbacks.'

With Li Jiangqian having emerged from seclusion, Li Zhouluo felt the pressure ease. There were only two major tasks left to handle: announcing the benefice register and conducting the ancestral sacrifice.

"Go and invite Jiangqian to come here," he ordered.

A short while later, Li Jiangqian entered the hall. Li Zhouluo smiled and rose to greet him. "The date of the clan sacrifice is approaching. The usual procedures remain unchanged, which means we still need to capture a Demon beast. Will

we be using a Foundation Establishment-level beast this year? Such creatures are rather difficult to find these days…"

The choice of sacrificial beast was usually decided by the clan's Foundation Establishment cultivators. With Li Minggong in seclusion, the decision fell to Li Chenghuai and Li Jiangqian. Li Zhouluo was probing for their inclination, suggesting tactfully, "The clan's resources are currently quite strained, and you have only just broken through… In my opinion… perhaps it is best we keep everything simple this year."

After all, Li Minggong was in seclusion. The clan's two early-stage Foundation Establishment cultivators were unlikely to hunt together. The task would fall to Li Chenghuai, the stronger of the two. But whether fighting or just luring the beast, the current situation was unclear, making it an obvious risk.

In Li Zhouluo's eyes, the sacrifice was merely a grand ceremony. At such a critical juncture, there was no need for such a high-profile display.

Li Jiangqian understood his concerns. He, however, still harbored thoughts of seeking out Talisman Qi.

'If I go to the Eastern Sea or the Helin Mountains, I wonder if I can even make it back in time…'

He wasn't afraid of failing to capture a beast; setting aside Li Chenghuai, he alone was more than confident of handling any wild Demon. The problem was that the clan's status had changed. In the past, they were a minor Foundation Establishment clan that nobody paid attention to. Now, they were a Purple Mansion power, and their Daoist Master was not on the lake. Many eyes were watching. Making a large commotion would certainly attract suspicion.

If Li Ximing were present, he could simply shuttle through the Great Void, grab a beast, and be back on the mountain for the sacrifice before anyone knew. Even if they found out, they would just assume it was for alchemy. But with Li Ximing absent, the sight of them hauling a massive beast back to the island would appear highly improper.

He frowned and finally replied, "Clan Head speaks reasonably. This matter requires further deliberation. This junior will first ask the Elder for his opinion before we make a final decision."

Li Zhouluo nodded and pushed the register on his desk forward. The names were already recorded on a gold-bordered scroll. "This is the register for the benefice. Jiangqian, please take a look."

But Li Jiangqian smiled and made no move to take the scroll. Instead, he bowed. "There is no need. The Clan Head may arrange it and announce it as he sees fit. I am just going to take a walk around the island."

Elsewhere on the island.

The morning dawn was just breaking over the lake. A certain residence was already bustling with activity. The two imposing green-tiger stone statues flanking the entrance were draped in bright red silk, and servants, also dressed in red, smiled and offered congratulations to all arrivals.

The plaque above the main gate flowed with light, the two gilded characters for "Dongxu" positively glowing. The round, pale Li Xixuan stood before the gate, dressed in festive red robes, accepting the greetings of those who called him "Master."

The "Dongxu" Residence was the ancestral home of the Yuanwan Branch. It had once been quite spacious, but as the descendants multiplied, the courtyard had been divided into four wings, and each wing divided into four more rooms. While it looked magnificent from the outside, the interior was shockingly cramped. Every time Li Xixuan stood at this gate, he used to sigh. Today, he was not sighing. His face was beaming.

Waiting just inside was Li Minggong's younger brother, his face flush with success, wearing a colorful patterned headscarf. Guests treated him with marked respect. As one group entered, a man in short-cut robes hurried up to him, rubbing his hands gleefully.

"Brother Chang, several of your sons and nephews received the benefice this time! You'll be needing good residences now, won't you? I happen to have some excellent locations available…"

The middle-aged man in the colorful headscarf was basking in his triumph. His good mood made him generous even to this opportunistic housing broker. He just laughed. "Wait a few days! There will be plenty of profit for you to make!"

He roared with laughter and pulled the man inside. Past the gate, the courtyard had been modified and was now extremely small, packed tight with well-wishers. He stuck his chest out, walking with an imposing air that stood in stark contrast to his father, Li Xixuan, who walked ahead of him, hunched over and casting suspicious glances at everything.

The son announced loudly, "In this round of the clan benefice, our Yuanwan Dongxu Residence has five members selected, totaling four branches! Everyone…"

He raised his cup, beaming. "The Main Branch cherishes its clan members, and all our families live in harmony! This is a toast to the Lake! A toast to the Island! And a toast to the Clan!"

Chapter 803: The Eastern Residence

The crowd raised their cups in celebration. Li Chengzai, wearing a vibrant kerchief, was the picture of high spirits. Li Xixuan, however, kept his eyes wide, sweeping the room again and again as he counted the guests. Whatever ease he had felt outside the courtyard had long since been tossed to the nine heavens.

'The Chen Clan and the An clan didn't send anyone… which is understandable. But the families of Li Chenghao and Li Chengpan didn't even send greetings… There are almost no guests of any real weight from the main lineage.'

Li Xixuan watched grimly. He wasn't particularly surprised, but any lingering shred of hope vanished. He had come from the bright, clamorous outer courtyard only to find the inner main hall pitch-black. A few children crouched in the corner. Li Xixuan raised his pale, plump hand and ordered softly:

"Get the third son back here!"

Before long, Li Chengzai, still in his colorful kerchief, entered the courtyard sullenly. Facing his father's dark expression, he tried to reason with him:

"…I already asked. Cheng was sent to the Milin Mountains by the old master, and Chengpan is busy near Zhouluo. It's reasonable they couldn't come. Father, why must you look so grim? It makes everyone uncomfortable."

Li Xixuan shot him a look and snapped:

"What do you understand? Although I never cultivated and couldn't recognize what kind of fire that was in the sky that day, several cultivators said the First Young Master, Li Jiangqian, broke through and exited seclusion… Li Zhouluo is amiable, but *he* certainly might not be!"

Li Chengzai frowned. He looked at his father and said:

"Our Eastern Residence is in the tightest spot, so we had to take the lead this time… We were the bird that stuck its neck out. Those above us compromised, everyone divided the benefits, and then they scattered like the wind, leaving the

bird that stuck its neck out to be slaughtered… Now, one by one, they wouldn't dare show up."

Li Chengzai had grown up in the residence depending on his father for everything. Hearing this, he panicked. "Ah? What logic is that? We all went to Qingdu together, and we all received the boons. How can they abandon us now? If they do this, who will dare to step up in the future?"

Li Xixuan replied, "You make it sound easy. When those above want to suppress you, they have countless excuses. They'll always find a pretext that satisfies both sides, and then they'll grab us to make an example. It's always the leader who gets beaten. If we don't plan, we are doomed."

Li Chengzai nodded repeatedly. Li Xixuan's brow remained tightly furrowed. "Before, we had some sway because the clansmen all wanted those boons and sided with us. Now that the boons have been handed out, we're a phoenix that's lost its feathers—worth nothing. Fortunately, I planned ahead… The merit and prestige of the children are genuine, not inflated."

"You children shouldn't make any moves regarding this. Just be honest and keep your heads down. You can't fight any of them. Your only hope is to rely on Minggong's reputation and stay low-key. I will go to the main hall later to apologize. Let everything fall on me, this old man. At worst, I'll suffer a little. Even in the most extreme case, my life won't be in danger."

Li Chengzai hesitated. "But every family is celebrating right now. For Father to go up the mountain… it seems inappropriate. It makes us lose face. Besides, why must we act as if we've done something wrong? The boons we received… compared to the other families, they were the absolute minimum…"

Li Xixuan's face hardened. "How is it inappropriate? Right now, Li Zhouluo is still in charge, and Li Jiangqian has only just emerged. If we don't approach him now, when should we? Wait until Li Jiangqian has his knife at our throats? If Li Zhouluo gives even a slight concession now, it will tie Li Jiangqian's hands regarding us in the future!"

"Oh…" Li Chengzai replied, half-convinced, half-doubting. "The First Young Master… intends to re-enter the island's affairs?"

Li Xixuan laughed in exasperation. This time, he didn't bother responding. He just shook his head and stormed out with a flick of his sleeves.

The front courtyard was full of guests, so he had to cross the threshold of the back courtyard and leave through the rear gate. The early morning mist was still chilly. Li Xixuan pulled his sleeves tighter, his pale, plump face looking listless.

'I fight for this, I fight for that, and in the end, no one is grateful. Boons for this one, boons for that one, but how many of them will actually amount to anything? In the entire Eastern Residence, only Minggong cultivates the path of immortality. This old man is counting his remaining days; I can only help them this much…'

Li Xixuan was the most desperate among the clan elders, precisely because his Yuanwan branch had far too few cultivators.

They were all descendants of Li Xuanxuan, but the other branch—the Yuandu Western Residence led by Li Cheng—had Li Zhoufang and Li Zhouyang, followed by Li Xinghan and Li Xingsai. Further down, they even had Li Queyi, who was associated with Purple Smoke. As long as a branch had cultivators, they could separate the family holdings without fear of being relegated to the fringes of the island.

The Western Residence had already split into several branches, and their leaders, the Li Zhoufang brothers, were cultivators themselves. Whether it was fighting for boons or finding positions outside, everything was much easier for them. Every clansman they arranged an external post for represented a new path for the future. The more they arranged, the easier things became. How could they compare to him, Li Xixuan, struggling all alone to find a future for his children and grandchildren?

It was bad enough that his descendants couldn't cultivate, but their minds weren't even sharp. How could Li Xixuan not be dismayed!

He huddled into his robes against the cold morning wind, chilled to the bone. His steps felt unsteady. Though the streets were filled with the sound of music, his heart was desolate.

The road from the Eastern Residence to the main hall wasn't long, but the hall sat on high ground. For a mortal, it was a journey guaranteed to leave one soaked in sweat. Li Xixuan usually traveled by sedan chair, but since he was sneaking out today, he had no such luxury. He had to wait by the roadside for a while and hail a carriage.

There were many coachmen and messengers on the island, but these were undignified jobs. Unless they had no other choice, members of the direct line were unwilling to do them. Most of these workers were the family or servants of cultivators who had been promoted onto the island or supplemented the main lineage, trying to subsidize their households.

He climbed into the small carriage, finally feeling some warmth. He drifted in and out of sleep as the carriage rocked along. After an unknown amount of time, the air grew hot and stuffy. He heard a shout from outside:

"Master! We've arrived!"

Li Xixuan lifted the curtain and saw the towering profile of the grand palace. He began to climb out. He was old, and his back and legs were stiff. He stretched out a foot, struggling to reach the ground, when he suddenly felt a cool touch at his waist. A pair of pale hands supported his back, helping him descend smoothly.

He steadied himself on the ground and let out a long breath. Raising his gaze, the first thing he saw was a pair of black boots, devoid of any decoration.

Above them, a crimson robe edged in gold fluttered lightly in the wind. Lifting his eyes slightly higher, he saw a pale face with long eyebrows.

Beneath those dark brows was a pair of golden eyes, watching him with a smile.

Li Xixuan's breath caught, and his heart clenched.

"First Young Master?"

Li Jiangqian was tall and lean, towering over the old man. Apricot-yellow flames still burned in his black hair, glowing faintly. He steadied Li Xixuan, then warmly grasped the elder's plump hand in his own and smiled.

"What a coincidence, meeting you here, Elder… Are you here to…?"

Li Xixuan felt a chill creep into his heart under that gaze. He had forgone a sedan and snuck out the side gate precisely to catch everyone in the hall off guard. How could he possibly tell Li Jiangqian the truth? He forced his expression to remain pleasant. "The matter of the boons has been announced. I came to pay my respects to the Patriarch and thank him for his grace…"

"Oh!" Li Jiangqian began walking toward the hall with him, shaking his head with a smile. "Elder, you are too polite. Though I have cultivated for some years, this is a skill I must learn from you! I was just thinking that during the evaluation, these clansmen were all impeccably behaved, but the moment they received their boons, they would surely go off and indulge themselves… But seeing you, Elder, I see true consistency in word and deed. The people of the Eastern Residence are truly fortunate to have you teaching them. Am I wrong?"

Li Jiangqian's words were always pleasant, but Li Xixuan had no idea what medicine he was selling from his gourd. The elder's scalp tingled. He just wanted to get to the hall, and his pace quickened. The doors were just ahead. He replied:

"Correct…"

Li Jiangqian nodded with a smile. "This junior was considering this very point. I discussed it with the Patriarch just this morning. These clansmen who receive boons… they must be watched more closely. If anyone in their branch, old or young, makes a mistake, the boon must first be suspended, pending review and reconsideration. This will also prevent people from slipping through muddy waters!"

"Ah…" Li Xixuan froze, as if struck by lightning. He stood stunned for a full second, nearly stopping in his tracks.

What had Li Xixuan come here to do? To apologize! With that one statement from Li Jiangqian, the moment he uttered his apology, his entire family's boons would be lost!

He stood dumbstruck for several breaths, his mind racing to formulate a response. He finally managed, "That… seems overly harsh. After all, which family doesn't have old and young? Surely…"

Li Jiangqian sighed, shaking his head and cutting him off. "Elder, your heart is too soft! How is this harsh? The Eastern Residence certainly won't make such mistakes… You needn't worry on behalf of the other branches… Oh… Dili Guang is here. Elder, please!"

Li Jiangqian timed it perfectly, interrupting him just as they reached the hall doors. Before Li Xixuan could respond, Li Jiangqian bowed, dissolved into an apricot-yellow light, and ascended into the sky. Li Xixuan was caught completely off guard as Dili Guang stepped forward to greet him respectfully.

"Elder, the Patriarch is currently receiving cultivators from the Purple Smoke Gate. Is there an urgent matter?"

Li Xixuan exhaled deeply, twice. He gave a slight bow with clasped hands and retreated without a word. As he walked down the steps, the old man realized something was wrong and began to think.

'Could such a major decision really be finalized just like that? There wasn't the slightest rumor about it on the island. I was bluffed by that brat!'

He started to turn back, then stopped, afraid. "No… no… Since he said that… how can I possibly go up and apologize now? He's an expert at twisting black into white and white into black. If I go now, he'll spin it as me voluntarily apologizing and sacrificing my descendants' boons to uphold the clan's discipline. I'd be hated to death…"

Li Xixuan's limbs felt cold, and he trembled for a moment. 'There's no solution… no solution. If Minggong doesn't come out of seclusion, the only way to avoid being tormented to death by this kid… is to beg the Old Master!'

… Outside the hall was a cacophony, but inside Li Zhouluo's inner sanctum, it was quiet. Cui Jueyin stood in the center of the hall, turned slightly to the side, hands clasped. He addressed the man seated above:

"Patriarch, this is Fairy Wei… and this is Daoist Cao."

"Greetings, Patriarch." The two bowed slightly. Li Zhouluo immediately replied, "Greetings, esteemed Immortals."

The replacement sent by the Purple Smoke Gate was Tinglan's confidante, Wei Danying. She wore a yellow feathered robe and looked somewhat awkward. Daoist Cao, meanwhile, was burly, his face covered by a black beard. He held the hand of a small, thin child who looked to be about eight or nine years old.

They were clearly here to deal with Daoist Cao's affair. Cao Chu himself seemed perfectly at ease. Judging by his appearance, he was a straightforward sort. His clenched fists were the size of vinegar bowls. Profound Light flowed over his robes. Ding Mu's thin hand could only grasp one of his fingers. Cao Chu's voice was deep:

"I am extremely fond of this child. I must trouble the Lake to part with him."

Who exactly he was "extremely fond of" was something everyone present understood clearly. Wei Danying hesitated before speaking.

"Fellow Daoist Cao Chu's situation… I trust the Patriarch is already aware. Since he has expressed the intent to take an apprentice, according to the rules of Purple Smoke, I must come forward and ask the Patriarch… We intend to bring his family along as well."

Wei Danying was clearly not well-acquainted with Cao Chu. The female cultivator knew the matter wasn't exactly respectable, so she phrased the request vaguely. Li Zhouluo couldn't let her lose face. He nodded.

"To be accepted into the mountain gate of Purple Smoke is this child's good fortune. The Lake will provide an additional share of his future cultivation resources. His family may certainly go with him. Please rest assured."

"Excellent!" Cao Chu looked pleased. He clasped his hands, bowed, and broke into a grin. He had a booming voice, and the single word was deafening. Wei Danying looked utterly mortified. She quickly said:

"Fellow Daoist Cao, perhaps you should head down first…"

Cao Chu made no fuss. He gave another cheerful bow and left briskly. The frail Ding Mu hadn't uttered a single sound, forced to take two steps for every one of the man holding his hand, looking as dry as a wooden puppet, yet there was a smile on his face.

Li Zhouluo watched the master and apprentice depart, frowning slightly. Wei Danying breathed a sigh of relief and looked up with a smile.

"This matter has troubled the Patriarch… Cao Chu is rather unreliable within the sect. On normal days, the cultivators on his peak won't even visit him. Fortunately, he only amuses himself with his wives and concubines; his character is otherwise passable…"

Li Zhouluo had seen the glow of Cao Chu's spiritual qi earlier and felt equally awkward.

'How is it that this Cao Chu cultivates Bright Yang… Oh. Actually… it's perfectly fitting that he cultivates Bright Yang…'

The two tacitly skipped the topic. Wei Danying's expression dimmed.

"These past few years, Changxiao and Hengzhu have been fighting fiercely in the Light Boat Sea region. The Changxiao Gate has suffered heavy losses. This should have been good news; my Purple Smoke doesn't have much influence overseas, so it was a good chance to stretch our legs."

"But something happened in the Eastern Sea, and Wen Wu had to be reassigned. This… is very bad. The earth veins in my Purple Smoke Gate's ocean territory have shifted violently. Earth fire and magma have leaked out. It is said the blaze is so bright it can be seen a thousand li away…"

"All the dragon-kin in the sea have fled to the surface. I hear the seafloor is overrun with Baleful Fire Qi, causing utter devastation. Many, many mortals and Demons have died."

The Purple Smoke Gate's strength overseas was inferior to both Changxiao and the Hengzhu Gate. They had invested considerable effort abroad these past years. Seeing Wei Danying's expression, the damage this time must have been significant. After all, the earth veins and fire veins had shifted simultaneously, and since it was in the sea, the water veins were likely affected too. A change in all three would cause catastrophic damage to arrays and structures.

Li Zhouluo's expression turned grave. He asked in a low voice, "Has the cause been identified…?"

Wei Danying looked frustrated. "It was either a Purple Mansion Realm cultivator with extremely profound cultivation in the Dao of Earth Virtue, or it was truly a natural shift in the earth veins—a calamity from nowhere. In any case… not only have the sect's Daoist Masters already gone, but many other cultivators are also being stationed in the Eastern Sea…"

"With so many cultivators mobilized, we will inevitably be short-staffed here with your noble clan. If our progress slows, please do not take offense."

Li Zhouluo nodded grimly, showing he understood. As expected, the Purple Smoke Gate had a reason for telling him this. His own clan's array was not urgent. He said softly:

"It is no matter. It is best that Purple Smoke attends to its own affairs first."

Wei Danying then took her leave. Li Zhouluo escorted her from the hall. She headed north, and Li Zhouluo, observing her route, deduced that Wei Danying was, in all likelihood, heading for the Profound Wonder Temple.

'Daoist Master Sumian follows the Treasured Earth lineage. As an Earth Virtue cultivator, he is an expert on earth veins. It seems she is going to request his help.'

Chapter 804: Murder

Dawn was just breaking, but the great hall was brightly lit. Li Zhouluo placed several stacks of scrolls onto the desk and let out a breath of relief. The lamplight cast a sallow hue on his face as he turned and said:

"The clan's records from the past few years, detailing all matters large and small, are recorded within. Li Jiangqian, you only need to read through them."

Li Jiangqian, still dressed in his crimson robes, nodded at his words. He picked up the topmost volume, his expression thoughtful as he began to read. Li Zhouluo shook his head and said:

"I haven't done a very good job these past few years. If there are any omissions or errors, I must ask you to correct them, Li Jiangqian. I apologize for the trouble…"

"Uncle, how could you say such a thing!" Li Jiangqian replied with a smile, shaking his head. "Fourth Uncle, you are kind-hearted and deeply care for the clan. How could there be any failings? These records show only benevolent governance. The policies you proposed are excellent; this nephew must study them carefully."

Li Zhouluo merely sighed again and shook his head. He unfastened the black robe he wore, placed it into his storage bag, and replied:

"You must stop flattering me. I am also on the verge of breaking through to the ninth level of Qi Refining. This timing is perfect; I will take this opportunity to enter seclusion."

He quickly departed. Li Jiangqian settled himself firmly back into the main seat, raised an eyebrow toward Dili Guang standing nearby, and asked:

"Are all the young masters on their way?"

Dili Guang nodded, responding respectfully, "Reporting to the Patriarch, Young Master Li Jianglong and Young Master Jiangxia entered seclusion three months

ago and six months ago, respectively. The message has been sent, but it is unlikely they will receive it in time."

Li Jiangqian gave a short laugh and replied, "It doesn't matter. Funan and the East Shore have always been managed by my two younger brothers, and everything is in perfect order. There is no need for them to make the trip. What about Jiangliang and Jiangnian?"

Dili Guang quickly replied: "The Fourth Young Master has been studying under Lord Cui Jueyin. Coincidentally, his lordship has been on the island these past few days, so the Fourth Young Master is already waiting in the side hall. The youngest master, Jiangnian, has also been cultivating on the island recently and is waiting as well."

"Send them in."

He gave the order and lowered his head again, returning his focus to the records. Scarcely ten breaths passed before the light clinking of metal sounded from the hall's entrance. A young master strode in, a sword cradled in his arm. His golden pupils scanned the room, and he called out in a bright voice:

"Big Brother!"

This was indeed his fourth brother, Li Jiangliang. He was fifteen now, his expressions vivid. He looked very similar to Li Jiangqian, though he appeared sunnier and more approachable. He spoke with enthusiasm:

"Congratulations, Big Brother! I went to your residence to pay my respects a few days ago, but your movements were unpredictable, and I wasn't able to see you. Truly, congratulations!"

Li Jiangliang was heartfelt, and Li Jiangqian naturally wouldn't rebuff him. He returned the greeting with a smile, saying:

"I was preoccupied with affairs these past few days and had no leisure. But the moment I was free, did I not send for you, Fourth Brother?"

The two exchanged a few more pleasantries before Li Jiangqian's gaze shifted to the youngest brother, Li Jiangnian, who stood last in line.

All four of Li Zhouwei's sons were tall. Even Li Jianglong, the plainest in appearance, possessed a fine build by any normal standard. Yet the Li Jiangnian standing before him now was short, almost stunted and thin.

What made Li Jiangqian frown, however, was the young man's face.

The members of the Li clan were generally known for their good looks, especially those descending from Li Tongya's line. Li Xijun had been a famously handsome man in his day, and Li Qinghong was a stunning beauty. Even Li Zhouwei, having managed the clan for so many years, had attracted the devotion of numerous female cultivators in the region. And Li Jiangliang, standing right in front of him, possessed a first-class bearing.

Yet Li Jiangnian had sharp, protruding lips and hollow cheeks. His eyes were both squinted and swollen. Worse, several warts dotted the side of his face, a few coarse hairs sprouting from them. It wasn't just that his appearance was unsightly; his entire demeanor was timid and cowering. He was not merely ungraceful—he was actively repulsive to look at.

'Failing to inherit Father's golden pupils is one thing… but to look this wretched!'

His brow furrowed deeply. Compared to the natural charisma his other brothers possessed, this youngest one seemed to have an innate quality that repelled others. Li Jiangqian watched him in silence, finding the contrast hard to believe.

'Is he truly… Father's biological son?!'

He couldn't even bring himself to speak, instead walking down from the main seat to observe him more closely. He asked, doubtfully, "You are already a cultivator about to enter Qi Refining… how can you still have such growths…"

Li Jiangqian was naturally referring to the warts on his face. The awkward Li Jiangnian, however, seemed accustomed to the question and answered meekly:

"I was born this way. Lord Cui already examined them. He said that as my cultivation base increases, they will naturally fade away, so there is no need to intervene."

Li Jiangqian could only step back. His original intention to test his two younger brothers had evaporated. He returned to the main seat, averted his gaze from Jiangnian, and replied:

"Jiangnian, you are about to begin Qi Refining. Are you here to receive the Courtly Red Dust Qi? I will give you an order token; you may go to the dense forest and retrieve it yourself."

Li Jiangnian nodded hastily, accepted the token Li Jiangqian handed him, and departed joyfully.

As he pushed the door open and left, both remaining brothers in the hall breathed a sigh of relief. Li Jiangqian let out a heavy breath, unsure what to even say, and simply rubbed the space between his brows.

Li Jiangliang lowered his head slightly and murmured, "For the past few years, our youngest brother has rarely left seclusion. Unless absolutely necessary, he eats and sleeps entirely within his immortal's abode. He only came tonight because he was forced to retrieve the spiritual qi."

"It's better that he stays hidden." Li Jiangqian sighed. "In this world, no matter where you go, your face is unavoidable. If you are born handsome, others treat you well at a glance. If you are born ugly, you invite insults just by walking down the road. As for using a Dharma Art to conceal it, he would inevitably be suspected of hiding his true identity and harboring ill intentions. At worst, we will just have him wear a mask to cover his features. He still won't escape the stares, but at least it will be tolerable to look at."

Li Jiangliang nodded repeatedly. Li Jiangqian spared him a glance, recognizing that his fourth brother didn't genuinely care whether Jiangnian wore a mask or not. He smiled and changed the subject:

"I heard Uncle Zhouluo mention that you consumed that portion of the Bright Radiance's Blazing Essence from many years ago. That means you follow the same dao lineage as I, cultivating the Scripture of Heavenly Radiance and the Waning Sun. You should come to me often for guidance in the future."

"Many thanks, Big Brother!"

Li Jiangliang cupped his hands and departed. Li Jiangqian rose to his feet, dipped a brush in the inkstone on his desk, and inscribed several characters. He then withdrew a stack of small letters from his sleeve, glanced at Dili Guang, and commanded:

"Go and summon the people from Qingdu and the Jade Court Guard."

He raised his eyebrows, a smile playing on his lips. "Don't worry about making a commotion. In fact, the bigger the commotion, the better. I want the entire island to hear this clearly!"

Dili Guang understood the intent. He nodded and withdrew. As predicted, the great hall was suddenly filled with the sound of countless footsteps. Soldiers in white armor streamed in from both side halls, sealing every exit. For a moment, the hall was filled with flickering shadows and the noisy din of clashing weapons and scraping armor.

Clang!

Li Jiangqian remained seated on the main throne. Chen Yang, clad head-to-toe in black armor, strode quickly in from a side door and offered a cupped-fist salute.

"Reporting to the Patriarch. Li Xixuan is indeed at Mount Qingdu. He is in the Old Lord's courtyard, begging bitterly. He has already been kneeling for an hour."

"Only an hour!" Li Jiangqian smiled, savoring the moment. "He is a mortal, after all. The boat ride to Qingdu takes quite some time. It's a good thing I waited for him until the middle of the night."

He withdrew an order token, smiling. "Dili Guang has already gone to summon the Qingdu forces. Take your own people. The very instant the Qingdu forces leave the mountain, you are to lock down Qingdu completely. Allow no one to enter or leave."

"Make the commotion as large as possible. Just say… that I have found grounds for accusation, and now, I intend to kill someone!"

Chapter 805: Merit Shelters and Dao Stipends

Li Jiangqian dispatched his men and waited in the main hall. Soon, a clamor arose outside, and a procession of figures quickly reached the entrance. They hesitated, shoving each other forward, but no one dared to enter.

With a creak…

Finally, Chen Donghe and An Siwei led the way into the Jade Court. Each was followed by three individuals holding real power within the Qingdu Jade Court. They bowed first. Li Jiangqian was quite respectful toward these two. He sat up straight and said:

"Elders, please come in first."

The hall doors swung shut, leaving only the two of them standing inside. Li Jiangqian pointed to the stacks of letters on his desk and said:

"There are twenty-two candidates for the clan's legacy shelter selection. Uncle Zhouluo granted each of them three types of protection: they can remain on the island, receive an official post along the periphery, and are given an annual stipend.

"Their every major and minor action over the last three years is documented here. Suspicions, evidence, reports suppressed by Uncle Zhouluo, and past stains found in the archives—all marked in vermilion.

"I need the two divisions to cooperate. Qingdu's forces are not to move. The Jade Court's men will go directly to 'invite' these people. Bring those invited to the hall and lock them in separate rooms. There is no need for interrogation and no need for torture."

Chen Donghe looked like he wanted to speak but stopped himself. An Siwei, however, bowed and offered a reminder:

"Patriarch, the clan has been relatively honest these past three years. Those chosen for the shelter selection are generally those without discernible faults. Even if some offenses were intentional, there's no handle for us to grasp. If we settle scores based on the distant past, I fear it will stir resentment."

"It doesn't matter."

Li Jiangqian smiled. "I only need you two elders to keep everyone under watch. We just need to tighten the atmosphere."

The two nodded in understanding. Li Jiangqian walked down from his seat and personally opened the main doors for them. As the doors swung open, the crowd of whispering figures kneeling outside immediately fell silent. Li Jiangqian smiled.

"One more thing. Please have the Qingdu Jade Court pass this message to all branches: If any sheltered family commits crimes or acts against Qingdu, when one person offends, the entire household will be implicated. Their shelter privileges will be reduced accordingly."

The crowd dispersed in an orderly fashion. Soon, people were being brought up the mountain one by one. Li Jiangqian waited a while before he saw a man in a patterned turban being dragged up the path. This was whom he had been waiting for. The smile vanished from Li Jiangqian's face, replaced by an icy glare.

Li Chengza's heart turned cold as ice.

The Jade Court Guard had shown up at his door in the dead of night, speaking of 'one person offending, the entire household implicated.' Li Chengza's heart had skipped a beat.

What had his old man gone to do? Confess!

Li Xixuan had rushed back, diverting midway to Qingdu to plead for mercy. But Li Chengza didn't know this. He only knew his father had gone to plead his case and had not returned, though it was now the middle of the night. Earlier, he had been sitting worriedly with his brothers, speculating about where their father might be facing punishment…

Now, having been glared at like that by Li Jiangqian, he was terrified.

'Father always said the First Young Master was ruthless. This whole maneuver… he's going to strip my family of our shelter privileges. All five slots will be gone… He truly is a master strategist. Father walked right into his trap!'

He was dragged into a side courtyard and locked inside. The heavy door shut, plunging the room into darkness. A formation activated, sealing the courtyard off from the outside world, making communication impossible. His heart filled with despair. When a servant from the main hall came to offer tea, he didn't react at all.

"Sir, please…"

He turned his head slightly. Suddenly, he found the servant familiar. He paused, then asked:

"Are you from the Ren family?"

Li Xixuan's primary wife was from the Ren family, making the East Residence very close to them. He quickly grabbed the servant's hand, his rarely used mind spinning furiously. He stammered:

"Get a message… to the East Residence… tell them to split the family assets. Immediately! Save whatever can be saved…"

The Ren family servant glanced at him and replied:

"You overestimate me, Young Master. I am just a lowly servant; how could I have such influence? Besides, the moment you were taken away, the East Residence already split the family assets!"

Li Chengza went limp. He sat stunned for a long time before finally uttering a single word:

"Good."

While Li Chengza agonized inside, the outside was quiet, broken only by the sound of hurried footsteps. Moonlight flowed like water. Li Jiangqian stood at the hall entrance as Chen Yang bowed slightly and reported in a low voice:

"Patriarch, Lord Xixuan is still in the Qingdu courtyard. The East Residence has already frantically divided its assets. The west branch had already split, so there wasn't much movement there, save for two sub-branches that further divided…"

"That's enough."

Li Jiangqian said casually:

"By the time Clan Elder Xixuan comes down the mountain, he will have already lost his East Residence. His fractured descendants will blame him. The senior elders say resentment shouldn't be aimed at brothers or the main clan. Placing the blame squarely on our Clan Elder Xixuan is perfect."

He scoffed.

"When parents fail in their duties, the siblings unite against a common foe. Doesn't that make them more unified? It won't harm their relationships, and they certainly can't blame the clan… It was Li Xixuan who confessed his guilt first. Only then did I, Li Jiangqian, send men to arrest people. Now, the East Residence has exposed itself without any need for interrogation. The reason for all these arrests… everyone understands it now!"

Even Chen Yang felt a chill run down his spine. He paused for a moment before cupping his hands.

"I only fear he won't cooperate… Clan Elder Xixuan… understands the situation better than anyone. If he spreads the truth everywhere…"

"I am not afraid of him refusing to cooperate."

Li Jiangqian flicked his sleeves and strode back into the hall, clasping his hands behind his back. He laughed.

"A parent's love for their child requires planning for the distant future. What good does exposing the truth do the East Residence? It will only invite me to fracture and dismantle them time and time again. He is old. He doesn't dare openly oppose me now that I hold the power."

"Moreover…"

He reached the head seat, picked up his brush, and added:

"Is there any difference between pleading for mercy and admitting guilt? If he wasn't guilty, why would he need to plead?"

Li Jiangqian glanced at Chen Yang and continued,

"Go and fetch Cui Jueyin."

Chen Yang swept away like the wind. Cui Jueyin entered the hall shortly after, having clearly been waiting nearby for some time. Li Jiangqian raised an eyebrow and smiled.

"The matter we discussed these past two months, Lord Cui… has it come to fruition?"

Cui Jueyin bowed slightly and said respectfully:

"As instructed by the Patriarch, I have selected three foundational Daoist manuals from my family's collection of 667 Daoist scriptures. They are: the 'White Han Compilation' from the *Six Chapters on Seeking Immortality*; the 'Methods of Questioning Scaled Beasts' general record; and the 'Principles of Spiritual Talismans' general outline."

"The selected portions of these three paths have been redacted, expanded, and supplemented using several other traditions. They are now named the 'White Han,' the 'Questioning Methods,' and the 'Spiritual Talismans' volumes."

He presented three volumes with both hands. Their covers were white, gold, and purple respectively, etched with patterns that gave them a transcendent aura. Li Jiangqian accepted them, flipped through them twice, and nodded.

"I've troubled you, Senior."

Cui Jueyin stood aside. Li Jiangqian turned to Chen Yang, who was waiting below.

"Bring the clan members from the side courtyards."

Before long, the detainees filed in, one after another. They stood assembled below the platform, heads bowed in terror. Li Jiangqian smiled.

"First, congratulations are in order. Clan Elder Xixuan righteously came to the mountain to accept responsibility for his faults. The clan initiated an investigation. Fortunately, Uncle Zhouluo has a sharp eye, and his shelter selections were extremely accurate. Although there were some suspicious points, they have now all been clarified. The shelter selections stand."

The crowd below breathed a collective sigh of relief. They exchanged furtive glances, many of them looking toward Li Chengza.

Li Chengza was now certain his father had merely gone to confess. Thankfully, nothing concrete was found, otherwise his own household would have been despised. He celebrated silently as Li Jiangqian continued:

"I have called you all here today to discuss a truly important matter. I intend to open a new door of opportunity within the clan. Using Milin Mountain as the

primary location, we will establish three paths of learning: 'White Han,' 'Questioning Methods,' and 'Spiritual Talismans.' These will be available for study by clan members on the island who cannot cultivate, allowing them to contribute their meager strength to the clan."

The crowd below looked up, confused, staring at the platform. Li Jiangqian smiled.

"In the future, the path of shelter selection will continue, but it will be reserved only for the descendants of cultivators who sacrificed themselves for the clan, and it will only shelter the single generation that possesses a spiritual aptitude. If their descendants lack this aptitude, their portion of the cultivator's assets will be temporarily recorded by the lake, waiting for a future descendant with aptitude to be born. This we will call a 'Merit Shelter.'

"As for the path of studying the Daoist scriptures: every five years, during the sacrificial rites, Milin Mountain will hold an examination. Those who demonstrate attainment in any of the three paths and pass a character assessment will be granted a 'Merit Stipend' position in the clan. Not only will they be permitted to reside on the main island, they will also receive rewards and a salary. This we will call a 'Dao Stipend.' "

The hall fell silent. Cui Jueyin, clearly prepared, retrieved several completed golden scrolls from his sleeve and passed them down to Chen Donghe and An Siwei.

Everyone knew the Li family's shelter selection was hardly ironclad. If one lacked ability, an appointed position could just as easily be revoked, and the rewards and residency rights lasted only one generation. If this Dao Stipend path was viable, wouldn't it be even better than the shelter selection?

Eyebrows raised in anticipation. Li Jiangqian continued:

"This path has three ranks of positions. The clan will also establish academies in the various prefectures, and graduates may even be dispatched off-island… Now, representatives from every branch, come forward and copy the scriptures."

He leaned back in his high seat. Below, the heated gazes of the crowd followed the three books. There were even a few Foundation Establishment Realm cultivators present; only with them leading the way did the others obediently form a queue to copy the texts. Li Jiangqian's gaze drifted over the ecstatic faces.

'I can never allow them to easily attain positions of authority… Only by channeling their energy into the endless annotations of these Daoist scriptures, forcing them to spend their lives poring over the texts until their hair turns white, will they have no ambition left to study other matters. Only then can they slowly climb this new power structure, one that is completely isolated from the sixteen prefectures, the two peaks, and the mountain. This is the only way to prevent future trouble…'

He maintained his smile. As the copying finished, amidst the cacophony of voices crying out gratitude for the Patriarch's immense grace, he looked up slightly.

'Besides, it's not without its benefits… Reading these scriptures extensively will also serve to educate their descendants… Children with spiritual aptitude will use these three books for their enlightenment. It might even aid their future cultivation.'

"This is the law of Merit Shelters and Dao Stipends!"

…

Night deepened. Stars glittered in the sky, and the vast sea was calm, unbroken by waves. Gulls and eagles soared. A few cries echoed from the distant horizon, fading quickly from hearing.

A cool breeze rustled the maple forest. White jade lotus lamps floated on the stream, while the cyan jade platform glowed with a pure, bright light. A cultivator in white-gold Daoist robes opened his eyes. Profound Light flashed into existence, and a purple fire flared before dissipating, illuminating the woods for an instant.

Li Ximing had spent this recent period cultivating in the forest. The injuries to his dharma body had fully healed. This cultivation abode, cleared for him by the Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain, was clearly exceptional; its spiritual energy was comparable to that of Gardenia Scenery Mountain.

Uniquely, white jade lotus lamps drifted down the stream, lit within by some sort of spiritual item aspected to Valley Water that aided healing. The fragrance was rich. Although it had little effect on injuries at Li Ximing's Purple Mansion Realm level, the thought behind it was clear.

'My progress on the "Heavenly Audience Gate" divine ability hasn't been great. Although I walked the line between life and death, and my Dao insight improved slightly, my cultivation base stagnated while I was healing…'

Refining a divine ability was a slow, grinding process. Li Ximing estimated it would take him another thirty-odd years to perfect Heavenly Audience Gate. He calculated inwardly:

"By Jiangnan standards, my cultivation talent isn't actually slow. Perfecting this in thirty-plus years means I can immediately connect it to the *Treasure Scripture of the Body Guarding the Tiger Pass*. Without needing a transitional technique, I can spend another ten-odd years forging the Dao foundation, and then I can begin refining 'Sovereign Treading Peril.'

"I haven't seen any records regarding the time it takes to break through to the second divine ability; it must depend heavily on personal talent. Lacking the experience, it's hard to estimate. Let's budget ten years. That means achieving 'Sovereign Treading Peril' in sixty years. If everything goes smoothly, I can condense the third divine ability in one hundred twenty years, break through to the mid-stage, and face the Purple Mystery Threshold."

The Purple Mystery Threshold was notoriously difficult, so Li Ximing couldn't estimate beyond it. Once he had three divine abilities, he would be considered a core powerhouse among Jiangnan's Purple Mansion Realm cultivators. Li Zhouwei wouldn't be much slower than him. At that point, even if they faced Changxiao, they wouldn't be completely outmatched.

"The only difficulty is surviving these next one hundred twenty years while being targeted by Changxiao. That is no easy task."

Li Ximing's situation was awkward. If he returned to Jiangnan, he had no confidence he could face Changxiao's overt attacks and hidden schemes. But if he remained overseas, his family wasn't safe either.

"Although Zhouwei took a huge risk and eliminated Situ Mo, ending our family's century-long affliction and removing a critical blade pointed at us, once Changxiao returns to Jiangnan and begins to scheme… even if he can't find another operative like Situ Mo, there will certainly be no shortage of borrowed blades…"

He felt a pang of frustration. Suddenly, the wind chimes in the maple trees tinkled. Xia Shouyu, dressed in white, emerged from the woods. She bowed slightly and spoke with great respect:

"Reporting to the Daoist Master: the two Daoist Masters have sent word. They say the matter discussed previously is ready, and we can set out."

Xia Shouyu had spent the better part of the last year on Nine Mounds, and her life wasn't just comfortable; it was luxurious compared to her entire life before. Never mind the density of spiritual energy in her dwelling; even the most desolate spot on a mountain path here had spiritual energy several times thicker than at Qingxu Temple.

Living this well, the woman positively glowed. Adorned with a few magical artifact accessories, she appeared even more beautiful. Her naturally thin eyebrows, which gave her a slightly severe look, were now offset by a pendant worn on her brow. Xia Shouyu had always known how to carry herself; now, she truly looked like a direct disciple from a major Purple Mansion Realm sect.

Li Ximing wasn't a cruel person and didn't find her appearance excessive. Seeing the once-rustic woman transform like this merely made him nod with a smile. He rose, tucking his hands into his sleeves as a thought occurred to him:

'I can use this opportunity… I should ask Houfu to take her to the lake. It's both safe and convenient, and it sends a subtle message of deterrence… Zhouming isn't getting any younger, yet he drifts aimlessly day after day. He's probably still frequenting some pleasure barge. That won't do.'

Thus, as he walked out, he asked:

"Lingdu is a generous elder. I hear that while your status on the immortal mountain is that of a guest, your actual treatment is akin to an outer disciple, with several scripture repositories open to you… is that correct?"

Xia Shouyu immediately panicked, rushing to say:

"Reporting to the Daoist Master, yes, that is true! But the artifacts and clothes this junior wears were all exchanged using the cultivation resources the Daoist Master granted me. I have not taken a single thing from the Nine Mounds tradition…"

Xia Shouyu had a meticulous mind and had already thought several steps ahead. But Li Ximing wasn't concerned about that. He nodded slightly.

"You've done well. I will find an opportunity to secure a better background for you, but you must be worthy of it. Since the scripture repositories are open to you, spend these next days reading more."

Xia Shouyu was both shocked and overjoyed. Although her talent, appearance, and intellect were second to none, her lowly birth was a constant source of hidden insecurity. Tears welled in her eyes.

"The Daoist Master's grace is like a second life! Even if I am crushed to dust, I cannot repay it!"

Li Ximing walked ahead, hands clasped behind his back, nodding slightly.

"Use these days to read. Otherwise, when opportunity is handed to you, you won't be able to hold it steady. If you are exposed later and regret it then, it will be far too late."

Xia Shouyu nodded repeatedly. The two arrived beneath the large maple tree where the discussion had been held earlier. Houfu, dressed in shamanic robes, and the elderly Lingdu were conferring in low voices. Seeing Li Ximing approach, Lingdu rose to his feet and said in an aged voice:

"Greetings, Fellow Daoist Zhaojing. Time is short. Please, let us depart together."

Li Ximing nodded. Houfu merely offered a greeting and fell silent again. The three of them pierced the Great Void, and infinite blackness enveloped them. Only then did Lingdu speak softly:

"Fellow Daoist Houfu and I have been setting this up for days. We wanted to be thorough and minimize the disturbance, which is why we delayed. However, we received news the day before yesterday. The Merciful One who went to the Buddhist Land to report has already walked the mountain of blades and sea of fire. He completed his punishment but was not demoted. Instead, he has returned under orders to continue the investigation. We had no choice but to hastily ask you to come."

Li Ximing shook his head.

"What can he possibly find? Anything that could be divined should have been divined long ago. If any traces had been found, they would have already pursued them. He wouldn't have needed to go to Buddhist Land to accept punishment in the first place."

He said this, but Li Ximing still felt a little apprehensive.

'This is a huge operation. I just hope that fellow doesn't come back bearing a grudge and pin everything on me… We need to finish this as quickly as possible.'

Lingdu seemed to share this sentiment. He didn't travel directly through the Great Void. Instead, he detoured to the Mortal Sea, utilizing its extremely fast transit properties to quickly arrive north of the Peacock Sea. He then retrieved a lotus flower from his sleeve.

The flower was a lovely pink, no bigger than his palm. On an adjacent stalk hung an old seed pod. Li Ximing stood beside him and could see clearly that the pod had exactly five neat holes.

Lingdu formed a hand seal, and three of the five holes immediately responded. Three jade-white lotus seeds popped out. The old Daoist Master said in a low voice:

"Please, both of you take one. Press it against the web of your thumb and hold it there. This will guard against Maha divination!"

'You had something this good and didn't mention it? You should have said so earlier…'

Li Ximing relaxed slightly. He pressed the seed into his hand as instructed and felt a strange sensation cover his dharma body, an indistinct five-colored treasured light. Following Lingdu, he exited the Great Void and found himself on the seabed somewhere within the Peacock Sea.

This area was dark and lightless. The seawater was a deep bronze-green. Li Ximing descended with the other two, quickly arriving at a massive undersea canyon. Lingdu said:

"Please wait here a moment!"

The old man vanished into the depths of the canyon. Although Li Ximing knew the probability of them harming him was almost zero, his heart still pounded nervously.

'If they set up a formation here and attacked me together, my life would be in grave danger… If I don't use the Profound Light… there is a sixty percent chance I will fall here…'

Fortunately, his fears did not materialize. After only half an incense stick of time, the seafloor began to tremble, and the entire seabed shook violently.

BOOM!

A brilliant, five-colored pillar of treasured light, as large as a house, erupted from the seabed. It surged through the heavy seawater, aiming for the sky. Houfu, who had been silently forming seals and chanting, finally stopped and barked:

"Rise!"

A small, patterned brown pouch flew from his sleeve, darting through the water to intercept the radiant light pillar mid-journey. The mouth of the bag pulsed. The five-colored light, which had been surging upward, bent its trajectory. It traveled several more li before turning just shy of the surface, diverting neatly into the bag's opening.

Suppressing such an anomaly was not easy. Even though the treasured light didn't pierce the heavens, auspicious clouds still gathered above the ocean surface. Li Ximing knew his part. He didn't use his own divine abilities or magic; instead, he activated the treasure pearl in his hand. The [Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger] lit up, and several beams of Bound Earth radiance shot toward the sky, scattering the clouds.

Houfu's brow furrowed tightly. While maintaining control of the brown pouch with one hand, he looked at Li Ximing and warned in a low voice:

"Fellow Daoist Zhaojing, be warned. The Peacock Merciful One can sense this item. Although we are suppressing it, the Peacock Sea is right here. That Merciful One will certainly ride the winds to investigate."

Li Ximing nodded curtly. After a few breaths, the pillar of light finally subsided, and Houfu looked visibly more relaxed. Just then, however, a sound-shattering screech echoed from the horizon:

"CAW—!"

A colossal beast surfaced on the ocean—a mix of five-colors and bronze. It had red eyes, a golden beak, and was the size of a small mountain, with a broad, flat back. The streaking light of its wake flowed with multicolored, treasured hues, instantly dyeing half the sky.

The peacock leaped lightly, breached the sea, and plunged straight toward their location, its voice a deep, resonant male tone:

"Who dares steal from my Peacock lineage!"

The Merciful One arrived in an instant, transforming underwater into a middle-aged monk draped in five-colored robes. He had six ordination scars on his scalp, each a different color. His hands were empty, and his eyes were wide with fury.

Li Ximing glanced at Houfu. The Daoist Master from the Great Xiukui Monastery seemed immensely pleased by the monk's appearance. He laughed aloud and replied:

"Your father."

The middle-aged monk snapped his gaze toward the voice and froze, terror seizing his heart.

'Purple Mansion Realm?! Two Purple Mansion Realm cultivators!'

A Merciful One was only about the level of an early-stage Purple Mansion Realm cultivator. Even if they cultivated the Lotus Seat, it primarily boosted survivability, not raw power. At best, he could fight a cultivator with two divine abilities. Typically, it took three to five Merciful Ones to resist a cultivator who had passed the Purple Mystery Threshold…

Seeing two Purple Mansion Realm cultivators at once terrified him. Furthermore, Li Ximing and Houfu had concealed their auras, revealing nothing of their divine ability cultivation, which made him completely unable to gauge their depth. Still, he was a Peacock, a Merciful One of the great Great Bestowal Temple of Bronze Splendour. His confidence remained. He spoke in a cold voice:

"I wonder which lineage these Daoist Masters hail from? Do you not know that the Peacock Sea is the territory of the Great Bestowal Temple of Bronze Splendour? This treasured light also belongs to my Peacock lineage. Please hand it over immediately…"

"The Great Bestowal Temple of Bronze Splendour has four Merciful Ones in total, and they are rushing here now. Daoist friends, do not bring disaster upon yourselves!"

Li Ximing's Bright Yang divine ability was not suited for concealing his aura, and he had no idea what the Merciful One's divination capabilities were, so he remained silent. Houfu, however, burst into wild laughter, looking completely unrestrained as he answered coldly:

"I won't bother changing my name! I am Daoist Master Buzi of the Supreme Yang Azure Pond Sect! Now get lost!"

Li Ximing stared, stunned. He nearly turned his head to look at him, muttering inwardly:

'Wait… Houfu… you… huh?'

Character List:

- **Li Xixuan** [Mortal] [Main Branch Lineage]
- **Li Chengza** [Mortal] [Main Branch Lineage]
- **Chen Donghe** [Qi Refining 9th Layer]
- **Li Jiangqian** [*Great Scripture of Radiance*] [Early Foundation Establishment Realm]
- **Chen Yang** [*Jing Dragon King*] [Early Foundation Establishment Realm]
- **An Siwei** [Court Guard] [Early Foundation Establishment Realm]
- **Cui Jueyin** [*Eternal Brightness Steps*] [Late Foundation Establishment Realm]
- **Xia Shouyu** [*White Li Heart*] [Early Foundation Establishment Realm]
- **Li Ximing** [Early Purple Mansion Realm] [Purple Mansion Alchemist]
- **Lingdu** [Mid Purple Mansion Realm] [Tantai Nine Mounds Lineage]
- **Houfu** [Early Purple Mansion Realm] [Great Xiukui Monastery]
- **Yu Guang** [Merciful One] [Way of Compassion]

Chapter 806: The Great Peacock Karma

Daoist Master Houfu was not a man of many words. Perhaps owing to his Xiukui lineage, he had a gloomy disposition and a reputation for being prideful. Li Ximing had always considered him a serious and cautious man.

Hearing Houfu say such a thing caught Li Ximing completely off guard. He had to hide his internal laughter.

'Oh, this is good. This is very good.'

But the peacock before them, who resembled a middle-aged man, narrowed his eyes. His colorful monastic robes pulsed with light as he spoke in a frigid tone, "Daoist… do you take me for a blind man!"

Houfu might have been bluffing, but the peacock certainly didn't buy it. If the great Daoist Master of the Azure Pond Sect, Chi Buzi, were truly present, how could he, Yu Guang, possibly still be standing here? Those two Purple Mansion Realm cultivators far surpassed him in strength. Yet, the pair before him were acting furtively and trying to change the subject. They must be terrified of provoking the Great Bestowal Temple of Bronze Splendour!

Confidence surged in the peacock. He sneered, "I have heard that Chi Buzi is a green-eyed wraith with unbound hair, dressed in azure robes and golden tassels. His Divine Abilities are astonishing. How can two skulking curs like you possibly compare to him? Now, move!"

At those words, Houfu's expression visibly darkened. His voice turned gravelly as he replied, "A brightly feathered chicken dares to bark like a rabid dog?"

The tension between them was thick enough to cut. If a fight broke out, Li Ximing would be the one forced to act. He quickly stepped forward, adopting a mild tone. "My colleague and I discovered this place together. By rights, what we find here is ours. How can it possibly belong to the Peacock Dao lineage?"

Yu Guang laughed, infuriated. He roared, "Stop playing dumb! You are merely stalling for time! Fine! I will see for myself exactly what kind of characters you are!"

His sleeve billowed as he summoned a vortex of iridescent flame from the void. The fire blazed fiercely even within the sea. With two fingers joined and his palm thrusting upward, he sent the flames smashing toward Houfu.

'It seems a fight is unavoidable…'

Li Ximing frowned slightly. 'I still underestimated Yu Guang's position within the Buddhist Land. It seems that for a Merciful One—who is bold enough to maintain a path of retreat back in the Buddhist Land—the mere threat of two Purple Mansion cultivators isn't enough to make him retreat without testing us.'

They had already agreed that Li Ximing would be the one to fight. The Purple Mansion spiritual fire wasn't yet in hand, so Li Ximing couldn't refuse. He was preparing to raise his hand when the small bag in mid-air, still absorbing the treasure light, suddenly radiated a dark luster. From its flanks, the brilliant radiance of the Supreme Yang crackled and burst forth.

The Supreme Yang radiance moved naturally through the water, drifting before Houfu to intercept the attack. The Supreme Yang is the First Manifestation, and it instantly smothered the iridescent flames. As the two forces collided violently, Houfu's icy voice cut through the turmoil: "Old mongrel, if you actually force my hand, you and your peacocks cannot afford the consequences!"

Yu Guang took one look and realized the pocket-like Dharma Artifact in the air was indeed no ordinary item. His lips moved, but no sound came out. A long bronze staff materialized in his hand. He took a single step into the void and vanished.

An intense warning sense flared in Li Ximing! The Profound Light between his brows pulsed, searching frantically, and his face stung with incipient pain. He cursed inwardly.

'Dammit… this colorful, bald donkey bullies the weak and fears the strong…'

Fortunately, Heavenly Audience Gate inherently possessed aspects of a Body Divine Ability. The point of Profound Light between his brows was potent; it paused only a fraction of a second before locating the bronze staff striking toward him. Li Ximing's lips buzzed, and he spat out a torrent of purple fire.

When he had previously dispersed the auspicious clouds unseen, he had used Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger specifically to avoid revealing his Bright Yang Divine Abilities. Now that he was in a direct confrontation, exposing the Bright Yang abilities was unavoidable; his Dharma Artifact was actually the more identifiable item. Thus, Li Ximing kept his artifact hidden, relying only on his Bright Yang flames to counter.

The purple fire transformed into a blazing violet serpent, slithering up the bronze staff and burning the Dharma power coating it with a sizzle. But Yu Guang's momentum was ferocious. The staff flared with brilliant light, pressing the attack straight toward Li Ximing's face.

Bang!

Li Ximing raised a hand, his palm reinforced by the Dharma power of his Bright Yang Divine Ability, and deflected the staff. His Dharma body shuddered from the impact. He seized the momentum to enter into the Great Void, only to feel a fiery sting erupt in his palm.

'This Merciful One… his Dharma body is impressively strong.'

Li Ximing had no intention of revealing the true form of Heavenly Audience Gate—that would be tantamount to announcing his identity. By using only his Bright Yang abilities, he left himself some room for denial later.

Sure enough, the monk reversed his grip on the staff, his eyes widening in suspicion. "Bright Yang? Are you from the Cui family?"

The peacocks, after all, lived overseas. The most famous Bright Yang lineage in the Eastern Sea was unquestionably the Cui Clan of Chongzhou Island. Although the Li family had recently visited and the Cui clan had claimed their Purple Mansion experts were depleted, the Peacock Sea was too distant for Yu Guang to know this. His immediate suspicion falling upon the Cui clan was perfectly logical.

Now that Li Ximing had escaped into the Great Void, the monk did not pursue. Instead, he immediately dove toward the sea trench below. Houfu reappeared behind his pocket-like Dharma Artifact, placing both hands upon it to accelerate the absorption of the remaining treasure light.

Li Ximing had no choice but to step out of the Great Void, materializing in front of the monk to block him again. The monk instantly grew impatient. He hammered down twice with his staff, forcing Li Ximing back, then snatched a round disc from his sleeve.

The disc appeared to be bronze, glowing with an iridescent sheen. Its surface depicted a magnificent, multicolored Buddhist mural: a vast, vibrant ocean dominated by a spirit mountain that pierced the clouds. Spanning the sky above was an enormous peacock, roaring at the heavens. Kneeling beneath it was a naked woman, her face filled with piety, holding two swaddled bundles. The bundle in white cloth held an adorable, chubby baby; the bundle in red held a tiny, pink peacock, its beak open in a cry.

The eyes of the roaring peacock in the mural suddenly blazed, shooting twin beams of crimson light. Li Ximing was already wary and had preemptively entered the Great Void, yet he still felt a piercing pain between his brows. An instant later, a five-colored flame erupted onto his Dharma body. Sparks flew with the sharp sound of shattering glaze. *Crack!*

"Not good!"

After his ordeal with Changxiao, the sight of these flames struck terror into Li Ximing's heart. He jumped several miles deeper into the Great Void. A box of spiritual water immediately materialized, and he slapped his Bright Yang Divine Ability over the wound, feeling a wave of soothing coolness.

Only then did he dare to inspect the damage. He found the flames had already vanished, leaving only a small, mottled mark on his Dharma body, about the size of a fingernail.

'Oh… that's it? That's pathetic.'

He felt a bead of sweat. Compared to Changxiao's Dharma Art, this monk's attack was a complete joke. Yet one was plain and simple, the other dazzling. Li Ximing stepped out of the void, purple flames erupting once more. The monk used his treasure to shine on him again. After several clashes, the monk demanded, "Which Dao lineage do you belong to, Daoist Master!"

Li Ximing had once teamed up with Kongheng to suppress the [Wrathful Visage] Merciful One, Fu Xia. At that time, Fu Xia had already fallen to the level of

a Master Monk, yet his Dharma body had endured their combined assaults unharmed. Now, Li Ximing was facing this new peacock with his full Purple Mansion cultivation, and this monk's Dharma body was clearly not weak. Unwilling to reveal his true Divine Abilities, Li Ximing found himself at a disadvantage relying on his Dharma body alone.

But Li Ximing lacked Houfu's intimidating background; his only goal was to block the monk. He deliberately stalled for time. "This humble one is Gu Feng, merely a rogue cultivator from the Southern Sea. The item below now belongs to us; it has no fate with the Merciful Ones. I must ask you to retreat." He offered politeness before hostility, adding a threat, "Once the Great Daoist Master below finishes, your lineage may end up losing another Dharma Body today!"

Lingdu wasn't a "Great Daoist Master" at all and had no intention of revealing himself. Li Ximing was purely bluffing. Yet, although the peacock had forced Li Ximing onto the defensive, he possessed no decisive Divine Abilities. Annoyed by Li Ximing's persistence, the monk actually began to show hesitant, half-believing signs of withdrawal.

Yu Guang halted mid-water, his expression darkening. 'These two are acting suspiciously. This man has been fighting me this whole time but refuses to reveal his true Divine Abilities. If I force this into a battle to the death, am I not just forcing his hand to kill me? And that person holding the bag… that Dharma Artifact is far from simple. If that truly is the Supreme Yang lineage, this is deeply troublesome.'

He had to remember: the Great Bestowal Temple of Bronze Splendour had *just* lost a Merciful One. This group, hiding their faces and identities, was suspicious to the extreme. Could they be the very cultivators who murdered Yuse? If so, staying here meant death!

Li Ximing didn't know if Yu Guang had truly believed the bluff or if the monk simply lacked the confidence to break through his defenses. 'The peacocks of the Great Bestowal Temple must have lived too comfortably in their Peacock Sea,' Li Ximing mused. 'How do they compare to the cutthroat cultivators of Jiangnan? He won't commit to fighting, yet he won't fully retreat. He's just wasting the opportunity. If he rushed down right now, he might even be able to negotiate a share. Since we clearly don't want to expose ourselves…' Their minds were on completely different tracks, their judgments worlds apart. But the Merciful One's intention to withdraw was solidifying.

Yu Guang ceased his attacks. He didn't dare direct his parting words at Houfu, who held the suspected Supreme Yang treasure. Instead, he fixed Li Ximing with a glare, clasped his hands together, and said coldly, "Daoist Gu Feng, you have taken an artifact of our Buddhist Land. Karma will surely follow. You may return it personally to the Buddhist Land, or retribution will find you, and you will lose both your life and your treasure. This old monk has given his warning. We will be waiting!"

Li Ximing almost laughed at the peacock's sanctimonious display. He shook his head and replied, matching the hostility, "If you bald-feathered birds don't leave now, we will be the ones sending you back to the Buddhist Land—in pieces!"

Yu Guang's expression turned venomous. He finally vanished.

Li Ximing recalled his Dharma power and flew toward the shallower water. The pillar of treasure light had already weakened to the thickness of a finger. Houfu gave the bag a final tug, absorbing the remnants, before turning to Li Ximing and nodding. "My thanks, Zhaojing. You bore the burden this time."

That bald bird was fierce in appearance but timid in reality, intimidated entirely by Houfu's Supreme Yang artifact. Li Ximing hadn't even needed to deploy Heavenly Audience Gate. This hardly counted as taking the fall; at most, he had attracted a flicker of suspicion. In exchange, he was getting a Purple Mansion spiritual fire. How could that possibly be considered a burden? He cupped his hands. "It is I who must thank Daoist Houfu!"

He meant it sincerely. Although Houfu's artifact was now exposed, he hadn't needed to reveal it. Since the plan had designated Li Ximing as the fighter, Houfu could have easily remained hidden and let Li Ximing shoulder the entire confrontation. Without the deterrent of that Supreme Yang radiance combined with Houfu's verbal threats, Yu Guang would likely never have withdrawn.

Houfu waved him off, his voice heavy. "That Yu Guang brought the [Peacock's Providence Disc]. That was unexpected. If not for the fact that his cultivation base is insufficient and he clearly has not earned the treasure's full recognition, this confrontation would not have ended so easily."

"So it was the monk who was weak, not the treasure that was all show."

Li Ximing nodded, seizing the opportunity to ask, "I seldom encounter the artifacts of Buddhist cultivators. Do all of them possess their own spirituality? Why do they reach the point of needing 'recognition' from the wielder?"

Houfu sneered. "A Dharma Artifact is a tool, and a Daoist Master is a person. A Buddhist treasure is also a tool… but does a Merciful One even count as a person? Within the Buddhist Land, they are nothing but slaves to the Mahas. If a wealthy man acquires a fine carriage, is the driver necessarily more esteemed than the carriage itself? If one is a landlord, the tenant farmer is less valuable than the ox. It is the same principle. Whether it's 'recognized' or not simply depends on whether the master decides to assign that ox to that farmer."

His words dripped with sarcasm. "That [Peacock's Providence Disc] is the personal treasure of the Peacock's Son. It should be equivalent to one of our Dharma Treasures. It really ought to have its own classification…"

Li Ximing frowned. "That is precisely my confusion. Why don't the Buddhist cultivators delineate their items clearly? A Master Monk uses a Treasured Artifact, a Merciful One uses a Treasured Artifact, and a Maha also uses a Treasured Artifact. Isn't that incredibly confusing?"

At this topic, Houfu's sarcastic smile deepened. He retrieved his bulging, sack-like Dharma Artifact. "If they delineated them clearly, what grand opera would the Buddhist Land have left to perform? How many Dharma Treasures has the Immortal Dao passed down through the ages? And how many Dharma Treasure-level artifacts has the Buddhist Land managed to create? We must exceed them tenfold! And what if we compare Dharma Treasures? My Supreme Yang lineage alone can name seven distinct Dharma Treasures! And that's not counting all those lost to the ages."

"How could those idiots from the Seven Paths ever accept such a comparison? So, within the Buddhist Land, only a treasure personally wielded by a Maha is called a Enlightened Artifact. If a mere Merciful One wishes to use one, they must formally *request* it!"

Li Ximing finally nodded, his understanding clearing. 'If that's the case,' he thought, 'then artifacts at the Dharma Treasure level are vanishingly rare among them. This means the status of the Peacock clan is likely far greater than even the rumors suggest.'

They exchanged a few more words before Lingdu's aged voice suddenly echoed in their ears: "Fellow Daoists, the matter here is concluded. Please grip the lotus seed in the web of your thumb, take a wide detour through the Great Void, and cover your tracks. Come to Nine Mounds."

Joy flashed in Li Ximing's heart. He exchanged a glance with Houfu. Without another word, they immediately split up, vanishing into the Great Void.

Once inside the Great Void, Li Ximing felt a coolness radiating from the web of his thumb. He flew east through the void, going all the way to the Sea's Cape. He then looped more than halfway around the Cape, almost reaching the World's Navel, before finally turning toward the Nine Mounds immortal mountain.

By the time he arrived at the mountain, two days had passed. Houfu was already waiting in the courtyard before the main gate, sipping tea. He was clearly waiting. Seeing Li Ximing finally arrive, he remarked, "Zhaojing is exceedingly cautious."

'How can I not be cautious? I was the one who fought. The Bright Yang lineage isn't known for stealth, unlike your Xiukui path that comes and goes without a trace…'

He merely cupped his hands and smiled. "My apologies for making Senior wait!"

So much time had been wasted that Houfu didn't bother offering him tea. He swept the entire tea set away with one motion, eliminating any chance for small talk, and the two proceeded inside together.

Passing through a maple forest, they found Lingdu leaning on his cane. Standing before him was another person—a tall figure dressed in profound black robes, cinched at the waist by a white and green sash. His dark hair was bound neatly, cascading down his back.

Perhaps hearing their footsteps, the man turned. He possessed the features of a young man, strikingly elegant, but his pupils were faintly red, radiating an unsettling, demonic aura. He did not look like a benevolent figure.

Seeing that even Lingdu stood respectfully a half-step behind him, Li Ximing knew who this must be. Beside him, Houfu lowered his head—for the first time Li Ximing had seen—and spoke with deep deference. "Junior Houfu greets Daoist Master Yuandao!"

Li Ximing quickly followed suit, bowing deeply. "Junior Zhaojing pays his respects to the Great Daoist Master."

Li Ximing had long heard tales of this Great Daoist Master of the Tantai family, Tantai Lingtong. This Daoist Master Yuandao had supposedly already refined his *fifth* Divine Ability, placing his cultivation even higher than Si Boxiu's! He was a Great Daoist Master at the absolute peak of the Purple Mansion Realm. Even a Maha would not dare act arrogantly in his presence and would have to treat him as an equal.

After they completed their bows, the Great Daoist Master's temperament proved entirely contrary to his unsettling appearance. His voice was warm, polite, and calm as still water, entirely lacking in arrogance. "Please, both of you, sit."

Li Ximing sat down obediently. Houfu also seemed unusually subdued. Only Lingdu moved comfortably, preparing tea for the three of them. Daoist Master Yuandao looked over with a smile. "How is fellow Daoist Lou Xing these days? It has been some time since I last saw him."

The question was clearly directed at Houfu. Li Ximing kept his gaze low. Houfu replied gravely, "The Ancestor was stuck comprehending the 'Purple Mystery' for a century, and it wore down his spirit. Although he has now broken through… he does not have much time remaining. He often speaks to me of the Great Daoist Master's Divine Abilities… He misses you greatly."

Daoist Master Yuandao rested one hand on the table as he accepted the small cup from Lingdu. Li Ximing caught a glimpse of a fine, dark sandalwood prayer chain looped around his wrist. The Great Daoist Master nodded, then turned his gaze to Li Ximing. "The next generation is truly formidable. I had thought Houfu achieving his Divine Ability so young was impressive, but I did not expect Zhaojing to be his equal. A rogue cultivator attaining the Purple Mansion Realm in less than a century… truly remarkable."

Given the stature of the man sitting before him, the Li family's meager foundation was nothing. Calling Li Ximing a rogue cultivator wasn't wrong. Li Ximing would not correct him, replying only, "Junior was merely fortunate. It cannot compare to the Great Daoist Master's vast abilities."

Daoist Master Yuandao chuckled softly. "We troubled you this time. Lingdu did indeed acquire the spiritual fire from that palace monastery… Lingdu!"

Lingdu quickly retrieved a small, vermillion ceramic bowl from his robes and placed it carefully on the table.

The bowl was exquisite and delicate, no larger than a baby's fist. It was smooth and immaculate. Within its dark interior, a single, grayish-red flame, no bigger than a grain of rice, flickered, surrounded by a faint five-colored halo.

Daoist Master Yuandao sipped his tea. Seeing that Li Ximing didn't recognize the item, he explained, "This is the [Small Peacock Karma Merging Fire]. You can refer to it simply as [Small Peacock Karma]. Do not be fooled by its rice-grain appearance in this bowl; if released, it would likely swell to the size of a mountain peak."

He continued, "This fire is a transmutation of the [Lustful Merging Fire]. That fire is the second type of fire exhaled from the beaks of coupling Yuwu birds… The first fire they exhale corresponds to the Supreme Yang; this second fire corresponds to Bright Yang, possessing the effect of sexual union."

"Thus, the ancient Yuwu birds were omens of wanton revelry in broad daylight. This is the reason."

This level of esoteric Dao discussion left not only Li Ximing stunned, but even Houfu was staring at the bowl with rapt attention. The Great Daoist Master paused. He flicked a finger lightly, and the sound of a great bell chimed, echoing across the entire immortal mountain.

Lingdu explained from the side, "The Great Daoist Master is discussing ancient True Monarchs and Demon Monarchs. He must first alert the disciples to guard themselves, lest the Merging Fire descend in response to the mention and burn the forests."

Daoist Master Yuandao paused briefly, then continued, "This fire was obtained by the Great Peacock and passed to his eldest son. That son entered the Buddhist Dao—his name must not be spoken—and cultivated this fire into the [Great Peacock Karma]. From his seat, the [Small Peacock Karma] was born. This is that flame."

He concluded, "The [Small Peacock Karma] can be classified as a Merging Fire. Among Purple Mansion spiritual fires, its power is considerable. It ranks in the mid-to-upper tier, at least."

Li Ximing felt a mix of joy and regret.

He had long prepared himself for the possibility that the spiritual fire he received would not be the Radiant Fire he desperately wanted. The world's flames were myriad… Yet he had participated resolutely, driven by the Intercalary Sun

Art. The Intercalary Sun Art was originally Tu Longjian's great opportunity; it allowed certain flames to be converted between paths, primarily involving the Li, True, and Virile Fire paths.

However, the *Art* did not cover every flame within those three categories, and furthermore, the Merging Fire path existed entirely outside its scope. Li Ximing had already prepared himself for the inability to convert it. He was not a greedy man—any Purple Mansion spiritual fire was a massive gain.

Although this was a Merging Fire, based on the Great Daoist Master's words, its power was exceptional. Li Ximing still felt the exchange was more than worth it. Joy filled his heart, but another doubt immediately surfaced.

'I merely attracted a flicker of suspicion. Do I truly deserve such a reward? This Merging Fire practically has the word "Peacock" written all over it! If I actually use this against an enemy, won't I be cementing myself as the culprit?'

If Daoist Master Yuandao hadn't explained its origin, Li Ximing would have accepted it after some polite refusals. But since the Great Daoist Master was sitting right here and had been so explicit, Li Ximing had no choice but to state respectfully.

"A flame of such power... this Junior is unworthy to receive it. Please, Great Daoist Master, take it back!"

Hearing this, Daoist Master Yuandao raised an eyebrow slightly and shook his head.

"There is no need for such ceremony. Your family is a power under the Origin Mansion's governance. My Supreme Mound Daoist tradition has deep ties to the Origin Mansion. It is only natural to look after one of our own. It is just a spiritual fire."

Li Ximing was inwardly staggered.

'A Dao lineage with deep ties to the Origin Mansion... If they are contemporaries, does that mean the Tantai family is on par with the founder of the Mansion? Even if they are a level below, that still makes them a "Three Sects" level power... No wonder he is so formidable! The Tantai family's background is truly profound!'

He hurriedly bowed again.

"Senior! One should only receive reward proportional to their merit. This Junior dares not be greedy. Furthermore, this [Small Peacock Karma] is a treasure of the peacocks. For this Junior to take it would be like holding a burning coal… I absolutely dare not accept it!"

Daoist Master Yuandao did not move, allowing him to complete the first bow. Only then did he reach out, gently halting Li Ximing's attempt to bow further. "Zhaojing, you are too polite," he said softly. "Set your mind at ease. Since I have explained this matter to you, I naturally have no intention of harming you."

Chapter 807: The Goodwill of Nine Mounds

Daoist Master Yuandao finished speaking and pointed lightly to the small, vermilion ceramic bowl on the low table. His reddish pupils flickered as he began.

"I know Zhaojing is worried about the peacock matter. This Small Peacock Karma is not something found just anywhere in the world. Parading it about is ultimately unwise. Not only is the Great Bestowal Temple of Bronze Splendour determined to acquire this fire, but at least five of the seven Northern Buddhist paths have Buddhist cultivators who could achieve their Dao using this karmic flame. Holding onto it will bring endless trouble…"

"I will give Zhaojing three choices."

He shifted his cup slightly, extended his hand, and said:

"First. Although the Small Peacock Karma is a karmic fire born of the Buddhist Land, its essence is still inseparable from the Lustful Merging Fire. However, it is unlike the Great Peacock Karma, which was personally refined by a being of great divine abilities. I am quite familiar with the Peacock Dao lineage. I can transform this fire into another type of Merging Fire for you, one called the 'Flame of Final Return.' It is similarly connected to Bright Yang and is a rare, gentle fire among the Merging Fires. It can be used for alchemy, but not for artifact refinement, nor can it be used against Converging Water or Geng Metal."

"Although the transformation process is tedious, lengthy, and expensive, and the 'Flame of Final Return' is far less valuable than the Small Peacock Karma, we happen to have a portion of it here on the mountain. You can retrieve it first…"

"That is the first option."

Li Ximing felt a stirring of interest and nodded respectfully, though a doubt immediately surfaced in his mind:

'I'm afraid the Nine Mounds Dao lineage can only transform the Small Peacock Karma *into* the Flame of Final Return, but not reverse the process… Daoist Master Yuandao's words imply he doesn't want to let the Small Peacock Karma go.'

While he was contemplating this, Daoist Master Yuandao continued.

"Second. You hand the Small Peacock Karma over to my Nine Mounds Dao lineage, and I will naturally provide a different spiritual fire in exchange. This fire is a True Fire, called the 'Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire.' "

"In recent antiquity, as the Supreme Yang and Bright Yang grew heavier while the Supreme Yin and Veiled Yin grew lighter, True Fires became increasingly fierce and Mansion Waters grew increasingly gentle. True Fires gradually skewed heavily toward artifact refinement. The Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire is an exception. The True Fire Surplus Position it corresponds to still resonates, preserving qualities from a much older era. It is exceptionally suited for alchemy."

"However, in combat, it is inferior to the Flame of Final Return. No matter how gentle, the Flame of Final Return is still a Merging Fire. The Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire lacks the ferocity of modern True Fires, making it weaker by a notch."

He took a sip of tea and finally said:

"Third. I can also compensate you with other spiritual items."

"The prosperity of Water and Fire is unmatched by other paths. I will not bully you. Besides the Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire, we also have a measure of Pristine Water here on Nine Mounds Mountain."

When Daoist Master Yuandao finished, Li Ximing felt suddenly torn.

'There is no Radiant Fire. I wonder if the Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire can be converted into Radiant Fire… The Flame of Final Return can be used for both alchemy and combat, and it's compatible with Bright Yang. That is also a good choice.'

The spiritual flames Daoist Master Yuandao offered were simply too tempting. The Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire sounded like something only these ancient Dao lineages could produce. Transforming it into Radiant Fire would be an outrageous waste. Li Ximing felt that even if he obtained this fire, he would treasure it immensely and truly be unable to bear converting it into Radiant Fire…

Beyond his indecision over the two flames, Li Ximing harbored an even deeper, hidden worry:

'This Daoist Master has no connection to me. Why is he being so kind? All I did on this trip was show my face, yet I'm being offered such heavy compensation? Am I about to be tied into some massive karma?'

Belatedly, he grew hesitant.

'Hah… I always see the rich benefits right in front of me and act too hastily. I can never think three steps ahead like Brother Jun and make meticulous arrangements. I just escaped one constraint, and now I seem to have walked straight into a thicket of thorns. Fortunately, Nine Mounds doesn't seem to bear heavy malice, so this is still remediable…'

Driven by this anxiety, Li Ximing first left his seat, bowed deeply, and spoke respectfully: "To have formed this connection with Nine Mounds, to have offered my meager strength, and to have met the Great Daoist Master—Zhaojing was already content. I truly had no greedy intentions and only hoped to remove the mark. Now, I only fear the Peacock's oppressive might, terrified that I cannot find peace. I dare not accept the Daoist Master's spiritual items. I only hope for a small measure of shelter to avoid their venomous beak."

As soon as he said this, Houfu paused, visibly stunned. Daoist Master Yuandao, however, merely raised an eyebrow, the corners of his mouth curving slightly. He spoke:

"You are certainly a cautious one. Since it has come to this, I might as well speak plainly… Listen closely, and do not repeat what you hear."

Li Ximing nodded quickly. The Daoist Master smiled.

"Your guess is correct. Something extraordinary was indeed taken from that hidden treasury, something vital to the peacocks. If news of a treasure of this magnitude got out, it would be enough to shake the entire Buddhist Land and alarm the Maha. Vija and Sibha themselves would come to retrieve it."

Li Ximing's heart sank, but seeing the other party speaking so openly, he paradoxically felt a sense of relief. Yuandao's slightly reddish eyes stared at him as he replied:

"But this matter was not undertaken privately by my Nine Mounds Dao lineage. Do you understand? It was already decided that Vija would strictly order Abbot

Yukuan to personally enter the Buddhist Land and report it. This treasure cannot fall into the peacocks' hands. The peacocks cannot even know of its tracks! Although the peacocks themselves are hardly worth mentioning… their voices are very loud."

As he spoke that last sentence, Daoist Master Yuandao's expression turned grim. Li Ximing nodded in understanding. Yuandao continued softly:

"Regardless of how Yukuan reports the loss of the Peacock Dao treasury to Vija and Sibha, the two Maha will not act in earnest. Instead, they will drag their feet and handle the matter lightly. They would much rather you *not* fall into the peacocks' hands, giving them even the slightest chance of learning anything."

"The only ones you have truly offended are the few peacocks in that temple. Even if this secret is exposed one day, it will merely throw the Buddhist Land into an uproar, an internal chaos. No one will treat you as the main culprit."

"As for the spiritual fire."

Yuandao glanced at him with a smile and said softly: "Whether it is the 'Flame of Final Return' or the 'Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire,' both are inextricably linked to Nine Mounds. This is merely my Nine Mounds Dao lineage signaling that we have protected you, demonstrating to the Buddhist Land that the Immortal Dao will not sacrifice even a single Purple Mansion cultivator over this affair."

Understanding dawned on Li Ximing. He nodded repeatedly, bowing once more to Yuandao. "Many thanks, Great Daoist Master! This junior…"

Yuandao waved his hand dismissively. "There is no need for thanks. Nine Mounds cannot help you with the big troubles, but we can lend a hand with minor, peripheral matters. Just don't blame our lineage for watching you die when your family truly encounters a disaster you cannot handle."

This statement was abrupt, bordering on rude. Li Ximing froze for a second, but Houfu, standing beside him, nodded slightly and picked up the conversation: "The Great Daoist Master has always been charitable and has helped many people on Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain. Such incidents inevitably occur… But Zhaojing is a man of integrity, with an excellent reputation in Jiangnan. His grand-uncle… was Daoist Master Yuansu's capable right hand."

Yuandao smiled faintly and gestured to Lingdu. "Fetch the fire."

Lingdu immediately departed. Yuandao, meanwhile, turned to idle chatter. "It's a long story… Back then, both Daoist friends Yuansu and Yuanxiu visited Nine Mounds. I suppose we are of the same generation. In those days, that pair of martial brothers was always bickering. They had a massive argument here and parted on bad terms. They never had any close interactions after that."

"But when Yuanxiu came to see me the other day, he looked down and wrung his hands when speaking of Yuansu, shifting like he was sitting on pins and needles. I suppose… there is still affection between them."

Li Ximing nodded respectfully, but a sliver of doubt rose in his heart. 'If that's the case… then even Yuanxiu, the youngest of the three Yuans of Azure Pond Sect, doesn't have much longevity left. How much better off can this Daoist Master Yuandao be? Yet look at him… his essence and spirit remain at their peak. He even retains the appearance of a young man, and his tone betrays no hint of twilight age… If he isn't using a divine ability to mask it, his life-nurturing cultivation is truly remarkable…'

He had just finished this thought when Lingdu returned from the side, carrying two small bowls.

One appeared to be crafted from Geng Metal, plated with some unknown substance that gave it a dark, dull finish. The other was another vermilion ceramic bowl. Both were no larger than a child's fist.

Lingdu carried them before him, opening the Geng Metal one first to reveal a pinpoint of grayish-gold light, the size of a grain of rice. He introduced it: "This is the 'Flame of Final Return,' a Merging Fire. This is the portion stored on the mountain. This fire damages artifacts, so it is best stored in seamless Geng Metal."

He then presented the other bowl. Inside was a pinpoint of bright red light, also the size of a grain of rice. Nine Mounds must possess some incredible sealing technique; regardless of how ferocious a flame was, once captured in this bowl, it was reduced to a mere speck.

"This is the 'Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire,' a True Fire. True Fire refines metal, so it is contained in a glazed ceramic dharma artifact tempered with Converging Water."

Li Ximing knew these were his to choose from. After a moment's hesitation, he accepted the vermilion ceramic bowl and said respectfully: "This junior accepts

the Great Daoist Master's decree. I shall remember this profound kindness and never forget it."

The Flame of Final Return and the Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire were nearly identical in rarity. If comparing value, the Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire was likely superior. The Flame of Final Return was slightly stronger and could also be used for alchemy, with the added benefit of compatibility with Bright Yang. However, Li Ximing reckoned that with his Talisman Qi, 'Valley Wind Guide-Fire,' he didn't lack that bit of compatibility.

Furthermore, the Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire was a True Fire. It most likely met the requirements for transformation under the Intercalary Sun Art. Even if Li Ximing had no intention of converting such a precious fire, having an extra path was never a bad thing. 'Great Radiance of White Brilliance requires Radiant Fire to cultivate and deploy. Without that fire, it's useless. Otherwise, the best option would be to convert it, complete the cultivation, and then convert it back…'

The subtle mysteries of the Flame of Final Return and the Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire could never be summarized in a few sentences by Yuandao and the others, and their applications in various situations would differ. Even if he came to regret it later, this was the best choice Li Ximing could make right now.

"Congratulations, Zhaojing!" Houfu offered his felicitations.

Lingdu also nodded slightly and smiled. "The Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire is not easy to refine. Please take this glazed bowl as well. Even if Zhaojing does not refine it here on Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain, this will make it convenient to carry."

Li Ximing had been coveting this thing for a while. He wished he could grab the metal bowl too, wipe it on his robes, and stuff it into his chest. Verbally, however, he remained modest: "How can I possibly accept this…"

In truth, Li Ximing didn't really need the bowl. With 'Valley Wind Guide-Fire' in hand, any flame that fell into his possession, even the Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire, would be refined in an instant. But firstly, he needed to maintain a low profile, and secondly, why not accept a free item?

He accepted the bowl, thoroughly satisfied. Lingdu then said warmly: "There is still the Shade-Cleansing Pool to visit… This… please allow the Great Daoist Master to take a look…"

He seemed hesitant, though whether toward Yuandao or Li Ximing was unclear. After all, inspecting another's dharma body was often a taboo act, as one never knew what measures might be left behind. But Li Ximing, possessing his own treasures, was completely unafraid. He feigned a moment of hesitation before extending his hand.

Yuandao turned his gaze, lightly tapped Li Ximing, and withdrew his touch almost instantly. The Great Daoist Master's eyes shifted, scanning Li Ximing, and he spoke with a trace of surprise,

"The Encompassing Profundity traces and silver bottle marks Lingdu spoke of… I detect none of them. The karmic connection from the Peacock's Providence Disc has also been resolved by the 'Seven Mansions Lotus Seed.' This dharma body of Zhaojing's… aside from some minor injuries, there is nothing else."

'That old bastard Changxiao… he really is playing these games of illusion and reality!' Li Ximing cursed inwardly.

Yuandao continued, "However… since you are here, you might as well make the trip. We can heal these minor injuries while we're at it, and perhaps advance your cultivation a bit."

"Please wait in your grotto-dwelling for now. The Shade-Cleansing Pool on the mountain only thaws at the Zi hour. When the time approaches, I will send a disciple to guide you."

Li Ximing knew this was a dismissal. He offered his thanks, bowed slightly, and quickly departed. Only after he had left the area did Yuandao ask:

"Well?"

Houfu pondered for a moment before replying: "His talent is decent, and he has a benevolent nature. Unfortunately, his background is too shallow. He hasn't seen many true treasures, so he is easily moved and doesn't know how to refuse offers… To have reached the Purple Mansion Realm, his intellect is certainly not lacking; at least among ordinary clan cultivators, he is first-class. Among Purple Mansion cultivators, however, he can only be considered average. He has one point—the Profound Peak incident revealed his stubbornness and loyalty to his word. He can be befriended. As an enemy, he poses no great threat."

Yuandao chuckled. He looked even younger than Houfu. "Stubborn and loyal to his word? Not necessarily. He might value relationships, or he might just have been unable to back down."

Li Ximing arrived at the stream by the maple forest and sat down. The gurgling water was pleasant. The white jade lamp pedestals lining the stream had been refilled with a different spiritual item, but unfortunately, the grade was too low for his cultivation level and had almost no effect.

He took the red-glazed bowl into his hand, rubbing it for a moment, pondering. 'The spiritual materials used for this aren't high-grade, but the crafting technique is exquisite. It seems to be a special refinement method…'

Li Ximing flicked the bowl lightly. Several hazy red lights immediately lit up at the rim, revealing a tiny spot of golden-red. Just an instant later, the bright red flame surged eagerly from the mouth of the bowl, erupting like a golden flower. It bloomed, petals of gold light hanging in the air, displaying their utmost beauty.

The flame immediately tried to escape. Two streams of bright red fire split, bracing themselves on the bowl's rim, struggling to pull the other half of their body out. Li Ximing seized the opportunity to observe it.

The fire was bright red overall. The outer ring was blazing red, marked with layers of faint red patterns. The interior was whitish, with flashes of gold occasionally leaping out.

This was, after all, someone else's territory. He didn't know if there were eyes in the forest or what measures the Purple Mansion array here might have. Li Ximing did not immediately refine the Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire. Instead, he simply sensed it for a moment, then reached his hand toward the blazing red outer flame.

A piercing pain shot through him. Li Ximing retracted his hand; his fingertips had turned slightly white. 'It is far more mysterious than the Bright Yang Purple Flame… and the power of the flames cannot be compared. A True Fire has the power to incinerate artifacts; Bright Yang is the Dao of generation and growth. Although this Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire is not fierce, its ability to burn dharma artifacts and the dharma body is on a completely

different level—heaven and earth—compared to the inherent Bright Yang Purple Flame of my divine ability…'

'My dharma body should be considered quite good among Purple Mansion cultivators who haven't refined a Body Divine Ability, yet even I must retreat from this Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire…'

Suppressing the urge to refine this fire for alchemy, he closed his eyes and entered meditation. Soon, an immortal attendant approached and said respectfully: "Daoist Master, please follow me."

Li Ximing followed him deep into the forest. Purple mist began to rise beneath his feet. After passing through a hazy purple path, he saw a small pool constructed of fine white stones. It appeared to be empty.

The attendant had already retreated. However, a person stood beside the pool. It was Tantai Muming from earlier. He bowed to Li Ximing and said respectfully: "Greetings, Daoist Master Zhaojing."

"This is the Shade-Cleansing Pool. It is a wondrous land aligned with Pure Qi and Lesser Yin. Its spiritual energy is pure and gentle, suitable for all Daos. It contains a resource known as the 'Wondrous Shade-Pool Dew,' which is particularly effective at healing the spiritual sense, advancing dharma power, removing impurities, dispelling foreign energies, preserving life, and avoiding lightning."

Li Ximing nodded slightly. Tantai Muming continued: "Please, Daoist Master, sit by the pool and circulate your divine abilities to cultivate."

Li Ximing had been thinking he would have to enter the pool to cultivate; if anything unexpected happened, it might endanger his dharma body. He was therefore quite happy to sit by the edge. Just as he closed his eyes, Tantai Muming also withdrew.

He cultivated for about an hour when he felt a sudden coolness on his brow, as if a drop of clear dew had landed right between his eyes. As expected, his mind felt instantly clear, comfortable, and refreshed.

A Purple Mansion cultivator's Shengyang Mansion had already been pushed into the Great Void. Li Ximing could see it clearly: the clear dew seeped in from his brow and immediately began to drip from within his Shengyang Mansion, turning into a torrential downpour that pelted everything inside the mansion.

Li Ximing felt as if he were standing in the rain, and a thought surfaced: "If one were to break through to the Purple Mansion Realm at this location, would this Wondrous Shade-Pool Dew fall continuously to keep the spiritual sense clear? If it has such a wondrous use, this would be a rare treasure indeed."

He had just finished the thought when the divine abilities within his body surged. A massive amount of divine ability dharma power flooded into him. A white mist had risen in the area, nourishing every corner of his dharma body.

Li Ximing hurriedly circulated his divine abilities, meditating and cultivating.

But the white mist was vast, and his speed of refining divine abilities couldn't keep up. Ninety percent of it simply dissipated outside his dharma body. Li Ximing watched this, feeling it was a slight pity. "Such pure dharma power… Unfortunately, refining divine abilities isn't just about having sufficient dharma power… Having enough power is good, but how can the refinement speed possibly be this fast?"

Just as he was lamenting this, a light rose from his sea of qi. The divine ability dharma power that had spread throughout his dharma body surged frantically toward his sea of qi. Amidst the storm of white mist, a brilliance suddenly ascended: Valley Wind Guide-Fire!

Valley Wind Guide-Fire could manipulate fire, draw qi, and refine true essence and dharma power!

Throughout Li Ximing's cultivation life, Valley Wind Guide-Fire hadn't played a huge role. While helpful for his cultivation speed, it was far from the terrifying efficiency of Li Yuanjiao's 'Spirit-Devouring Qi Circulation.' Only now did he realize its potential as the vast dharma power surged toward him.

But Li Ximing still couldn't refine it into divine abilities fast enough; he could only circulate his Talisman Qi first.

If 'Spirit-Devouring Qi Circulation' were here, it would undoubtedly transform all of this into cultivation base. Li Ximing could only watch helplessly as Valley Wind Guide-Fire swallowed all the dharma power in one go, refined it, and gathered it all in his sea of qi.

Li Ximing glanced at it and thought: 'Not bad at all.'

Only then did he open his eyes. Before him was the same bamboo forest. The white stone spiritual pool at his feet was now frozen over with a thick layer of blue ice, reflecting a crystalline light. The mist in the forest had vanished completely.

His dharma body was, naturally, perfectly fine, without any side effects. It had even advanced slightly. His cultivation base had also grown considerably. Valley Wind Guide-Fire had helped somewhat; combined with Heavenly Audience Gate and his original cultivation, he had now crossed the initial threshold.

'This saved me three years of work.'

He flicked his sleeves, stood up, and walked out via the path. Only two cultivators were guarding the forest. Seeing him, they hurriedly bowed. Li Ximing simply asked: "How much time has passed?"

"Reporting to Daoist Master, we have been guarding this place ever since you entered seclusion. Eight months have passed."

"Has Daoist Master Houfu left the mountain?"

The moment Li Ximing asked, the cultivator immediately replied: "Reporting to Daoist Master, Daoist Master Houfu has been lecturing on the scriptures and teaching arts on the mountain these past few months, once per month. He has not left. He should still be on the mountain now."

'He certainly knows how to build relationships…'

Li Ximing was in high spirits. He headed toward the mountain peak and indeed saw Houfu and Lingdu from a distance, conversing in the forest. The same chessboard was set before them. This time, it seemed to be a new game, with only a few pieces placed.

As long as they were playing, Li Ximing didn't have to worry about being dragged into a game. He walked over confidently. As expected, the two looked up. Lingdu smiled.

"Congratulations, Zhaojing!"

Li Ximing returned the courtesy politely and asked: "Where is the Great Daoist Master? I must go and thank him!"

Lingdu shook his head. "He has already left to visit a friend. It will be difficult for him to return within three to five years."

Li Ximing looked deeply regretful and offered a few polite words, though deep down, he felt a small sense of relief. He sat down nearby, looked at Houfu, and said quietly: "Senior Houfu, when do you return to Jiangnan?"

Houfu looked surprised. "It will likely be several more months."

Li Ximing seized the chance and said with a smile: "I actually have a favor to ask of you, Senior… I took on a Foundation Establishment disciple overseas and need to bring her back to Jiangnan, but I have many affairs overseas and cannot be in two places at once. I must ask Senior for help."

For a Purple Mansion cultivator, a trip to Jiangnan didn't take much time. Both of them naturally understood why he wasn't going personally. Houfu just nodded. "It's that Xia Shouyu, isn't it? She has often come to listen to my lectures these past few months. Earlier, I thought she was a disciple of Nine Mounds seeking the Dao. Although her cultivation is shallow, her heart for the Dao is strong."

Li Ximing nodded, expressing a trace of regret: "She was carefully selected by me, but her background is lacking… and her surname isn't Li. I worry that when she returns, she won't have the prestige or status to keep others in line… It's quite troublesome! I was just thinking about picking out a background for her."

As he spoke, he glanced at Lingdu. That old man was sharp. He said leisurely: "That's simple enough. Just give her a powerful status. Since she'll be far overseas, it doesn't matter if it's real or fake. If Fellow Daoist doesn't mind, we can give her the status of a relative of a Nine Mounds cultivator, acknowledging a background for her…"

Li Ximing had originally hoped to angle for an outer disciple status, but he didn't expect Lingdu to be so unwilling to accept any karma, wanting nothing to do with his own lineage. He replied verbally, "That is indeed a good solution…"

Lingdu let out a heavy sigh. "There is a disciple on the mountain who just perished while attempting breakthrough to the Purple Mansion Realm, severing his incense line. We will recognize her as his granddaughter. Let her call him maternal grandfather… She just needs to place a few sticks of incense on his spirit tablet, and it will be settled."

Lingdu had dragged a dead man into it. Li Ximing didn't mind; it was just a matter of fabricating a title. He smiled, "Excellent! This has truly troubled Senior Lingdu!"

Before long, Tantai Muming hurriedly led Xia Shouyu up the path. The woman looked nervous and uneasy; she had absolutely no standing to speak in this place. Lingdu merely glanced at her and called out.

"Muming!"

Tantai Muming hurried forward. The two whispered to each other. It was impossible to know if Tantai Muming knew the truth, but when he stepped back, his expression had completely changed. He said joyfully.

"So it turns out she is Senior Brother Yudui's granddaughter, the one who was lost! I will take her down to acknowledge her ancestor right away!"

Xia Shouyu reacted even faster. Her eyes instantly turned red, and she nodded emphatically. Tantai Muming led her away, speaking intimately to her along the path, appearing concerned in the extreme.

Li Ximing watched the two depart. Lingdu sighed meaningfully.

"Zhaojing… some are showered with endless sweet rain yet cannot be helped up, while others rise to the ninth heaven on a single gust of wind. It is truly hard to say…"

Chapter 808: Destiny-Forged Alchemy

Li Ximing nodded. The three Purple Mansion cultivators began discussing the dao right then and there. Lingdu opened with a topic, speaking on the flawless nature of Wu Earth and which Dao could restrain it. Houfu countered by recounting stories of the Daoist Masters in his family sparring with Wu Earth cultivators. He speculated that a certain divine art within the Upright Wood lineage was the ultimate counter to Wu Earth, and the conversation flowed with enthusiasm.

Li Ximing, naturally, had little to contribute. His only significant contact was with Changxi of the Earth Virtue, and beyond that, Sumian of the Treasured Earth Dao. He had only heard that some cultivator named Cheng Yan practiced Wu Earth, but he'd never even met the man. He settled for listening intently, chiming in only with pleasantries when appropriate.

Seizing a lull in their discussion, Li Ximing turned to Lingdu and asked, "Senior… do you know anything of the Heavenly Glow Dao lineage?"

Houfu's expression turned intriguing, his gaze suddenly profound. Lingdu, however, frowned.

"Zhaojing, are you referring to… the Mount Luoxia of the Wuguang Xiexia?"

Li Ximing was asking on behalf of his elder brother and had merely taken the opportunity to inquire. He hadn't expected the conversation to immediately jump to Mount Luoxia, a name he was hearing for the first time. He paused, momentarily stunned, before quickly clarifying.

"No, not that… I mean the Heavenly Glow Purple Mansion Dao lineage…"

Lingdu looked startled, then visibly relaxed, letting out a helpless laugh.

"All Heavenly Glow in this world originates from one of two places: Mount Luoxia or Mount Duan. While they seem to be two separate locations, they are, in fact, enjoyed exclusively by that single individual. If you are speaking of the

Heavenly Glow Purple Mansion lineage… that, too, is someone else's private property. It is something the vast majority of lineages simply do not possess."

Li Ximing offered some flattery.

"This junior knows such things can't be found elsewhere. Most traditions naturally wouldn't have it. But an ancient, profound, and unfathomable tradition like yours, Senior, surely surpasses all others… so I thought I would ask."

Houfu, however, sighed, his gaze holding a deep, unspoken meaning.

"Zhaojing, you are thinking too wishfully. We have nothing related to the Heavenly Glow."

He spoke cryptically, leaving Li Ximing to look up in surprise, but neither cultivator seemed willing to elaborate. Just then, someone else arrived in the grove. Tantai Muming strode up quickly. He waited until Houfu finished speaking and the three looked his way before reporting respectfully, "We have guided Fellow Daoist Xia through the clan acknowledgment rites and had her read the biography of Senior Brother Yu. She has changed her attire and is waiting quietly in the grove."

"Good." Lingdu replied with a smile. "Fellow Daoist Zhaojing likely has further instructions. Let her come up."

Li Ximing understood this was his cue; he likely shouldn't overstay his welcome. He reflected internally.

'I really have stayed too long. I received the benefits, and the Nine Mounds lineage has treated me exceptionally well. Staying longer would be impolite. It's best to depart soon.'

Soon, Xia Shouyu ascended. She was dressed in a white top and a gray skirt, adorned with shells that chimed softly—the typical attire of an Eastern Sea cultivator. Li Ximing beckoned her over and retrieved two scrolls from his sleeve, one red and one gold.

"Take these two scrolls back with you," he instructed. "The red scroll confirms your marriage. The gold one is a personal letter from my hand. Deliver them both directly to Elder Xuanxuan at the lake."

Whatever Xia Shouyu was feeling, her face remained respectful as she bowed.

"Many thanks to the Daoist Master for bestowing this marriage! This junior will certainly deliver these to the Elder's hands!"

Li Ximing then turned back to Houfu and bowed.

"I must trouble you, Senior!"

Houfu gave a slight nod. Li Ximing gestured for Xia Shouyu to stand behind him, watching as Houfu replied.

"Zhaojing, you are too courteous. Just call me Houfu… In recent years, the White Victory Dao has been clashing with the Great And Illustrious Peace Temple, shaking the Great Western Plateau. The Sword Gate requested aid from my Great Xiukui Monastery. I must travel west to the Great Western Plateau anyway, so this is directly on my path. It is no trouble at all."

Li Ximing nodded, but Lingdu looked utterly astonished, his eyes widening.

"The White Victory Dao? Do you mean one of the three who was born in Splitreed Island? This is extraordinary! Truly extraordinary…"

Li Ximing knew a fair bit about ancient history, and the splitting in Splitreed Island wasn't exactly a great secret. In those days, Yingze had split the Lesser Yang Demon Monarch into three. One of those parts was the demon Xiyan, located right in the Great Western Plateau…

Although he didn't know why Lingdu immediately connected the White Victory Dao to the Xiyan Demon Monarch, it didn't stop Li Ximing from realizing the gravity of the matter. He lowered his voice.

"Senior means to say… Lesser Yang…"

Houfu merely shook his head. Even though Li Ximing had spoken with extreme caution, Houfu raised a finger to his lips, his expression grave.

"Not necessarily," he replied. "It is just that the White Victory Dao has risen rapidly. First, their leader achieved the Diverse Mansion realm over a decade ago… then, a year ago, another of the 'Five Brightnesses' perfected a divine ability. Two consecutive Purple Mansion cultivators have emerged, reversing the situation. The Merciful Ones of the Great And Illustrious Peace Temple can no longer hold them back."

He paused, adding, "Although there has been no sign of *that specific individual*, as a Lesser Yang lineage, it is possible this is his handiwork."

Lingdu's expression was grim. He likewise raised a finger, but this time, he pointed toward the sky.

"Do not forget, there is another Lesser Yang beyond the heavens. If *he* was the one injured, it is entirely possible it triggered anomalous activity from the other two."

The three looked at each other, speechless.

While those two dared to speak of such things, Li Ximing dared not listen. After all, one represented a Supreme Yang and Supreme Yin lineage, the other a tyrant of the overseas Nine Mounds lineage. He, Li Ximing, was a down-and-out cultivator with no one backing him. Seeing the silence descend, he felt a chill creep up his spine and quickly bowed.

"I will not impose any longer. Many thanks to the Nine Mounds Immortal Mountain for the spirit fire. I will remember this kindness…"

After exchanging a few more pleasantries—Lingdu offered only a token request for him to stay—he was escorted to the mountain's edge. The farewell felt rushed; the elder was clearly distracted, and all three were lost in their own thoughts. Only Houfu added one last comment.

"By escorting Xia Shouyu back to the lake, people will inevitably assume I have met with you, Zhaojing. I personally fear neither Yehui nor Changxiao… but if Tinglan comes asking, I will find it difficult to answer her."

Evidently, as fellow Supreme Yang lineages, Purple Smoke and Xiukui shared a decent relationship. Houfu felt uncomfortable deceiving her outright.

Li Ximing considered this. He still needed to build the grand array and truly shouldn't leave a fellow Daoist Master hanging. Yet, exposing his own movements was troublesome; he couldn't give an exact location that Changxiao might exploit. After careful thought, he drew a jade pendant from his sleeve and handed it to Houfu.

"I am traveling nearby in the East A-Wang Sea. If Fellow Daoist Tinglan wishes to find me, tell her to come to the border where the East A-Wang Sea meets the Peacock Sea. Have her crush this talisman, and I will naturally go to her."

Houfu understood and accepted the pendant. Li Ximing bid farewell to the two and sped away, flying across the ocean until he reached the neighboring East A-Wang Sea. The chaos here had somewhat subsided. Several Demon Generals

had carved out territories, and smaller factions had begun to grow. The sea region looked relatively peaceful.

He carefully inspected his dharma body, ensuring no trace of Lesser Yang brilliance remained, and muttered, "That came out of nowhere, talking about such terrifying things… You mention one, you have to bring up all three, and that drags out another seven or eight…"

Li Ximing scanned the area, then dived deep into the sea, landing on the ocean floor. He immediately activated the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger. Enveloped in a pure aura of Earth Virtue brilliance, he phased through the earth, piloting the Earth-Tiger shuttle deep underground until he located a fire vein and settled within it.

Using the power of the Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger, he carved out a cave, channeled the fire vein into it, and placed his alchemy cauldron atop the heat. Only then did Li Ximing sit down.

Before he could even act, he suddenly felt his Shengyang Acupoint turn ice-cold, as if a frigid force had smashed down upon him. Sparks exploded in his mind, his vision blurred, and a frosty qi surged up his face, forcing tears from his eyes.

"This…"

'It's over!'

It felt as if a giant hand had seized his spiritual sense, yanking it instantly into the infinite void beyond the heavens.

Suddenly, he saw blazing suns and twinkling stars, endless white jade immortal palaces rising like scales, clouds veiling the moon, and the divine light of the Golden Crow soaring amidst phoenixes. Twelve bridges of gold spanned a celestial lake, and tens of thousands of halls glittered…

The scenery flashed past in an instant. Before Li Ximing could see clearly, he plunged back into darkness, as if standing in a deep, subterranean palace. Specks of light dotted the gloom ahead, where a single stone bridge crossed the void. A man in gray robes, stained with blood, stood upon it. Peering closer, Li Ximing recognized a steady, calm, middle-aged face.

Wang Quwan.

The dim void seemed to contain only this single, empty bridge suspended in darkness. Wang Quwan was looking up, gripping a blue-gold treasured sword. From far above, strands of silk-like white brilliance descended, seemingly connected to some profound Dao trove.

Li Ximing's vision zoomed rapidly toward that white brilliance. Countless wondrous treasures, Daoist scriptures, and dharma artifacts flashed before his eyes, dazzling and multicolored, until his focus finally locked onto the deepest object—a spirit sword hanging in the void.

The sword was simple and dignified, colored a pale gray without a single etching. It was a stark contrast to the luxurious and complex refinement styles of the current age. The cross-guard was nearly the same width as the blade itself, giving the entire sword a straight, uniform profile.

What truly captivated Li Ximing was the sword's sole decoration: a bright white spirit stone set into its pommel.

The familiar aura radiating from that stone caused the Talisman Seed within his Shengyang Acupoint to tremble violently, a sensation that made Li Ximing shudder. This was not the first time he had felt this. All those years ago, when Yu Muxian had arrived by boat, the young Li Ximing had been touched by that fragment and fainted. This was that same feeling.

A realization struck Li Ximing like lightning, flashing a single phrase through his mind:

'An Immortal Mirror fragment!'

The white brilliance rapidly receded, and the encroaching darkness dissipated. Li Ximing felt the world spin, and he slowly opened his eyes. He saw the dim stone walls of the cave. The dark alchemy cauldron stood before him. The crackling sound of the fire vein returned to his ears. He was back in the subterranean grotto.

He first performed a deep, formal bow before standing up. His face was a ghastly mix of blue and white as he exhaled a plume of frosty air. Forcing down his discomfort, he fumbled in his storage bag for a jade box.

"Cough!"

The moment he opened his mouth, several pale white vines burst forth, growing frantically. In an instant, they climbed his jaw, and several tendrils draped

down like hanging orchids, blooming mid-air into clusters of pure white flowers.

A cold fragrance filled the cave.

He reached up, grasped the spirit object, and plucked the entire growth out, root and all. He placed it in the jade box, and without sparing it a second glance, immediately began checking his body.

'I wasn't struck by a Supreme Yin divine ability… it's just a lingering chill… So it was the Immortal Mirror. I really thought I had angered a True Monarch by recklessly discussing them, that one just happened to be nearby, and I was about to be obliterated by Fruition Attainment pressure…'

He breathed a sigh of relief. The chill in his heart faded, replaced by shock and wild joy.

'Wang Quwan… that was Wang Quwan! That place must be the Secret Diffusion Dao trove, and the Secret Diffusion trove contains an Immortal Mirror fragment!'

'This place is countless thousands of miles from Jiangbei, yet I was able to glimpse the Secret Diffusion scenery… How powerful… And that place with the immortal palaces and pavilions… could that be beyond the heavens?'

He surmised that his sense had first linked to somewhere beyond the heavens, then followed the connection between that place and the Immortal Mirror down toward Jiangbei, observing the Secret Diffusion inheritance, before finally piercing into the Secret Diffusion Dao trove and perceiving the fragment's location…

'Truly a divine and mysterious technique…'

Suppressing his shock, Li Ximing quickly realized he had missed the immediate opportunity.

'The opening of the Secret Diffusion Dao trove must be timed. This time, it must be because the Revering Radiance Gate and the other sects gathered the required inheritances and opened it for the first time… Though I missed this window, if I just wait, there will be another chance…'

'If that's the case, raising my own Secret Diffusion successor is completely out of the question; it's far too late. I absolutely cannot allow that treasured sword

to sit inside that trove for ten or twenty years… The only path is to fully support Wang Quwan…'

He sat silently, his gaze heavy.

'Wang Quwan… Wang Quwan… Is this the hand of destiny, or the pull of karma?'

Li Ximing slowly reined in his thoughts. Back home, Li Jiangqian also possessed a talisman and must have sensed this event. With him managing affairs from the clan, arrangements would certainly be made. Li Ximing didn't need to rush back himself.

Only then did he turn his gaze to the jade box. Inside, the branch of "Moon Orchid" remained vibrant, eight small flowers blooming upon it, radiating a faint white halo.

'A fine resource for the Purple Mansion realm.'

Li Ximing's judgment was worlds apart from what it once was. With the Profound Light concealed between his brows, he could identify the grade of many things. Although he couldn't name the Supreme Yin spirit object before him, he could still recognize it as a Purple Mansion-grade resource, similar to the Horn Wood Golden Tassel.

'This is the perfect time to start alchemy. And I have another great medicine… right here on me.'

Steeling his resolve, he felt around his own body, precisely locating his Dantian. He pressed his index finger and thumb against the spot and spread them apart.

Huala!

The skin and flesh of his lower abdomen stretched open, revealing the Qi sea within. A brilliant golden radiance shone out, illuminating the entire cave.

Li Ximing quickly rolled up his other sleeve, plunged that hand into the opening, and felt around for a moment before slowly extracting something.

It was a glistening white pearl, smooth and round, with a crystal-like luster. It was only the size of a grain of rice, but the moment it left his abdomen, it instantly swelled to the size of a fist, releasing an intoxicatingly clear fragrance.

Li Ximing almost lost his grip on it. His divine abilities flared, and he invoked the suppressive power of Heavenly Audience Gate to halt the pearl's expansion.

"Hmph!"

This object was the refined spiritual qi from the Shade-Cleansing Pool, tempered by the Valley Wind Guide-Fire. If a Foundation Establishment cultivator had this, they would be stuck with it in their Qi sea, unable to use it or exhaust it. Even for a Purple Mansion cultivator, it would normally take a very long time to safely draw out.

Fortunately, Li Ximing had a flexible mind; digging it out by hand was the fastest way. Now, the hand holding the wound open relaxed. With a single wipe, the opening healed completely, leaving not even a scar.

'But without the amplification from the Valley Wind Guide-Fire, my personal suppression is far weaker.'

Looking at the orb in his hand, Li Ximing immediately began assessing it with his old professional eye.

'This is pure Pure Qi, the divine ability essence of the Lesser Yin lineage, mixed with a hint of Bright Yang from its time in my Qi sea. If I use this as the base for a pill… I should be able to refine a furnace of spirit pills that greatly enhances divine abilities.'

'After all, this qi-pill requires my constant suppression. If I let go, it would likely erupt into a veritable mountain of spiritual qi. If I don't refine it, just carrying it around is not a solution.'

His expression suddenly turned strange.

'Well, it's not that there are *no* other ways to carry it… I could always cut myself open again and stuff it back in for the Valley Wind Guide-Fire to manage…'

That was, of course, a joke. While the Valley Wind Guide-Fire could suppress it effortlessly, the object was now the size of a fist. It wouldn't fit back into his Qi sea even if he forced it.

Although the Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire was not yet refined, he possessed the Valley Wind Guide-Fire, and Li Ximing reckoned he could handle it one-handed. He pulled out the crimson bowl and flicked it with a finger.

Peng!

The Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire erupted again, its bright red glow illuminating the cave. Li Ximing took a gentle breath.

Huala!

The entire sheet of flame eagerly flew from the bowl, surging toward his nostrils. In a mere instant, the bright red light vanished from the cave, leaving only the empty, crimson-glazed bowl in his palm.

The moment the Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire entered his body, it tried to flee. But the Valley Wind Guide-Fire instantly blazed to life, lunging like a starving beast, and bound the new fire with an incredibly powerful pull. The flame flickered brightly, and just like that, Li Ximing had complete control.

He easily guided the flame down, settling it into his Juque Palace. The Bright Yang Purple Flame and his True Fire showed no conflict; they actively made space, flanking the new True Fire as if protecting it.

Only then did Li Ximing open his eyes. His pupils flashed bright red, then pale gold, before slowly returning to their normal color.

"Good!"

Looking at the Shade-Cleansing Qi Pill and the Moon Orchid in his hands, Li Ximing felt immense satisfaction and began pondering the refinement method.

'I have no corresponding recipe. Refining them separately would require my own formulation, and the results would likely be nothing special. It's best to refine them together. Pure Qi, Lesser Yin, Supreme Yin, and Bright Yang. There are no conflicts. This can become a great pill!'

'However, alchemy demands a hierarchy: Monarch, Minister, Assistant, and Envoy. This Moon Orchid is a great medicine, but the Shade-Cleansing Qi Pill is also a great medicine, their qualities equal. If one becomes the Monarch, the other becomes an overly powerful Minister of a different nature. Such a refinement cannot succeed. Even if forced, it would waste the medicinal properties.'

The Xiao family's alchemy was the traditional Jiangnan technique. Li Ximing had long since surpassed Xiao Yuansi's alchemy Dao. The notable refinement methods Li Ximing possessed were few: the techniques for the [Xuanque Jingxin] and [Tianyi Cuiyuan] pills were just different recipes using similar

methods. That left the complete alchemy system he'd obtained from Sea's Cape: the Heavenly Heart Oneness Pill Art.

'The Heavenly Heart Oneness Pill Art demands high Dao comprehension, which isn't a problem, but it uses *destiny* as the primary ingredient… Hsss…'

Li Ximing was already a master of alchemy; his insight surpassed the vast majority of Purple Mansion cultivators in Jiangnan. After acquiring the Heavenly Heart Oneness Pill Art, his vision and skill in the Dao of alchemy had risen to another level entirely.

Jiangnan alchemy used *nature*—that is, the medicinal properties and affinities of spirit items were combined to create a pill. The alchemist was tested on their dharma power, cultivation base, and divine abilities. The Heavenly Heart Oneness Pill Art used *destiny*. It combined the karmic destiny and life-force of the ingredients. The alchemist was tested on their Dao comprehension, their personal fate, and their hierarchical status in the world.

'Spirit items possess both nature and destiny. The spiritual status of that Moon Orchid is terrifyingly high. But the Shade-Cleansing Qi Pill is essentially just solidified dharma power. It has nature, but no destiny. Even after passing through my body, its destiny is worlds below that of the Moon Orchid!'

'If I refine this using the Heavenly Heart Oneness method, the Moon Orchid is the undeniable Monarch medicine. The Qi Pill is its iron-clad Minister! Lesser Yin assisting Supreme Yin—it is a perfect match! Furthermore, the orchid grew from my mouth, and the qi pill was born in my abdomen. They are fundamentally of one body, their destinies intertwined, a true heaven-sent opportunity. Who else in this world but me could possibly refine this pill?'

Li Ximing was struck by sudden enlightenment. Through his own exploration, he felt he was dimly perceiving a higher realm in the Dao of alchemy.

Fired up with inspiration, he struck the cauldron. The bright red Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire erupted, swirling around the vessel before diving beneath it, converging into a vortex of scarlet flame.

He was more focused than ever before. He deliberately retrieved a [White Jade Spirit Wood]—a gift he had received when breaking through to the Purple Mansion realm and had saved ever since—and tossed it into the True Fire first.

Then, his storage bag pulsed. Boxes long and short, jade vials large and small, all flew out, wrapped in his spiritual qi. Serpent Origin Spirit Water, [Wuxi Sand],

[Yuanyang Spirit Essence]… all manner of spirit items flowed forth, leaping one after another into the furnace.

A viscous, bright purple medicinal liquid began to pool at the bottom of the cauldron. The Shade-Cleansing Qi Pill dropped into it and immediately threatened to erupt into a torrential storm of spiritual energy, intent on blowing the cauldron apart. The Profound Light between Li Ximing's brows flared, and a white, suppressive divine ability slammed down, binding all the rampaging energy within the furnace.

Finally, the Moon Orchid fell inside. Li Ximing instantly sealed the lid, pressed both hands to the cauldron's sides, and enveloped it in his Bright Yang divine ability. He shut his eyes, focusing his full power on the task.

'This pill uses every ounce of knowledge I have accumulated. It will undoubtedly be the pinnacle of the first half of my alchemy career!'

…

Southern Sea.

The Shitang Sea is the region of the Southern Sea with the least amount of land. Known as the Ten Thousand Mile Shitang, it is bordered by the Southern Borderlands to its back, Songzhou to the east, and Lufang to the south. Aside from the Azure Pond Sect's own North Dan Island, the region consists only of sparsely scattered small islands. Positioned between these major islands and having enjoyed recent peace and order, its trade has become increasingly prosperous.

North Dan was a land of beautiful scenery. At its center stood Elephant Mountain, rising six thousand feet. A grand palace sat atop its peak, bustling with cultivators coming and going. Yet, passing through this palace, one found a quieter pavilion in the rear courtyard where a man in white robes stood alone.

He had a noble, dignified appearance, a slightly long face, and brows set close to his eyes, giving him a generous and refined handsomeness. He held a sword level; it was bright white yet shimmered with a seven-colored radiance.

Potent sword qi brewed along the spine of the blade. He frowned slightly, his eyes shut tight, his face pale. Several breaths passed. The sword light pulsed erratically, threatening to erupt. Only then did his eyes snap open.

"Cough."

He coughed twice, and flakes of golden osmanthus petals tumbled from his robes, scattering on the ground in a golden halo.

Although he had clearly lost focus, the sword light had merely fluctuated rather than erupting violently, a testament to his profound mastery of both dharma arts and swordsmanship.

This man was the Master of the Heaven-Probing Pavilion, a direct descendant of the Moongaze Immortal Clan, and the current Lord of Shitang's North Dan—Heavenly Pavilion Heavenly Glow, Li Xizhi!

Li Xizhi quickly steadied himself, and the light on his sword immediately stabilized. With a flick of his other sleeve, the osmanthus petals on the ground were swept up, disappearing into a jade box that leaped from his waist, which he then tucked into his storage bag. All traces vanished in an instant.

He raised his brow, his eyes flashing with shock and suspicion.

'An Immortal Mirror fragment… Which disciple of my clan has touched upon this opportunity?'

Chapter 809: The Jia-Yi Configuration

'Underground… a white light…'

He mused internally, 'The Revering Radiance Gate built an underground palace. I heard its deepest part lies beneath Xiaoshi Mountain. Perhaps it's related to the Secret Diffusion Dao lineage… Secret Diffusion, Secret Diffusion… both are of the Encompassing Profundity. Their ancestors were the same branch.'

As the master of the Heaven-Probing Pavilion, Li Xizhi now possessed extensive knowledge. Although he couldn't access the core Dao repository of the Azure Pond Sect, over a decade of studying their vast collection of texts had still granted him a profound foundation.

'Earlier, I speculated the Immortal Mirror was an immortal artifact from the Moonlight Origin Mansion. But how is it suddenly connected to Encompassing Profundity? Since the Moonlight Origin Mansion shares its source with the Supreme Yin Daoist tradition, it definitely shouldn't be the same path as Encompassing Profundity. If it is, then something is wrong…'

Li Xizhi pondered for a moment, sheathed his sword, and stepped out of the pavilion. He crossed through his residence and passed the threshold, arriving at another estate.

Li Xizhi's cave dwelling had two layers of restrictions, inner and outer. He didn't need servants waiting on him; rather, he was wary of anyone spying on his techniques. Thus, he kept no one within the cave dwelling itself. Only upon entering the attached residence did he finally see figures. After passing through several more courtyards, a woman in palace attire greeted him.

"You've finished so early this time… did something happen?"

Li Xizhi replied: "I had a breakthrough earlier. It's a good thing."

The breakthrough Li Xizhi mentioned was, naturally, in the [Five-Color Sinking Expanse Sword Art]. This was a sword technique that emphasized both swordplay and Dharma Arts equally. Li Xizhi possessed the Talisman Qi [Rainbow

Pierce Skyway], so cultivating in seclusion boosted his Dharma Arts, which in turn applied to this [Five-Color Sinking Expanse Sword Art].

This was an exceptionally difficult sword art, but Li Xizhi only needed to focus on practicing the swordplay. Not only was the difficulty massively reduced, but the process even showed faint signs of pulling his sword Dao cultivation upward in reverse. His long-stagnant sword Dao was advancing once again.

Yang Xiao'er had been his wife for many years, and Li Xizhi naturally understood her concerns. He placated her with a sentence, then extended his hand, palm up, and smiled.

"Look."

A bright, warm-white stream of light floated up from his palm, shifting into yellow and white hues. They interwove and roamed like the sky clearing after rain, a rainbow suddenly appearing, its colors blending, before condensing back into the warm-white light and sinking down.

Yang Xiao'er didn't feel the slightest sharpness from it. She blinked, then realized with joyous surprise: "Sword Essence?"

Li Xizhi smiled and nodded, speaking softly: "Years ago, when I descended on Dew Pot Island to fight for the Roaming Rampart Lapis Pagoda, the dragon kin didn't intervene, but there were more than enough cultivators from the Southern Sea. While Dharma Arts are strong, they are easily countered by specialized artifacts. Now that I have Sword Essence, future matters… will be much more convenient."

Yang Xiao'er smiled and agreed. Her expression turning serious, she turned, retreated, and firmly shut the doors on both sides. The grand array activated. She then retrieved a talisman from her robes and pressed it to the door, causing dark light to flow across its surface.

Ensuring they were completely alone, she stepped forward and whispered: "I asked my family. The current spiritual aura is changing rapidly. With the demonic cultivators purged, life is flourishing. Small clans and sects are springing up like bamboo after the rain. The entire Shitang region is linked… The islands are almost all covered in Ginseng-Timber Wood… The family noticed."

The spiritual aura of the Southern Sea's Shitang region had always been Crossing Peril and Solidifying Enterprise. It was a pure Earth Virtue spiritual aura, beneficial to demonic cultivators and Earth Virtue, and balanced toward all

Twelve Qi, yet it curiously did not suppress lightning. The rampage of demonic cultivators in recent years was inextricably linked to this aura. In the last few years, this aura had grown increasingly unstable and was already reaching its time of decline.

When a spiritual aura rises, it can uplift countless cultivators and nourish spiritual items. But when it declines, it requires the sustenance of those same cultivators and the symbolism of spiritual items just to maintain its existence. Li Xizhi's suppression of the Shitang demonic cultivators had severed the last thread keeping the aura clinging to life, accelerating its collapse.

This had forced the master of Thunder-Hearing Island to defy the Azure Pond Sect's pressure and personally attack Li Xizhi. In the end, even that Purple Mansion from Thunder-Hearing Island was suppressed in the Great Void by a single talisman from Yuanxiu. This affair was incredibly complex behind the scenes, but the story that circulated externally was merely that the Lord of Thunder-Hearing Island had challenged Li Xizhi and narrowly lost by a single move.

Even disciples of immortal sects could only vaguely perceive it as a conflict of interest between Shitang North Dan and Thunder-Hearing Island, or at best, part of the struggle between the righteous path and the demonic path. Only Li Xizhi and a select few others knew that Purple Mansions had actually clashed within the Great Void.

But Yuanxiu pushing Li Xizhi to the forefront immediately unsettled Yang Xiao'er. She began to investigate the true aim behind suppressing the demonic cultivators and altering the spiritual aura, returning to her sect several times to probe her family for information.

She brought up the Ginseng-Timber Wood, and Li Xizhi nodded, replying: "When I inspected Shitang back then, I saw that the Ginseng-Timber Wood the Lingu Family planted on the islands had already spread everywhere. I knew purging the demonic cultivators was just a matter of time. The Ginseng-Timber Wood is lush and vibrant, never withering through the seasons, an evergreen vine in this Southern Sea climate. Now these small clans and sects are rising… and sure enough, they've started raising the Lingu Family's Wu Oakworms…"

"Although the Lingu Family withdrew from this place, most of its lifelines are still held by the Azure Pond Sect… or rather, by the Lingu Family. Otherwise,

why would they have given it up so easily? It's just that this spiritual aura is constantly changing. I fear something is about to happen."

Yang Xiao'er's expression turned grave. She whispered, "This is only what's on the surface… There is another meaning. According to my brother's research, Ginseng-Timber Wood is pillar wood. In ancient times, this category was called Jia Wood. The Wu Oakworms are also aspected wood, wood of vibrant life and propagation, which is called Yi Wood. When the two combine, it is the Jia-Yi configuration. You pacified Shitang, and though not the head of the Azure Pond Sect, you are a pillar. Shitang is birthing new small clans, which is also propagation. This is also a Jia-Yi combination… There are too many such analogies. Looking back at when the Lingu Family ruled Shitang, most of the events fit this pattern."

"The elders in my family predict that the transformation of Shitang's spiritual aura will take at least another year or two… and there is a seventy percent chance it will transform into the [Jia-Yi Configuration]. It is shifting to favor Wood Virtue…"

Li Xizhi understood immediately. He let out a heavy breath and said, "Jia and Yi combine, taking the image of Metal. The [Jia-Yi Configuration] likely benefits Upright Wood. Daoist Master Yuanxiu and the Lingu Family have been cooperating for many years, not just one or two. I was just handling the cleanup… He wants to attempt the Golden Core realm in the Southern Sea… But he clearly only has four Divine Abilities. Has he cultivated a fifth?"

Yang Xiao'er lowered her gaze. "He probably couldn't find a fifth Dao lineage, but his lifespan is what it is. Even for a Wood Virtue cultivator, he doesn't have much time left. He has to make the attempt now, whether he's ready or not. Do you remember Anhuai Heaven? I heard the Dao repository of Anhuai Heaven was burned by Daoist Master Yuanxiu. Perhaps he already found a substitute for the fifth Divine Ability back then. He didn't want anyone else to know, so he ruthlessly burned it. Now, driven to desperation, he is preparing for a final gamble."

Li Xizhi rubbed his temples. "That makes sense. I heard that among the Three Yuans of the Azure Pond Sect, Daoist Master Yuansu had the highest talent, but lacked Dao lineages. Daoist Master Yuanxiu also far surpassed Yuanwu. Now he's attempting the Golden Core; even in death, he wants to go out with a bang. It's just that if he dies, I'll be the one held over the fire."

Yang Xiao'er nodded silently. Chi Wei annihilated generations of geniuses, and Chi Buzi vanished. If Yuanxiu dies, the Azure Pond Sect will be left without a single Divine Ability cultivator. But, as a Supreme Yang Dao lineage, no one would dare offend them directly. Their overseas interests, however, would be impossible to protect…

Although Li Xizhi had a brother in the Purple Mansion realm and was himself a vital figure in the Azure Pond Sect, meaning Thunder-Hearing Island wouldn't dare touch him, the Shitang region he had governed for so many years would likely be lost.

What worried her more was Tantai Jin's attitude. She whispered, "Tantai Jin is acting as the Sect Master now. If something happens to Daoist Master Yuanxiu, and he doesn't transfer you back, husband, that will be real trouble… His backing from the Nine Mounds Dao lineage is not simple; they don't fear ordinary Purple Mansions!"

"It shouldn't come to that." Li Xizhi shook his head. "He won't leave me in this place. There are far more important places than the Southern Sea. Even if he wanted to gift Shitang to the demonic cultivators, sending the Lingu Family would be more appropriate. I am a stabilizing presence right now. Tantai Jin needs me… I only fear that the Miao Family and Changxiao are colluding. That would be troublesome."

As the couple was speaking, the dark light on the door suddenly trembled. Yang Xiao'er immediately fell silent. A few breaths later, a knock came:

"Knock knock… Sir, Lord Quan has returned to North Dan and wishes to report to you!"

Li Xizhi's interest stirred. He gave his wife a slight nod, calming her anxious mood, before pushing the door open and saying warmly:

"Have him bring the person up."

Soon, Quan Yuduan strode quickly into the estate, followed by a youth in black robes who looked around with some apprehension. Behind him was the sword-bearing Si Xunhui, while Li Wushao followed grimly at the very rear.

"Greetings, Master / Grandfather / Lord!"

Li Xizhi scanned the group first, not spotting Li Chenghuai. His expression unchanging, he pondered for a moment before nodding to Li Zhouluo with a smile.

"Seats!"

Once everyone was seated, Li Xizhi raised an eyebrow. "How did Chenghuai reply?"

Quan Yuduan presented a letter with both hands. "The Young Master did not reply, but he sent back this letter for you, Sir."

Li Xizhi accepted it, placing it on the desk without opening it. He smiled at Li Zhouluo. "Zhouluo, you must be weary from the road. This has been a hard journey. I have already prepared a residence for you. Go and rest first."

Li Zhouluo had no objections and nodded quickly. Li Wushao led him away. Li Xizhi was most concerned about the Immortal Mirror fragment. Logically, since he had just viewed the vision, there was no way Si Xunhui and the others should have exited so quickly. He frowned.

"Xunhui, what of the Secret Diffusion Dao lineage?"

Si Xunhui gave a wry smile and shook his head. "Master, we entered the underground palace and reached the deepest part. There was an altar inversely flooded with Converging Water, a world within itself… but inside it was total darkness, assaulted by water, fire, and lightning. Those Foundation Establishment cultivators went deeper, while we could only cling to the edge and endure. We collected one or two useless spiritual items and had no choice but to retreat."

Li Xizhi understood immediately. "It seems it requires at least a Foundation Establishment cultivation base… It's beyond our reach for now. It hasn't been easy for you either, holding out for several years. These years of being flooded by water, burned by fire, and struck by lightning have also been greatly beneficial to you. Go and cultivate…"

Si Xunhui bowed and presented a jade slip, saying respectfully: "I spent time on the journey recording all the obstacles within. It is all documented here. This can also serve as reconnaissance for the sect; perhaps it will fulfill another disciple's opportunity."

Li Xizhi chuckled and shook his head. Currently, the fastest cultivator of the Secret Diffusion Dao lineage was Si Xunhui himself; who else could cultivate it faster than a young master of the Si clan? The slip was of little value. He just waved his hand, dismissing him.

After Quan Yuduan also withdrew, Li Xizhi finally picked up the letter. He unfolded it and read, staring blankly for a long moment before refolding it with a long sigh.

"Hai…"

Yang Xiao'er emerged from the hall again. Li Xizhi ground some ink and said quietly, "The child wants to come out, but still has some lingering knots in his heart. I'll persuade him. I'll seize the opportunity these next few years to keep him by my side, and then have Zhouluo wed and send him back… When the tides rise in the Southern Sea, we won't have the good treatment we enjoy now!"

Moongaze Lake.

Dawn had just broken, its light flowing over thousands of homes. The continent was orderly. Golden light pooled on the floor tiles of the great hall.

Li Jiangqian, dressed in crimson robes, was pacing the hall. The policy of Merit Shelters and Dao Stipends had been implemented for several months, requiring the clan to supplement a massive amount of details and regulations. This, combined with the timing of the rites, left him pressed for time. Being a cautious man, he ultimately decided against risking the hunt for a Foundation Establishment Demon.

He reflected that it wasn't much of a loss. He had just broken through to Foundation Establishment, and receiving the rites now would only stabilize his cultivation and push him to the threshold of the mid-stage. It would be better to wait five or ten years, ideally receiving the rites while at the mid or late Foundation Establishment stage, where he would need to spend more time grinding his cultivation anyway.

'If it weren't that the Purple Mansion realm is too far off, and I lack complete certainty, it would be even better to condense a Divine Ability before receiving the rites! After all, there are shortcuts for Foundation Establishment cultivation,

but there are no shortcuts for condensing Divine Abilities in the Purple Mansion realm… Even if there were, the cost would be enormous for only a ten or twenty percent boost. If the Talisman Qi's wondrous ability to boost cultivation could also be used at the Purple Mansion stage, it wouldn't just be saving three to five years of effort!'

Although there was no Foundation Establishment Demon to sacrifice, the rites were still overwhelmingly complex. With two major affairs stacked together, he had been run off his feet for months.

Of course, as the recipient of the talisman seed, he too had sensed the phenomenon days ago. After the initial joy, only a vague anxiety remained.

'I heard cultivators from several sects have returned, and Si Xunhui also returned fully loaded, already taking Uncle Zhouluo to the Southern Sea. Yet, there's still no word from Wang Quwan.'

It wasn't that Li Jiangqian cared for the man; he was currently the clan's only Foundation Establishment cultivator of the Secret Diffusion Dao lineage. If he perished in that underground palace, who knew how many years it would be before they could retrieve that treasured sword!

He mulled it over. Just as Miaoshui finished healing from her injuries and emerged from seclusion, her cultivation having greatly improved, the clan's available Foundation Establishment manpower eased up. He dispatched Miaoshui to Chengshui Marsh to provide support. After all, that woman used to operate in Jiangbei before her surrender; she understood the dynamics of various places and was less likely to attract trouble.

He was pondering this when Cui Jueyin entered the hall, bowed, and reported:

"Clan Head…"

Li Jiangqian had summoned him. He politely bade him rise and smiled.

"I heard something these past few days. Several cultivator families in the clan's West Residence have either hired guest elders, invited other clan members, or simply taken the field themselves to instruct their disciples in Dao debates."

Cui Jueyin replied, "This subordinate has also heard. This matter… is difficult to criticize…"

"It's fine," Li Jiangqian said. "But we cannot let them monopolize it. Please organize several guest elders to also establish an academy in Milin. Offer free instruction to the mortal clan members in their studies... Once the first few batches have passed their examinations, we can rotate these personnel out."

Chapter 810: Within the Secret Diffusion

Cui Jueyin acknowledged the order. Li Jiangqian shook his head and said, "With the Purple Smoke Gate shifting manpower to the Eastern Sea, our production speed slows daily. But since the Daoist Master hasn't returned, delays are acceptable. The clan is stable; these are minor issues. Protector Cui, you are often on the Eastern Shore. Do you know what's happening with Jiangxia?"

Li Jiangqian pointed to several letters on his desk, their format indicating they were almost certainly from Li Jiangxia. He frowned. "For several months now, the families on the Eastern Shore and the autonomous territories in the wilderness have gone silent. The number of disciples coming to the forest has plummeted. This is supposed to be the triennial intake, yet almost no one has shown up… This is no simple matter."

The Eastern Shore comprised 118 families, and their autonomous territories extended into the wilderness. Li Jiangxia had spent years chipping away at this region. Although they had been struck once by the Capital Immortals Dao, their foundation remained unshaken. Though called the Eastern Shore, the name no longer covered the scope of their influence. If the entire wilderness were divided into five parts, the western two were under the Li family's remote control.

These territories were crucial sources of spiritual materials. Now that they needed to forge the Purple Geng Broad Valley Mountain-Piercing Profound Nails, this supply line was even more critical. He couldn't ignore it.

Cui Jueyin nodded. "I have received word… and I have determined the cause."

"In recent years, the Sacred Writ Gate in the eastern Shanji Prefecture has stabilized its foothold and begun recruiting widely. This group of demonic cultivators seems to be imitating the Revering Radiance Gate. With the Purple Smoke Gate backing them, they intend to transition to a righteous path…"

"They are desperately short on low-level cultivators, so their standards are low. Their main requirement is a 'clean background,' and they prefer cultivators from Jiangnan… Shanji Prefecture is blocked to the north by the Profound Wonder Temple and flanked by Supreme Yang lineages. Only the wilderness has a large population of cultivators… but the wilderness is full of rogue cultivators, a mixed bag with scattered and disorganized lineages. Even with the Sacred Writ Gate's low standards… few qualify."

"However, the wilderness borders the Eastern Shore. As it happens, the Eastern Shore families have spent years cultivating disciples according to the season, preparing them for the forest's recruitment. They focused on solidifying cultivation and building strong foundations, not rushing their training. When the Sacred Writ Gate opened its gates wide, they all flocked east to try their luck."

Beyond the Eastern Shore lay the autonomous lands, so those families primarily offered tribute through mining and planting. Unlike the prefectures on the lake, which were clearly internal territory, there was no need for the kind of diplomacy used with Ding Mu. After hearing the explanation, Li Jiangqian didn't seem anxious.

He nodded. "It makes sense. My family already has too many guest elders, too many rules, and not much enjoyment. Their future prospects here are far worse than with the Sacred Writ Gate. How could our offer compare to the comfort of being a disciple in a Purple Mansion Realm sect?"

Cui Jueyin bowed. "The Clan Head speaks truly… However, the Sacred Writ Gate lineage is only using them as fillers. They'll enter as outer disciples, lacking cultivation time and resources. It won't necessarily be better…"

"That's not important… Everyone has their own ambitions. We aren't lacking one or two batches of people." Li Jiangqian raised his eyes, his gaze settling heavily on the map scroll on the table. "What I fear is that they join the Sacred Writ Gate one by one. Today they take this family, tomorrow that one. If all one hundred and eighteen families are taken away, the east will be strengthened, but what about our west?"

Cui Jueyin nodded hesitantly and spoke softly, "The Third Young Master has been cultivating his influence there for many years. Perhaps we should integrate the Eastern Shore and wilderness region and establish a Prefecture Peak… But I fear this will make all those families anxious… It would not be easy to manage."

The crimson-robed youth shook his head. "Prefecture Peaks cannot be expanded lightly, much less swallow over a hundred families at once. This is about our family's reputation. Those Eastern Shore families exist to give the families bordering the lake someone lower-ranked to look down upon; it's a method of uniting our core vassals by giving them superiority."

"Furthermore, these families are remnants from the era of the Jiang and Yu clans. When the Yu family weakened, they couldn't be touched, fine. But why didn't the Jiang family act? Why didn't the Xiao family? The Azure Pond Sect rule forbidding sects from crossing prefectural boundaries is not just empty words; it originates from the ancient Moonlight Origin Mansion. Under the Mansion's governance, only a true Sect can operate across prefectures. Even the Purple Smoke Gate must keep to its designated borders."

"Secondly, it avoids creating a direct border with other Purple Mansion powers… My family has the forest to manage these families; the Xiao family has Mount Yu. It is the same structure."

Li Jiangqian pondered this, looking at the map. "The wilderness also borders the Xiao family, near Mount Yu. Many must be going there to cultivate as well. Yet the Lixia Xiao family has not reacted… This makes things difficult."

He looked up. "Do all those families have people serving in the forest? Immediately revoke their positions. For those who went to the Sacred Writ Gate but failed the entrance, the forest will not accept them either. I will send someone east to ask questions. That Dai Jinquan of the Sacred Writ Gate seems reasonable. We will ask first."

Li Jiangqian waved Cui Jueyin away. Finally, a person ascended from the hall below. Dili Guang had followed Li Zhouluo to the Southern Sea, so this attendant was from the Dou family. He bowed.

"Reporting to the Clan Head, Guest Elder Miaoshui has returned."

Li Jiangqian looked up, concerned. "Alone? Or with Guest Elder Wang?"

The man replied, "Three returned together. They are already in the side courtyard, and are said to be heavily injured."

Li Jiangqian frowned and immediately descended. He arrived just as the three were approaching. Miaoshui's aura was stable, though her robes were ragged. She bowed first. Wang Quwan followed behind her, sword at his waist, his face pale.

The last person was a stranger, his face covered in cold sweat and his clothes stained with blood. A golden, armor-like energy had invaded his body, freezing his limbs purple and making him stiff as he bowed.

Li Jiangqian let out a hearty laugh and stepped down from the dais, taking Wang Quwan's hand. "Quwan, you are truly a peerless talent! You have returned safely, just as I expected!"

He then turned to the stranger, perplexed. "And this is…"

As Li Jiangqian began to ask, Wang Quwan cupped his fist. "This is Daoist Shouding from Mount Jingyi. We fought enemies together within the earth palace. He was injured when we escaped that perilous place. Considering the long road back to the Eastern Sea, and knowing we must pass through the territory of the Pure Unity Dao Gate, I feared an ambush. Thus, I invited him here to the lake to rest."

'Mount Jingyi!'

Hearing this, Li Jiangqian immediately scrutinized the man. This Daoist Shouding looked young, with narrow eyes and an unimpressive demeanor. Perhaps he was suffering the backlash of a technique, as his hair and beard looked somewhat withered. Wounded by that golden energy, he couldn't even speak.

During the Profound Peak incident years ago, Changxi had gifted Yuezhou Island to Mount Jingyi. They should have been allies of the Profound Peak faction. Yet Mount Jingyi had never sent a single person, nor a single resource. They left the Kong family to struggle alone in Jiangnan, which indirectly led to Li Ximing being completely trapped. To put it unkindly, Sumian had at least spoken up; Daoist Master Xuanyi hadn't even opened her mouth. She hadn't so much as passed wind.

The core Profound Peak lineage despised them for this. While the Profound Wonder Temple hadn't suffered losses, Sumian was equally displeased with Xuanyi. Since his own family had been harmed by the affair, Li Jiangqian had nothing good to say about Mount Jingyi either.

Yet, of all the families in Jiangnan, this man had met Wang Quwan. And now he was here, delivered to the Li family. Only Li Jiangqian, with his deep political cunning, could maintain a smiling, courteous expression.

"So, it is a guest from the immortal Mount Jingyi. This is only proper. Please, rest in a cave dwelling… If you require any resources, you need only ask."

Daoist Shouding's face was purple, his lips trembling. He managed a strained sound of acknowledgment, then coughed up a mouthful of blood, unable to even offer polite pleasantries. Li Jiangqian had Miaoshui escort the man away but bid Wang Quwan to sit in the hall. Only then did he return to his seat, a plan forming.

'I wonder if this fellow's mouth is tight. Since he's from Mount Jingyi, I must try to find out… probe him indirectly, and see what kind of relationship Changxi and Xuanyi truly have.'

Aloud, he smiled. "Congratulations on your return… How were things inside the earth palace?"

As he spoke, his gaze rested on Wang Quwan, heavy with meaning.

'Based on his actions, he must have spoken a great deal with that Shouding in the palace. As a disciple of Jingyi, Shouding must understand the secrets of the Secret Diffusion lineage. The question is, did Wang Quwan manage to learn anything?'

At his question, Wang Quwan quickly bowed. He retrieved a large box from his sleeve and opened it before him. Inside rested a red pearl chain and a long, earth-yellow shield—the very Crimson Orb Jade and Hundred-Stone Spirit Shield he had borrowed.

She reported, "Clan Head, the earth palace contains deeper mysteries. We traveled to the lowest level, entered an earth vein, and then another vein beyond that, where we found a pool of Converging Water. It contained a universe within."

"Upon entering that pool, we found a palace inscribed with the words 'The Grand Secret Mirage-Vault.' The long plaques on either side had been stolen. The moment we passed the palace, water, fire, and lightning descended upon us. We flew and shuttled through it… for an entire year."

"The water, fire, and lightning were weak at first, but the water was Converging Water and the fire was Merging Fire. It burned hotter and hotter, and the lightning shattered our techniques. Fortunately, I had the two artifacts the family granted me—especially the Crimson Orb Jade—and my Floating Cloud Body supporting me. Only then did I pass."

Li Jiangqian felt something was wrong. 'A Grotto-Heaven? But what kind of Grotto-Heaven traps Foundation Establishment cultivators for a year and a half while they are still flying? How could it possibly be that large?'

Wang Quwan continued, "Past the trial of elements, we saw a stone bridge. According to Daoist Shouding, the bridge was crafted from an Wu Earth spiritual material. The entire bridge was covered by a great array that suppressed spiritual sense. I groped my way to the midpoint and found a stone stele inscribed with the three words: 'Code of Golden Manifestation.' A box containing water was granted from the sky. I took it, but the path ahead vanished, and I was forced to retreat."

"When I returned, I found Shouding. He said that 'Code of Golden Manifestation' required a Metal-Virtue Dharma Art to break. I have not learned one, so I turned back. But the exit path had changed. A crowd of people inside seemed to be fighting over something. I found a place to hide. After half a year or so, a large group moved off in one direction, and I seized the chance to escape."

"But the moment we emerged from the pool of Converging Water, a group of demonic cultivators ambushed us. Thankfully, the artifacts in our hands were powerful… but Daoist Shouding suffered greatly… The demonic cultivators saw his higher cultivation level and assumed the leader must have the treasures, so they focused all their attacks on him… He even used up the talismans his master had given him."

Li Jiangqian listened silently, then asked, "This Shouding from Mount Jingyi… how did he come to be with you?"

Wang Quwan replied succinctly, "He was severely injured but knew the way out. Shouding led me to the exit, and I protected him along the way."

Curiosity sparked in Li Jiangqian. 'Xuanyi understands the Secret Diffusion that well? It seems that if we want that treasured sword, Mount Jingyi could be a useful asset…'

After finishing his report, he bowed slightly, retrieved another box from his storage bag, and opened it before Li Jiangqian, revealing a light, translucent spiritual liquid.

"I did not recognize this spiritual item, but I brought it back for the family."

Li Jiangqian immediately frowned. "This is an opportunity you earned. What nonsense are you speaking?"

Only then did he glance at it, recognizing it instantly. "This is Clear Origin Spirit Water. It can be used to cultivate ocular techniques. You keep it. It is exactly one portion, and it will be of great use to you!"

Before Wang Quwan could reply, Li Jiangqian waved his hand dismissively. "Anything obtained from a Dao repository belongs entirely to you."

Wang Quwan hesitated a moment but finally put the item away. He bowed deeply and said in a low voice, "Clan Head… I noticed one other thing… I fought many people within the earth palace. The deeper we went into the veins, the stronger the cultivators became, yet their Immortal Foundations grew increasingly monotonous. There seemed to be only a few types. I privately asked Daoist Shouding, and he claimed that those who enter the earth palace with similar Dao lineages naturally gather together…"

Li Jiangqian remained noncommittal, unsure if he was telling the truth or repeating a fabrication. He rubbed the jade cup in his hand, appearing to make a decision. Finally, he spoke.

"As I thought…"

Wang Quwan looked puzzled. Li Jiangqian shook his head. "This matter concerns the Purple Mansion realm. I have a few speculations… which I can share with you, Quwan."

Wang Quwan immediately bowed, clearly having harbored these doubts for a long time.

Li Jiangqian said seriously, "If I am not mistaken, that earth palace was built by the Revering Radiance Gate. The demonic cultivators waiting outside were also their people. They discovered a specific Dao lineage underground, one that requires specific Immortal Foundations to enter… so they distributed tokens far and wide to those with the right foundations… letting those people enter the grotto for them, only to kill them when they emerged."

His expression darkened. "When the Floating Cloud Cave was destroyed, its techniques and resources were sent here by the other two caves. The technique you cultivate came from the Brahma Cloud Cave, which is backed by the Revering Radiance Gate… It seems their original plan was to give it to one of our family's disciples, lure them to that pool of Converging Water, and kill them… Divination is likely blocked in that place. Fortunately, Quwan, you were cautious and did not fight them for treasure… and the Daoist Master granted you a pill, allowing you to reach Foundation Establishment, which is how you escaped intact."

Wang Quwan froze, a flicker of shock passing over him.

Li Jiangqian smiled, shaking his head. "But the Daoist Master is far-sighted, beyond anything you or I could know. Perhaps he already saw through Revering Radiance Gate's scheme. He values you highly, so he specially granted you the pill for a battlefield breakthrough, leaving them entirely empty-handed… What was a minor trick by the Revering Radiance Gate instead became your destined opportunity…"

Li Jiangqian had twisted the order of events, lightly inserting Li Ximing's name with casual confidence, deftly papering over the family's failure to warn him sooner. Shock slowly dawned on Wang Quwan's face. He processed the implications and let out a long breath.

Li Xuanxuan had genuinely given him the artifacts to protect his life. Neither Li Jiangqian nor Li Zhouluo had involved themselves in his gains, making their attitude clear. Wang Quwan bowed deeply. "My only regret is that my cultivation is shallow. I could not fight for more and wasted the opportunity the Daoist Master gave me…"

"That is nothing," Li Jiangqian smiled. "Based on your description, that place is not somewhere a few Foundation Establishment cultivators can explore in one trip. Go find Sun Bai for healing first. I will write a letter and ask the master of the Heaven-Probing Pavilion. We will definitely gain something from this."

Chapter 811: Marriage

Li Jiangqian dismissed Wang Quwan to tend to his injuries. After a while, a woman emerged from a side hall, dressed in white robes over a pale cyan skirt. Seeing her, Li Jiangqian finally offered a genuine smile. "Greetings, Aunt Xinghan. And congratulations."

Li Xinghan had only just emerged from her seclusion. She noticed her grand-nephew had already reached the Foundation Establishment Realm and returned his smile with a nod. "I should be the one congratulating you. I just came out and heard what happened with the Sacred Writ Gate… How utterly arrogant."

"Not entirely," Li Jiangqian said, shaking his head. He dismissed the surrounding cultivators and secured the doors. A slight smile touched his lips. "This incident proves the Sacred Writ Gate will never be a significant threat. Daoist Master Zhu Gong might be competent in cultivation, but she is useless at managing a sect. Her followers are nothing but wine-sacks and rice-bags. At their core, they remain overseas demonic cultivators; they don't understand the rules of Jiangnan, nor do they know how to play by them."

"I can tell Zhu Gong is trying to imitate the Revering Radiance Gate's playbook. But she is not Daoist Master Changyun, and she doesn't have a Zhong Qian working for her. Why was the Revering Radiance Gate able to transition to the righteous path so quickly? Because Daoist Master Changyun's demonic cultivators were those who surrendered during the North-South war. As a Daoist Master, he killed as he pleased, utterly ruthless, and thus commanded fear. Daoist Master Zhu Gong, however, dragged her entire household over. Her subordinates are disciples of many years; this one is a junior relative, that one is family. Can she execute them on a whim? A large ship cannot turn easily. Even our Li family must deliberate endlessly just to alter a single system. What hope does the Sacred Writ Gate have!"

Though the Profound Immersion Dao lineage was currently ascendant, he clearly held the Sacred Writ Gate in contempt. "They haven't cleansed themselves of their demonic cultivator habits. They are just going over there to stir up trouble. My only concern is that she'll exhaust the resources of the Eastern shore, or that one of her peak lords will go mad and provoke our family. That would be an ugly affair."

Hearing his analysis, Li Xinghan visibly relaxed. With Li Zhouluo gone, Li Zhouming indifferent to clan affairs, and Li Chenghuai returning to seclusion after a brief appearance, she was the only high-generation cultivator left to manage things, and the stress had been weighing on her. If Li Jiangqian was confident, she felt much calmer. "It is good you have a plan… I did have another thought, however. The Sacred Writ Gate is recruiting disciples indiscriminately. I heard both the Yuan and Yu families sent people to join. Should we…?"

Li Jiangqian shook his head slightly. "They still have Foundation Establishment cultivators managing the sect; they won't run it like a sieve. Any people we send won't reach the upper echelon, especially not spies from a family known to have a Purple Mansion cultivator. There is no need to send anyone from the direct lineage and hand them leverage. See if anyone from the branch lineages is willing to make the trip."

"Anyone we send now couldn't compare to Queyi or Quexi; they probably fall far short of Ding Mu. I sent people to Purple Smoke a few days ago to deliver resources to him. I hear that Daoist Cao is treating him quite well, even selecting a top-grade Embryonic Breathing cultivation method for him."

After sighing, he suddenly recalled something else. "Aunt," he asked, a knowing smile playing on his lips, "during the years you were in seclusion… a certain man surnamed Zhuang has been cultivating on the Western shore. He frequently sends letters requesting an audience. Are you aware of this?"

At the mention of this, Li Xinghan looked rather awkward. "I… I am aware," she admitted. "His name is Zhuang Pingye. His father, Zhuang Cheng, is a famous rogue cultivator in the Guyan Great Desert, renowned for his Talisman-Sword techniques. I encountered him that day I went to the desert to eliminate demons. We spoke a few words on the road, and I politely said perhaps we'd meet again. I never expected him to actually follow me to the lake…"

Chasing someone from the desert all the way to the lake—the intention was obvious to everyone. Li Jiangqian hesitated. "I heard he is considered exceptionally handsome, and his appearance and family background are both outstanding. His family's inherited sword Dao is also said to be unique. In your opinion, Aunt… what is his character like? And… do you find him bothersome?"

He was asking her true feelings. She raised an eyebrow slightly. "He is very polite in all matters, so he isn't bothersome. His family background isn't bad, and he certainly seems sincere at the moment. However, my uncle asked Elder Donghe to write to his acquaintances in the desert. They say his reputation there is merely average. While he can't be called fickle or a womanizer, he is a frequent patron of the flower houses and taverns… But the general atmosphere in that place is like that… so it's hard to judge."

"He is, after all, a young master from a cultivation family who has achieved Qi Refining. It's inevitable he would indulge in such things while roaming…"

Li Xinghan shook her head. "My assessment is that he sees me as a suitable match. I am not unattractive, my innate talent is comparatively high, and my family status would be beneficial to him. As for genuine affection… I doubt there is much. When I traveled the Northern shore and the desert in the past, I met others of his sort, just none with such an illustrious background. My family members, on the other hand, are quite taken with him."

Li Jiangqian hadn't anticipated this response. "Then what is your intention, Aunt?"

Li Xinghan smiled, pursing her lips. "He appears sincere for the present. Let him continue cultivating on the Western shore. Ultimately, the pursuit of the Immortal Dao is the true path. I am not inside his mind, so I cannot say his thoughts. There is no need to assume the worst of him. Given enough time, the truth will reveal itself."

Li Jiangqian couldn't help but study her again. "I expected you to be somewhat flustered by this. You are taking it very calmly."

"You, child…" Li Xinghan shook her head and laughed. "You underestimate me. Years ago, when I was on the Northern shore cultivating my sword techniques, several 'talents' from the Fei family arranged to 'coincidentally' encounter me. After I rejected one of them, the Fei family supposedly broke his legs. It was horribly embarrassing for me."

Just as they were discussing matters, a messenger rushed in from outside the hall, his legs trembling. He collapsed to his knees. "Family Head! Daoist Master Houfu of the Great Xiukui Monastery… has appeared on the island! He requests an audience with you and the Old Master!"

"What?!" Li Jiangqian froze, exchanging a look of pure shock with Li Xinghan.

'A Daoist Master from the Great Xiukui Monastery… We have no friendship, no connection… why would he come seeking us out?!'

Li Ximing was not known for having a wide circle of acquaintances. This sudden, unexpected visit almost certainly signaled bad news rather than good. A chill settled in Li Jiangqian's heart.

'This is trouble…'

But a Purple Mansion cultivator had arrived on their island. They had to pay their respects immediately; a moment's delay was unacceptable. Protocol dictated they couldn't simply invite him in; Li Jiangqian and the others had to go out themselves to greet him, as befitted their junior status. While a minor detail, Li Jiangqian knew that to someone like Houfu, who valued appearances, such etiquette was critical.

He hurried from his seat and exited the main hall with Li Xinghan, making for the side palace. Entering the hall, they saw a young man in black shamanistic robes seated in the host's chair. Standing beside him was a woman dressed in a white blouse and a grey skirt. A gemstone of unknown origin was set upon her brow, accentuating her extreme beauty.

Li Jiangqian led the greeting, bowing low. "This junior, Li Jiangqian of the Moongaze Immortal Clan, the unworthy acting Family Head, pays his respects to Daoist Master Houfu!"

Perhaps because his etiquette was flawless, Houfu seemed polite enough. "Rise," he said with a nod.

Li Jiangqian rose but did not take a seat, standing respectfully to the side. Li Xuanxuan soon rushed over from Qingdu. After the old man paid his respects, Houfu raised an eyebrow. "While this Daoist Master was walking the overseas territories, I chanced upon Daoist Master Zhaojing of your clan, and we journeyed together for a time. Before we parted ways, he heard I was returning inland and entrusted me with a message."

"Thank you, Daoist Master!"

Hearing these words, Li Jiangqian bowed repeatedly in thanks. Li Xuanxuan looked as if a great weight had been lifted from him; realizing Li Ximing was not in grave danger, he was moved almost to tears. Li Xinghan let out a quiet sigh, the worry visibly melting from her expression, replaced by joy. Houfu gestured toward the woman, Xia Shouyu.

"This junior was also entrusted to me by Zhaojing. He said she is to be wed to one of his descendants. She is, herself, the progeny of a high cultivator from overseas."

Li Xuanxuan had already been observing Xia Shouyu. He originally assumed she was some expert from the Great Xiukui Monastery and had been admiring her remarkable bearing. When he heard Houfu's words, his eyes instantly lit up.

'Zhouming is well past the usual age… I thought Ximing wasn't paying attention to the matter… so he had already made arrangements! Excellent, excellent… Now that he has reached the Purple Mansion realm, his planning has become so thorough…'

Hearing this, Li Jiangqian finally felt assured that Li Ximing's condition must be stable, and his own confidence returned. Houfu, however, looked eager to depart.

"My conversations with Zhaojing were amicable," he stated calmly. "He will not be able to return to the lake for some time, but he sent Shouyu back with his instructions. The clan merely needs to remain disciplined and keep a low profile."

"This Daoist Master has urgent matters to attend to in the west. The war on the Great Western Plateau rages unabated. The Shu territories have suffered drought for nine straight years. Months ago, the local clans collapsed, sects have fled, and the people are resorting to trading children for food everywhere. Every moment I delay, thousands more die. I will not waste time with idle talk."

Before they could reply, he stepped into the Great Void and vanished.

As the group offered respectful farewells, Li Jiangqian was already analyzing the Daoist Master's words, his sharp eyes calculating.

'A great drought in the Shu lands means no rain is falling. When the land is this parched and the springs run dry… this is a sign of the Pristine Water Fruition Attainment.'

While he was contemplating the status of Pristine Water, Li Xuanxuan had already stepped toward Xia Shouyu. "This old master is Li Xuanxuan. Miss…"

"I wouldn't dare!" Xia Shouyu quickly curtsied, retrieving two scrolls from her sleeve—one red, one gold. She held them in her palms, presenting the golden scroll to Li Xuanxuan first. "Old Master, this is what the Daoist Master instructed me to deliver to the family. The golden scroll is for the clan here at the lake. The red scroll… is my marriage contract."

She showed no trace of shyness, speaking with perfect composure. "It is for the clan disciple of the 'Zhou' generation. His name is Ming."

Li Xuanxuan saw his guess had been largely correct. Accepting the golden scroll, he nodded and beamed. "Miss… that child is the Daoist Master's own direct grandson. His only one."

A flicker of surprise crossed Xia Shouyu's eyes. She paused for a beat, then the corners of her mouth lifted in a smile. Stepping forward slightly, she requested, "Has he emerged from seclusion? I hope the family might arrange a meeting…"

Li Xuanxuan was already holding the scroll. Li Jiangqian extended a hand toward the main hall, smiling. "Please…"

Houfu's visit seemed to have banished the oppressive gloom hanging over the Li clan leaders. Even their steps felt lighter as the group returned. Li Xuanxuan followed behind, unable to resist unrolling the scroll to read.

Li Ximing mentioned no urgent crises. He stated that his injuries were largely healed and the clan should not worry. He was cultivating externally and could not return for some time, instructing Ding Weizeng and Cui Jueyin to watch over the clan.

He did, however, specifically mention the Capital Immortals Dao, ordering Li Jiangqian and the others not to let relations with the north become overly hostile. They were to ease tensions where possible:

'Changxiao is currently scheming from the sidelines, and the situation remains unclear. There is no need to drag Yehui into this, lest we find ourselves facing a wolf at the front gate and a tiger at the back, caught in an impossible dilemma.'

Li Xuanxuan rolled the golden scroll closed just as they entered the main hall. Li Jiangqian accepted it to read while they awaited the return of the messenger sent to fetch Li Zhouming.

A long time passed with no reply. Li Xuanxuan began to feel a sense of dread. Sure enough, the messenger finally returned, looking deeply embarrassed. He approached Li Jiangqian and whispered, "We could not retrieve the Young Master… he went out for leisure… and has not returned from the lake perimeter…"

Given the Li family's current control over both Qingdu and Yuting mountains, it was impossible that they *couldn't* find Li Zhouming. It only meant he was indulging in debauchery again, leading the messenger to phrase it as "could not retrieve." Li Jiangqian felt a flush of secondhand embarrassment.

Xia Shouyu, however, proved exceptionally sharp. She smiled lightly. "It is no matter. This is the perfect time of year for an outing. I shall accompany you. There is no need to disturb the Young Master's enjoyment."

Her words immediately told Li Xuanxuan that this woman had her own mind. She had covered for Li Zhouming's absence now, but the issue would have to be faced eventually. It was better to just be open about it. He sighed internally. "Indeed… It is best we go together."

Li Jiangqian, having just finished the scroll, put it away with a thoughtful expression. "If I may ask," he inquired, "your esteemed Dao… from which immortal mountain or pavilion overseas does it hail? That we might pay our respects to its name."

Xia Shouyu offered a tactful smile. "My elders merely cultivate upon an immortal mountain; it is not worthy of being called a great pavilion. Daoist Master Zhaojing has shown immense kindness to both my family and myself. The three Daoist Masters were discussing the profound mysteries when the topic of matrimony arose, and thus this match was bestowed…"

"As for the lineage my elders follow… this junior worries that revealing it might compromise the Daoist Master's location. For the moment… it is not convenient

to disclose. When the Daoist Master returns or sends word, then I can speak clearly. My apologies."

It was a watertight deflection. Li Jiangqian smiled and nodded. "Not at all. Although the rites are not complete, you are practically a member of our senior generation. How can you apologize to a junior? You honor me!"

The group left the main island together, taking to the air. Just as they ascended, they saw a streak of heavenly light racing in from the lake's edge. It was Li Zhouming, dressed in a flamboyant red robe with his signature fan dangling at his waist, flying frantically back toward the island.

Li Jiangqian spotted him instantly and knew the next few moments were going to be excruciatingly awkward.

Li Xuanxuan had tried reasoning, pleading, and scolding, but he was utterly helpless against this particular descendant. His anger began to simmer again, but with Xia Shouyu present, he decided to grant the boy a sliver of dignity and simply turned his head away.

Xia Shouyu appeared entirely unbothered. She inclined her head slightly in a formal greeting. "Greetings, Young Master."

Li Zhouming had been looking guiltily at Li Xuanxuan, wondering why the old man wasn't already screaming at him. Before he could puzzle it out, his gaze landed on the stunning woman before him. His eyes lit up with delight. "Greetings, Miss…"

As he drew closer, he realized Xia Shouyu was already at the Foundation Establishment Realm. Despite his own noble status, he was only a Qi Refining cultivator casually addressing a Foundation Establishment expert as 'Miss.' He suddenly felt insecure, but Xia Shouyu merely smiled and nodded, appearing somewhat shy and endearing, which immediately caused him to lift his chin a fraction higher.

Li Xuanxuan shot him a warning glare—though it was doubtful the boy understood it—and announced in a gruff voice: "This is Fairy Xia, the beloved daughter of an overseas immortal cultivator. She possesses outstanding talent, profound cultivation, a gentle temperament, and beauty like a celestial. This… is the marriage your Grandfather arranged for you. She came today specifically to meet you… and just which gutter were *you* playing in!"

"Huh?"

Li Zhouming was completely stunned. While his grandfather, Li Ximing, had provided him with an esteemed status, he had offered little actual attention; Li Xuanxuan had been the one to raise him. Hearing this sudden news, a delighted grin split his face.

'So it was Grandfather! Grandfather's divine power is truly vast… what magnanimity, the true bearing of a Daoist Master! Wonderful, wonderful! He actually found me such a gentle and adorable wife! I will never curse him in my heart again… Never! And I won't let Father curse him either! I'll praise him to everyone I meet… What a good Grandfather, hehe.'

Chapter 812: The Evil Cicada

Li Zhouming immediately flicked his sleeves, raised his head, and announced joyfully,

"So, news from Grandfather has arrived! I have been so worried about him, but it seems he has also been thinking of me. Does he have any decree?"

Only after saying this did he turn to Xia Shouyu and smile.

"It's just… the Daoist Master arranged this marriage, but he never mentioned it to me. May I ask the lady's name?"

His words were polite. Xia Shouyu returned his smile but paused slightly, allowing the old man to speak first. Li Xuanxuan's expression softened a fraction as he replied:

"You do remember to worry about the Daoist Master. He is currently traveling in the Eastern Sea, and everything is going smoothly."

Only then did Xia Shouyu speak.

"In response to the Young Master, this humble woman's surname is Xia, name Shouyu. I am a cultivator from the Eastern Sea."

Li Zhouming quickly unfastened his fan.

"Please… Allow me to take you for a walk by the lake. It's the perfect chance to talk about the Daoist Master!"

Since it was only their first meeting, Xia Shouyu didn't sense anything amiss. She smiled and walked toward him. Li Xuanxuan felt a sense of strangeness in his heart, unsure what to say, and could only nod in acknowledgment. As the two left together, the old man didn't know whether to laugh or curse.

'This child is usually dull and mischievous, unreliable in all things. Nine out of ten sentences he speaks are nonsensical… But the moment he sees a woman, it's like he's suddenly enlightened—his eyes clear, his mind sharp, a completely

different person. Every word he just said was perfectly on point… No wonder none of those girls by the lake ever caused any trouble. Hah…'

Li Jiangqian waited for him at the side, pondering deeply. After all, with two scrolls of decrees returning from Li Ximing, the main lineage descendants needed to gather and discuss. He entered the main hall with the old man and sealed the doors tightly. Li Xuanxuan sighed.

"It is best that the Daoist Master is fine. This Lady Xia was also his choice. I can see she is an extremely intelligent girl, and her family background must be good…"

Li Jiangqian guided him to the master seat. Once the old man sat down, Li Jiangqian stood to one side, poured him tea, and said in a low voice:

"She is very skilled in conversation. It was impossible to glean much in such a short time, but the subtle part is that we shouldn't be asking questions anyway, lest we expose the Daoist Master's whereabouts. However, I observed her attire… while elegant, none of it seems to be top-grade. If she truly had an extraordinary background, she should have at least one Foundation Establishment Realm dharma weapon, or perhaps spirit boots… yet I saw none."

"Perhaps my eyes are poor and I failed to recognize their value, or perhaps she simply hasn't brought out her powerful artifacts…"

Xia Shouyu was intended to be an elder (by marriage/status), so Li Jiangqian spoke extremely diplomatically. Li Xuanxuan, however, understood the implication and voiced his doubt:

"That is one point. But she repeatedly mentioned that her elders are cultivating on an immortal mountain and that her immediate family is not wealthy… That is also plausible."

Li Jiangqian nodded. Only when facing Li Xuanxuan did he dare speak so frankly. He replied:

"By my deduction, even if she has elders on an immortal mountain, Lady Xia must belong to a side branch or an impoverished main branch. The Daoist Master's trip overseas might not have been part of the original plan. Perhaps he made a compromise with a certain lineage, asking them for some assistance,

which resulted in this marriage contract. Since we are the ones asking the favor, the other party naturally wouldn't send over their most talented or crucial direct descendant…"

"This is just my private speculation. Ultimately, this is probably for the best. Of all the female cultivators with outside surnames I've seen by the lake, not one can compare to Lady Xia. The Daoist Master's considerations are certainly more thorough than ours."

Li Xuanxuan nodded. He saw Li Jiangqian raise his head as if sensing something. A knock came from outside. With a wave of his sleeve, the hall doors swung open. Chen Yang was waiting outside. He hurried in and whispered in his ear:

"Patriarch… someone from the Azure Pond Sect has arrived."

Li Jiangqian frowned. "Who from the Azure Pond Sect? In what capacity are they here?"

Chen Yang whispered, "The visitor is Peak Lord Li Quantao of Fuchen Peak. He claims to be a good friend of the Heaven-Probing Pavilion Master."

Li Jiangqian had no recollection of the name, but Li Xuanxuan immediately nodded upon hearing it. "Ah, it's that young man. Quickly, invite him up!"

Although Li Quantao and the Moongaze Li clan didn't interact often, the gratitude between them ran deep. Their relationship went back to his father, Li Encheng, and Li Quantao himself had once saved Li Xizhi's life. Li Xuanxuan valued him greatly and turned to Li Jiangqian.

"We had such a good relationship back then. Now that our family has become a Purple Mansion Realm Immortal Clan, we absolutely cannot make him wait. We must not let others think we are putting on the airs of an Immortal Clan and forgetting gratitude. It would cause a needless misunderstanding."

As they spoke, Li Quantao, dressed in blue robes patterned with waves, ascended the hall. The high-spirited youth of the past was now a middle-aged man, appearing far more reserved as he continuously cupped his hands in greeting.

Li Xuanxuan remained seated in the master chair while Li Jiangqian invited Li Quantao inside, taking a seat beside him to accompany him. The middle-aged man looked around the hall, his eyes filled with emotion. "Your clan… the changes are too vast. I hardly recognize the place."

"You and Xizhi are like brothers! You used to call him Brother Zhi. Why the formality…"

Li Xuanxuan replied with a smile, motioning for him to sit closer. "Have you encountered some difficulty? Or perhaps a junior disciple needs pills? Just say the word."

Li Quantao still couldn't relax. In the intervening years, he had married the sister of the Si family's Si Tongyi. With the Si family's support, his children did not lack for cultivation resources. Yet, his expression was somewhat desolate as he nodded.

"I was under sect orders to investigate matters in the Shanji area. Since I was passing the lake, I stopped by to visit."

He lowered his voice. "I just came from the Mushroom Forest Plains. It is chaos there. The Yuan Family Patriarch, Yuan Hudu, died suddenly when an old injury relapsed. Yuan Zibin has taken control of the family, imprisoned the elder Yuan Huyuan, and has hung several of his uncles, like Yuan Fuyao and Yuan Fuyi, from the mountain peak, whipping them for sport. He calls them his 'herd of swine,' letting them faint and reviving them repeatedly… It is too horrible to watch. He has also requisitioned over a thousand women into the mountains. The land is filled with misery."

Li Xuanxuan frowned. "Has Yuan Chengzhao made any statement?"

Mentioning Li Xizhi's junior brother, Yuan Chengzhao, Li Quantao just shook his head.

"He has not emerged from seclusion… This sort of thing isn't unique; it happens everywhere. It's only gaining attention because he imprisoned and humiliated an elder. Otherwise, it would hardly be news… It's nothing compared to the imperial descendants of Chu back in the day. My father used to say that patricide is not unknown even in immortal sects. And that Earth Virtue cultivator from Changxiao… his Dao companion is his own elder sister. It's common. In those sects and minor clans that have lost the suppression of a Divine Ability cultivator, the one who rises to power gains cultivation and authority, and their desires become uncontrollable, often leading to extreme brutality."

"In the past, the sect could manage these things. Now, we can barely manage ourselves, and such incidents are becoming more frequent."

Li Xuanxuan saw his hesitation and waved his hand, dismissing the attendants. Li Quantao was clearly agitated. Li Xuanxuan then found an excuse to send Li Jiangqian away as well. Only then did this Azure Pond Sect Peak Lord—this distant relative of the Wei-Li bloodline—let out a sigh. After a long moment, he whispered:

"There is some good news. Qin Xian, Peak Lord Qin, has been promoted to Peak Lord of Yuanxing Peak. He is preparing to select an auspicious day to marry Fellow Daoist Fei Qingyi…"

The affair between Fei Qingyi and the Si family confidant, Qin Xian, had been going on for a long time. That it was finally coming to fruition was significant news, but it clearly wasn't what Li Quantao truly wanted to say. Li Xuanxuan waited quietly. Sure enough, Li Quantao continued:

"A few days ago… just as Peak Lord Qin took his new post, I was also on duty. A blaze erupted on the main peak of the Azure Pond Sect, dyeing the heavens. I followed the disturbance and sensed an abnormal fluctuation in spiritual energy… A cultivator had fallen."

"But I was the first to arrive at that cultivator's cave-dwelling. I saw signs of excavation at the entrance gate and indentations from magic weapons striking it. The formation had been dispelled by an extremely skilled cultivator…"

Li Xuanxuan's heart trembled. He focused intently as Li Quantao, his face pale, whispered:

"I felt that something was wrong and descended the mountain quietly. But then… I saw my eldest son, Li Kan, and my second son, Li Xiangye, sneaking down the path. The cold white-iron swords they carried were broken, yet they kept them strapped to their backs…"

With the conversation having reached this point, Li Xuanxuan knew exactly what he meant. He remained silent. Frankly, Li Xuanxuan was surprised the Si family had waited this long to make a move. Li Quantao continued:

"The next morning, news spread through the sect. It was said that the former Sect Master, Chi Zhiyun, had failed his breakthrough and perished during the night. Although no one spoke out, I could see… most people wore expressions of sorrow."

At this, an exhausted look settled onto his features. He whispered:

"We all knew something would happen, but… I was still holding out hope that he would simply fail to achieve his Divine Ability on his own. My wife said they originally assumed the sudden change in spiritual atmosphere meant he was doomed to fail. No one expected him to reach the stage of Inward Heart Surging Profundity, which benefits the Fire Virtue. As the day drew closer, everyone grew anxious… leading to this."

Despite his words, his face was a mask of anxiety and fear.

In the end, Chi Zhiyun, the Sect Master of the Azure Pond Sect, had been generous, incredibly intelligent, merciful in judgment, and bold in promoting talent. He was truly a hero of his generation. Under his governance, the Azure Pond Sect was completely loyal; almost everyone had received his grace. Even after Chi Zhiyan's perverse actions had cost him all his confidants, and even with the Si family in power, everyone in the Azure Pond Sect knew Chi Zhiyun was in seclusion. They all felt guilty, and no one ever dared to bring him up.

Tantai Jin had promoted so many people, yet not one of them had been willing to act on his implied wishes. Now, he had been forced to rely on the hastily promoted confidant, Qin Xian, to plot the deed, using Li Quantao's two naive sons to carry it out. This revealed just how guilty the Si family and Tantai Jin truly felt. Even so, the Azure Pond Sect was still filled "with expressions of sorrow." The situation was awkward to the extreme.

Li Quantao grew even more distressed, his eyes welling with moisture. "He was a heroic figure. He was in seclusion, breaking through to the Purple Mansion Realm, pushing his Shengyang Acupoint into the Great Void. Everything was succeeding. He had broken his inner demons and was about to grasp Divine Ability… only to have his stone gate dug open from the outside. Two mere Qi Refining children broke in with swords, pierced his dantian, and severed his head. He died defeated and disgraced. If he bears a grudge, shaking heaven and earth would not be enough to appease it!"

"Senior, the elders in my family have all passed away. Brother Zhi and I are like blood brothers, and you are my elder… Speaking privately, back when my father was targeted by the Chi family, Sect Master Chi provided us much protection… I thanked him from the bottom of my heart then. Now… now, it wouldn't be wrong to call me ungrateful and perfidious!"

A dignified Foundation Establishment Realm cultivator, Li Quantao was covered in a cold sweat, tears streaming down his face. He bowed deeply, his voice trembling with terror:

"And those two were my own sons. They actually did such a thing… My conscience alone freezes my spine. I don't know what to do… I truly don't know what to do! Please, Senior… guide me!"

Li Quantao had grown up protected on the immortal peak, naive to the ways of the world. Although he had learned much since, he still acted according to his conscience. He was fundamentally a decent and kind man; otherwise, he never would have saved Li Xizhi all those years ago. His eyes were now filled with pure terror. The old man opened his eyes and asked softly:

"Do you know why they used your sons in this way?"

Li Quantao nodded stiffly.

"My father had a… misunderstanding… with Chi Wei. So they figured pulling me in was the most convenient option. It binds me tightly to them, making it impossible to leave. By involving Brother Zhi's connection, and then… I went into seclusion, and my two boys met someone… who instigated it… It doesn't matter who anymore."

Li Xuanxuan couldn't help but swallow a mouthful of hot tea to warm his stomach. He coughed.

"This is the karma of the past… It is all karma from long ago. The sin is not yours…"

Li Quantao's eyes widened, his lips trembling. "Senior believes in karma? I thought the Wei-Li were the last people to believe in it… If you believe that, you can forgive anything. That isn't good… If we must speak of karma, it was my father who committed the evil, who ambushed Chi Wei and stole the lineage…"

He seemed to have revealed something unintentionally. He lowered his voice, "Chi Wei was despicable, but Chi Zhiyun tried to dissuade him. He did much to remedy the situation and treated the victims kindly. I know Chi Zhiyun had to die. A clean execution, or even just explaining it clearly before killing him… but to harm him like *this*… I am deeply unsettled."

"Even revenge must have standards. If he harmed my family for personal gain, I would, at most, take revenge on him, kill him. I would not capture his great-grandson and dismember him. If I did that, wouldn't I be even more despicable than him? Shouldn't I suffer retribution for that? This is what I mean."

Li Xuanxuan listened, stunned. His heart sank. He took a medicinal pill from his sleeve, but Li Quantao waved it away.

"Senior, I am perfectly clear-headed. Lord Si is in the Southern Sea. What Purple Mansion Realm cultivator could possibly influence me through the grand formation of the Azure Pond Sect? This matter has weighed on my heart for a long time. This is not a momentary impulse."

His eyes dimmed slightly. "I understand that your esteemed clan also suffered greatly at the hands of the Chi family. The hatred runs deep in your hearts; you cannot understand me… But Senior is also correct. If there is karma, in the end, it will fall upon me!"

Li Quantao bowed deeply one last time and retreated from the hall. His hurried silhouette looked utterly defeated. Li Xuanxuan forgot to see him out. He picked up his tea and drank several consecutive mouthfuls before he felt the warmth return to his limbs.

After a long while, Li Jiangqian returned to his side, looking slightly surprised. "Why did he leave without even turning his head… Senior…?"

Li Xuanxuan rubbed his brow and said softly, "Chi Zhiyun… has fallen."

Li Jiangqian wasn't surprised. He nodded. "It was only a matter of time. That they dragged it out this long only shows the Si family was being careless."

He immediately grew suspicious. "Was he the one who told you? Was he involved? The Si family wanting to pull him in… they must be up to no good. They aren't trying to drag our family into this, are they…"

The old man seemed unsettled. He nodded silently, rising and walking down the steps. He glanced at Li Jiangqian and coughed.

"I was actually coming to find you… Sometimes I look at Quewan's temperament and find it good; other times, I feel you are more reliable. You two siblings should complement each other more… Why don't you learn from your sister? Not everything needs to be taken to the absolute extreme, assuming the worst! There are benefits to interacting with sincerity… You trust people too little. You

prefer to embellish everything with rhetoric. While it often wins you advantages, I fear it makes those around you—your friends—grow cold-hearted."

Li Jiangqian hadn't expected Li Xuanxuan to bring this up. He smiled naturally and replied:

"Toward my sister, and toward you, Senior, I have never been anything but completely sincere. My heart is clear on this. Any rhetorical embellishments are only seen by my elders, and they are always used to gain benefits for the clan… My conscience is clear."

The old man only walked down the steps, returning his smile. He nodded. "I'm old. These are the words of a dotard. The clan's affairs still require your full attention… This burdens you."

He descended the stairs but, surprisingly, did not return to Qingdu. Instead, he walked toward the bustling center of the island. Li Jiangqian accompanied him halfway before turning back to the hall. His expression serene, he sat down in the master seat, tapping the table lightly, his eyes turning cold as ice.

'I've never seen Senior act like this. Who had the audacity… who has been whispering slander about me in the old man's ear!'

Character Appearances This Chapter

Li Jiangqian, *Great Scripture of Radiance*, [Early Foundation Establishment Realm]

Xia Shouyu, *White Li Heart*, [Early Foundation Establishment Realm]

Li Zhouming, [Fourth-level Qi Refining], [Purple Mansion Direct Lineage]

Li Quantao, *Merging Dawn Abyss*, [Mid Foundation Establishment Realm], [Hongxue Descendant]

Li Xuanxuan, [Ninth-level Qi Refining], [Bomai Direct Lineage]

Chapter 813: Beihai Sea

Purple Smoke Gate.

Ethereal purple qi, unchanged for a hundred years, drifted through the mountain range. This land seemed eternally steeped in violet hues, with peaks jutting like islands from a purple sea of clouds, orderly and imbued with an immortal aura.

A stream of light drifted up the mountain, revealing a young woman riding the wind. She wore a simple white blouse and a purple skirt, her face round and her eyes bright above delicate ears. Though her attire was not extravagant, its neat propriety gave her a pleasant charm.

"Junior Sister Queyi!" a voice called from the mountainside.

She looked toward the sound just as a man hurried over on the wind, landing before her with a smile. "Back so early today!"

This was Li Queyi, a disciple of the Purple Smoke Gate currently at the third layer of Qi Refining. Seeing the man, she quickly bowed. "Greetings, Senior Brother Huang! I should be practicing my sword right now, but I received an urgent message from the sect. I'm being sent to the Eastern Sea… so I returned early."

The Purple Smoke Gate's station in the Eastern Sea had been suffering disasters for half a year—landslides, tsunamis, and shattering islands had shifted all the earth and fire veins. The sect was overwhelmed, having already pulled most of their personnel from Moongaze Lake, leaving the main sect short-handed. This Second Senior Brother was well aware of the situation.

"Why are they sending *you*?" he asked doubtfully. "You've only been cultivating for such a short time! What kind of reasoning is that? This will be hard to explain, won't it? Does Master know?"

He clearly understood her background; if someone barely in the Qi Refining realm was sent out and met with misfortune, the sect would have no way to answer to the Li family.

Li Queyi forced a smile. "Naturally, they aren't sending me to fight. I cultivate the Jade True lineage, and the formation on that island is also from the Jade True system. I'm just going to handle logistics."

"Well, that makes sense…" Senior Brother Huang relaxed slightly, though worry lingered on his face. They descended together, heading toward their peak.

Ziqi Peak was not poorly situated; it rested on the right flank, encircled by mountains. Had its position been slightly more central, it would have directly faced Mu Zuo Peak. As the morning dawn broke, the world turned golden.

Senior Brother Huang hesitated for a long moment before finally speaking. "About last time… what I mentioned to you, Junior Sister. The Treasured Virtue Pill… Any word on that ingredient I needed, the White Zi Root? The sect doesn't have many alchemists, and it's terribly troublesome… you have to reserve their time far in advance."

He gave an awkward laugh. "I'm not… I'm not trying to pressure you, Junior Sister. This is just a loan. Your Senior Brother is truly facing barren pockets right now. Once I gather the necessary cultivation resources, I will absolutely repay you tenfold in the future…"

A trace of fatigue crossed Li Queyi's face, but she maintained her forced smile. "I have already written home to ask. If there is any news, they will certainly send word. Please rest assured, Senior Brother."

The Purple Smoke Gate's stipend for disciples wasn't bad, but not every disciple possessed an influential background. Ling Yanzi, in particular, was a lone wolf. The few disciples he accepted were either commoners or came from minor Qi Refining clans. The old man simply didn't know how to manage connections, yet he possessed an overly compassionate heart and preferred accepting disciples of humble status. Back when he first gave the Li family their entry token, they, too, were merely a Qi Refining family.

This Second Senior Brother was desperate to break through to the Foundation Establishment Realm. The sect had already provided him with one share of resources, and Ling Yanzi had given him what little he could spare, but naturally, the more resources one had, the better. Thus, he frequently turned to Li Queyi.

Li Queyi was utterly exhausted by it. Everyone on the peak treated her with overwhelming affection, seemingly wanting to praise her higher than the heavens, but in reality, they were all just staring at the resources in her pockets. If the items were truly hers to give, it would be one thing. But these were things she had to beg her family for, time and time again. How could she bear to keep opening her mouth to ask!

Ling Yanzi, meanwhile, understood nothing of management. Her senior brothers weren't inherently bad people, but for the sake of their Dao path to Foundation Establishment, even a good person could become ruthless. In private, they swallowed their pride again and again to plead with her. Every time Li Queyi picked up her brush to write home, her heart ached with grievance.

'I'm not asking for these senior brothers to be like Wen Wu of Mu Zuo Peak, arranging everything perfectly, carefully selecting techniques for me, and managing all the connections with the alchemy and artifact-refining peaks. But surely they don't have to force my hand like this, over and over again… This…'

'When I first arrived, I knew this peak was inferior to the others. I assumed that if I just cultivated hard and maintained good relationships, everything would be fine. But who could have known that a poor and bitter peak has its own logic… How could this life be anything *but* bitter?'

Ling Yanzi was genuinely good to her, yet even he had privately requested resources from the Li family on two occasions. Li Jiangqian had spotted the underlying issue at a glance and mentioned it subtly in a letter. Li Queyi understood immediately: it was the cost of currying favor with her master. The old man had to support too many disciples, stretching every single spirit stone as if it were two. She saw that clearly enough.

A few days ago, Wen Wu had brought Li Quexi to visit, hoping to strengthen the relationship between the cousins. Who knew what pills Mu Zuo Peak had provided Li Quexi, but her cultivation speed was terrifyingly fast. Worse, Li Queyi heard that her cousin was actually sending spiritual items she acquired *back* to the family. This news made Li Queyi feel even more insignificant.

This trip to the Eastern Sea—she claimed it was a sect arrangement, but in truth, Li Queyi had privately begged a senior sister from the Xiao family, who also cultivated at Purple Smoke, to arrange it. She just wanted an excuse to escape.

Yet, she could still understand the desperation driving her senior brothers as they risked everything for a chance at Foundation Establishment. She could

only lower her voice. "I don't need Senior Brother to repay me multiple times over. My family has some spare capacity, so I am willing to help my martial brothers. I have already sent the letter home. If the family obtains the root, they will send it directly to Master. I am leaving for the overseas assignment soon, so Senior Brother can just collect it from Master when it arrives."

She gave a slight bow, excused herself, and retreated to her own rooms, feeling an isolating chill seep out from the entire peak. She was at a complete loss.

'How did it come to this? Poverty is one thing, but why can't martial siblings support each other with basic fellowship? Instead, they scramble over one another to scheme for my things. Meanwhile, the wealthy Mu Zuo Peak is filled with righteous, generous people, all of them focused wholeheartedly on clearing obstacles for my cousin…'

Beihai Sea.

The Beihai Sea was an sea within the greater Converging Heaven Sea domain. Its total area was not large; if one discounted the numerous reefs and islets dotting its surface, the remaining water was smaller than two Splitreed Islands combined. Yet, it was ludicrously wealthy, overflowing with spiritual items, truly the spiritual essence of the Converging Heaven Sea.

The dragon lineage had a custom of 'shepherding the seas.' In the past, this meant Dragon Princes were rotated between the various oceans like traveling magistrates. Nowadays, it more closely resembled a feudal system of enfeoffment. Each Dragon King governed a fixed sea territory, but these domains were invariably outside the Converging Heaven Sea, scattered between the Vermillion Sea's Strait of Ten Thousand Isles and the World's Navel.

The Converging Heaven Sea proper was akin to the Dragon Monarch's personal domain and was not meant to be partitioned off. But exceptions always exist. In the last millennium, three exceptionally favored Dragon Kings had been granted fiefs within Hetian. The Beihai Sea was the smallest of these, but it was the closest to the core territory, bordering the Yinzhou island where the dragons dwelled. It was practically adjacent to the capital. This alone demonstrated the immense favor and status held by the Beihai Dragon King.

The central sea was perfectly calm. A few small boats drifted on the currents. A figure squatted on the bow of the lead vessel, his eyes glowing green as he stared intently ahead. After a moment, he slipped back into the cabin and whispered, "Young Master, Changliu Gorge is just ahead."

Inside, a young man leaned against the bulkhead, his pair of golden pupils emitting a faint, yin-like glow in the shadows. Hearing the report, he merely replied, "Slow the boat. Follow the coast west and look for settlements. There is no need to head straight for the gorge."

The green-eyed man immediately rose, hopped back to the bow, and drew a pair of slimy, dark-green hands from within his robes, using them to slowly propel the boat forward.

This passenger was, of course, Li Zhouwei.

Back then, Li Zhouwei had ambushed and killed Situ Mo, seizing his Dharma Artifact. He was pursued to the borders of the Myriad Radiance region, where, in full view of numerous Changxiao Gate cultivators, he slew Yunan Zi and escaped into the Sword Gate's territory.

The Sword Gate dispatched a main lineage disciple, Cheng Xuhua, to greet him and invited him to rest in the local prefecture. But there was no decree from the Purple Mansion Realm, no heavyweight figures appeared, and they certainly did not invite Li Zhouwei into their mountain stronghold. He understood immediately: the Sword Gate desperately wanted no part of this conflict and was acting purely out of basic courtesy.

Although Cheng Xuhua was clearly stunned by Li Zhouwei's actions and remained perfectly polite, the courtyard they offered him did not even contain a cup of tea. Li Zhouwei wasted no time. He hastily packed and used a golden talisman to escape to the Eastern Sea.

Everyone knew the Changxiao Gate and the Hengzhu Dao did not get along, so he absolutely could not flee toward Hengzhu. Furthermore, Changxiao's Lightboat Reefs and the Hengzhu's Suzhù Reefs are situated extremely close to one another. Li Zhouwei feared, one, that someone might be waiting to ambush him midway, and two, he himself had never intended to throw his lot in with the Hengzhu Dao. Thus, he chose the opposite path, traveling straight into the heart of the Converging Heaven Sea.

Traveling day and night, he reached the Beihai Sea. He selected a remote location to remotely pay his respects to Li Chenghui, then immediately entered seclusion to heal his wounds and refine his cultivation. Having made significant progress, he only emerged in the last few days.

He was at the late stage of the Foundation Establishment Realm. He had *just* broken through right before he was forced to fight his way out from the suppression of numerous Changxiao cultivators and their Dharma Artifacts. The ordeal had severely destabilized his foundation. He consumed a medicinal pill to stabilize his cultivation base, estimating that after a year or so of consolidation, his cultivation would be perfected, and he could begin practicing his secret arts.

Only now, however, did he finally have a moment to truly sit and process everything. He sighed softly.

'I originally assumed that with Wang Fu dead, even though Changxiao bears extreme malice toward the "Son of Destiny" and wants to plot against our family, they would at least adhere to the basic rules. It should have been a long-term strategic game. I never, ever expected that old bastard to be so decisively vicious.'

Regarding the Li family's strategic maneuvering at the Purple Mansion Realm level, he was the most informed person aside from Li Ximing himself. This incident appeared to have been triggered by Profound Peak, but in reality, it was a meticulous, long-brewing plot by Changxiao. They simply hadn't anticipated that Changxiao's determination had reached such lengths. That Purple Mansion formation over the lake was not the work of a single day. Li Ximing was bound to expose his movements in the Eastern Sea eventually. Even if the Profound Peak incident hadn't happened, Changxiao would have manufactured another pretext.

Now that he had calmed down, he sorted through the clues. 'Changxiao's scheme didn't begin the moment the Daoist Master broke through. It likely started much earlier, with Yehui and Changxiao planning to boil the frog—a scheme to kill me while maintaining their reputation. But then the Daoist Master broke through abruptly. Yehui immediately tried to pull out, forcing Changxiao to abandon that plan and move directly to assassinate the Daoist Master instead…'

With no news regarding either Changxiao or Li Ximing, Li Zhouwei had no intention of leaving the Beihai Sea. He had chosen this location with extreme care.

This Beihai Dragon King was the son of Dongfang You. Not only was he powerful and deeply favored, but most critically, this Dragon King was the master of the White Dragon lineage and the father of Dingjiao—the Dragon Prince of the Clear Seas and Serene Pools, Inheritor of the Azure.

Years ago, Li Zhouwei had accepted a request from Dingjiao and helped facilitate the 'fox-dragon affair.' The White Dragon lineage certainly hadn't acted without reason. Setting aside friendship and face, Li Zhouwei possessed something that the White Dragon lineage coveted. This was, therefore, the safest place he could possibly be.

'If I had fled south, who knows if the Hengzhu Dao would have used me to escalate their feud with the Changxiao Gate. I would just be placing myself in someone else's hands. Changxiao's methods are bizarre; the Hengzhu Dao's protection is simply not as reliable as the dragons' authority.'

'The Hengzhu Dao conflicts with both the Golden Feather Sect and the Azure Pond Sect; they are separate factions. The Daoist Master mentioned this when he visited Daoist Master Yuanxiu. I cannot go there lightly. Conversely, the moment I entered the Beihai Sea, the dragon lineage almost certainly knew. I might even get an opportunity to meet the King.'

Therefore, he had subdued several local demons along the way to serve as his attendants. Li Zhouwei silently took stock. "I killed Situ Mo and seized his Dharma Artifacts… that man's personal fortune was quite substantial. It's just a pity I couldn't grab Yunan Zi's belongings. I was too worried about divination tracking… otherwise, adding that old man's wealth, it would have been a true windfall."

But Situ Mo had been ordered around by various Purple Mansions; it was hard to say if his belongings were 'clean.' Left in a storage bag, they were fine. Taking them out was another matter.

Furthermore, his own Immortal Foundation possessed an extremely powerful ability to suppress and seize Dharma Artifacts, and he had stolen quite a few from the Changxiao Gate. Naturally, he couldn't use any of them himself. He had used the Immortal Mirror to inspect his haul; one Mansion Water gourd artifact still had the residue of a tracking formation carved into its inner wall. It

was a ticking time bomb. He didn't dare remove it, planning instead to exchange the entire tainted lot while he was in the Beihai Sea.

He summoned one of the demons. The demons of the Beihai Sea were generally more knowledgeable and cunning than those of the Southern Borderlands. But having eaten men, their temperaments were all the same: they respected strength, not diplomacy, fearing power, not virtue.

He forced the demon to kneel and demanded, "What kind of place is this Changliu Gorge? Is there a market for spiritual items?"

The demon appeared to be some kind of fish creature, dripping slime onto the deck. It scrambled to reply, "Reporting to the Great King! At Changliu Gorge, there is a Changliu Mountain. At the foot of this mountain, there is indeed a market! A Purple Mansion Daoist Master lives on the mountain; I hear she is called Daoist Master Xiang Chun. Her temperament is excellent! She treats demons and immortals as equals, and she is a good friend of the Beihai Dragon King! It is rare for us demons in Beihai to have such a market…"

"Oh? Such a place exists…" Li Zhouwei was beginning to understand. He nodded. "No wonder you lot have some semblance of worldliness and have all cobbled together partial human forms. It turns out you have a market where you can learn such things."

These Qi Refining demons could not, of course, achieve a true human transformation; they had merely practiced some minor techniques to appear as half-human lackeys. Proud demons with purer bloodlines would never stoop to such arts.

"Then head to the market," Li Zhouwei commanded.

The demons began to row. Li Zhouwei was already calculating the situation. 'Daoist Master Xiang Chun… Her mountain is here in Beihai, bordering the Yinzhou continent, and she is close with the Dragon King. Her stance and identity need no further explanation. I recall the Daoist Master mentioning her once. No wonder she's such an accommodating figure. So this is Changliu Mountain. Perhaps… perhaps I can inquire about the news here.'

He sat cross-legged on the boat, closing his eyes to cultivate. After some time, he heard a commotion outside. His spiritual sense immediately swept outward.

Several demons dressed in azure robes stood before his boat. He heard the trembling, timid voice of the toad demon from the bow. "My lords… my lords, please,

hold on! The one in this boat is also a Great King! I cannot afford to slight either side! If this one becomes angry, you all… you might not fare so well. Please, reconsider!"

The lead azure-robed demon had two long ribbons tied about its neck. It had a high nose and bulging eyes—a domineering visage—yet its tone was not arrogant. It bowed slightly. "Fellow Daoist, you misunderstand. Please, just announce our presence. We have come under orders to request an audience with the Great King."

The toad demon was a natural coward; speaking that one sentence of warning had already taken all its courage. It didn't bother arguing further, simply stumbling back to make the report. The azure-robed demon followed. Li Zhouwei, already grasping the situation, lifted the cabin curtain.

His golden pupils swept over them, causing the lead demon to shudder involuntarily. "Who is your master?" Li Zhouwei asked casually.

The azure-robed demon immediately bowed low, speaking with profound respect. "Reporting to the Great King, my master is the The Water-Parting Dragon King of the Boundless Sea's Primal Serenity. His fief is here in the Beihai Sea. He is currently resting upon Changliu Mountain and wishes to invite the Great King to join him."

Chapter 814: The Secret of the Great Ancestor

"So it's the Beihai Sea Dragon King. A simple summons would have sufficed; there was no need for such a formal invitation."

The azure-robed demon soldier cautiously raised his eyes. He saw an imposing man in soft armor step out of the cabin, his attitude polite enough.

"Lead the way."

These few azure-robed demons were all at the late-stage Foundation Establishment Realm. Li Zhouwei used his ocular technique and discerned they were some kind of deep-sea green shrimp. To command such a presence in the Beihai Sea, they had to be serving a Dragon-kin. Li Zhouwei had a decent relationship with Dingjiao, and this Dragon King was considered an elder.

A massive, jewel-encrusted, high-backed chair rose from the sea, lifted by a host of demons. It was as large as a house, supported beneath by nine black-backed turtles. The armrests were fashioned from two white Hooked Serpent heads, polished smooth and inscribed with glowing blue runes, emanating a fierce aura.

The Dragon-kin had used Hooked Serpent nobles for decoration for ages. Guest chair armrests, in particular, often used their heads. They disdained black or gray serpents, insisting on using only white ones. Li Zhouwei landed on the seat; his entire human frame was smaller than one of the armrests. The crowd of demons swayed as they carried him forward.

Li Zhouwei had assumed some minor Dragon-kin official had detected him. He never expected the Beihai Sea Dragon King himself to send an invitation. It seemed like a great honor, but it was actually a headache.

'Is this necessary? Unsolicited kindness is, nine times out of ten, a trap, especially coming from a Demon of this level. Dragons and the White Qilin share

a bond, and Dingjiao even said this Beihai Sea Dragon King once met Emperor Gong of Wei. But if the relationship was truly that reliable, there would be at least a single White Qilin left in the entire Eastern Sea…'

He sat cross-legged, sinking into heavy thought. The seat beneath him moved slowly but covered ground rapidly. Hundreds of miles passed in what felt like moments. The water currents rushed by. The toad stationed beneath the seat called out obsequiously:

"Your Majesty, we've arrived at Changliu Mountain!"

'Changliu Mountain?'

Li Zhouwei immediately sensed something was wrong.

'If the Beihai Sea Dragon King invited me, why didn't he take me to his Dragon Palace in the Beihai Sea? Why call me to Changliu Mountain!'

He frowned. The azure-robed demon at his side was sharp. The instant the toad finished shouting, he immediately followed up, his voice soft:

"Indeed, that is Changliu Mountain ahead. Our Lord rarely emerges from seclusion. He is currently on the mountain discussing the profound with a Daoist Master. Knowing you were also in the Beihai Sea, he invited you to join them."

'It seems this Daoist Master of Changliu Mountain… is truly intimate with the Dragon-kin.'

Li Zhouwei nodded thoughtfully. The conveyance stopped at the foot of the mountain, where a young woman dressed as a Daoist nun waited. She looked sixteen or seventeen, her face rosy. The moment she saw him, she actually bowed low to the ground.

"Greetings, Your Majesty. The two lords are waiting for you on the mountain."

Li Zhouwei felt a slight shock, his expression shifting. He re-examined the immortal mountain but saw no one else, only this single Daoist nun. The two green shrimp demons followed him ashore. The Changliu Mountain nun bowed repeatedly to them, but the two demons merely offered a slight nod in return.

Li Zhouwei remained silent.

'Changliu Mountain is also a Purple Mansion Realm lineage… yet they debase themselves like this. The Converging Heaven Sea… it truly is nothing more than the backyard of the Dragon-kin…'

He proceeded up the mountain. Along the way, he saw no cultivators coming or going, nor any medicine gardens or pavilions. The spirit trees flanking the path were dense, obscuring nearly everything from view, which only intensified his feeling of unease.

They soon reached the summit. The two azure-robed demons moved ahead to guide him, and he finally saw a vast, luxurious palace. They passed through three successive gates, all guarded by demons. The pillars lining the path grew taller, painted with the wave patterns of Converging Water.

"My Lord! The White Qilin has been brought!"

The two demons spoke in unison, their voices echoing in the vast, empty hall. From the front, however, came the sound of sweet, high-pitched, rustling giggles.

Li Zhouwei performed his salutations and slightly raised his brow.

On the main throne at the highest point sat a robust, gray-haired man. He had a high-bridged nose, narrow eyes, and wildly disheveled hair. His eyes were shockingly large and glowed with a flashing red light. The light in the palace was already dim; viewed from afar, he looked like a fiend from a grim fog.

He wore a suit of silver-white soft armor. Long, gray-white fur spilled from the gaps in the armor plates, flowing down his body. His hands were as large as human heads, his claws gleaming coldly as they rested on the armrests.

This demon sat with his legs spread wide. Sitting on his left knee, which was as broad as a small table, was a woman. She had dark black hair and an innocent face, draped in a semi-transparent white gauze. Her pristine white thigh and most of her upper torso were completely bare. Her eyes were shaded and remote, their color indistinct.

Within the massive palace court, dozens of other Daoist nuns of varying beauty sat gathered below the main throne. Some held fruit platters, others raised golden jugs, all of them flirting and laughing, each displaying their own charms.

The rosy-cheeked Daoist nun who had greeted him at the mountain's base went up, smiled, and greeted her companions, joining her sisters to kneel and massage the Dragon King's feet.

Li Zhouwei lowered his gaze slightly, refusing to watch. The suspicion in his heart was suddenly confirmed.

'Just as I thought…'

The one on the throne was undoubtedly the Beihai Sea Dragon King. The cultivator who met him had said, 'two lords are waiting.' The entire atmosphere of Changliu Mountain was one of dissolute indulgence. Who else could the Daoist nun on his knee possibly be?

She had to be the Purple Mansion Realm Daoist Master of Changliu Mountain, the Daoist Master Xiang Chun.

'No wonder… No wonder Changliu Mountain receives such preferential treatment. No wonder the Daoist Master Xiang Chun treats humans and demons as equals. The demons in the Beihai Sea only dare to say the Daoist Master and the Dragon King are 'close'… This goes far beyond just being close…'

'I heard Daoist Master Xiang Chun is mid-stage Purple Mansion Realm and not old; she only broke through in the last hundred years. The Beihai Sea Dragon King is old enough to be her grandmaster… Several of the Dragon Princes are probably older than Daoist Master Xiang Chun… She clearly isn't his official wife. Dragons are inherently lecherous… and no one dares to spread a single word of gossip about it…'

This was truly an awkward situation. The Beihai Sea Dragon King obviously didn't mind the relationship being known, or he wouldn't be sitting here so brazenly. What Daoist Master Xiang Chun thought about it, however, was hard to say.

Li Zhouwei couldn't fathom their motives. Having completed his salutations, he could only offer an ambiguous greeting:

"My respects to both the lords…"

The gray-haired man spoke. His voice was just as fierce as his appearance—gruff and deviant. "White Qilin… I heard Jiao'er mention you. I just finished my seclusion, and since you happened to be in the Beihai Sea, I decided to see you."

He loosened his grip, allowing Xiang Chun to slide off his knee. With a wave of his sleeve, the crowd of female cultivators below dispersed. The moment Xiang Chun's feet touched the ground, a set of black-gray Daoist robes materialized, covering her completely. She took a seat to the side.

Only then did the Beihai Sea Dragon King continue, "This is Daoist Master Xiang Chun, the mistress of Changliu Mountain."

After he spoke, Daoist Master Xiang Chun replied in a soft voice, "Lieyun… so this is the White Qilin. I have read much about them, but this is the first time I have seen one."

Unsure what medicine these two were selling, Li Zhouwei could only maintain perfect etiquette and bow once more.

Dongfang Lieyun's status was clearly far beyond Dingjiao's. He didn't offer Li Zhouwei a seat, instead speaking with detached interest.

"I saw Emperor Gong of Wei in my youth. That one was a Golden Core direct descendant and the lord of a Immortal Dynasty. He was purer than this one. But his temperament wasn't much like a White Qilin. I imagine it was because the state's destiny was fading, and the Bright Yang Fruition Attainment was unstable."

Xiang Chun nodded, whispering, "That was during the Wei era. Today, he is a rare sight in the world, a White Qilin."

The gray-haired man blinked slightly, his glittering red eyes finally turning toward Li Zhouwei. Dongfang Lieyun smiled.

"I sought you out for Xiang Chun."

Li Zhouwei looked up. The Dragon King said flatly:

"Bright Yang and Veiled Yin are the foundation of Valley Water. Xiang Chun requires White Qilin blood to cultivate a divine ability."

A bitter chill shot up his spine. Li Zhouwei quickly composed himself. His expression remained unchanged as he replied, "To be able to help the Daoist Master is this junior's honor."

Dongfang Lieyun laughed loudly and nodded slightly toward Xiang Chun, his voice softening.

"I will take him now. When the required years are fulfilled, I will refine a measure of White Qilin blood and send it over to you."

He then rose from the main throne, casting an enormous shadow over the hall. Without sparing another glance at anyone, he waved his sleeve. Immediately,

azure seawater gathered at his feet, and they warped away through the Great Void.

The entire grand hall instantly fell empty. Daoist Master Xiang Chun remained standing in the same spot, staring coldly into the empty space. After a long moment, a slight smile touched her face.

"White Qilin blood… It's mine!"

Amidst a blur of azure light, Li Zhouwei's vision cleared, revealing a dazzling crystalline expanse. A palace seemingly made of crystal, with jade-like steps appearing one by one, filled his sight. He let out a breath. Not far away stood a jade platform.

An intense chill radiated from his side.

The Beihai Sea Dragon King, Dongfang Lieyun—who looked more fiend than man—was sitting sprawled on the steps beside him. His form was so massive that his legs spanned five or six steps at once. He held a jade pot, those crimson pupils fixed squarely on Li Zhouwei.

He glanced at Li Zhouwei, then stood up, his voice low.

"I called you here for a few things. In this world, only on the surface of the Converging Heaven Sea can certain matters be discussed. It is fortunate we can settle them all today."

Dongfang Lieyun's voice had changed, shedding its earlier deviant tone, becoming heavy and powerful. Li Zhouwei immediately understood.

"Your Majesty, please speak."

Dongfang Lieyun paced to the great doors of the crystal palace and stood with his back to Li Zhouwei, his voice deep.

"The Wei Great Ancestor, Li Qianyuan. Do you know of him?"

Li Zhouwei sensed the gravity in that low tone. A creeping sense of dread, a feeling of mortal danger, prickled his skin. "The founding monarch of Wei. Naturally, I know of him."

Dongfang Lieyun spoke quietly. "The Zhou Dynasty divided the world, sparking endless wars that could not be stopped. Finally, the True Monarch fell, and the state lineage was severed by Jin. From then on, the world knew no peace. Often, the death of one emperor meant the end of the dynasty. There was even a century that saw six changes of rulers. The Great Ancestor emerged from Guanlong to conquer Qi and Lu, unifying the north. He became the first emperor to verify Bright Yang, and the very first human master of the Bright Yang Fruition Attainment."

"Following that, he established the Immortal Dynasty. The Imperial Throne *was* the Fruition Attainment. To ascend the throne was to borrow the status of a Golden Core; to accept an official rank was to borrow the dharma power of Bright Yang. Although the Wei court was consequently brutal, it was a true Immortal Dynasty… Of Wei, Qi, Liang, and Zhao, only Emperor Wu of Liang learned his method. Only the Wei and Liang dynasties possessed this power. The others had only the name of a Immortal Dynasty, not the reality."

"As for refuse like Zhao and Yan, it is laughable. They were merely puppets of the Buddhist cultivators, yet they dared call themselves emperors!"

He continued to face away from Li Zhouwei, explaining as if to himself:

"Everyone believed the Wei dynasty he founded was the greatest method ever devised to solve the barrier between immortal and mortal, the best way to build an immortal kingdom… Yet such a figure, a man only half a step from the Dao Embryo, suddenly died a violent death. The Bright Yang Fruition Attainment returned to the Great Void. Because of this, Emperor Gong of Wei collapsed, exploding into a pile of rotten meat right in front of the court. The imperial majesty built over generations became a terrifying, horrific joke… The officials simultaneously lost their power, and thus, the nation disintegrated."

"This method of the immortal kingdom was subsequently stolen by the Buddhists. They studied and improved it, filling in the gaps generation by generation, which led to the Seven Phases Buddhist Land method they use today. Ultimately, the Northern Buddhists persecute the Wei Li clan so desperately not just because of karma. It is just like a common thief who steals another's

property, then jumps up and down, screaming accusations, desperately wishing they could kill the original owner so the stolen item truly becomes their own."

Li Zhouwei's hair stood on end. Dongfang Lieyun finally turned his face, revealing an expression of grim, agonizing depression.

"It was Luoxia… You have met Li Xunquan. Mount Luoxia's plot for the Bright Yang position is no secret. But the Great Ancestor's influence on the Bright Yang Fruition Attainment is too deep. He imbued it with too much meaning, and Heaven itself approved him. The Fruition Attainment recognizes only him. But he has lost his sanity, so he can only fall from the Great Void, again and again… Luoxia applies its influence bit by bit, using these repeated falls to wear away his divine power and his fate—and, of course, to torture Li Xunquan."

"The last one… your family is familiar with him. It was Chu Yi."

Li Zhouwei snapped his head up. Dongfang Lieyun continued, "After a thousand years, Bright Yang is finally, greatly corrupted. Luoxia has gradually seized the true initiative. They opened their grotto-heaven, leaking vast quantities of Bright Yang cultivation methods into the world. Normally, cultivating Bright Yang would help the Great Ancestor, but he is too defiled. When these cultivators impact the Purple Mansion Realm or the Golden Core, influencing heaven and earth, it instead helps to shake the Fruition Attainment."

"And you… you are a watershed moment."

Dongfang Lieyun's expression was complex, tinged with a cruel venom. "The Bright Yang Fruition Attainment is finally willing to bestow its destiny upon another. That destiny is upon you. Your probability of successfully impacting the Purple Mansion Realm is enormous; you could even strike for the Fruition Attainment itself. You don't even need to succeed. The very act of *trying* will cause him immense damage… Although we lack the power to rescue the Great Ancestor, based on the meager strength we do possess, my hornless dragon lineage *should* kill you."

"But, inconveniently, you are a descendant of Wei Li. You can be considered a junior of Emperor Gong of Wei… From that angle, it seems we should help you. You must understand the hornless dragon lineage's complicated feelings toward you… Ignoring you… already seems the best possible solution."

His voice gradually turned sinister. "My branch was closer to Emperor Gong of Wei. Some time ago, I sent Dingjiao to retrieve you, to slowly reveal the matter of the Wei Li, all while trying to avoid Mount Luoxia's notice. But things changed. You possess the body of a White Qilin. Changxiao covets your destiny. He chased Li Ximing all the way to the Eastern Sea, shamelessly probing with that dog face of his, while Luoxia watched from the sidelines."

"A spirit cultivator of my Dragon kin has deep ties to your Li clan and was forced to intervene and save him. She is intimately connected to the Dragon Monarch. The moment she acted, high-level cultivators could deduce exactly what step the Dragon Monarch's secret affairs had reached. This situation twisted and turned, becoming Luoxia's poisonous scheme to probe my hornless dragon lineage, allowing them to see the Dragon Monarch's true state. I do not know if Changxiao intended this, but the people from Mount Luoxia have already succeeded."

"This move put us badly on the defensive… This Venerable One sensed then that something was wrong."

Li Zhouwei's expression changed drastically as he realized the Dragon King's gaze was utterly bleak. Dongfang Lieyun's voice dropped, turning cold as steel.

"It made This Venerable One consider a possibility. Mount Luoxia is extremely close to Bright Yang. They could not possibly be unaware of your destiny. So why didn't they come to collect you? Wouldn't it be far better to have you under their control? What if… what if this destiny of yours was *lured* out by them, deliberately bestowed upon a Wei Li descendant… specifically to trap my lineage in this dilemma? You… and the entire Li clan… what if you are nothing but a trap, deliberately allowed to exist by Mount Luoxia?"

The Dragon King's pupils contracted, narrowing until they were almost two vertical red lines. He hissed, "You are the handiwork of Mount Luoxia."

Chapter 815: White Dew Blood

Li Zhouwei stared opposite the red-eyed Dragon King, a peak Purple Mansion cultivator who possessed five complete Divine Abilities. Dongfang Lieyun's ferocious aura seemed to overflow. As his emotions shifted, the entire crystal palace trembled slightly, letting out a low hum.

He had spoken quickly and at length, stacking one deduction and calculation upon another. The interrogation was imminent. Li Zhouwei barely had time for a lightning-fast review of the situation before he answered:

"Since Your Majesty believes I am the result of Mount Luoxia influencing the bestowal of the Bright Yang Fruition Attainment, and the Great Ancestor is already so weakened… even if I were to die suddenly, would they not simply bestow a second attainment? If Mount Luoxia placed that second chance within their own mountain, wouldn't killing me be nothing more than drinking poison to quench their thirst?"

"Furthermore, ignorance was one thing, but now that Senior has revealed these secrets to me, is seeking that Fruition Attainment… truly something this junior should attempt? Failure to achieve the Fruition Attainment means death. But if I succeed, could Mount Luoxia bear to watch a Fruition Attainment they plotted over for a thousand years fall into the hands of a Li Qianyuan descendant? The Bright Yang lineage values hierarchy and orthodoxy above all. If this junior becomes a True Monarch, how could this Fruition Attainment possibly satisfy Mount Luoxia's ambitions?"

Dongfang Lieyun had yet to reply. Li Zhouwei maintained his calm expression and continued, "This junior knows nothing of destiny's calculations. I only know that as a White Qilin—even if I truly was born of Mount Luoxia's influence—cooperating with the dragon lineage to protect the Great Ancestor's position is the only logical path. No matter how powerful Mount Luoxia is, they ultimately have no place for me. If Your Majesty truly intended to kill me, there would be no need for this long discussion. You merely wished me to understand the stakes."

For the dragon lineage, the worst possible outcome was Li Zhouwei failing to achieve the Fruition Attainment, which would mean all their efforts had been for nothing. Conversely, Mount Luoxia was the one who *most* desired Li Zhouwei to make the attempt… Dongfang Lieyun's expression remained grim, his deep voice resounding:

"Once the Dao path is severed, how could a White Qilin accept it? Will you not also perish when your lifespan ends? Any ambitious cultivator would rather test the Bright Yang against Mount Luoxia. If you maneuver against them and actually succeed in becoming a True Monarch, the wonders of such divine abilities are profound. Might there not be a way to reconcile? Even if you perish, you gain infinite chances at rebirth. That is far better than dying as a Purple Mansion cultivator."

Li Zhouwei did not back down. "If I become a True Monarch and then perish, I will surely be suppressed by Mount Luoxia for eternity, never to see the light of day. As a Purple Mansion cultivator, I still have the option of seeking Intercalary or Surplus Positions. At worst, if the dragon lineage grants me a measure of Metallic Essence, I can reincarnate and escape this cage entirely."

Li Zhouwei had made the outrageous demand of exchanging for Metallic Essence, yet Dongfang Lieyun showed no surprise. Standing far off at the front of the hall, the demon ignored the mention of the surplus positions and spoke in a quieter voice:

"If you reincarnate and cultivate another path, you may never again touch the realm of Five Divine Abilities."

Li Zhouwei fell silent for a moment. The demon took a step forward, the vicious light in his eyes having faded significantly. He finally took the initiative again:

"Whether you are Mount Luoxia's gambit or not, I have no reason to kill you. I brought you here this time to clarify the situation… Although Mount Luoxia will certainly seek you out once you break through to the Purple Mansion Realm, the true ownership of the Bright Yang Fruition Attainment is not something you alone can decide."

"By the time you reach the late stage of the Purple Mansion Realm, the Great Ancestor's condition will remain unknown. Whether you intend to seek an surplus position, an intercalary one, or—left with no other choice—reincarnate, will all depend on the situation at that time."

Li Zhouwei silently exhaled in relief. He bowed and replied, "The Great Ancestor was harmed by Mount Luoxia. The dragon lineage has been an ally for a millennium. Zhouwei can still distinguish right from wrong."

The Beihai Dragon King did not answer him, instead walking step-by-step up to the highest jade platform. His already massive body cast immense shadows. Standing at the edge of the dais, he looked up and said softly, "I must collect this [White Qilin Blood]. First, I have my own use for it. Second, it serves as an excuse to deal with Xiang Chun. But rest assured, you will not suffer a loss in this matter. I will have someone bring you spiritual items…"

Li Zhouwei looked up. He knew this trial was unavoidable, but he still had an unconfirmed suspicion. Sensing the Dragon King was currently amenable, he seized the chance to ask, "There is one thing I am unsure if I should ask… Among the dragon lineage… which one has such close ties to my Wei Li clan that they would intervene to save me?"

Dongfang Lieyun glanced at him. "That is a long story… It has much to do with Daoist Master Zipei from years past, and it is not convenient for me to speak of it here. If you are interested in investigating, continue heading east. Past the Crimson Reef Island region, there is a sea to the north called the Lie Sea. Go there and ask yourself."

The Dragon King's expression darkened slightly. "That dog Changxiao, however, is sharp. He sensed something was amiss. Whether he intended to or not, he understood he had become Mount Luoxia's pawn, and now he's hiding… I wonder who he is colluding with in the shadows…"

Li Zhouwei understood the implications of this. He bowed. "Many thanks to the dragon lineage for intervening!"

Dongfang Lieyun gave a slight wave of his hand. Wind and clouds surged through the crystal palace. Tides of white vapor poured in from outside, swiftly climbing the jade-green steps until they swirled past their calves.

Dongfang Lieyun and Li Zhouwei stood together within this white vapor, as if atop the highest peaks of the sky. The surrounding crystalline, emerald scenery was completely obscured, leaving only an endless white expanse and the nearby jade platform.

The vapor instantly coalesced, condensing beside them into the form of a young man. He was dressed in immaculate white robes, his hair neatly combed. His

face was slightly round, his eyebrows short and delicate, and his eyes pure black. He offered a classic, elegant bow:

"Dongfang Heyun greets Your Majesty."

The Dragon King shifted his red eyes. "I have told you several times, there is no need for such courtesy. You are now master of your own divine abilities. If you continue this way, I will be the one who feels awkward."

Dongfang Heyun smiled slightly, but his bowed back did not straighten. "Proper etiquette must be observed. This is something I learned from the human clans in ancient times, and I have benefited from it ever since. I cannot simply discard it just because my strength has increased and I have learned a few divine abilities..."

The demon was very polite to him and didn't argue, merely nodding. Dongfang Heyun then turned his gaze to Li Zhouwei, nodded slightly, and smiled. "So the White Qilin is here. It truly has been a long time... I wanted to visit Fellow Daoist Xizhi several times, but he is always in the Ten Thousand Mile Shitang, and it is inconvenient for me to see him there."

Logically, the dragon lineage had no fear of the Azure Pond Sect. There were few places in the Eastern Sea or Southern Sea that a dragon could not go. At the Ten Thousand Mile Shitang, the most he might encounter was Si Boxiu, and to put it bluntly, Dongfang Heyun really didn't need to give Daoist Master Yuanxiu much face.

Yet Dongfang Heyun said it was "inconvenient," making it unclear if he was just being polite or if there was something preventing him from entering the Shitang. Li Zhouwei bowed, offering a casual courtesy: "My clan elder has also mentioned Senior's grace and holds you in high esteem. If Senior wishes to meet, you need only send word, and we will naturally select a place to host you."

Dongfang Heyun smiled and nodded politely. High above, the Beihai Dragon King gestured. The white-robed young man retrieved a dark gold box from his sleeve, adorned with the subtle etching of a rampant qilin.

Dongfang Heyun gently stroked the box, seemingly chanting an incantation. The dark gold box popped open automatically. Inside, nestled on folded black silk, sat a round porcelain dish the size of a pastry, filled with a shimmering, golden-white liquid.

The moment this golden-white spiritual item appeared, it was as if a sun of the same color had risen in the clouds. The light was dazzling; ten thousand rays of dawn burst through the vapor, illuminating the entire white domain.

Dongfang Heyun extended a hand, and a fierce wind instantly gathered the clouds from all directions, forcing all the nascent sunlight back into the box. Only then did the surrounding scenery return to normal. He smiled.

"This item is surely familiar to you, Fellow Daoist. It is called [White Du Blood]. In ancient times, it was known as the [Shuyang Victorious Qilin Light]. The beast of the Bright Yang is the [Shuyang]. The Shuyang's eldest son was called [Shengming]—that is, the very first White Qilin. During a solar eclipse, the light that falls from the White Qilin becomes [White Du Blood]."

The Li family was indeed familiar with the name [White Du Blood]. Years ago, when Li Ximing was preparing to break through to the Purple Mansion Realm, this was one of the Bright Yang spiritual items on his list. No wonder they had never found a trace of it; if the White Qilin was extinct, how could [White Du Blood] exist? Although there was often more than one way to condense a spiritual item, this one was almost certainly tied to the White Qilin.

But Li Zhouwei had a more pressing concern. He looked up, seizing the chance. "You all refer to me as a White Qilin. How do I differ from [Shengming]?"

Dongfang Heyun chuckled. "You possess the destiny of a White Qilin, and that destiny is abundant—so rich it is as if you are the reincarnation of the White Qilin itself. However, you lack the *essence* of the White Qilin. That is why you cultivated the Purple Mansion Golden Core Demonic Dao, to complete that essence. Once you break through the Golden Core, you will be no different from the Victorious Qilin… When that time comes, during an eclipse, the [Shuyang Victorious Qilin Light] will fall from you as well."

"It is only because you already possessed such a complete White Qilin destiny that the Life Divine Ability of the Purple Mansion Golden Core Demonic Dao came so naturally to you… If you had entered the Buddhist Dao, you would have instantly attained a position. The Undefeated King of Brightness was just like that."

This was rare information. Li Zhouwei quickly asked, "Is the Life Divine Ability the same as destiny?"

Dongfang Heyun patiently explained: "The Life Divine Ability is still a divine ability. Possessing the destiny makes cultivating the Life Divine Ability easy, but the Life Divine Ability cannot create destiny. Once one ascends to a Fruition Attainment, it will naturally be conferred upon cultivators of the Purple Mansion Golden Core Demonic Dao. The Metallic Essence is not the point; the *position* is the key. It is only rumored that the great cultivators of antiquity—figures at the Immortal Lord level—could rely on Metallic Essence to birth destiny."

Li Zhouwei was extremely sharp. Hearing this, he immediately understood. 'It seems the key to everything is attaining the Fruition Attainment. Seeking destiny through essence… is perhaps truly seeking the Fruition Attainment through essence, and then gaining destiny via the Fruition Attainment. Thus, completing both…'

Since the Beihai Dragon King was still waiting above, he said no more. Dongfang Heyun continued, "Preparation prevents calamity. We are taking this measure of [White Qilin Blood] from you not just because Lady Xiang Chun requires it, but because His Majesty must also inspect it. We are primarily examining the bloodline; we do not need this item for its spiritual properties. Doing this *before* the Purple Mansion Realm is an act that damages your foundation, but if we waited until *after* the Purple Mansion, the damage would be extremely difficult to remedy."

Dongfang Heyun maintained his amicable attitude and offered the explanation. Li Zhouwei finally understood.

'So that's how it is! They are truly cautious. Even now, they still need to inspect my bloodline… Xiang Chun needing the spiritual item is just a pretext. The dragon lineage is extracting it themselves, verifying that I am truly the White Qilin of the Wei Li clan, and then casually gifting it to Xiang Chun. The intermediate process is what matters most!'

Dongfang Heyun brought the small, pastry-sized porcelain dish over. "With this [White Du Blood], you only need to refine it. When I extract your essence blood from the outside, it will not harm your foundation; it may even consolidate and deepen your cultivation."

The young man was, as ever, courteous, even making a small joke. "Of course you cannot use this much. Just a drop on your glabella is more than enough. If you had waited until after the Purple Mansion Realm, you would have needed the entire portion."

He seemed hesitant to touch the spiritual item directly, merely offering it forward. Li Zhouwei extended his index finger and touched it. His fingertip grew intensely hot. When he brushed it against his glabella, no liquid remained on his hand, but a surging radiance emerged from the spot between his brows.

Li Zhouwei sat cross-legged on the jade platform. Dongfang Heyun formed seals nearby, seemingly examining something, as dots of golden liquid quickly gathered at the tip of his other hand.

The Beihai Dragon King observed from his high seat with lowered eyes. Time passed. Dongfang Heyun retracted his hand, now holding a golden bead of liquid the size of a fingernail.

Li Zhouwei remained seated with his eyes shut tight, his face pale. The Profound Light from his glabella enveloped his entire body, rapidly replenishing his vital energy. This was clearly not a process that would end quickly. Dongfang Heyun raised his hand, and the sea of clouds swiftly surged to cover him, isolating and protecting him.

He hurried up the platform, offering the golden bead with both hands. "Your Majesty, please inspect it."

Dongfang Lieyun, on the main seat, gently took the bead and examined it in his palm. After a long moment, the red-eyed Dragon King said in a low voice, "Although this is not a detailed inspection… it is, at the very least, of the orthodox Bright Yang lineage. There is no mistake…"

He pondered for a long time before speaking again, quietly. "Heyun, I find his personality lacks the dominance and ruthlessness… it does not resemble a White Qilin… yet it also lacks the insidious volatility of a White Cicada. If I had to say… he reminds me more of Emperor Gong of Wei."

Dongfang Heyun smiled slightly and bowed. "In this subordinate's view… that is perfectly normal. After all, the Great Ancestor of Wei is in an abnormal state, and the Bright Yang has likewise been affected. The signs were already present during Emperor Gong's time. For him to resemble Emperor Gong now, is that not perfectly logical? Lacking dominance and tyranny is actually better. We need not worry that his temperament is too fierce, causing him to rush headlong for that Fruition Attainment… This is truly ideal."

"Indeed." The Beihai Dragon King couldn't help but nod. "No matter how much they influence the Bright Yang Fruition Attainment, they cannot bestow several

lines of destiny at once. Calculating the days, Mount Luoxia is about to move on the Bright Yang's descent again. We must watch over this side; how much can they manage over there? One Li Zhouwei is the most they can handle, and he is safe right under our noses…"

Dongfang Heyun nodded respectfully. "The Bright Yang Surplus Position is extremely difficult to obtain. The Dongli Sect has researched the Radiant Fire Intercalary Position, but it is no simple matter either, especially right under Mount Luoxia's watch, and having to cultivate the divine abilities… I just wonder what the North will say of this."

At the mention of this, the demon on the high seat clearly hesitated. He lowered his voice.

"It is still early, but we had to mention it to him first, to make him wary and vigilant toward Mount Luoxia… lest he be too passive later…"

He put away the golden droplet and stood.

"I am making a trip to Yinzhou Island. If he emerges from seclusion, explain things to him and send him on his way."

Chapter 816: Tai'e

Li Zhouwei awoke from his deep meditation. Spiritual energy surged through his body like a roaring river, his aura stable, his cultivation base smooth and perfected. The light of his Immortal Foundation shone clear and bright.

'With the help of the White Dew Blood, I truly avoided significant harm this time,' he thought. 'But activating my Essence Blood is a serious matter. Even taking a spiritual item of this quality only managed to offset the cost and stabilize my cultivation base.'

This success was also due to Dongfang Heyun controlling the dosage perfectly. Bright Yang possesses properties that enhance fertility. While Dragon-kind are generally magnanimous, they prioritize their own Dragon heirs above all else, making them naturally miserly when it came to any spiritual item related to Bright Yang.

"Hooo..."

He exhaled a stream of white vapor and opened his eyes. The ethereal mists around him still drifted and billowed, making him feel as if he were lost in an infinite sea of clouds. All traces of the Crystal Palace had vanished. The Beihai Sea Dragon King was also gone; only the youth in white robes remained standing quietly at his side.

He didn't know how long he had been cultivating, but Dongfang Heyun's gaze seemed never to have moved from him. The moment Li Zhouwei stirred, the youth offered a thoughtful smile.

"One hundred and twenty-eight days have passed," Dongfang Heyun said. "According to the Li-Wei orthodox calendar... it is now the seventh month. If you are using the Liu-Chu orthodox calendar of the Yue State, it is the twenty-second day of the sixth month."

Li Zhouwei already knew that the Yue State followed the Liu-Chu calendar, which differed from the reckoning used by the Li Clan's Wei State. Yet Dongfang

Heyun stated it so naturally, as if he had once lived in Wei and the conversion of dates was second nature to him. Li Zhouwei felt a slight shock ripple through his heart.

'Just how ancient is he? Dragon Monarch Beijia is a Hornless Dragon. If Dongfang Heyun truly is the first breath exhaled by Dragon Monarch Beijia, doesn't that mean he is nearly as old as the Dragon Monarch himself?!'

Struck by the realization, he first bowed respectfully and said:

"Thank you, Senior, for watching over me. Nearly four months have passed… Senior is truly erudite, to even know the Wei calendar."

Dongfang Heyun ignored the compliment and gestured for him to rise. The clouds filling the palace began to shift, converging beneath their feet until a spot of utter blackness materialized. Only then did the youth say:

"It is merely habit. Fellow Daoist, please."

Dongfang Heyun seemed to call everyone Fellow Daoist. He stepped into the Great Void. Li Zhouwei immediately saw the void filled with the deep, shimmering Light of Converging Waters—undoubtedly a Grand Array belonging to Dragon-kin. As Dongfang Heyun moved through the Great Void, he continued:

"The matter concerning the Lie Sea originated as a favor owed to Daoist Master Zipei."

"During the North-South Conflict long ago, it became necessary to open Anhuai Heaven. This released those portions of the Essence of True Qi and, in doing so, also revealed the status of the True Qi Fruition Attainment. The entity occupying that Fruition Attainment… is likely gone. This event greatly benefited my Dragon-kin, so Daoist Master Zipei seized the opportunity to make a transaction with us. As for her true motive…"

Dongfang Heyun shook his head, his expression caught between a smile and something else.

"To this day, it remains unknown."

Li Zhouwei's heart sank. While the Li Clan and Purple Smoke were not entirely unconnected, their relationship was casual at best. They certainly had no deep ties to Zipei herself. After a moment of thought, he asked:

"Senior, you are sending me to…"

"Hoh."

Dongfang Heyun smiled slightly and replied:

"We just exited the Grotto-Heaven; naturally, we are heading toward the Beihai Sea. If you have a destination in mind, I can accompany you part of the way and see you there."

"You need not worry about Changxiao for now. As long as you don't stumble directly into one of the Changxiao Sect's few overseas outposts, he lacks the inclination to hunt you down. As for returning inland… that remains somewhat precarious."

Li Zhouwei understood his meaning. The open seas were ultimately the territory of Dragon-kin; whatever plots or hidden dangers existed, they would not be aimed at him here. But once he returned inland, Dragon-kin had no ability to intervene. While Changxiao wouldn't dare kill him, his formidable Life Divine Ability meant he surely possessed other insidious methods.

After saying this, Dongfang Heyun nodded slightly and added:

"It just means that Daoist Master of yours will have to endure a little more hardship."

Li Zhouwei replied:

"Since that is the case, I will trouble Senior to drop me at the nearest marketplace. I have several Dharma artifacts on hand that I must dispose of cleanly; traveling the seas while holding them is inherently unsafe."

Li Zhouwei ideally wanted to trade directly with Dragon-kin. They possessed the finest goods and had no fear of handling items belonging to the Changxiao Sect. However, the opportunity had not presented itself, and he suspected Dongfang Heyun lacked the authority to approve such a transaction. He posed the request deliberately, curious to see how the youth would respond.

"Easily done!"

As expected, Dongfang Heyun didn't comment further. He simply raised an eyebrow, peered out from the Great Void, and replied:

"In the Beihai Sea, you have the Changliu Mountain Marketplace. To the east, there is a place called Tai'e Island, a small trading market run by the Azure Pond

Sect in the Converging Heaven Sea. To the west is Mount Duan; it has a market, but it's best avoided. Further south lies the Vermillion Sea."

Li Zhouwei nodded, understanding the options. He felt a twinge of regret; he had originally wanted to continue east to see the Lie Sea at the far edge of the ocean. He said:

"Then I must trouble Senior to take me to Tai'e Island."

"Very well. Tai'e Island… that is also a new name."

Dongfang Heyun called it a new name, though given his age, "new" could have meant any time in the last several centuries. The youth nodded. After traveling only a short while longer, they burst through the Great Void and returned to the mortal realm. Li Zhouwei felt his footing lighten as he took to the air, realizing the white-robed young man beside him had already vanished. Only his elegant voice lingered:

"It is an Immortal Sect outpost, after all. It is inappropriate for me to draw closer. This spot is barely a hundred li from Tai'e Island; you may fly there yourself."

Li Zhouwei descended on his beam of light and bowed toward the empty sky. He let out a long breath, feeling himself relax considerably.

'I finally got through that!'

While Dragon-kin had shown him little malice, being surrounded by them—a Peak Purple Mansion Realm expert here, a Purple Mansion Realm Spirit Demon there, all of them high-status figures from the revered Dragon lineage—was inherently stressful. He was never truly at ease in the presence of such powerful demon beasts.

'I also managed to get an update on Changxiao, which means I don't need to be quite so wary of him. I can operate with more freedom now.'

Although the affair between Luoxia and Dragon-kin was complicated, it was fortunately not a problem for someone at his Foundation Establishment Realm to consider. Li Zhouwei never worried about such lofty matters, and his mood brightened instantly. He looked toward the horizon and was startled to see that the ocean before him was a deep, pervasive violet-red.

The seawater here was distinctly purplish-red, laced with faint traces of blue-violet. The typical azure blue of the Converging Heaven Sea was nowhere to be seen. As far as he could see, the water was an interwoven tapestry of purple and

blue. He immediately rode his light higher, appreciating the strange vista with growing curiosity.

After flying only a dozen li, he spotted a rogue cultivator hovering on the wind above the sea's surface. Li Zhouwei needed directions. With a casual wave of his hand, a beam of Profound Light flared, and he rematerialized a short distance from the other cultivator.

Li Zhouwei's speed was already far beyond that of a typical cultivator, and he was further augmented by the Light-Shifting Shuttle Technique of his Yuan'E Soft Soft Armor. The rogue cultivator had no time to react. Seeing a Late-stage Foundation Establishment Realm cultivator materialize nearby, he instantly broke out in a cold sweat. He noted the newcomer's extraordinary bearing and the quality of his artifacts, recognizing this was no ordinary person. He quickly bowed.

"This humble cultivator greets the Daoist!"

Li Zhouwei had no intention of making things difficult for him and simply inquired:

"Which direction is Tai'e Island? And why is the seawater here violet-red?"

The cultivator hurriedly replied:

"Reporting to the Daoist, Tai'e Island is just over seventy li to the southeast. This area is known as the Violet-Slaying Minor Reefs, one of the few territories near Tai'e Island where resources can still be gathered. It originally produced Spirit Sand, but it was completely excavated by cultivators years ago. All that remains is the vast Cinnabar ore vein beneath the seabed. The seawater is saturated with Cinnabar dust, which gives it this violet-red appearance from afar."

He gave an ingratiating smile and added:

"Both the name and the reef itself have an origin. Years ago, a Senior Li known as the 'Astral Golden Bowstring' was stationed here when a Water Ape attacked. It was an incredibly imposing beast; I heard it was a Great Demon Beast nearing the Purple Mansion Realm. That Senior shot it dead right here with three arrows. Its body dissolved into a hundred li of Cinnabar, which formed this very reef. I heard it was because that Demon beast possessed… some kind of… Whole… something…"

Li Zhouwei's eyebrows lifted, and the corners of his mouth turned up in a smile. His opinion of the rogue cultivator instantly improved. He motioned for the man to fly alongside him, and they both rode their light toward the southeast. "Is that the origin! You are speaking of the Whole Pill. So, who named these 'Violet-Slaying Minor Reefs'? And who is in charge of Tai'e Island these days?"

This rogue cultivator knew how to please, immediately affecting a look of sudden realization. He nodded repeatedly.

"Right, right! The Whole Pill! Your Excellency is truly knowledgeable. The 'Violet-Slaying Minor Reefs' weren't even the original name. They were called the 'Ape-Slaying Minor Reefs.' But the Island Lord stationed here is surnamed Yuan, and 'Ape-Slaying' sounded… well, it wasn't pleasant to his ears. So, they just substituted the color instead."

Li Zhouwei was flying extremely fast. In the time it took to exchange these few words, a large, ochre-yellow island had already appeared on the horizon. As they descended toward it, the rogue cultivator spoke respectfully:

"Your Excellency, please give your orders. This lowly one is Xiahou Damo. I am quite familiar with this island. To be able to serve the Daoist would be this humble cultivator's good fortune."

In these seas, encountering a high-status Foundation Establishment Realm cultivator traveling alone, without an entourage, was a rare opportunity. The rogue cultivator was trying to seize it. Li Zhouwei simply nodded.

"Take me to the place that deals in Dharma artifacts."

Since the island's guarding cultivator was surnamed Yuan and belonged to the Azure Pond Sect, it had to be the Yuan Clan of Mushroom Forest Plains. Decades ago, Li Zhouwei would have needed no guide and would have been obligated to pay a formal visit. But now that their two families had parted ways, he couldn't be bothered and simply let Xiahou Damo lead on.

After only two streets, they arrived at the most opulent establishment on the island, a towering four-story pavilion. When Xiahou Damo stepped across the threshold, the attendants on either side barely gave him a second glance. When Li Zhouwei followed him in, however, they instantly lit up with brilliant smiles, bowing and greeting him as "Your Excellency."

Li Zhouwei wasted no time and proceeded directly to the highest floor. A man in blue robes, also at the Foundation Establishment Realm, moved to greet them. His judgment was clearly superior to Xiahou Damo's. He politely inquired:

"May I ask which noble lineage Your Excellency hails from…?"

Li Zhouwei took his seat firmly and replied:

"Supreme-grade Foundation Establishment Dharma artifacts, taken by killing a core disciple. Buy them if you can. An elder of my family also cultivates with the Azure Pond Sect, so do not waste my time with pleasantries."

He glanced up, his golden pupils sweeping the man's face. The features struck him as familiar. "What is your name?"

The man's expression had already changed. While quietly dispatching someone downstairs, he replied with utmost respect:

"This junior hails from Jiangbei. My surname is Zhou, and my name is Boyun."

When Li Zhouwei heard Jiangbei combined with "Boyun," he immediately recalled a certain saber master. Comparing the man's features to his memory, he raised an eyebrow.

"Gongsun Boyun… I have met your elder brother. His saber technique is passable."

Zhou Boyun broke into a cold sweat upon hearing this. Fortunately, Li Zhouwei had no interest in pursuing the matter. He retrieved several jade boxes from his sleeve, setting them out one by one.

"Two Golden Thorn Dharma artifacts from the Golden Tang Gate; both are decent. One Green Gourd from the Mansion Water; this one is peak-grade among Foundation Establishment items, true heirloom quality. And one wooden staff—standard, but it can nourish the physical body and assist recovery."

He then produced an ordinary cloth storage pouch and set it on the table.

"The contents of this are also quite valuable, and should be easier to move."

Zhou Boyun bowed.

"May I ask… what Senior requires in return?"

Normally, no one would trade items like this purely for spirit stones; it simply wasn't necessary, and artifacts of this grade often couldn't be bought with spirit

stones alone. However, for Li Zhouwei—and indeed, for the Li Clan as a whole—most items that were not useful at the Purple Mansion Realm held little significance. This made the transaction difficult.

Li Zhouwei considered this briefly and replied:

"I require one exceptional Dharma shield and one flying shuttle, or other Dharma artifacts of comparable quality."

He paused, then finally asked his most important question:

"Do you have any Purple Mansion Realm-level cultivation resources or materials here?"

The question left Zhou Boyun completely flustered. He was merely a Guest Elder on this island; how could he possibly have access to such things? His face flushed with embarrassment. Fortunately, a commotion arose from the stairwell, followed by hearty laughter.

"I wonder which Fellow Daoist has come to grace my Tai'e Island as a guest!"

Looking as if he'd received a pardon, Zhou Boyun quickly retreated to the side, bowing respectfully.

"Island Lord!"

Li Zhouwei knew the man surnamed Yuan had arrived. His expression remained neutral. He was not naturally arrogant and normally would have stood to show respect, but the current relationship between their two families was deeply awkward. It would not be an exaggeration to say a knot of enmity now existed between them. He could only lower his gaze and say nothing.

An old man ascended the pavilion stairs. He looked ancient, leaning heavily on a cane, with a full head of white hair, though his face was reasonably kindly. When he saw the young man remain seated, his expression soured with displeasure.

Had any ordinary cultivator dared to show such disrespect, Yuan Hu'e would have already started cursing. But this guest was extremely young and his cultivation profound. He worried Li Zhouwei might be a direct lineage disciple from some major power, so he dared not let his displeasure show too clearly.

His Tai'e Island was small, after all. Even bearing the Azure Pond Sect's name, it was easily looked down upon. Worse, most core disciples from major sects

knew that the Azure Pond Sect's own Purple Mansion Realm foundation was currently teetering. Glancing at the jade boxes spread on the table, he formed a guess and spoke in a tone that was half-polite, half-warning.

"This one is Yuan Hu'e, of the Yuan Clan of Mushroom Forest Plains. I humbly serve as the Island Lord of Tai'e and as the Peak Lord of Mercy Peak within the Azure Pool Sect, stationed here by sect orders."

"Might I ask who Fellow Daoist is? You needn't worry that my Azure Pool Sect cannot afford this exchange. The Violet-Slaying Spirit Trace is still active, and the Heavenly Pavilion Heavenly Glow holds sway over the Southern Sea and the Ten Thousand Mile Shitang. Shipping what you need would not take long."

Seeing that the man truly did not recognize him, Li Zhouwei understood. This old man must have been stationed here for many years, missing the recent events inland and rarely, if ever, returning. He replied casually:

"My reputation cannot compare to Old Senior's."

He smiled slightly and added:

"This junior hails from the Small Lake Within the Mainland. My surname is Li. My given name is Zhouwei."

The pavilion fell utterly silent. Zhou Boyun looked completely bewildered, clearly still trying to place the location "Small Lake Within the Mainland ." But the expression on Yuan Hu'e's face froze solid. His pupils dilated rapidly, his gaze fixing belatedly on the young man's golden eyes.

His mind roared into a state of blank white noise. A chill ran down his limbs, followed by a complex wave of dread and utter horror.

'Li Zhouwei… He is that Pride of the Li Clan, the Li family's White Qilin!'

'The White Qilin Li Zhouwei! The one who ambushed and killed the Golden Tang Gate Master, Situ Mo! The one who fought six opponents at once, endured the spiritual artifact [Yongjing Profound Ring], and forcibly executed Yunan Zi—a core disciple of the Purple Mansion Realm lineage and a cultivator at the Peak Foundation Establishment Realm!'

'Why has this Baleful Star come here?! Is he not afraid of Changxiao?!'

Chapter 817: The Deng Clan

Yuan Hu'e froze, rooted to the spot, utterly speechless.

Zhou Boyun, standing beside him, was still processing the old man's aggressive stance. He had been anxiously looking for an opening, sensing a perfect opportunity to impress Yuan Hu'e. If Li Zhouwei hadn't immediately exposed his identity, Zhou Boyun would have already jumped in to support the elder, but doing so now might bring disaster upon his own brother. All he could do was steal glances at Yuan Hu'e's face. The old man's beard trembled violently as he stammered:

"So… so it is Your Excellency… Please, forgive my disrespect! What ridiculous nonsense I was spouting, daring to speak of Your Excellency's own elders…"

All the false bravado evaporated, replaced by a mixture of deep embarrassment and terror. "This old man was blind… Back when Lord Li Xuanfeng was stationed on this island… this humble one admired him immensely. I often sought his guidance and have always carried that gratitude in my heart. To think that Your Excellency would arrive today… not only did I fail to welcome you properly, I failed to even recognize you. A terrible sin… a terrible sin…"

The reversal was so abrupt it left Zhou Boyun stunned. But he heard every word clearly, and a cold dread washed over him.

'My heavens… Li Xuanfeng was a Li. Li Xizhi is also a Li. They are one family! This Li Zhouwei is from the Moongaze Immortal Clan!'

Only now did Zhou Boyun grasp the severity of the situation, cursing his own foolishness. The old man, however, had already turned on him.

"You, surnamed Zhou!" Yuan Hu'e barked. "When such a distinguished guest arrives, you don't even bother to investigate clearly? You just send a messy report about some 'dangerous man at the door'… I ought to punish you severely for this!"

'Ah?'

Zhou Boyun broke out in a cold sweat. Even the Yuan family couldn't withstand the Li family's current power, let alone a mere rogue cultivator like himself. Li Xuanfeng's reputation in this region was immense; several cultivators had even tried to mimic his mastery of the bow. Zhou Boyun didn't dare utter another word, standing rigid and silent as a mute.

Li Zhouwei watched the old man twist the narrative, blaming his own transgression on "failing to recognize him in person" while shoving Zhou Boyun forward as the scapegoat. Li Zhouwei said nothing, letting his silence amplify the pressure.

Yuan Hu'e continued to ramble, but seeing that Li Zhouwei offered no reply, he finally let out a long, trembling sigh.

"Ai!"

Yuan Hu'e had always held Li Xuanfeng in both respect and awe; he'd never had the slightest intention of offending him. But he was stationed overseas, a cultivator originally promoted by the Ning family, making his position sensitive. He had no authority in Yuan family matters, only the privilege to listen.

When he first heard that Yuan Hudu and Yuan Huyuan were playing both sides, he knew disaster was coming.

As it turned out, Yuan Chengzhao, back in the sect, was just as unreliable. The relationship between the two families had been excellent, built on the friendship between their seniors and generations of goodwill. They had even been discussing a marriage alliance. Instead, those two old fools and one shortsighted junior sold out Yuan Chengdao, creating the irreparable feud that existed today.

Now, Yuan Hudu had died when his old injuries relapsed, and Yuan Zibin had taken control of the family. Yuan Zibin was an arrogant, perverse tyrant. It was clear that over three generations, the Yuan family had rotted to the core. This decay had implicated Yuan Hu'e, marking him as an enemy of a Purple Mansion Realm power. With that power now standing right in front of him, Yuan Hu'e felt as though his heart were bleeding.

"The juniors back home… they don't know any better…" he whispered.

The grudge between the Li and Yuan families could not be resolved with a few simple words. Li Zhouwei felt he had neither the qualification nor the inclination to mediate this grievance on behalf of his elders. He waved his hand dismissively.

"Tai'e Island Lord, there is no need for explanations. I am only passing through. I will leave as soon as I have traded for the spiritual items I need."

He gestured to the jade box on the table. Only now did Yuan Hu'e properly inspect its contents. He carefully took the items out, appraised them, and reported nervously:

"Your Excellency, Tai'e Island currently has a white-skinned fan named the [White Yin Fan]. It is a Dharma artifact of the Profound Qi dao, capable of stirring clouds of black and yellow energy. It is quite rare. It was consigned here for sale by a Peak Lord from the Azure Pond. It should be of suitable value."

Li Zhouwei finally heard something interesting. Dharma artifacts of the Profound Qi dao were uncommon, and his own **Cyclic Soul-Refining Halberd Arts** catalyzed an Obsidian Flame that was derived from that very path. This fan would be a perfect fit.

"Which Peak Lord is this, and what do they require in exchange?"

Yuan Hu'e wiped a bead of sweat from his brow. "He is the former Peak Lord of Sever Peak, also a Mid-stage Foundation Establishment Realm cultivator. His surname is Deng, given name Yuzhi. He is over a century old and cultivates in this region, so he left the item here for consignment…"

He shot a look at Zhou Boyun. Looking as though he had just received a pardon, Zhou Boyun scrambled out of the room to fetch the man. Li Zhouwei's interest sharpened, and he nodded to himself.

'So, he's from the Deng family.'

Yuan Hu'e's gaze returned to the table, locking onto the long staff. He studied it for several moments, clearly tempted, yet wary of personally using an item belonging to the Changxiao Gate. He hesitated.

"As for this long staff," he said, "this old man can make the decision to keep it on the island for consignment."

He fumbled inside his sleeve for a moment before producing a lustrous, pure white pearl of light. He offered it tentatively.

"This is a protective artifact, the [Aegis of Mystic Light], from the Clear Qi path. It is compatible with all cultivation paths. Perhaps Your Excellency would take this for now? We will leave the staff here to be sold. Once it finds a buyer, we can compare the values. If there is a shortfall, I will deliver the difference; if there is an excess, you may repay me. We can settle the matter later on the lake…"

Li Zhouwei needed only a single glance to understand. The old man coveted the staff. Life-preserving items were invaluable to aging cultivators like him, but he feared the methods of the Changxiao Gate and wanted time to have the staff inspected by others first.

The [Aegis of Mystic Light] was indeed versatile, but defensive barrier artifacts were typically expensive. Since Yuan Hu'e was offering this as a simple exchange, it likely offered meager protection. Still, the long staff was useless to Li Zhouwei, and he had no desire to waste time running around various marketplaces. He pushed the wooden staff across the table and accepted the white pearl.

"Your Excellency, please look… this is the catalog of treasures currently curated on the island."

Yuan Hu'e took possession of the wooden staff, stroking it lovingly. He was clearly ill at ease in Li Zhouwei's presence. Making an excuse about needing to verify the staff and make inquiries, he quickly departed.

Li Zhouwei picked up the catalog and began to read. Before long, he heard Zhou Boyun's respectful voice from the doorway.

"Your Excellency, please come in!"

A middle-aged man entered. His hair was graying and he was exceptionally thin, with shifty, rodent-like features. Despite his appearance, his expression was calm. His small eyes swept the room and settled on Li Zhouwei. He offered a slight bow and sighed.

"Family Head Li… we finally meet. I am Deng Yuzhi, of the Deng Clan of Simin…"

The Deng Clan was a minor family. Although they possessed a Foundation Establishment cultivator to hold the line, they had been forced by the Chi Clan to

practice a bizarre cultivation art that caused successive generations to go mad and perish. Only after Chi Wei fell and Chi Zhiyun intervened to ease relations did the Deng Clan's situation improve. Their disciples finally stopped practicing that technique. Deng Yuzhi was the last survivor of it.

The Deng family had established a friendship with the Li family long ago. Deng Yuzhi's older brother, Deng Qiuzhi, was reportedly a close friend of the Sword Immortal Li Chejing. Years ago, Li Zhouwei had even used the Deng family as an intermediary to send a letter to Li Quantao. Though they rarely interacted, the bond was solid. Li Zhouwei rose and invited him to sit.

Although Deng Yuzhi was unsightly, he carried himself with an unexpected grace. He produced a jade pot and matching cups, poured the tea, and smiled. "Congratulations, Family Head."

Li Zhouwei nodded slightly. "Greetings, Senior. Is your family faring better these days?"

Deng Yuzhi revealed an unpleasant smile. "We have been well for the past century. Once Chi Wei died, we could finally breathe. Those who held the deepest malice toward my family, like Ning Hejing and Chi Zhiyan, are also dead, which eased things further. When Chi Zhiyun fell some time ago, my family even mourned him extensively..."

Li Zhouwei frowned. "Chi Zhiyun fell? Your clan... what are your intentions toward the remnants of the Chi Clan?"

Deng Yuzhi replied, "When the Chi Clan Head was assassinated, I drew my sword and set out immediately. I intended to seize the opportunity to slaughter his entire remaining family, from the elders down to the children. Halfway there, my own sons and daughters stopped me..."

"Perhaps it is because I spent all my years running between Mount Yi and Azure Pond, leaving me no time to raise them properly. They do not recognize the sins our ancestors suffered, generation after generation of being butchered. Chi Wei has been dead for over a hundred years. Who cares about some distant uncle from a branch family who died that long ago? They only see me as cruel. They fear my rage will bring disaster upon them, worried that Chi Buzi will return one day to settle the score."

He sipped his tea. "When I was in my twenties, my brother was murdered. I have hated for over a hundred years. I felt my Deng family was being devoured,

generation after generation, and that this blood feud was carved into my very bones. I always believed that if the day for vengeance ever came, every member of the Deng family would fight to the death… But when I returned home, it seemed no one remembered. Or if they did remember, they felt no hatred. They only felt that Chi Zhiyun had saved them, sparing them from being devoured for the last century."

He pursed his lips, his harelip trembling grotesquely. "My very appearance is the consequence of my father practicing that wretched art. My face is ugly. When I returned home after a hundred years, they discovered that my heart is also ugly. They believe I only want to commit this act—an act that would bring endless calamity to our family—purely as revenge for my own hideous face. They don't realize that I *could* change my appearance now; I deliberately keep this face to remember."

"I went back three times. I walked the lands for ages. Gradually, I felt it was all meaningless. Perhaps I don't even hate them that much anymore. So I left Simin and came here."

His tone was flat as he asked, "What about your clan? Your family deserves great credit for the Chi Clan's destruction. The Chi Clan still has mortals who haven't died out. Does your clan ever think of exterminating them to finalize your revenge?"

Li Zhouwei remained silent.

Deng Yuzhi continued, "This whole affair is impossible to unravel. Your family lost a Sword Immortal. My family lost an unknown, worthless Qi Refining cultivator. On the surface, your family's hatred seems more justified. But didn't we both lose a family member? Because yours was a Sword Immortal, he is easier to mourn, his vengeance easier to justify. As for an unknown nobody… no one cares that he was murdered. Who cares?"

"It's just… he was my brother. So I hate a little more."

He laughed self-deprecatingly, his harelip clamping shut. He retrieved a brocade jade box from his sleeve. "Back when I visited the Li family, I met Senior Li Tongya and Fellow Daoist Li Xuanling. It is rare to see someone from those days, so I ran my mouth. I heard you want the [White Yin Fan]… It is just as rare to find a buyer so perfectly suited for it."

He placed the box on the table and gently opened it. Inside lay a pure white ivory fan, only the length of a forearm. Its surface was smooth and delicate. The fan's handle was forged from pure, lusterless Dark Iron.

With a single glance, Li Zhouwei recognized it as a superior Dharma artifact. He was immediately tempted and nodded. "May I know the artifact's origins? And what does Fellow Daoist require in exchange?"

Deng Yuzhi smiled. "This was one of the artifacts my ancestor obtained while serving under the Great Liang. When the Great Liang fell, my ancestor crossed the river and fled south. This spiritual hoard was thus preserved. Unfortunately, later descendants were unfilial and squandered most of it. This artifact eventually fell to me. It should have been returned to the clan, but I was... greatly disappointed. I left hastily. I never imagined the heavens, seeing the hardship of my first half-life, would take pity on me. I unexpectedly had a new son late in life."

His gaze softened, a warmth that made his harsh features seem less unpleasant. He clearly adored this new child.

"An artifact of the Profound Qi path is not a good fit for my own techniques, and I am preparing to establish a property in the Converging Heaven Sea Region for my heir. He cultivates Pit Water. Since the nature of the energy is such that 'Profound Qi transforms to Pit Water and expels Li-Fire,' this fan is even less suitable for him. I was hoping to find my son something reliable to protect his life, and I took a liking to that gourd of yours."

"The path of Mansion Water," he concluded, "is highly suitable, both for myself and for my young son."

Li Zhouwei had heard that the Deng family technique was a rare dual-attribute art, requiring both [Frigid Night-Moon Qi] and [Sinking Heart of Falling Rain]. The former was of the Supreme Yin, and the latter belonged to the Mansion Water path. It was indeed a perfect match.

Slowly, Li Zhouwei shook his head. "That is truly a pity. First, this gourd still contains a tracking imprint left by the Changxiao Gate. If you were to leave it to a junior, it would be an endless source of future calamity. Second, it is, after all, stolen property. I fear that one day, it will be recognized."

Zhou Boyun had clearly failed to explain the risks; middlemen like him always hid half the truth to secure a deal. Hearing Li Zhouwei's warning, a chill ran through Deng Yuzhi. He offered a grateful smile.

"Many thanks for the warning, Fellow Daoist… That is one issue. The materials in your storage pouch are also needed for a formation I am building, but without the gourd as the main trade, it is difficult to exchange for them."

He didn't even mention the artifacts from the Golden Tang Gate. Not only were they of inferior quality, but they were obviously incompatible with the cultivation paths of both him and his son.

Li Zhouwei nodded thoughtfully. He truly desired the [White Yin Fan] and could not let it pass by. In comparison, the Mansion Water gourd was significantly weaker, and with the unresolved imprint lowering its intrinsic value, the decision was clear.

"I am extremely interested in the [White Yin Fan]," Li Zhouwei stated. "I see that Senior is not in a desperate hurry for a day or two. I must travel to the far seas to visit a senior, and my route will take me through many places. This journey will provide the perfect opportunity to handle the gourd—perhaps alter its appearance, and ask a high-level cultivator to wipe the imprint clean. Then it will be whole and complete."

Deng Yuzhi nodded slightly.

Li Zhouwei added, "The original owner of this item was surnamed Zhuang. He was one of those who ambushed me. It will be much safer for everyone once it is properly cleaned."

They exchanged a few more pleasantries, but Deng Yuzhi still looked hesitant. He stood and went outside. Just then, Li Zhouwei saw Zhou Boyun re-entering and stopped him.

"Do you know of the Lie Sea? Are there any maps of it for sale in the marketplace?"

The Lie Sea was supposed to be the new Dragon-Attribute Sea Pasture. Zhou Boyun just shook his head, completely lost. Li Zhouwei had to recall the description given by Dongfang Heyun: the Chain of Seas lay east of Crimson Reef Island, past the Converging Heaven Sea, bordering the Outer Sea.

"In that case," Li Zhouwei said, "bring me a map of Crimson Reef Island."

Zhou Boyun hurried off again. Li Zhouwei returned to studying the secret arts manual alone in the pavilion. After some time, the man returned, handing the map over with utmost respect.

Li Zhouwei smiled. "Gongsun Boyun… your elder brother serves the White Ye Immortal Sect, correct? Why would he bear to let his younger brother remain a simple rogue cultivator here in the Converging Heaven Sea?"

The man stiffened, his face flooding with terror. He was not completely ignorant of affairs in the mainland; he knew Moongaze Lake had fought the White Ye Immortal Sect before. He could only bow deeply.

"My brother established his Immortal Foundation many years ago. He spent his entire savings to push this foolish and inept younger brother into the Foundation Establishment Realm, but he was unwilling for two birds to roost on the same branch. He feared that if disaster struck, both brothers would perish together."

"He told me that although the mainland is rich, it is far too dangerous. He forbade me from going there, and he forbade me from using our family surname, Gongsun. But he sends resources overseas to me every year… He hopes one day I will have enough to start my own family and create a small sect… Only then, he said, can he finally rest easy."

Chapter 818: The Thunder Pool

Li Zhouwei shook his head.

"I have met your older brother, Gongsun Bofan. Despite his humble origins, his disposition is superb. The rogue cultivators in Jiangbei are innumerable, yet he has reached the apex of their path. If we ignore the ineffable hand of fate, he truly isn't far behind Wang Quwan…" He glanced at Zhou Boyun. "While he is formidable, you are stationed here in the Eastern Sea. You must be more cautious. Do not waste his heartfelt efforts!"

The Li Clan had once been enemies of the Capital Immortals Dao, though relations had thawed recently. Zhou Boyun's words, however, were far too blunt. They were certainly not complimentary toward the Capital Immortals Dao. If the wrong people heard his comments—that 'two birds cannot rest on the same branch'—it would be tantamount to placing a blade against his brother's throat.

It was fortunate that Li Zhouwei was the one present; he held Gongsun Bofan in decent regard, and the conflict between their two families had lessened. Had it been anyone else, they would not hesitate to sow discord between Gongsun Bofan and the Capital Immortals Dao. A few choice words shouted during the heat of battle, and even someone as steady as Gongsun Bofan would likely turn pale with fright.

Zhou Boyun, whether he understood the gravity of the warning or not, nodded repeatedly and replied respectfully,

"It is only because I saw how divinely mighty you are, my lord. I feared that if I spoke too highly of my brother's relationship with the Capital Immortals Dao, I might displease you… That is why I spoke the plain truth."

Li Zhouwei was not an overly charitable man. Having said his piece, he stopped there. He gave a slight nod and exited the private room, sighing inwardly.

'Rogue cultivators, generation after generation… producing a single genius like Gongsun Bofan is already a miracle. How could he possibly have an equally remarkable younger brother? That family of Wang Quwan… how incredibly rare they are.'

As he left the pavilion, Yuan Hu'e hurried over, smiling. "My lord… I was just asking someone to inspect the artifact. Why are you leaving so soon? I haven't even had the chance to host you properly…"

Li Zhouwei knew the man couldn't wait for him to leave, so he didn't waste words, merely waving his hand.

"Island Lord, there is no need to see me off!"

He immediately transformed into a ray of Profound Light and streaked away, vanishing toward the horizon.

Only then did Yuan Hu'e straighten his bowed back. His face darkened as he returned to the pavilion, with Zhou Boyun following uneasily behind him.

The old man shut the door firmly and said coldly,

"Why didn't you inform me of such a situation sooner! You just sent someone saying it was 'big business'… But he produced an artifact like that! Is he some ordinary person? We couldn't even verify his origins! And now look!"

Zhou Boyun grew increasingly embarrassed and remained silent. Yuan Hu'e's expression was grim. "If not for your brother, do you think you would have this cushy job? You nearly got this old man killed! From now on, you're done here!"

Yuan Hu'e stormed out, leaving Zhou Boyun with that parting glare. He stalked out of the pavilion and returned to his own manor-cave. His anger had faded, replaced by calculation.

'The Mushroom Forest Plains are beyond saving. It's a land of conflict, and the ancestors passed down this fatal legacy. Several generations of elders have cultivated themselves to death pursuing it, and the children grow weaker with every generation. If we stay, what future does the Yuan clan have?'

'Yuan Chengzhao is also a selfish bastard. The Yuan family means nothing compared to his own Dao path. Things have escalated this far, yet he doesn't dare show his face or say a single word. Can't count on him. I must bring a few of the children out here. We will establish a new mountain in this territory, escape

that cursed place, and restore the family discipline. We cannot let the lineage be extinguished…'

The radiance of the Bright Yang surfaced in the sky as the morning clouds began to glow. The sea glittered with golden light. Floes of ice, large and small, drifted on the surface like countless shards of shattered gold.

The Dragon King of Crimson Reef Island cultivated Cold Qi, sealing it in this land. This Crimson Reef Island was pierced by waves of frigid intent, and icebergs floated everywhere. Li Zhouwei had read the jade slips obtained from Tai'e Island, which recorded that Crimson Reef Island had become quite prosperous in recent years. Many new spirit mines and spirit troves had emerged, attracting a growing number of cultivators.

He flew midway and scanned the area. He didn't spot any Demon beasts, but he did see several flashes of greyish-red flame and heard the crackle of thunder. Two groups of cultivators were engaged in a lively battle atop an iceberg.

Li Zhouwei glanced over. One side wielded ferocious flames that made the opposing artifacts sizzle. The other commanded booming thunder that shattered chunks of the iceberg. A look at their attire and he recognized them immediately.

"One side is Crimson Reef Island, the other is Thunder-Hearing Island. This is a fight between stupid birds and vicious dogs. Both sides stink; neither is any good."

The leader of Crimson Reef Island was a young woman dressed in blue, a stark contrast to the red robes of her companions. The leader of Thunder-Hearing Island wielded two copper alms bowls, thunder crackling between them. He was an old acquaintance: Miao Ye.

This man was a direct descendant of the Miao Family. He had come to the lake before to ask about the Duruo Spear.

Looking closer at the iceberg, he saw that a cluster of ice-blue and white flowers, roughly the size of a fist, had bloomed on the summit. Their stems were vibrant green, rooted directly in the ice. Beside them crouched a black tortoise the height of a man and the size of a large table, trembling as it hid in its shell.

Li Zhouwei recognized it instantly. 'So, it's the Jade Hare Ice Flower… A rare treasure medicine. Legend says it only blooms beneath the Pine of the Wintry Snow. I never expected to find it here.'

'Strange… Even if this flower didn't grow beneath the pine, it absolutely should not be growing on an iceberg. This looks more like a manifestation caused by someone's divine ability breakthrough… It must be the Dragon King of Crimson Reef Island…'

Besides the strangeness of the spiritual item, Miao Ye's status was considerable. He would never travel thousands of miles just to fight over a Jade Hare Ice Flower. Clearly, both groups had other reasons for appearing at Crimson Reef Island; this treasure medicine was just an unexpected skirmish.

The Li Family's enmity with Thunder-Hearing Island wasn't as deep as their hatred for Crimson Reef Island, but it wasn't much better. He swept his gaze over the brawling cultivators, memorized the location, and transformed into light, taking a wide detour.

'After I return from the Lie Sea, I should also find a place for seclusion. I won't leave the Converging Heaven Sea. I can stop by Crimson Reef Island and see just what these two factions are scheming.'

He had already covered most of the distance, and traveling as light was extremely fast. But he suddenly found goose-feather snow falling from the sky. It came down thick and fast, blanketing his entire field of vision in white. The world below became an interweaving canvas of blue and white.

Li Zhouwei smelled the rich scent of pine. On the small reef islands below his feet, countless pine trees burst forth from the stone, shaking in the blizzard, growing taller and taller, only to be quickly buried by the endless snow.

He flew for a hundred miles before the heavy snow began to subside. By the time he reached the outer sea, the snowfall had stopped completely. Li Zhouwei grew suspicious again.

"I've never heard of mastering a divine ability causing such a huge spectacle. It doesn't look like the fall of a Foundation Establishment Realm cultivator either. It looks more like a Demon beast on Crimson Reef Island breaking through to the Purple Mansion Realm… Perhaps one of that Dragon King's subordinates."

He focused and flew on. Following the map's guidance for half a day, he gradually saw a small patch of dark reefs appearing on the edge of the sea. In the distance, the scattered shadows of islands emerged.

Li Zhouwei landed on the reef and looked around. The ground beneath his feet trembled slightly. A carriage, shimmering with purple light, actually rose from the sea's surface. A wave rolled in, carrying sparks of purple lightning.

A female cultivator in a white robe appeared. Her features were delicate, her pupils a deep purple. She led the carriage and spoke politely, "My Mistress invites you. Please, Young Master, come with me!"

Li Zhouwei's ocular art flickered. He perceived that she was a Purple Feather Sparrow and understood that the mistress of the Lie Sea had sent for him. He nodded slightly. "My thanks, Fairy."

"I wouldn't dare!"

The female cultivator, slightly awed, guided him onto the carriage. It was sized for ordinary people, completely unlike the previous Dragon-kin vehicles, which were as large as houses or small hills. This one seemed compact and exquisite.

Li Zhouwei lifted the curtain and entered. A small stove sat in the center, and behind it was only a single soft cushion. It was far too minimalist for the usual Dragon-kin style.

He was extremely familiar with the carriage's interior. He expertly lit the stove and waited, feeling both anticipation and sorrow. The carriage had already leaped into the air. He heard the female cultivator speak.

"Please wait a moment, Young Master. My Mistress is above the Lie Sea at the Profound Firmament Thunder Pool. We will arrive momentarily!"

Li Zhouwei acknowledged her. He watched the misty clouds outside the window gradually turn grey. The carriage beneath him suddenly shook, as if it had landed on something, and then began to race forward.

The thunder on both sides grew denser, and the color of the dark clouds deepened. They pierced the depths of the clouds and finally came to an abrupt halt. Before him was an entirely different scene.

He saw a vast, circular pool of purplish-white, filled with a dense, shimmering thunder liquid. It stretched beyond the horizon. Purple lightning constantly

descended from above, smashing into the pool. The strikes were clearly powerful, yet the thunder liquid below, seemingly forged of fine iron, only rippled faintly.

The rim of the pool was a deep cyan, about thirty feet wide, gleaming with the luster of copper and iron and covered in dense thunder patterns. A group of female cultivators in white robes waited quietly by the edge.

Li Zhouwei stepped down. The white-robed cultivator handed the carriage off to another attendant who came to receive it. She gestured slightly and said respectfully, "This way, Young Master."

Li Zhouwei walked forward. The pool's shore vibrated slightly with every celestial thunderclap. After walking a short distance, the cultivator smiled.

"This place was formed by devouring thunder. The metal edge of the pool is the remains of a Grotto-Heaven, and the thunder liquid also poured forth from that Grotto-Heaven. It is called Echoing Thunder Water. It is solid as profound iron; it neither dissipates nor scatters, neither moves nor sounds. And yet, it is thunder."

"Above the Thunder Pool circle thirty-six paths of Profound Thunder and twelve Firmament Thunders. Once you enter, not only can you not fly, but I must urge you, Young Master, *never* draw a metal object. If you must draw an artifact, you absolutely must not point it toward the heavens. The forty-eight thunderbolts will descend and claim your life."

Li Zhouwei nodded in understanding. Fortunately, the Yuan'E Soft armor he wore was soft armor, without any sharp protrusions. He followed the female cultivator forward as the world behind them was gradually obscured by the dark sea of clouds. He saw a gap in the pool's edge, but the purplish-white thunder liquid did not flow out, standing erect as if it were solid.

The cultivator stepped onto the thunder pool. With a metallic clang, she walked directly upon the thunder liquid. Li Zhouwei followed her forward; it was indeed as hard as iron rock.

In the very center of the Thunder Pool stood a small, silver-white palace, not at all imposing. Li Zhouwei raised his gaze and saw a person leaning in the pavilion above.

The woman was draped in purplish-white feathers. She had a high-bridged nose, willow-leaf eyebrows, and almond eyes. Her long hair was coiled behind

her, fastened with a single silver-white hairpin, while the rest of her dark hair cascaded like a waterfall from the pavilion window.

A purple mist filled her eyes. The purplish-white feathered robe pulsed as if breathing. Behind her, a faint purplish-white disc shimmered. She merely sat there, yet in his spiritual sense, she was a blinding radiance—a terrifying concentration of extreme thunder, compressed within that body, which otherwise appeared tranquil and gentle.

Li Zhouwei exhaled deeply. He bowed profoundly, as if toppling a golden mountain or a jade pillar, and announced in a clear, strong voice, "Moongaze Li Zhouwei pays his respects to the Mistress."

The woman chuckled softly. "Minghuang, you've come."

The woman in the Thunder Pool was none other than Li Qinghong!

Hearing her reply, Li Zhouwei slowly released the tension in his heart. The woman descended from the pavilion and helped him up. Li Zhouwei's voice was slightly hoarse as he replied, "The Old Master… is still worried sick about you, Mistress. He assumed you must have met with disaster in the Grotto-Heaven. The longer it went, the more anxious he became. But it turns out you have mastered the thunder and secured dominion over a sea… When I report this to the Old Master, he will surely weep with joy."

Although he had guessed it was related to Li Qinghong before coming, Li Zhouwei hadn't dared to hope too much. Even seeing her with his own eyes, he still suspected she might be a remnant soul. But with that one sentence from her, only relief remained in his heart.

Li Qinghong listened, a trace of worry clouding her expression. She spoke softly, "Some things are not suitable to be written on paper, lest they invite calamity… Furthermore, it is difficult to extend my hand onto the mainland. Back then, when Dingjiao met the fox, he still had to go through you in the Eastern Sea; he could not send a letter directly."

"My situation is even more unique. It involves many matters of the Dragon Monarch swallowing thunder. It is not convenient to expose myself, nor is it appropriate for me to leave this sea."

Li Zhouwei bowed. "Knowing that you are safe, Mistress, is the only blessing we need! Only now do I know the Daoist Master managed to escape danger… It was

all thanks to your intervention. I only fear we caused you inconvenience, which would be a grave error…"

Since Li Qinghong had stated these concerns, it likely meant her current position was extremely close to that of the Dragon-kin. Learning that Li Qinghong was unharmed *and* that she had rescued Li Ximing was already the best possible outcome. Li Zhouwei absolutely did not want to drag her down. His repeated use of "Mistress" was a clear signal to the Dragon-kin of his attitude.

But his heart was filled mostly with gratitude and joy. "Our family member had just reached the Purple Mansion Realm and understood nothing. The Daoist Master is not the type to manage affairs meticulously. He was plotted against and nearly perished in the Eastern Sea… We only have you to thank for his rescue…"

But Li Qinghong just shook her head slightly and smiled. "For Ximing to reach the Purple Mansion Realm… he is far more formidable than I. He did not disappoint… Whether it's me or the Old Master back home, we both owe him our thanks. We all advanced one step of blood, one step of tears… Because of him, those blood and tears were not shed in vain."

"If he hadn't held on through that mental threshold, we wouldn't even have room to maneuver today… Besides… you all have always underestimated him."

Li Qinghong gave a soft smile and invited him into the pavilion. Sitting down in the pavilion of the Profound Firmament Thunder Pool, her pale purple, almond-shaped eyes blinked slightly.

"The Dao of Thunder-Guiding and Cloud-Anchoring—that is, the Thunder Cloud Temple Grotto-Heaven—many cultivators perished there. Thunder-Hearing Island from the Southern Sea, the Xi Family from the Northern Sea, the Daoist traditions of the Western Heaven Plateau… from Jiangnan and Jiangbei, from Zhao, Yan, Wu, and Yue… every single one of them is a lineage the Dragon-kin have disseminated over the past thousand years."

"My cultivation method originated from Ling Yanzi. Back then, the Dragon-kin also selected him to enter. It was originally promised to the Purple Smoke Gate, but he gave it to our family first. That karmic affinity thus fell upon me… This method landing in our family's hands involved Changxiao and Purple Smoke, and now, the prophecy is fulfilled through Changxiao and Purple Smoke."

The white-robed cultivator who had led him in brought forward a jade pot. Li Qinghong raised a slender hand, stopping her. Those eyes, once so full of heroic spirit, now held a trace of gentleness.

"It's impossible to explain it all clearly anymore. Looking back at everything… perhaps I was just born with the destiny to swallow thunder."

Chapter Characters

Li Zhouwei: 'Heavenly Audience Gate' [Late-stage Foundation Establishment Realm]

Yuan Hu'e: 'Wuxin Rock' [Late-stage Foundation Establishment Realm] [Island Lord of Tai'e Island]

Li Qinghong: [Purple Mansion Realm Spiritual Cultivator] [Thunder of the Dragon-kin]

Gongsun Boyun: 'Locust Shade Ghost' [Early-stage Foundation Establishment Realm]

Chapter 819: Preserving Truth Through Martial Might

Li Zhouwei pondered this deeply before replying, “The cultivation manual you acquired, my lady, spans a hundred years of history. It began in the sea and later moved to the lakes. Everything was meticulously arranged. Dragons cannot walk the land, and Mount Luoxia cannot control the seas. If some divine ability connects these events, who could possibly wield such immense power… Perhaps, my lady, you truly bear the weight of Fate.”

Though Li Zhouwei seemed merely to be expressing his awe of Li Qinghong, his words landed differently on his two listeners.

‘Who could possibly wield such immense power?’

Both held the answer in their hearts, yet they dared not speak it, dared not even truly think it. Since the suspicion had been planted, they could only cling to the explanation of Fate, refusing to broach the other possibility.

Li Qinghong immediately softened her voice. “This matter… must be traced back to the Conflict of North and South. In those years, the Grotto-Heavens of the True Qi path opened wide. Publicly, it was said the True Monarchs had traveled beyond the heavens, leaving the various Purple Mansion Realm masters to their own devices. In truth, the Golden Feather Sect took the lead, acting on a Celestial Decree from True Monarch Taiyuan, to probe the status of the True Qi path’s Fruition Attainment.”

“When the Grotto-Heavens opened, three portions of the Martial True Qi Malignance Essence emerged. It was rumored that all three belonged to True Monarch Tianwu himself… and thus, everyone understood… True Monarch Tianwu was in peril.”

Li Qinghong retrieved some tea leaves from a white porcelain jar nearby, shaking a measure into the pot. Her slender hand and the Jade vessel complemented each other perfectly.

Li Zhouwei asked skeptically, "They could confirm the status of a True Monarch based solely on three portions of Metallic Essence?"

Li Qinghong lowered her voice. "In the years Anhuai Heaven was established, True Monarch Tianwu's authority shook the region, and all Demons and fiends retreated before him. He brought out three suits of armor and placed one in each of the three major territories of Anhuai Heaven. He left behind a single sentence, and then he departed beyond the heavens."

"That sentence was…" Her expression turned reverent. "'When the armor lives, the Malignance stands. When the armor dies, the Martial Truth Qi hangs vacant. I invite later generations to ascend.'"

"In the decade that followed, those three suits of armor sequentially grew skin and flesh, becoming two men and one woman. Their faces, features, and voices were indistinguishable from living people, and all three attained great divine abilities. They guarded Anhuai Heaven until the day it was sealed and the Kingdom of Ning was destroyed. After that, they vanished without a trace."

"During the Conflict of North and South, the Purple Mansion Realm masters stormed into Anhuai Heaven, only to find it utterly deserted. The armor was gone. All that remained were those three portions of the 「Martial Truth Qi Malignance Essence」."

She shook her head. "This ended up fattening Jiangbei. One portion was obtained by Mount Changhuai in the Kingdom of Wu. Purple Smoke acquired another. The final portion, however, escaped and vanished due to the negligence of Daoist Master Chengyan. As a direct result of that failure, a Purple Mansion Realm cultivator from the Southern Sea perished."

"All three portions are critically important. The general cultivators… well, the Purple Mansion masters aside, *especially* the Golden Feather Sect, which gained nothing… they are intensely dissatisfied with him. Even Mount Changhuai and the Dragon-kin, who *did* obtain the True Qi, show him no courtesy whatsoever. Those with shorter tempers… like Hengli of Hengzhu, or Ping Yan of Yinzhou Island… they practically scream for his blood."

Li Zhouwei shook his head repeatedly. "No wonder it is said Daoist Master Chengyan cannot travel freely, nor dares he leave the known Seas. So this is the reason."

Li Qinghong continued, "That escaped Metallic Essence also became a Demon-fiend. That thing is ferocious. Because it was left behind by True Monarch Tianwu, it retains a sliver of the True Monarch's essential status. With the Fruition Attainment currently unoccupied, it is even more terrifying. Even Purple Mansion Realm masters must give it a wide berth… And worse, it was transformed from one of those three suits of armor, so its intelligence and cunning are certainly not inferior to any man. Right now, it's hidden who-knows-where and absolutely refuses to emerge."

Li Zhouwei let out a long breath. "To think even a single suit of armor possesses such might. To achieve Fruition Attainment as True Monarch Tianwu did… leaving his armor to watch over the world while he sought higher truths… one could face death without regret."

Li Qinghong nodded slightly, clearly holding this True Monarch Tianwu in high regard. "He was a genius of the near-ancient era, and a magnanimous figure. It is said that when his own younger sister perished, her name appeared on the registry of the Underworld. Honored as a True Monarch, he easily could have used his divine abilities to detain her soul, yet he respected the order of the Underworld and refused to interfere for personal reasons. Later, he personally traveled to the Underworld to negotiate her return."

Li Zhouwei sorted through the information, but a doubt suddenly arose. "True Monarch Taiyuan holds an illustrious position in the current era and is highly active. Cultivators from the Golden Feather Sect can even enter the Grotto-Heavens to train. Since Golden Feather gained nothing, and that Metallic Essence has twisted into a Demon-fiend, why doesn't the True Monarch personally intervene and recapture it?"

Li Qinghong had clearly pondered this long ago. After all, True Monarchs still exist both within and beyond the seas. There was no reason they would allow something coveted even by Golden Core cultivators to roam free as a Demon-fiend.

"I already asked about that," she replied. "It concerns the Underworld. Once the Metallic Essence transformed into a Demon-fiend, the Underworld gained sole jurisdiction over its capture. If the Underworld does not dispatch agents to retrieve it, not even a True Monarch has the authority to interfere… This falls squarely within their jurisdiction. If True Monarch Taiyuan *were* to intervene, it would be an act of profound disrespect."

She frowned, her willow-leaf brows knitting as she searched for the words to describe the severity. She offered an analogy: "It would be like traveling to Mount Luoxia, standing at its base, and intercepting the forty-eight rays of twilight that fly across the firmament, stopping them from returning to the summit… and then stealing one or two of those rays for yourself."

"Ah…"

Li Zhouwei understood immediately. Both Mount Luoxia and the Underworld were entities in a league of their own. Mount Luoxia was more visible in the mortal world and thus inspired greater awe, but the Underworld, which held sway over all the fiends of the world, was no less tyrannical.

Just as Li Qinghong finished speaking, the water in the pot boiled, and the Jade lid rattled softly. She poured Li Zhouwei a cup, revealing a tea that was surprisingly pale purple. "This is a tea plant someone gifted me, Winter's Echo. I planted it here in the Lie Sea. This is the year's first harvest."

Li Zhouwei offered his thanks. He first inspected the cup. The veins of the tea leaves shimmered gold and silver, while the leaves themselves were snow-white. He took a delicate sip, only to feel an intense numbness spread from the tip of his tongue all the way down to his stomach. An instant later, a dense wave of spiritual energy surged upward, sweeping his fatigue away entirely.

The taste, however, was purely and solely *numb*. It was, frankly, not pleasant. Li Zhouwei swallowed and replied, "Excellent!"

Li Qinghong, however, was quite enthusiastic. "This is the very first thing I've ever grown myself. Although my sense of taste is vastly different from a mortal's now, I can hazard a guess at the flavor… It should be quite good."

"Mm, yes, absolutely."

When the tea was first poured, it was just ordinary spiritual tea water. But this Thunder Pool was an exceptionally mystical place. The ambient power of thunder in the world was drawn by the tea water and rapidly converged. Li Zhouwei felt a distinct tingling at his Baihui acupoint on the crown of his head. It felt as if lightning was about to descend from the heavens.

'I cannot hold this cup…'

Li Qinghong, naturally, was fine; no lightning in heaven or earth would strike her. Li Zhouwei, however, calmly but quickly set his teacup down. Seeing Li Qinghong purse her lips in a smile, he shook his head, slightly embarrassed.

Her pale purple, almond-shaped eyes blinked. Her crimson lips parted in a smile. "If it tastes bad, just say it tastes bad. You cannot tell a lie in this place. When the ancients swore oaths to the heavens, retribution always came as lightning. Lies are forbidden in the Thunder Pool. You are only safe because Fate shields you. If anyone else had sat here and said that, the lightning would have already struck."

"If you insist on praising it, I'll end up serving it to other guests, getting them all numb, and then they, too, will be forced to say how 'excellent' it is…"

Li Qinghong couldn't help but laugh. She refilled his cup. "If Xizhi were visiting, I'm sure he would also praise it. When the lightning struck… Xizhi could probably endure it. But poor Wushao's tiny frame certainly can't take a bolt of thunder. Although I would be here to prevent him from being turned to ash, he would, at the very least, become a roasted snake."

Li Zhouwei nodded awkwardly. Seeing Li Qinghong adding still more tea to his cup, his tongue began to tingle preemptively. Unsure if he was expected to drink it, he quickly changed the subject. "Grand-Ancestor, have you heard any news of the Daoist Master?"

Li Qinghong finally set the Jade pot down. "That day he was pursued all the way here, giving me a justifiable reason to intervene. I intercepted Changxiao. Changxiao is extremely cunning. The instant he saw me, he feared offending the Dragons, and his attacks immediately became hesitant and restrained. If I had tried to circle around him, Ximing would have vanished."

"We did not fight for long. He possessed little true will to battle from the start. The longer we clashed, the more he sensed things were amiss, and he fled in a single breath. He is now hidden in some unknown corner observing the situation. He remains a significant threat."

Li Qinghong's expression turned serious. "He already considers our family a mortal enemy. This is now a blood feud that ends only in death. While he may not dare to harm you directly, he will have zero scruples about harming Ximing…"

"As for Ximing… he was struck by a Encompassing Profundity Dharma Art. I was quite worried at first, but who knew that only a few years later, he'd be alive and kicking again? He already sent a letter home, and he has even managed to connect with the Tantai Family!"

Li Zhouwei breathed a sigh of relief. He thought for a moment, then said, "I do have one matter that I must trouble you with, my lady."

He retrieved a Jade box from his sleeve and placed it on the table. "I successfully ambushed Situ Mo, and during that time, I also seized a Dharma tool from a disciple of Changxiao Gate. It follows the Mansion Water path and is of excellent quality. I have studied it and sought advice for some time, only to discover an imprint left by the Changxiao Gate deep inside it. The technique used is advanced, allowing any Changxiao disciple within a certain radius to detect it…"

"This specific Mansion Water Dharma tool is somewhat well-known, and I fear being discovered if I carry it. While I myself may be fine, I cannot pass it on to the younger disciples of the clan, and attempting to trade it significantly diminishes its value. I currently have my eye on another Dharma tool, but this issue has delayed the transaction."

He looked up, his hand hovering over his teacup before pulling back again. "If my lady happens to have a suitable Dharma tool here to exchange, it would be the most convenient solution."

Li Qinghong glanced at the box. "Let me take a look. It will save you the trouble of running around. Since you already have your eye on something else, neutralizing the danger from this item is the best course."

She smiled, her tone shifting. "Of course, this place was also established quite hastily. It's not as if I have a stock of Dharma tools lying around to trade you."

Li Zhouwei nodded and opened the Jade box. Inside sat a small, glimmering azure gourd. It radiated a brilliant, precious light, yet it seemed suppressed by the ambient Profound Thunder in the sky, causing it to appear somewhat dim.

Li Qinghong extended her slender hand. Pulled by a primal magnetic force, the gourd immediately flew into her grasp. She scanned it for two beats.

Boom!

A bolt of Firmament Thunders descended from the sky, striking the gourd with a deafening crash. Purple lightning washed over the artifact, and a thick plume of pitch-black smoke erupted from within it, only to be instantly annihilated and dispersed by the dense lightning of the Secret Realm.

The small azure gourd immediately looked brand new, even the original owner's imprint scrubbed clean. Li Qinghong nodded. "This item truly is rather mystical. It must be an antique. It appears they were originally attempting to refine it into an extremely high-grade Pristine Water Dharma tool. But somewhere mid-process—perhaps they ran out of materials, or perhaps some accident occurred—it was converted into a Mansion Water tool."

She paused briefly, then called softly, "Yuanzi!"

The same white-robed female attendant who had guided him inside entered the pavilion, kneeling firmly on the floor. She accepted the gourd from Li Qinghong with both hands.

Li Qinghong instructed, "Take this Dharma tool down to the Lustrous-Head clan on the seabed. Instruct them to alter the artifact. Ask if they can change its color and external appearance while increasing its power, or at least not diminishing it. Then, return to the Thunder Pool with their answer."

"Zhouwei… do you have any specific requirements?"

Yuanzi nodded respectfully, holding the Dharma tool as she stood aside. Only now did Li Zhouwei truly feel the authoritative atmosphere of a domain belonging to the Dragon-kin. He quickly replied, "Not many requirements! Just ensure the final item does not clash with Supreme Yin or Pit Water!"

Li Qinghong shook her head with a smile. "The Lie Sea was originally just an insignificant part of the outer ocean. It had no reputation; it was merely considered a vassal territory of Crimson Reef Island. Crimson Reef Island only ever sent their subordinates here to exploit the populace. The local Demon beasts and cultivators led bitter lives."

"After this Thunder Pool was established, they all submitted to my authority. With that parasitic middle layer of exploitation removed—and since I demand very little of them—they are all immensely grateful. Just send the Dharma tool over. I guarantee they will re-forge it to your complete satisfaction."

Li Zhouwei offered a genuine smile and nodded. "Oh, there's no need to go to *that* much trouble. Ultimately, it's destined to be traded away. If they spend too much effort on it, I won't be able to bear parting with it."

Only then did Li Qinghong turn her head. "No need for extravagance. Just follow the young master's wishes."

"Yes!"

Yuanzi bowed and exited with the Dharma tool.

Li Zhouwei then returned to their topic. "Based on your earlier words, the Metallic Essence portions are currently held by Mount Changhuai and Daoist Master Zipei. But Daoist Master Zipei has already reincarnated…"

He hesitated at this point, showing his confusion.

Li Qinghong interrupted him. "Daoist Master Zipei of the Purple Smoke Gate acquired a portion of the True Qi, but she did not use it for her reincarnation. In the end, she gave it to the Dragon-kin. Purple Qi and True Qi are conceptually very close, yet she refused it… According to the Dragon-kin, there were two reasons. First, she was aiming to assail the Purple Qi Fruition Attainment and refused to leave herself any mental fallback, fearing it would compromise her ascent. Second, she *had* to give it up. Even if she had taken it into reincarnation, she would not have achieved her desire. Any ordinary Metallic Essence would be one thing, but *that* particular portion… it would have compelled a Dragon Monarch to intervene personally! It might even have unleashed boundless karmic slaughter."

Li Zhouwei nodded in understanding. Li Qinghong's expression, however, grew uneasy. "However, according to the Dragon-kin, that exchange Zipei made seems to have been what perfected my Thunder Body. If not for her contribution, it is highly likely that nothing at all would have remained of me after swallowing the thunder. They… they hope that if I encounter cultivators from the Purple Smoke Gate in the future, I will look after them…"

"If our family has the opportunity, we must try our best to foster good relations with that sect… At the very least, we must avoid any conflict. It doesn't just put me in an awkward position; I also fear that those with ill intentions might exploit the situation."

Her words took Li Zhouwei by surprise. His expression turned solemn. "I will immediately find an opportunity to relay this to the family… Was that portion

of Metallic Essence truly so critical? Enough to compel a Dragon Monarch to intervene?"

Li Qinghong replied, "Today… the re-establishment of the True Qi Fruition Attainment is already a foregone conclusion, so that Metallic Essence is naturally vital. A few years ago, the Dragon King of the Admirable Sea came to visit, and he mentioned an even more critical point…"

Her expression grew complex. "The True Qi… the Dragons do not merely *hope* to get a piece of the pie. They *must* secure a piece of the pie. Even Dragon Monarch Xiyang's intervention in the affairs of True Monarch Shangyuan was, in part, to ensure this True Qi could descend upon the world…"

Li Zhouwei hesitated, processing this, before asking, "Could it be… that the True Qi is essential for the Dragon-kin to advance further?"

Li Qinghong nodded, leaning forward slightly. Though her voice remained soft, her words landed with the weight of thunder:

"The Martial True Qi Malignance Essence. Its divinity is profound and clear within; its ferocious might overflows externally. Its righteous nature halts depravity; its benevolent authority is infinite. It does not dwell alone, nor does it live in isolation. It intertwines with the serpent as its companion; its heart is the perfect balance of Yin and Yang—It annihilates Demons and fiends, preserving Truth through Martial Might!"

"True Dragons… True Dragons…"

"How can they possibly lack 'Truth'?"

Chapter 820: The Imperial Command

Li Zhouwei let out a heavy breath and replied, “I understand.”

The Dragon-kin hadn’t sent him to the Lie Sea merely for a family reunion. The words Li Qinghong spoke were likely the Dragon-kin’s true intention. The importance of that True Qi was so high that the Beihai Sea Dragon King had reminded her repeatedly, ensuring Li Qinghong explained the situation to him personally.

“This Bright Yang is one scheme, and that True Qi is another. They are likely afraid my Li family will get entangled, causing the two plots to intersect and interfere with the Dragon-kin’s plan to secure the True Qi.”

Li Zhouwei understood the stakes clearly.

‘The Bright Yang matter is hardly about old sentiments; it’s mostly about preventing the Luoxia faction from acquiring it. But compared to the pursuit of the True Dragons, everything else must be pushed aside. Once this matter is involved, forget a Wei-Li descendant—even one of their own Dragon-kin would be killed without hesitation. This trip… this is a warning, delivered by the Beihai Sea and Admirable Sea factions within the Dragon-kin.’

Li Qinghong studied his expression as she sipped her tea.

“You must not touch the True Qi. The family simply needs to wait quietly for your breakthrough.”

She seemed to recall something, the words hesitating on her lips before she finally lowered her gaze.

“It truly is a pity… about Li Chenghui.”

Li Zhouwei fell silent, unsure how to respond. A long moment passed before he spoke.

"My uncle and I defended the river for sixteen years, vigilant day and night, often feeling we were nearing the end of our path. I had it slightly easier. Uncle slept on his spear, waiting for the dawn. I fear that the moment the anomaly at Mount Wu first appeared, his death was already imminent."

"To have survived all those days… only to fall here."

Among the Chengming generation, Li Chenghui and Li Qinghong had been the closest. They had trained together at the Ancestral Spring, and because of their shared Dao Heritage, Li Chenghui often sought her guidance. His sudden death must surely be the most painful for her.

Li Qinghong remained quiet for a time before saying, "Back then, I always thought he was the most promising of the Chengming generation, and the most cautious. I believed he could carry the weight of the Great Liang. He truly did not disappoint."

The atmosphere immediately grew heavy. Li Zhouwei, wishing to change the subject, clasped his hands.

"Senior, when this junior was passing through Crimson Reef Island, I witnessed quite a commotion. Two groups of cultivators were fighting fiercely. There were people from Thunder-Hearing Island and Crimson Reef Island present. I had heard that Crimson Reef Island is usually deserted… What is…?"

Li Qinghong pondered this briefly.

"It must be related to the Crimson Reef Dragon King. He emerged from seclusion, becoming another late-stage Purple Mansion Realm Dragon King. Perhaps he intends to construct his Dragon Palace soon and will host a celebratory banquet… They came for that?"

Li Zhouwei was still perplexed but nodded.

"But I only saw people from those two families… Perhaps their information network is just faster…"

Li Qinghong thought carefully, then mused, "Your words remind me of something. The Crimson Reef Dragon King is of the Black Dragon Ancestral Line. Thunder-Hearing Island once assisted the Black Dragon Ancestral Line… If the Crimson Reef Dragon King is celebrating, it's reasonable for Thunder-Hearing Island to arrive in force. As for Crimson Reef Island… that is harder to say."

Understanding dawned on Li Zhouwei. He spoke in a solemn tone,

"In that case, my family is allied with the White Dragon Ancestral Line. It is probably best we avoid contact with this Crimson Reef Island, lest we be given trouble. They are Dragon-kin, after all. If they truly decided to make an issue of it, my family could not withstand the pressure."

Li Qinghong inclined her head.

"While that reasoning is sound, the Dragon-kin have a singular objective and are unshakeably united on this front. They won't make things too difficult for you right now. Just stay away from Crimson Reef Island. Don't make things awkward for them."

Li Zhouwei acknowledged her words just as the white-robed female attendant hurried back into the pavilion, bowing respectfully.

"Mistress of the Pool, the Deepwater Attendants examining the Dharma artifact have replied. This artifact can harmonize the Mansion Water. By tempering it with the Spiritwater of the Harmonious Abyss, the Pristine Water within can be transformed and consolidated. By adding another layer of Harmonizing Metal to balance the mansion, it can be refined into a Blue-Gold Gourd. It will be an inch larger than its current form, and the method of wielding it will change from grasping to holding, or wearing at the waist. It will gain two new wondrous abilities, including summoning water to suppress enemies…"

These underwater Demon beasts provided an exhaustive description. Li Qinghong listened distractedly. When the attendant finished, she glanced at Li Zhouwei.

"Minghuang. What is your assessment?"

Li Zhouwei made a quick estimation. The original green gourd had been inferior to the Deng Clan's fan. This upgrade had both gains and losses but was certainly a significant improvement. Although it still couldn't compare to the fan, he replied, "It is already excellent."

Li Qinghong nodded and turned to the attendant, whose name was Yuanzi.

"How long will it take?"

Yuanzi bowed.

"At least six months. We estimate between half a year and nine months."

The woman's gaze turned back to him. Li Zhouwei had no other pressing plans; cultivation was cultivation, regardless of the location. Besides, he had many secret arts he needed to practice. He nodded.

"That poses no problem. I was just looking for a place to enter seclusion. Is it convenient here in the Lie Sea?"

Li Qinghong considered this.

"The thunder within the pool is far too potent and tyrannical; it is naturally unsuitable for Minghuang's cultivation. There aren't many cultivation spots in the Lie Sea below. At best, there is Sea Otter Mountain, but the Spiritual Essence there is inferior even to the mainland. I am afraid Zhouwei will be inconvenienced."

The outer seas were barren, far worse than the Eastern Sea, let alone Jiangnan. Li Zhouwei naturally understood this. After they exchanged a few more pleasantries, Li Qinghong concluded, "I will have Yuanzi escort you down."

Li Zhouwei bowed, letting out a long sigh of relief.

"Now that I have met with you, Senior, I can finally send word back to the family."

Li Qinghong smiled and returned the gesture. He followed the white-robed female attendant out, heading back toward the sea. The chariot they had arrived in was waiting by the pool's edge, the surroundings still utterly empty. Yuanzi respectfully invited him to board without any unnecessary words.

Li Qinghong's palace had few attendants, and they all seemed to share her temperament: concise and elegantly efficient. The chariot plunged toward the sea. Sea Otter Mountain came into view, revealing itself to be extremely simple. Although there were temples and abbeys on the mountain, the buildings were orderly and built low to the ground, with modest front and back courtyards. A few Daoists were burning incense, deep in quiet prayer as they cultivated thunder arts.

But as the chariot broke through the cloud layer, the tranquility below instantly shattered. A visible panic spread through the inhabitants. A group of Daoists quickly gathered below the Ritual Altar on the mountain peak. Looking down, Li Zhouwei saw a swaying sea of black Daoist kerchiefs.

RUMBLE!

The chariot landed atop the Ritual Altar with a deafening, thunder-like roar, sending ripples of silver light pulsing outward. A man at the head of the group below shouted:

"The Firmament Cloud Abbey, representing the fourteen Dao Heritages of the Second Celestial Thunder, respectfully welcomes the High Celestial Thunder Emissary! We receive the thunder command and uphold the Immortal Decree!"

The assembled Daoists bowed as one. From the sides, the sounds of ritual flutes and zithers rose. From the front of the chariot, Yuanzi's clear voice announced:

"We carry no formal edict, only an advisory directive."

"The White Qilin of the Path of the Bright Yang is visiting the Thunder Pool and will be resting on Sea Otter Mountain. I am under orders to accompany His Excellency in selecting a cultivation site. There is no need for this mobilization, but you absolutely must not show any neglect."

"This lowly cultivator obeys."

Li Zhouwei felt the chariot tremble slightly as Yuanzi pulled back the curtain for him, bowing respectfully.

"Your Excellency, please!"

He stepped out onto the Ritual Altar. It was forged from silvery-white metal. The Daoists below remained with their heads bowed low. Only the leader, an old Daoist, stepped forward, stopping one step below the platform to bow deeply.

"We pay respects to the Aspect of the Bright Yang. For Your Excellency to choose this small mountain to tread upon blesses our Dao lineage. This lowly cultivator is overwhelmed by this honor, extremely grateful."

Yuanzi, terrified the locals would offend their guest, stuck close to him, whispering an explanation,

"Your Excellency, when the Eastern Sea's waters receded and the thunder rose, the Thunder Pool descended upon the world. The Firmament Cloud Abbey sensed their Dao Heritage and followed it here all the way from the Northern

Sea. Their heritage originates from ancient cultivators. If their speech causes offense, please…"

She was attempting to smooth things over, but inwardly she trembled. 'That old man Lu must have a death wish! This is the White Qilin. Although he is polite while visiting the Thunder Pool, the Bright Yang Aspect prizes hierarchy above all else. He didn't even kowtow, and he's spouting nonsense about blessing the Dao lineage…'

Li Zhouwei, however, found this very interesting. He swept his gaze over the crowd, noticing that most of the Firmament Cloud Abbey's adherents were mortals. There were only a sparse few at the Embryonic Breathing stage, and the old Daoist before him was merely at Qi Refining. What a thoroughly miserable state!

"Please rise."

He responded, raising an eyebrow.

"Is this ancient etiquette… or the rules of thunder cultivation?"

Sweat immediately beaded on the old Daoist's forehead.

"Your Excellency, only one rule has been passed down through our heritage. We do not know if it is etiquette or thunder law. This small mountain is crude and cannot fulfill the requirements of the rites. It is this lowly cultivator's sin."

Li Zhouwei gave the man a thoughtful look. It seemed these ancient cultivation rules were rather different than he had imagined. He activated his brilliant Profound Light and descended from the Ritual Altar.

Although Li Zhouwei was not a true White Qilin, his Foundation Establishment Realm cultivation, amplified by his destiny, made him appear as nothing less than divine to this crowd of mortals. They stared in mingled awe and envy.

Yuanzi accompanied him into the abbey, quietly adding details.

"Although these cultivators are weak, their Dao Heritage has deep roots connecting them to the Profound Firmament Thunder Pool and the Dao of Thunder-Guiding and Cloud-Anchoring. There is also a Xi Clan in the Northern Sea that sent a disciple here to cultivate. He is currently in seclusion, attempting to break through to Qi Refining."

"I have heard of them."

Li Zhouwei knew of that Xi Clan member, Xi Zikang. He had been an upright man. Unfortunately, he had almost certainly perished within that Grotto-Heaven along with the others. Li Zhouwei could only sigh internally.

'The Dao of Thunder-Guiding and Cloud-Anchoring… just from that name alone, it is clearly something the Dragon-kin are determined to possess. To guide thunder and anchor clouds—that should inherently be the role of a dragon.'

They soon arrived at the deepest cultivation abode within the Firmament Cloud Abbey. It was exactly as Li Qinghong had said: not only was the spiritual energy inferior to the lake above, but the space itself was incredibly cramped.

If an abode had been opened by a cultivator from the inner seas, it would at least be the size of a courtyard. This one, however, was barely the size of a single room. It contained only one table, one chair, and one meditation cushion. Yet the old Daoist clearly cherished the place; the entrance was neatly lined with soft mats.

The old Daoist bowed low beside the entrance as Yuanzi activated the formation array for him.

"Your Excellency… please. When there is news regarding the Dharma artifact, I will come up the mountain to retrieve you."

Li Zhouwei nodded and stepped inside. The great door sealed shut automatically, and the Dharma Lamps within the abode lit up, brightly illuminating the confined space. He sat in place for a short while, organizing all the recent information until his mind gradually cleared.

He settled onto the meditation cushion. Nine secret arts—each one vast as the sea, yet concise and profoundly potent—surged forth from his spiritual sense. These were the nine secret arts of the Radiant Essence Scripture!

These arts were exceptionally precious. Li Zhouwei had no need to carry transcribed copies to study. The knowledge had been directly bestowed upon him when he received the Talisman Seed. Preparing to begin his cultivation, he followed the experiential records left behind by Li Ximing and first isolated the art known as **Primal Yang** to read.

"The origin of Bright Yang, the aspect of the Pivot Yang manifests. Every step adheres to the rules; every glance matches the rite. To sing is to harmonize the pitch pipes; to move is to regulate the hierarchy of status; to tread is to not step upon the land of a state without a Monarch; to stop is to not roost in the domains of feudal lords…"

Li Zhouwei read it through once, nodding slightly.

'Reasonably easy to understand…'

He suddenly remembered something. Rummaging through his storage pouch, he retrieved a jade slip. This was something Li Ximing had given him. It appeared to be annotations for this secret art—it contained only the commentary, not the original text.

Li Zhouwei read the preface first and saw the signature:

□Daoist Master Gufeng□

'Oh. A fitting pen name for a Daoist Master. He must have drawn inspiration from the Talisman Qi.'

He proceeded to read the lengthy hundred-thousand-word text, but his brows furrowed, and he shook his head in thought.

'This thing is verb… cough… it doesn't suit me. This must have been prepared for the younger generations of the family. It's not of much use to me.'

'However, this scroll speculates that the cultivation difficulty is not the same for everyone. Although the nine secret arts ascend sequentially, based on an individual's specific temperament and talent, the difficulty of mastering each of the arts varies…'

He put the slip away. Instead of immediately beginning Primal Yang, he read through the other eight arts and briefly tested each one.

Within his Sea of Qi, flickers of golden light appeared, sometimes white, sometimes gold. One moment they formed a lamp, the next they formed steps, then transformed again into a vast palace complex or a million elite soldiers, flashing unstably. Time flowed past like water.

More than half a month later, Li Zhouwei slowly opened his eyes, exhaling a plume of white mist. Although the abode's lamps were bright, his eyes were far more dazzling, faintly flowing with a golden Profound Light.

His expression, however, was far from calm. Doubt surged in his heart, mixed with profound astonishment.

'These nine secret arts… I've already cultivated a significant portion of them!'

He had tested them all, using the secret arts to stimulate his Immortal Foundation and observe the changes. Edict Glyphs materialized upon the foundation, faint but distinct, as golden lines and white light flowed across its surface. This was unmistakably the sign of having mastered the **Imperial Command**—one of the nine arts!

And this Imperial Command was supposed to be, by far, the most difficult of the nine!

'It certainly wasn't the cultivation method's influence… Daoist Master Gufeng practiced for so many years before his breakthrough, and he always had to start from scratch. Then… it must be the influence of my destiny.'

Yet, after testing all nine arts, he found it was far more than just that. The nine arts were: Primal Yang, Heavenly Lamp, Jewel Steps, Great Fissure, the Art of Returning Fold, Myriad Arms Prefecture, Imperial Command, Golden Qilin, and Red Cicada.

Of these, Imperial Command was already at Grand Completion. Great Fissure was 50% mastered, and Myriad Arms Prefecture was 30% mastered!

Li Zhouwei was simultaneously shocked and overjoyed, but this was immediately followed by deep confusion.

"Why these three?"

Although his current cultivation level wasn't high, destiny clung to him, and his discussions with the Dragon-kin had yielded an immense amount of valuable information. He already had a theory.

"The Pivot Yang bears two children: one is the White Qilin, the second is the White Cicada. But at the time of my birth, the White Qilin delivered the child, and the White Cicada vibrated its wings. Both phenomena appeared simultaneously. This likely means I exist somewhere between the Qilin and the Cicada. As for how much relation this truly has to the Pivot Yang itself, that requires a separate discussion…"

The Pivot Yang was, after all, the primary aspect of the Bright Yang. Li Zhouwei didn't dare compare himself to it lightly. Furthermore, who knew how much

influence the successive generations of the Wei-Li had exerted upon the Bright Yang Fruition Attainment over the ages? The Dragon-kin believed he was the White Qilin, and that assumption probably wasn't far from the truth.

"Regardless of my connection to the Pivot Yang, mastering Imperial Command… likely corresponds directly to this destiny."

Mastering Imperial Command was understandable. But having 50% mastery of the Great Fissure and 30% of the Myriad Arms Prefecture was utterly baffling. If he had shown a slight mastery across all the techniques, that would be one thing. But arts like Primal Yang showed absolutely zero trace of cultivation.

"How strange… When did I ever cultivate these two arts? Or perhaps… was I simply born with them?"

Chapter 821: Harmonising Metal

The secret method Imperial Command served to increase one's personal might and compel others. While its utility was limited, commanding mortals or low-level cultivators posed no issue. As for the remaining two secret methods, he had made progress, but they were far from mastered and offered no tangible benefits.

Then again, secret methods were never intended to be Dao arts that enhanced one's combat prowess. He estimated that even mastering all nine would offer less aid in a real Dao battle than his Cyclic Soul-Refining Halberd Arts.

Li Zhouwei mused on this, suppressed the nagging doubts in his mind, and resolved to ask Li Qinghong about it later. For now, he immersed himself back into secluded cultivation.

Cultivating the Primal Yang was not difficult, and time slipped by in an instant. A faint vibration echoed from outside the immortal's abode, and he slowly opened his eyes. Yuanzi's respectful voice carried in:

"My Lord, the Lustrous-Head Clan has reported personally. The spiritual artifact is successfully refined, and they humbly request you come to inspect it."

The doors to the manor-cave boomed open. Li Zhouwei dissolved into a streak of light, reappearing at her side. Yuanzi bowed and began to lead the way. The old Daoist followed just as respectfully as before, though this time he was accompanied by a young man in a silver crown and feathered robes. He appeared to be a cultivator from the Xi Family of the Northern Sea, and he dared not speak, keeping his gaze lowered as he trailed behind.

Li Zhouwei deliberately slowed his pace, yet the young man remained silent. It wasn't until Li Zhouwei had stepped onto the ritual platform that the youth seized his opportunity:

"Xi Nanqing of the Firmament Cloud Abbey, greets you, my Lord."

Li Zhouwei acknowledged him with a simple sound. In the brief moment he turned to enter the carriage, he shot the youth a glance, lifting the curtain just slightly.

"The Xi Family of the Northern Sea. Your clan has cultivated lightning for generations, and you walk the Righteous Path. We should indeed interact more often."

Xi Nanqing offered a brief reply and fell silent, having nothing more to add. The carriage swayed as it rode the thunder upward, ascending through heavy layers of mist. Li Zhouwei glanced down. The Daoists on the mountain were dispersing in an orderly fashion. The old Daoist, meanwhile, was removing the cushions and table mats from the abode and distributing them among several nearby middle-aged cultivators, who were likely all advanced in years and without heirs.

He withdrew his gaze. Above, the purple-and-white brilliance of the Thunder Pool emerged from the cloud layers. Heavy black mist churned within it, seeming to brew infinite reserves of lightning, radiating an aura that was both dangerous and oppressive.

Following the familiar path, he stepped across the liquid lightning and ascended the silvery-white pavilion. Li Qinghong sat in the same spot as before, though this time her long hair cascaded freely over her shoulders. A blue-gold gourd now rested on the table. The woman's pale lavender eyes locked onto him as she smiled.

"Minghuang, take a look at this spiritual artifact."

Li Zhouwei took his seat and lightly weighed the gourd. It felt significantly heavier.

Li Qinghong continued, "It is much as we predicted. The spiritual artifact has successfully transformed its nature to one of convergence, reinforced with Pond Sector Xin Metal of the Harmonising Metal. It is heavier by fourteen catties and seven taels. It has gained the ability to use Converging Water to erode an enemy's spiritual qi; it's far more potent than before. The Lustrous-Head Clan were here to construct formations, but their artifact refinement techniques and Dao attainment are truly first-class. This wasn't some casual patch job. Even the gourd's original owner wouldn't recognize it standing before him."

"Converging Water is the final destination toward which all rivers flow. By adding the Pond Sector Xin Metal—Harmonising Metal is, by nature, a metal of preservation and collection—the gourd can now contain spirit water. It will nurture the liquid within, slowing the dissipation of its spiritual essence. You can even store talisman water crafted from an immortal foundation inside it."

"Thank you, my Lady!"

Li Zhouwei nodded repeatedly as he listened. He accepted the gourd, stored it safely in his sleeve, and after offering several more thanks, he remarked:

"Harmonising Metal is certainly peculiar. I have rarely seen it within the Seas. If it is truly a metal of preservation, I suspect the few spiritual artifacts our family possesses capable of storing spiritual items must have been refined using this substance."

Li Qinghong smiled faintly. "Although I do not cultivate the Metal Virtue, I have been reading some hidden scriptures lately. Your guess is almost certainly correct. Harmonising Metal is exceedingly rare these days, which is precisely why ancient spiritual artifacts could often preserve spiritual items, whereas most modern ones cannot."

"Speaking of this… the matter of the 'Three Metals' has troubled my family for a long time. Even though the Water Virtue is incomplete, it is still referred to as the 'Five Waters.' Why, then, is Metal Virtue only the 'Three Metals'? Brother Wushao and I studied this privately several times but found nothing. I eventually asked…"

"It turns out both of those missing paths to Fruition Attainment are already occupied. Furthermore, their holders are both located Beyond the Heavens, and their current status is… difficult to articulate. The implication from the Dragonkin is that these two paths are not only difficult to cultivate, they are currently impossible to *achieve*. This has led to the awkward, incomplete state we have today."

"Although spiritual items aligned with these two paths occasionally appear in the mainland and the Seas, cultivators at the Foundation Establishment Realm are pitifully rare. As for Purple Mansion Realm-grade spiritual items, they no longer manifest in the world; they can only be passed down as ancient legacies or extracted from ancient spiritual artifacts. In the last thousand years, I have heard of fewer than ten cultivators who attempted these paths. All were

Heaven's Chosen prodigies, but they strayed onto these two divergent roads, only to languish and die during the early Purple Mansion Realm. Today, only one such person remains."

Doubt stirred in Li Zhouwei's heart. "I have heard that methods exist to convert between different daos, such as 'Refining Pristine Water into Converging Water' or the 'Art of Borrowing Geng for Dui.' Can these two missing Metal Virtues be obtained through similar means?"

Li Qinghong shook her head. "That, I do not know."

Li Zhouwei grew contemplative, his mind suddenly turning to the Jiang Family incident.

'No wonder… No wonder that Daoist Master from the Wang Family went so far as to destroy an ancient spiritual artifact just to extract the Six Xin Harmonising Metal. The empty husk is supposedly still in their vaults. So this is why: Harmonising Metal is no longer being naturally produced… The Wang Family commands the Wandering Metal in this age; if a conversion method existed, what element could they *not* create? Why would they need to travel thousands of miles just to destroy an ancient spiritual artifact? Since even the Wang Family resorted to that, it must truly be impossible to convert.'

Understanding dawned on him, and he felt he had gained significant insight. He nodded. "No wonder it is said that when the 'Three Metals' manifest, the Metal Virtue is considered proven. If this is the case, then it truly is all 'complete'—all that can exist, already does."

After the time it takes to drink a cup of tea, Li Zhouwei spoke again. "There is one other matter I must ask you, my Lady. What do you know regarding secret methods? Are there any known cases of a cultivator reaching the late Foundation Establishment Realm who has also achieved significant attainment in these secret arts?"

Li Zhouwei knew that asking Li Qinghong was tantamount to asking the Dragon-kin directly. Fortunately, the Dragon-kin were aware that he carried the burden of Fate, giving him the courage to ask. To his surprise, however, Li Qinghong merely paused, shook her head, and replied:

"I have never even cultivated an secret method, so naturally, I know nothing of such matters."

Li Zhouwei could only let the matter drop. They chatted for a short while longer within the Thunder Pool before he finally rose to take his leave.

"I am greatly indebted to you for this, my Lady. On my return, I will detour by Crimson Reef Island and stop at Tai'e Island to exchange for some magical implements. Afterward, I will follow the coast down toward the Vermillion Sea to trade for supplies before returning to the Zongquan Island region to enter secluded cultivation."

Li Qinghong nodded and walked him out of the pavilion. Softly, she said:

"The Old Master is advanced in years. Please, ask him to take good care of his health. I am confined to this pool and cannot leave, but I miss him terribly… I have now cultivated the Thunder Body. If a storm ever brews over Moongaze Lake and lightning flashes upon its surface, tell him to consider it me, visiting my great-uncle."

"This junior will certainly relay the message."

They walked all the way to the edge of the Lightning Pool. Her vermillion lips parted slightly, and she hesitated for a long moment. She seemed to have a warning or advice to impart, but, perhaps considering her station, she ultimately swallowed her words.

Li Zhouwei saw the hesitation. He offered a deep, prolonged bow, making no promises or oaths. He simply mounted his escaping light and departed toward the west.

Moongaze Lake.

Dawn rose as always. A young man in crimson robes stood at the highest point of the pavilion, gazing out over the entire lake prefecture. Behind him, a young man in black robes stood bowed, looking only a few years his senior. He wore a sword at his waist and held an extremely respectful posture.

The crimson-robed youth slowly withdrew his gaze, letting it fall upon the small letter in his hand. His brow furrowed, a trace of cold disdain touching his features as he spoke in a low voice:

"Kong Guli is dead…"

The young man behind him remained calm. He bowed and replied:

"This subordinate also received the news. The Sacred Writ Gate is handling the funeral with great fanfare. I fear we will be required to send representatives."

It had only been a few years since the Kong Family submitted to the Sacred Writ Gate when the turmoil in the Eastern Sea began. As one of the two surviving elders of the Kong Family, Kong Guli had been entrusted with heavy responsibilities there. He had been dispatched by the Sacred Writ Gate to reinforce Purple Smoke, only to be ambushed halfway by the Pure Unity Dao Gate, dying on the road.

When the news returned, Kong Guxi wailed in grief. But before he had wept more than a few moments, Daoist Master Zhu Gong personally traveled to the Pure Unity Dao Gate to confront Daoist Master Guanghou. The dispute lasted for several days. Upon her return, she immediately promoted Kong Xiaxiang to the powerful position of Protector and bestowed several marriage contracts with the direct bloodline, all by way of compensation.

Kong Guli's funeral, meanwhile, was held with extravagant splendor and the highest possible honors. The elder's children and grandchildren were nearly all gone. They found the youngest remaining boy in the Kong bloodline, whom Daoist Master Zhu Gong personally accepted as a disciple, and invited all the major families to attend the condolences and witness the ceremony.

This grand spectacle lasted for several days, and Li Jiangqian monitored it closely. He refolded the letter in his hand, shaking his head.

"Chen Yang, our delegation for the condolences must be impressive. The Sacred Writ Gate is trying to strengthen its bond with the Kong Family, binding them to the point where they are inseparable. My Li Family must, therefore, be extra cautious to avoid any suspicion. This requires you to lead the trip personally."

He instructed, "Also, be mindful… do not engage in idle chatter with the Kong Family members. Kong Guxi will not seek you out. And since our family has reached the Purple Mansion Realm level, they won't dare cause an ugly scene or sever relations. At worst, you will simply have to endure their cold expressions."

"This subordinate understands!"

Visiting the Sacred Writ Gate was certainly not a pleasant assignment. Li Jiangqian was privately wary that the Profound Immersion Dao Lineage was attempting to drive a wedge between the Li and Kong families, forcing the Kongs to cling desperately to the Sacred Writ Gate's thigh. If someone hot-tempered like Ding Weizeng were sent, they would inevitably clash. Cui Jueyin's status, meanwhile, was too sensitive. Chen Yang, however, had always been thorough and perceptive. Entrusting this to him was the most appropriate choice.

Chen Yang accepted the command and withdrew. Li Jiangqian remained standing on the high platform. After a moment, he saw Cui Jueyin ascend from below. Cui Jueyin bowed, offering forth a jade slip with both hands.

"Reporting to the Patriarch: the Milin Dao Garden established some time ago has been attended by numerous mortal members of the clan. We tested them individually these past few days, and we now have the results."

"Even when mortals study the Dao classics, there are clear differences in their aptitude. Some, despite being unable to cultivate, demonstrate a strong comprehension of Dao methods. Others, through sheer diligence, can barely grasp a concept or two. And some have clearly received guidance from cultivators in their families and show minor achievements…"

Li Jiangqian frowned. "If they already have cultivators guiding them, what need is there to attend the Milin Dao Garden?"

Cui Jueyin looked slightly embarrassed. "The family established the Dao Garden intending it for the clan's poorer disciples. But after several months, the majority of the clan members have enrolled… Firstly, the cultivators in their immediate families rarely have the spare time to instruct them. Secondly… they don't have much to teach."

Li Jiangqian paused, stunned, then shook his head. "It seems I overestimated them."

When it truly came down to Dao methods, the average rogue cultivator only knew one or two basic spells. Likewise, the family's Guest Elders, unless they specialized in talisman drawing, spirit plants, alchemy, or artifact refinement, possessed no meaningful Dao attainment even at the Qi Refining stage. Only upon reaching the Foundation Establishment Realm and forging one's immortal foundation does a cultivator begin to gain true insight into the world.

Although the Li Family was an Immortal Clan with abundant Daoist scriptures, even members of the direct bloodline only began gaining slight Dao attainment during Qi Refining. Of the clan's few Qi Refining cultivators, only the brothers Li Zhoufang and Li Zhouyang had any spare time. But no matter how much they cared for the junior clan members, they could not halt their own cultivation to instruct mortals.

Thus, the fact that the Milin Dao Garden was overflowing with students was simultaneously unexpected and perfectly logical. Li Jiangqian smiled and shook his head.

"This is an unexpected boon. The growing rift between the various courtyards might be mitigated by this… Separate the children into groups. Make sure to pair those from different branches who are unfamiliar with one another, and split up those from the same courtyard. Force them to get acquainted…"

Ever one to seize an opportunity, he implemented the slight change. Cui Jueyin carefully noted the instruction and continued:

"There are indeed a few individuals who show a profound understanding of Dao methods, often making astonishing insights. But since they cannot cultivate, their talent is ultimately useless."

Li Jiangqian raised an eyebrow, thinking to himself. 'The Talisman Seed functions as a spiritual aperture… Perhaps these children could seek it out… Unfortunately, by the time they demonstrate such academic talent, it is far too late. They are well past the age of six, and it has already been confirmed they cannot cultivate… It is of little use. Forget it. If any of them possessed truly transcendent talent, like Quewan, the Talisman Seed would have responded on its own…'

He waved Cui Jueyin away. Suddenly, he sensed strands of Clear Qi rising toward the zenith. Wisps of energy brushed aside the cloud layer, revealing the Azure Sky. The energy was light and gentle; it flashed for only a brief instant before rapidly wilting away.

Li Jiangqian pondered this, watching the phenomenon intently. "This is a celestial phenomenon I have never witnessed before."

Before long, a messenger arrived, bowing deeply before him.

"Reporting, my Lord. Old Master Tian Zhongqing of the Tian Clan has failed his breakthrough to the Foundation Establishment Realm. His body has perished, and his Dao has dissipated."

Understanding dawned on Li Jiangqian. He shook his head. "So, that was the sign of 'Clear Qi' failing a breakthrough… He was the only person in the entire lake region attempting to reach Foundation Establishment by cultivating Clear Qi. In those early years, the lake was impoverished, and he practiced the Clear Qi Dao Lineage. He simply grew too old. Although he changed his cultivation method since then, it was ultimately too late."

He seemed genuinely remorseful for a moment. "He managed to hold on for so long. While the Inward Heart Surging Profundity benefits the Immortal Dao and secluded cultivation, and it clarifies the Twelve Qi, all of which helped him immensely, it still wasn't quite enough… If he had practiced a third or fourth-grade cultivation method from the start, and had more resources, he might have attempted this breakthrough ten or twenty years younger. Back then, he would have had a chance."

"In the early days, our family lacked geniuses, but several of the stewards from external families were excellent. What a pity…"

The man from the Jade Court Guard bowed and retreated quickly. Li Jiangqian pondered this on the platform for a moment before someone from Qingdu arrived right behind him, reporting the news:

"Old Master Tian left final words. His immortal remains are to be buried by the Meichi River in Lijing Prefecture. It is said that Elder Chen shed tears upon hearing the news. Lord Li Wen and Old Master An have already set out."

Tian Zhongqing's great-aunt had been Lord Xiangping's wife; the old man himself called Li Xuanfeng 'Cousin-Uncle.' His status was prominent, and he had been an instrumental figure in the clan's rise. Li Jiangqian sighed heavily.

"Send some compensation to the Tian family. I recall the old master lost all heirs in his son's generation. The one currently managing the Tian family is named… Tian Ling. He is at the Qi Refining level. Although only a nephew, he served Tian Zhongqing as a son would serve a father. Bestow the gifts upon him."

He waved the messenger away, stepped down from the high platform, and added:

"I will go personally."

Chapter 822: The Immortal Decree

As Li Jiangqian headed toward the riverbank, he glanced up at the sky. The ethereal essence released by Tian Zhongqing's fall had already vanished without a trace. The sun blazed fiercely, casting a light so bright over the lake it was almost suffocating.

"The summers get drier every year."

He descended on stepping flames. Below, in the Lijings Prefectural Town, doorways were already draped in white mourning gauze. The various branches of the Tian clan had once been prominent families in Lijing. Though their power had waned after moving to Eastern Yue, and they were caught in the crossfire of the conflict between north and south, their path had been difficult. Fortunately, Tian Zhongqing had returned safely back then. Even if the younger generation was lacking, the family still retained a measure of prestige and relied on old favors. Li Jiangqian had been delayed, and by the time he arrived, the riverbank was already crowded.

Although Chen Yang had departed, the Chen family—a great clan equal to the Ans—had no shortage of influential figures to manage the situation. Moreover, Chen Donghe himself had personally come this time. Li Jiangqian scanned the crowd. Aside from Li Chenghuai and a few others currently in seclusion, nearly half of the lake region's true powerholders were present.

He wasn't surprised. It was no secret that the esteemed clans of the lake region were a tangled web of alliances. The Li clan itself had integrated with external families through generations of intermarriage. The fact that Ding Weizeng, Qu Bushi, and Miaoshui—several of the Foundation Establishment Realm cultivators belonging to the Jiangbei faction—had *not* attended, actually earned his silent approval.

The old master of the Tian family, Tian Ling, waited by the riverbank dressed entirely in white. He was something of a special case. His father, Tian Rong, had been assassinated by a servant girl, leaving Tian Ling to grow up alone in

Qingdu. He had held posts first in the Jade Court and later in the Lake region, but his low cultivation meant he was never considered an important figure. Currently stationed on the eastern shore, he had rushed back for the funeral. He stepped forward to receive Li Jiangqian, bowing meticulously.

"Greetings, Clan Head."

Li Jiangqian offered a few words of comfort as he landed. He scanned the dense, overlapping reed marshes, spoke the necessary pleasantries, and made his appearance brief. It was enough to fulfill his obligations.

Stepping away from the formal proceedings, he sought out Li Xuanxuan. The old man looked deeply worried. The moment he saw Li Jiangqian, he spoke.

"Qian'er, are you returning to the main island? Take me with you; I need to retrieve an item or two."

Li Jiangqian was indeed managing countless affairs and still had his own cultivation to attend to; he had little time to waste here. He nodded, supported the old man's arm, and ignited his flames, flying back out over the lake. As they traveled, he asked:

"Elder, what are you fetching that requires you to go personally?"

Li Xuanxuan sighed. "The Tian family's younger generation is truly in decline. We must help where we can… This old man has some spiritual items stored away. I'll go fetch them… If I spot any promising youths, I'll pass some along."

Li Jiangqian nodded thoughtfully. "You can entrust that task to me."

Before Li Xuanxuan could reply, Li Jiangqian activated his ocular technique. A brief glance aside made him pause. "Hm?"

Standing amidst the clouds near the lake was a man and a woman. The woman's features were unremarkable, but she carried herself with an excellent bearing, a faint smile on her face. In her arms, she cradled a treasured sword that radiated an aura as piercing and cold as Ice.

Beside her stood an exceptionally handsome young man, appearing to be in his late twenties. He wore a deep green robe secured by a Jade belt, and dark boots. A short talisman-sword hung at his hip.

Li Jiangqian smiled and flew over, bowing first to the woman. "Greetings, Aunt Xinghan."

Li Xinghan returned the greeting and then hurried to pay respects to Li Xuanxuan. The young man, surprised, quickly followed suit. After the flurry of salutations, Li Jiangqian turned to the man, feigning unfamiliarity.

"And this is…"

"I am Zhuang Pingye, of the Guyan Zhuang Clan," the man replied with a smile.

Li Jiangqian recognized him; this was indeed the famous talisman-sword successor from Guyan. "Fellow Daoist, you have a truly striking countenance," Li Jiangqian praised.

Zhuang Pingye was indeed exceptionally handsome, but his was the dazzling handsomeness of wealth and dashing flair. His features—a broad, noble forehead, bright lips, white teeth, and a full chin—were so opulent they commanded attention. Yet, he lacked true refined grace. He was prettier than Li Xizhi, but Li Xizhi possessed an enduring quality to his looks that Zhuang Pingye lacked. His beauty was also starkly different from Li Xijun's cold, sharp elegance.

His looks and bearing were first-class, and he was clearly accustomed to praise. He bowed politely to Li Jiangqian.

"Greetings, Clan Head!"

His voice was also extremely pleasant, compelling trust. Based on this first impression alone, Zhuang Pingye seemed an impeccable candidate for a husband. Li Xuanxuan watched with a faint smile, nodding slightly.

Li Jiangqian nodded, and Zhuang Pingye immediately added:

"I heard that Xinghan enjoys sword arts. I recently acquired a rather unique sword manual in the Great Desert and brought it to study with her."

Li Jiangqian glanced at Li Xinghan, who nodded gently. He offered a few more pleasantries, praising Zhuang Pingye. Though the young man smiled, he deflected every compliment with practiced humility. Not wanting to intrude, Li Jiangqian took his leave.

'With that appearance and bearing, he's certainly not beneath Aunt. He doesn't seem like a brainless fool, either… Though he's a few years older, his prospects for reaching the Foundation Establishment Realm look very promising…'

As Li Jiangqian flew back on the wind, solidifying his impression of the man, Li Xuanxuan spoke.

"It seems Xinghan isn't averse to him. He has a good demeanor and is clearly generous. Matters of affection often rise and fall as quickly as an overturned cup or spilled tea. We must investigate clearly, and quickly—how many brothers does he have? His paternal line consists of high-level cultivators, but what about his maternal line? Does he have any black marks on his record? If this needs to be stopped, it must be stopped early, before it harms anyone."

Li Jiangqian replied cautiously, "Elder, I already investigated this. He is the youngest legitimate son of Zhuang Cheng. His mother, a woman from a minor clan, died early. The subsequent official wife bore no children, which is why Zhuang Cheng keeps seven concubines… Still, he has very few legitimate sons. Zhuang Pingye is deeply favored, surrounded by numerous servant girls and songstresses, but he has no heirs."

Li Jiangqian had only revealed a fraction of what he knew, but the implication was clear. Li Xuanxuan frowned. Then again, one of his own descendants was also known to indulge in that path, so he only hesitated, offering no reply. The two descended back onto the island, arriving at Qingdu. The old man sighed.

"These things are often unavoidable… We shall wait and see."

They landed. Li Jiangqian returned to the main hall in the center of the island via his fire technique and took his seat. A guard soon reported that Xia Shouyu was waiting outside.

This woman had, after all, been personally selected by Li Ximing, and furthermore, she was a Foundation Establishment Realm cultivator. Li Jiangqian treated her with considerable respect and immediately invited her in. Xia Shouyu was escorted into the hall. She bowed.

"Greetings, Clan Head… I have been looking for Young Master Zhouming these past few days, but he was nowhere to be found this morning. His attendants mentioned he went for an outing by the lake, but I found no trace of him. Since the weather is rather oppressive, I came here to inquire…"

'An outing in this blazing heat? Where else could he be… he's off indulging his vices.'

Li Zhouming had been remarkably well-behaved recently, so much so that Li Xuanxuan almost believed the boy was finally mending his ways. But a fox cannot

hide its tail. The itch obviously became unbearable, and he had gone off to rendezvous with some woman. Li Jiangqian felt the awkwardness of the situation and forced a smile.

"My uncle does have a habit of taking such outings. He often rides out alone, and even the servants cannot track him."

Xia Shouyu observed his reaction and understood the situation perfectly. However, with the marriage agreement still pending, a woman as calculating as she would never choose to make an issue of it now. She smiled.

"I understand. It was merely a casual mention. The wedding date is approaching, so I came to find the Clan Head to discuss the arrangements."

Her expression turned serious. "My family members were supposed to come here, but considering the Daoist Master's situation… the Daoist Master gave specific instructions not to expose anything. I fear that if cultivators from my home traveled here, their movements might be revealed. Yet, planning this alone seems inappropriate. Therefore, I came specifically to consult the Clan Head…"

Li Jiangqian fell silent, observing her expression just as carefully, weighing his calculations.

Xia Shouyu's engagement had been personally decreed by Li Ximing. Her background was a mystery, but Li Jiangqian had no authority to question the decision. Besides, she handled every matter meticulously, leaving no room for complaint.

By framing it this way, she made any request to meet her elders seem unnecessary. He couldn't tell if this was a strategic maneuver—advancing by retreating—or a genuine desire to consult. With Li Ximing's reputation backing her, Li Jiangqian could only concede.

"Senior is commendably cautious. We shall proceed with the wedding according to custom. With the Daoist Master vouching for you, the formalities with your sect are not urgent…"

He set aside the letter in his hand and smiled. "However, Senior possesses the rare Blazing Fire Dao lineage. Such lineages have specific requirements. If there is any location within the lake region better suited for your cultivation, you must mention it. Since you cannot currently contact your sect, you may also list any spiritual items required for your high-grade techniques."

"The juniors in the family are also quite curious about the Blazing Fire lineage and were hoping to ask you for guidance."

Xia Shouyu's heart tightened, though her smile remained unchanged. "There is no need for spiritual items; I brought sufficient supplies when I left home. As for guidance… I would not dare presume to instruct the Immortal Clan. However, if the juniors visit, I will certainly not be negligent in their teaching."

Li Jiangqian was about to press the point when the sound of hurried footsteps echoed from the entrance. Cui Jueyin appeared at the hall entrance, his expression urgent. He bowed quickly, and Li Jiangqian swallowed the rest of his sentence as Cui Jueyin approached and whispered:

"Clan Head… someone from the Golden Feather Sect has arrived. It is the individual closest to Daoist Master Qiushui—Zhang Duanyan of the Golden Feather Sect. She is waiting outside the island perimeter."

'Qiushui? Zhang Duanyan!'

If one had to name the most unprovokable figures in all of Jiangnan, one was the sole survivor of the Three Yuans, Daoist Master Yuanxiu. The other was this very Daoist Master Qiushui. Both were cultivators on the verge of trying the Golden Core realm, figures that even other Purple Mansion Realm Daoist Masters deeply feared.

Furthermore, Daoist Master Qiushui was a Great Daoist Master specializing in the Whole Pill path and a member of the Golden Feather Zhang family, placing her status even a notch above Daoist Master Yuanxiu. This meant Zhang Duanyan's authority within the Golden Feather Sect was scarcely less than that of the Sect Master!

Li Jiangqian's pupils constricted. He shot to his feet and strode rapidly down from the dais, offering a brief apology to Xia Shouyu as he passed.

"An honored guest is at the gate. I must greet them immediately. Please forgive me for neglecting you, Senior."

How could Xia Shouyu possibly complain about being neglected? She was practically breathing a sigh of relief. Li Jiangqian vanished from the hall in moments, and she hurriedly excused herself, making her way back to her own cultivation abode.

Li Jiangqian, meanwhile, had no capacity to analyze their conversation further. His mind filled with unease, he exited the hall and rode the wind toward the island's edge. Sure enough, a woman stood waiting in the small pavilion there.

The woman was tall and dressed in golden robes. A golden gauze veiled the lower half of her face, revealing only a pair of calm eyes and fair skin. Her hands were clasped behind her back. An old man, eyes half-closed and back hunched, stood beside her.

The woman was currently gazing out at the lake scenery with what seemed to be an appreciative smile. However, her ramrod-straight posture and a subtle hesitation in her movements betrayed an inner turmoil.

Li Jiangqian hurriedly landed his flames outside the pavilion and entered on foot, bowing deeply. "Greetings, Emissary of the Immortal Sect."

Zhang Duanyan turned and returned the bow. She studied him for a moment. "You are Li Jiangqian. Let us speak inside."

Li Jiangqian and Cui Jueyin led the pair inside, guiding them through the defensive formations and back to the great hall. Zhang Duanyan observed their surroundings and nodded.

"The Li Clan has governed this lake region with considerable merit, surpassing the Jiang family of old."

Li Jiangqian clasped his hands. "The Jiangs were descendants of an Origin Mansion; we cannot compare. We have merely benefited from our Daoist Master's good fortune, which has allowed us some prosperity…"

Zhang Duanyan smiled faintly. Faced with an emissary from the Golden Feather Sect, Li Jiangqian tactfully bypassed the main audience hall, guiding them instead toward a rear hall.

The reason was simple: the main audience hall possessed only one high seat, forcing an awkward declaration of status. Zhang Duanyan was not at the Purple Mansion Realm, but she was the mouthpiece for one, and her personal background was illustrious. With his own Daoist Master absent, Li Jiangqian letting her take the high seat would seem obsequious; taking it himself would be arrogant. The rear hall, with its less formal seating, solved the dilemma. They sat, and Cui Jueyin served tea.

Li Jiangqian spoke respectfully. "The Emissary of the Immortal Sect gracing our humble abode brings radiance to the entire lake region. May I ask what guidance you bring us?"

"There are indeed arrangements to discuss. Have you had news of your Daoist Master in recent years? It would be best if he were present to oversee this matter."

Zhang Duanyan nodded lightly, returning his polite smile as she inquired after Li Ximing's whereabouts. Li Jiangqian replied:

"The Daoist Master is traveling overseas, and we have received no news of his return. If the Immortal Emissary needs me to relay a message to him, I fear I am unable to do so."

Zhang Duanyan sighed softly. "The Clan Head misunderstands. A few days ago, an emissary from the North arrived at the Golden Feather mountain gate. They bore an Immortal Order, and after negotiations with my Golden Feather Sect, a great matter was decided. I have been dispatched south to transmit this order to the various sects."

'An emissary from the North?'

The Zhang family had never shown any deference to Buddhist cultivators. For Zhang Duanyan to refer to this person as an emissary from the North—and even subtly imply her own status was lower—the origin of this visitor was obvious.

'Mount Luoxia!'

Just as this realization struck Li Jiangqian, Zhang Duanyan rose from her seat. Her veil vanished, revealing a lovely face with bright eyes and pristine teeth. She spoke in a low voice:

"This decree should have been received at the Tiantai Dharma Realm. Fortunately, it was already formally received once at the Golden Feather Sect. This is merely a transmission, one step removed from the original Immortal Rank, but it is still improper to announce it indoors. If the decree cannot reach the heavens, this hall will collapse. If my feet do not touch the raw earth, the foundations beneath us will shatter..."

Li Jiangqian only had to gesture her one step back; the rear of the hall opened directly onto a courtyard exposed to the sky. Zhang Duanyan judged it spacious enough.

"All of you, bow now."

The old man accompanying her was already prostrate on the ground, his expression respectful to the point of terror. Li Jiangqian and Cui Jueyin bowed down. Zhang Duanyan's expression turned utterly solemn. She retreated half a step, bowed deeply from the waist, raised her hands above her head, and respectfully intoned:

"Comprehending Profundity's purple reflection, the Wu light revealing the dawn mist; the Golden Oneness of this Dao, I humbly beseech thee."

The Great Void did not tremble, nor did any spiritual light flash. Her hands merely vibrated faintly, and a scroll materialized within them. It was white with a brown border, looking as commonplace as a mortal book as it lay flat in her palms.

Li Jiangqian's heart seized. He dared not ask a thing. He only registered that every sound of bird and insect in the garden had fallen utterly silent. The wind stopped. Even the bright light from the zenith above seemed to dim.

Zhang Duanyan's expression was grave, her normally calm eyes filled only with profound weight. Her voice dropped low: "On the twenty-second day of the seventh month, in the twenty-second year of Shenxuan, the Wu Light accepts the offering. The Celestial Entourage shall honor the realm, arriving at the Three Streams of Jiangbei. It descends to observe the mortal world, to spread virtue and grace. It proceeds thence to Qilu, returning in six years and six months. All clans in the lands it traverses must burn incense and perform the rites. Close your doors and do not disturb the passage. In all places the Celestial Entourage treads, deference is paramount. Do not entangle yourself in this causality."

Zhang Duanyan only spoke the words; the immortal decree in her hands was never unrolled. Perhaps the Li family lacked the status to see it, or perhaps opening it would unleash something terrifying. The scroll remained inert in her palms.

Yet her voice echoed in the profound silence. Li Jiangqian slowly bowed his head lower, his mind roaring like thunder.

'Mount Luoxia's *Celestial Entourage* is coming to Jiangbei to observe the mortal world…'

Whose entourage could possibly come from Mount Luoxia? It had to be a True Monarch! "Observe the mortal world"... the phrase sounded magnificent, projecting an air of supreme authority, but it meant only one thing: a True Monarch was reincarnating and descending!

'Proceeds to Qilu, returning in six years and six months...'

This True Monarch intended to carve a path from Jiangbei straight through to the lands of Qilu, returning to Mount Luoxia after six years and six months—a precise repetition of what Chu Yi had done all those years ago!

As for the warnings about deference and causality, it felt less like a threat and more like a merciful reminder: this True Monarch was descending to observe the world's suffering as the path to reclaim his Fruition Attainment. Any great clan or immortal sect that blocked his way would be scattered like dust in the wind.

'Back then, Chu Yi rose abruptly and annihilated the great clans of Yufu Prefecture. Our family knew nothing concrete, only whispers and speculation. Now... only because we have achieved the Purple Mansion Realm, do we finally qualify to receive Mount Luoxia's direct orders...'

While Li Jiangqian still possessed the clarity to analyze the situation, Cui Jueyin was frozen solid beside him, stunned into a statue. His legs trembled violently. As a direct descendant of the Overseas Cui Clan—a line that had suffered repeated torments—his terror of a True Monarch ran far deeper than Li Jiangqian's, perhaps even deeper than Zhang Duanyan's.

Zhang Duanyan herself remained solemn, her eyes overflowing with boundless awe and reverence, as if her own consciousness had been swept away. Yet, it seemed genuine. Only the knuckles of the hands gripping the scroll had turned white.

She was a Foundation Establishment Realm cultivator; that grip contained enough force to shatter brick, yet the immortal decree remained utterly pristine, without the slightest wrinkle. Li Jiangqian kept his eyes firmly fixed on the ground, his voice resonant with deference.

"This lowly cultivator accepts the decree!"

The immortal decree in Zhang Duanyan's hands vanished abruptly, as if it had never existed. The woman stepped forward naturally to help Li Jiangqian rise, her voice emerging slightly hoarse.

"Clan Head, please rise quickly."

Li Jiangqian accepted the gesture and rose, though a heavy pressure remained lodged in his chest. Beside him, Cui Jueyin was drenched in sweat, his eyes lowered to mere slits, his gaze seemingly nailed to the earth, utterly unable to look up.

The four returned inside in silence. Zhang Duanyan took her seat but remained quiet.

Zhang Duanyan had traveled here from the Golden Feather Sect. The Li clan didn't know which stop this was on her itinerary, but based on geography, they had to be the first or second. The woman clearly had little experience reciting an immortal decree. It wasn't only the Li family members who were shaken; her own face was pale, and she seemed to be struggling to catch her breath.

Li Jiangqian quickly adjusted his emotions and poured her fresh tea. "We have truly troubled the Immortal Emissary to make this trip simply to warn my family… Jiangqian thanks you on behalf of the entire Li clan!"

Zhang Duanyan raised the cup to her lips and took a sip. Her eyes betrayed her exhaustion, but she forced herself to maintain the proper etiquette. "The Clan Head speaks too gravely. This is merely within the scope of my duty."

Li Jiangqian considered this, then asked, "Just one thing… this 'twenty-second year of Shenxuan, seventh month.' My family is unfamiliar with this calendar. When is that?"

Zhang Duanyan replied in a low voice, "Shenxuan is the calendar used by the Northern Dao lineages, reckoned by the spiritual atmosphere. It corresponds to June, two years from now."

Li Jiangqian sighed softly, searing the date into his memory. But Zhang Duanyan spoke again, her expression turning solemn.

"Since the Celestial Entourage will be in Jiangbei, the grudge between your esteemed clan and the White Ye Immortal Sect must be set aside. If you are still preoccupied with such squabbles when this begins, I fear that in the end…"

She hesitated, trailing off. Li Jiangqian nodded quickly.

"Emissary, rest assured, my clan knows its limits. We would never do such a thing. The affairs of a True Monarch are far beyond our touch. We will not intentionally provoke the Capital Immortals Dao… But we cannot guarantee their restraint."

"Rest assured on that count."

Zhang Duanyan shook her head. "The Capital Immortals Dao will absolutely not make a move. They will not use this as an opportunity for any schemes or assassinations. They will not even allow the *thought* to arise. This matter is far beyond the control of any Purple Mansion Realm. If anyone harbors such designs, the result is often the annihilation of both parties, and worse, it is an offense to the North. That is tantamount to punching a hole in the heavens."

Li Jiangqian finally relaxed. Only then did Zhang Duanyan continue:

"In another two days or so, the decree will also have been delivered to the Capital Immortals Dao. I implore your clan and the Capital Immortals Dao to negotiate properly. Use the two years you have. Withdraw the personnel that must be withdrawn. Swiftly promote the clans necessary to hold the territory. Ensure the boundaries are handed over properly. Do this, so you are not forced to sever a limb to survive when the time comes."

"As for the rites and incense, it is best to perform them to the fullest extent. No one truly knows the specifics of this situation. It would be best to construct a high altar and ensure all formalities are observed."

"This junior obeys!"

Zhang Duanyan let out a slow breath. She pondered for a long moment before speaking again, as if steeling herself to add a final warning.

"Daoist Master Qiushui met Senior Xuanfeng back in the day. There was some affinity there, and she holds him in high regard. Furthermore, my grandfather shares a deep friendship with your clan. Therefore, I will offer one personal reminder: your clan must remain quiet. Do not entertain any thoughts of making contact. That path leads only to eternal damnation."

Hearing this, Li Jiangqian felt a flicker of suspicion. 'Where is this warning coming from? She already made the point clear. It's not as if our family is ignorant of the Chu Yi affair. Why would we be insane enough to attempt contact with a True Monarch?'

He immediately replied aloud, "That is absolutely impossible. My clan would never seek its own destruction."

Zhang Duanyan nodded lightly and turned her gaze to Cui Jueyin. This time, her tone was not so polite. "And you."

Cui Jueyin was still drenched in sweat. Being singled out, he sucked in a sharp breath and bowed deeply. "I swear on the Chongzhou Cui Clan, I will never defy the Immortal Decree!"

Zhang Duanyan sipped her tea, finally guiding the conversation away from the terrifying subject. Her voice softened. "Once this affair has passed, both Daoist Master Yuanxiu and my own Daoist Master Qiushui will be attempting to break through to the Golden Core realm. It is rare for a Daoist Master of my Zhang family to seek their Dao in the outside world. We will be sure to send your clan an invitation. If your Daoist Master has returned from his travels and is in residence, he is more than welcome to observe the ceremony."

The Zhang family, unlike the Chi clan, were the legitimate, direct descendants of True Monarch Taiyuan—true Golden Core Immortal Descendants. The Golden Feather Sect's Grotto-Heaven was on an entirely different level than the domain at Pristine Water; countless members of their direct lineage likely cultivated within it.

When a Daoist Master of the Zhang family neared the end of their lifespan, they would perish inside that Grotto-Heaven, feeding their spiritual essence back into their domain rather than letting it scatter to benefit outsiders. Zhang Tianyuan, who had not been seen in years, had almost certainly followed this path.

Zhang Duanyan phrased it elegantly, but the reality was that aside from their ancestors on the Path of Metal Virtue, none of the Zhang family's recent Purple Mansion Realm cultivators had managed to cultivate the Five Dao Divine Abilities to completion. Now, all their hopes rested on Qiushui.

For a Golden Core Immortal Descendant to speak this way already showed immense respect. Li Jiangqian hurriedly returned the bow.

"The Great Daoist Master is the foremost expert of the Whole Pill path beneath the heavens! Her cultivation and techniques shake the world. She will certainly attain Fruition Attainment. My clan need only prepare our congratulatory gifts and wait for the day when heaven and earth celebrate with her!"

Chapter 823: Rumors

"Let us hope your auspicious words come to pass, Family Head."

Zhang Duanyan shifted her gaze away from Cui Jueyin and replied.

The attempt by Daoist Master Qiushui to seek the Whole Pill Fruition Attainment was the one thing the entire Zhang family desperately hoped would succeed. It was also an endeavor the entire Golden Feather Sect was sparing no effort to support. The benefits of gaining another True Monarch were so enticing that the mere thought could make one's breath quicken. Li Jiangqian's words had clearly struck the right chord, bringing a hint of a smile to Zhang Duanyan's face.

"The Sect has been paying attention to the brethren of your noble clan… truly, all are talents. My Golden Oneness of Highest Azure daoist tradition also regards them highly. If the opportunity arises, you may send them to the mountains to seek entry. Although my family is strict in recruiting cultivators from outside the Grotto-Heaven, given the aptitude of your clan's geniuses, they would have a very strong chance."

Li Jiangqian smiled and nodded, uncertain how much of her statement was genuine and how much was mere courtesy. Since she hadn't produced any token or command sigil, he treated it as polite chatter and refilled her tea.

The Golden Feather Sect's stance toward the Li family was neither good nor overtly malicious; it remained perpetually ambiguous. Although they proclaimed to their own disciples that Li Tongya and Zhang Yun were close friends, when it came to practical matters, there was little tangible support to speak of.

This wasn't specifically targeted at the Li clan. Compared to other sects, Golden Feather already showed considerable goodwill toward Moongaze Lake. When Yuansu died and the matter of Li Xuanfeng's custody fell into the hands of the Purple Mansion realm cultivators, Qiushui's attitude had been amicable. The

present Zhang Duanyan was also approachable. Had it been any other power, their attitude might not have been nearly so pleasant.

The Golden Feather Sect had always acted with a certain capriciousness. If their interests aligned, they could be generous in sharing benefits. If their interests conflicted, the Dao lineage wouldn't hesitate to inflict harm. Despite this, their reputation in Jiangnan remained quite good. After all, for such an enormous Golden Core Dao Lineage, people tended to forget its severity and were far better at remembering its kindness, provided it showed even a sliver of gentleness.

Now that their business was concluded, Li Jiangqian began to subtly probe for information, sighing.

"My family has only just attained the Purple Mansion Realm, and we must rely on your esteemed sect for guidance in all matters. The Upper Sect from the north has passed down an edict, which we were fortunate to receive via Golden Feather... After all, years ago, that Daoist Master Chi... he was observing the mortal world within the Azure Pond territory. When Azure Pond received their orders, they completely disregarded the minor clans below them..."

His face showed resentment, but the words carried a deeper meaning.

No one knew if Mount Luoxia had actually passed the command to Azure Pond. His question, while appearing to be a complaint, would inevitably force a response that hinted at the positions of the various sects. More importantly, it touched upon the nature of Golden Feather's role in this trip. For the dignified Golden Feather Immortal Sect to act as a mere messenger was, ultimately, not a glorious affair.

Zhang Duanyan sipped her tea before replying.

"When Azure Pond was previously under Daoist Master Chi, he was indeed a bit hasty and paid little attention to the people's livelihood."

Having said this, she skillfully avoided the Azure Pond issue and instead smiled.

"The ancients always emphasized the division of Dao Lineages. Take the Green Pine Supreme Yang Dao Lineage; it can be traced all the way back to an Immortal Lord. As long as one inherits the Green Pine Supreme Yang Dao Lineage, they must show each other some face. Outsiders who see this connection will also take a step back."

"Jiangbei is also one such region of lineages. If we speak purely of Dao Lineage divisions, my Golden Feather has some jurisdiction over sects like Revering Radiance and Profound Wonder. This is the same reason the northern power is referred to as the Upper Sect."

It was a clever answer, deftly sidestepping the matter of Azure Pond. Li Jiangqian nodded.

A nostalgic look crossed Zhang Duanyan's face as she continued, "Once… in the Ten Directions Conclave, there were established rules between sects. Only remnants of those rules remain today. Your noble clan can still rely on this connection to pay respects to the various Supreme Yang Dao Lineages. When the Origin Mansion existed, noble clan would have been considered a subordinate. Although they would count as part of the Supreme Yang Dao Lineage, there was a clear hierarchy between you and direct lines like Purple Smoke and Azure Pond… Nowadays, however, that hierarchy is not so easily enforced."

She paused, then looked at Li Jiangqian with a smile and nodded. "I heard my grandfather mention… the Great River and Grand Tomb Scripture… is in your clan's possession?"

Li Jiangqian's expression flickered, but he nodded lightly.

While the matter was important, there was no reason to hide it. Zhang Yun himself had visited the Li family years ago to confirm this. Now that the family had their own Purple Mansion Realm expert, the cultivation method no longer seemed so dangerously valuable as to invite disaster.

Thus, Li Jiangqian rose from his seat, bowed, and replied, "Years ago, my ancestor was acquainted with Senior Zhang Yun. They discovered a hidden trove together, divided the spiritual items, and thus obtained this technique. It has been kept in our treasury ever since."

Zhang Duanyan showed no surprise. "The Great River and Grand Tomb Scripture has been lost for many years, and our sect lacked the method to unseal it. We believed that with Senior Tongya's celestial bearing, he would surely have the fortuitous opportunity to decipher it. So, it was entrusted to your clan, considered a continuation of his Dao path."

"We never imagined that Jingzhan would harm the senior and his son. At that time, voices within the sect demanded we send someone to the lake to retrieve both the cultivation method and the Duruo. My grandfather argued against

the consensus, came personally, and intended to exchange it for the Wanling Flower as a replacement."

Li Jiangqian listened intently as the woman chuckled. "He didn't expect the Wanling Flower to be connected to Yinghua, so Grandfather returned empty-handed. It was then that the voices in the sect claimed he was protecting Senior Tongya's descendants due to their deep friendship."

"So that's how it was!" Li Jiangqian nodded thoughtfully, musing internally.

'The news that the Jade slip contained the Great River and Grand Tomb Scripture came during the destruction of the Moongaze Lake Market. That group of people… perhaps it included Golden Feather cultivators who intentionally shouted the name to give our family a clue.'

Finally understanding the origin of the rumor, he naturally wouldn't say anything else, offering only, "My deepest thanks to your predecessor!"

He then asked, "Senior Zhang entered seclusion to break through. Is there any news?"

Zhang Duanyan's expression remained unchanged. "My lord broke through long ago. He is currently within the Grotto-Heaven studying mystic arts."

"Senior truly is a peerless talent!" Li Jiangqian nodded slowly, a realization dawning on him.

'There were no phenomena in the wider world. It seems… one truly can break through to the Purple Mansion Realm inside a Grotto-Heaven. If so, then how many Purple Mansion experts the Golden Feather Sect actually has, how many are active in the world, and how many might have fallen… it's nearly impossible for the outside world to discern.'

'A Grotto-Heaven… truly extraordinary. It's understandable why Yue Cultivating Sect abandoned Jiangbei and Yue State. Even if they lost all their external territories, they still possess an entire, vast world within the Grotto-Heaven.'

The two chatted for a while longer. When the sun passed noon, she rose to leave. Li Jiangqian escorted her beyond the island. As they were parting, Zhang Duanyan turned back, a bright smile on her face.

"Since your noble clan cannot open the Great River and Grand Tomb Scripture, letting it sit in your treasury for a hundred or even a thousand years won't

change that. Why not let it go? Allow someone in the world bound by fate to obtain it. They will surely make it shine with brilliance."

She seemed to be implying something specific. Li Jiangqian, catching her meaning, replied, "I understand. Thank you for the guidance, Immortal Emissary."

She and the old man then departed to the north. Based on their flight path, they were likely heading toward the White Ye Immortal Sect.

Li Jiangqian mulled over her words on his way back.

'It makes sense. It will never open itself just sitting in the treasury. But if we let it flow out into the world, we'll lose track of it. It seems we must identify the right person to pass it to, just as the Zhang family did with us…'

'But how to identify this person? Furthermore, their cultivation method would need to be compatible…'

He found this approach too inefficient and frowned… when a better idea struck him.

'Perhaps we could have a Purple Mansion Realm cultivator use their divine abilities to place a secret imprint upon its surface. Then we let it drift freely. When the time comes and someone opens it, we would sense it, shatter the Great Void to arrive as if reaping a harvest, and obtain a superior Purple Mansion Dao Lineage.'

At this thought, a chill climbed his spine.

'If I can think of this, wouldn't the Zhang family also have thought of it? Wouldn't the various Purple Mansion experts who carved up Tomb ravine Gate have thought of it? Can it be that this item was released… just waiting for a cultivator bearing the mark of destiny to activate it?'

'How did Zhang Yun determine that my ancestor carried the mark of destiny? Could it be that the copy of the Great River and Grand Tomb Scripture he saw happened to share the same energetic affinity as my ancestor's cultivation method, allowing it to be continued? And seeing his extraordinary bearing, he decided to test him, thus forming his speculation?'

'If the Zhang family hadn't hinted at it, I would never have considered this possibility!'

Even someone as ruthless as him couldn't help but feel suspicious. 'Ordinary cultivators might not think of such a venomous plot. Whether this imprint exists or not… we'll know as soon as the Daoist Master returns. I'll ask him to examine it.'

Li Jiangqian walked back to the main hall, lost in thought. The teapot and jade cups had already been cleared from the table. Cui Jueyin followed behind him, his head lowered, seemingly in a daze.

Suddenly, Li Jiangqian turned around. "Protector Cui, regarding this matter with the Upper Sect, does the Cui family have any knowledge?"

Cui Jueyin bowed deeply, his gaze fixed on the floor. "Reporting to the Family Head… it is truly that my family… for a thousand years… what we have endured… endured…"

This Foundation Establishment Realm Daoist, who for years had always maintained the calm and elegant demeanor of a noble scion, now seemed utterly terrified. The mere mention of Mount Luoxia seemed to evoke an extreme, primal fear.

"The Dongli Sect… annihilated in an instant… A direct edict from the Upper Sect. Our ancestors acted rashly and defied it. Three generations were nearly exterminated. Even Purple Mansion Divine Abilities cultivators died violently within days. We must fear it. We *dare not* fail to fear it!"

"Now, the edict is before us. All we can do is tremble, prostrate ourselves, and await orders."

Li Jiangqian stared gravely at him. Beads of sweat continued to drip uncontrollably from Cui Jueyin's neck, one after another. This was the first time he had ever seen Cui Jueyin in such a state, and he sensed a profound, deep-seated unease.

'If I keep pressing, I'm afraid disaster will spring from his words.' He sighed inwardly and said, "Protector Cui, go and rest well."

Cui Jueyin stood, bowed, and retreated from the side. Li Jiangqian's gaze fell upon the empty desk.

'Comprehending Profundity, reflecting the purple. Wu Light meeting the sky glows. The Jin-Yi path… is one of supplication.'

'Golden Feather has a reputation of subservience to the north… and most of the time, this reputation is fact. That entity in the north… is confirmed to be at the Dao Embryo realm, without a doubt. As for how many Dao Embryos are behind them… that is hard to say.'

'Zhang Duanyan implicitly revealed that the Jiangbei families and Golden Feather belong to the same Dao Lineage. Since Golden Feather cannot refuse, these lineages can all be considered subordinates of Luoxia. This means the mastermind behind the conflict between north and south, and the designs on the fertile lands of Jiangbei, is also perfectly clear.'

A feeling of powerlessness rose in his heart. He forced the thought away and focused his mind back on Jiangbei.

'The Ding Clan moved their entire population; they can be protected. Qu Bushi and Miaoshui are merely local guest elders with shallow connections. The family's deepest entanglement… is the Wang Clan.'

The Jiangbei Wang Clan had lived and grown in this place for generations. Escape was impossible. No matter how cleanly they tried to cut ties, the karma remained.

"Right now, whoever is biggest in Jiangbei is destined for the worst luck… We must pull back from the lands of Funan for now. Bring all the cultivators back. Let it go wild. Don't touch it. Don't even go near it."

He summoned an attendant. "Pass down my order. Tell the Second Young Master to depart immediately and report back to the Lake."

The attendant received the order and was about to leave when Li Jiangqian hesitated, then called him back. "Go and ask Protector Cui. It would be best if he personally traveled to Jiangbei to deliver this order."

Besides Li Jiangqian himself, Cui Jueyin was the only one in the family who understood the gravity of the situation. His own brothers were not easy people to deal with, and this matter was one of absolute urgency. Li Jiangqian could not afford any mistakes.

He immediately got busy, spreading out the bamboo slips on his desk, noting down every possible oversight.

'Wang Quwan is tied to the Secret Diffusion Dao Lineage. We must protect him if possible… but his connections to the Jiangbei Wang Clan run too deep… this is truly…'

As Li Jiangqian pondered this, he suddenly froze. A dark cloud of suspicion crawled across his features.

'Wang Quwan… Wang Quwan… It couldn't be… Could it be that destiny pushed this person forward first, intending him to be a stepping stone for that True Monarch? If so… isn't this man doomed to die?'

His heart heavy, he deliberated for a long time before ordering, "Summon Qu Bushi."

Old Man Qu's immortal foundation was the Palace of Concealed Storage. He excelled at surveying earth-veins and nurturing spiritual fields. Having already organized the lands of Funan, he had spent the last few years by the lake identifying fields, teaching a few apprentices, and re-classifying the Li clan's spiritual fields. He was living a quiet, secluded life.

He was quite idle, so he arrived quickly at the hall upon being summoned, prostrating on the floor. "This lowly one greets the Family Head!"

This old man usually kept a low profile, avoiding involvement in anything significant. He was exceptionally cunning, which was precisely why Li Jiangqian had sought him out. He smiled and asked:

"I need to ask you about something. You are very familiar with Funan in Jiangbei. Are there any independent cultivators there, Foundation Establishment Realm, who have absolutely zero connection to my family?" He paused, then added, "Preferably ones who aren't gentle… the tyrannical, overbearing types."

Qu Bushi was baffled by the request but sank into deep thought. "There are many independent cultivators in Jiangbei now, but very few in Funan; it's mostly managed by our own cultivators and manpower. However, I have heard… in the Midong territory, there are several."

Midong had been tossed by the Li family into the hands of the Capital Immortals Dao and had long since devolved into chaos. The Capital Immortals Dao had sent several cultivators to manage it over the years, but all had failed. Eventually, they resorted to simply collecting a stipend, and the place remained a total mess.

Qu Bushi observed his expression, guessing he was looking for some kind of scapegoat, and answered:

"If Milord is looking for someone ignorant and untraceable, this subordinate has an idea. There are countless people like that in the Eastern Sea. Lure one over, tempt him, perhaps point a demonic cultivator his way… let him murder for treasure and create his own sect gates. Once the man is dead, everything vanishes. Very convenient."

Qu Bushi truly lived up to his reputation as someone who had survived the Eastern Sea to reach Foundation Establishment. Li Jiangqian considered this and immediately had a plan.

'The Capital Immortals Dao will surely send someone to negotiate soon. This isn't a matter for just one family. I vaguely recall that Guan Gongxiao also knows how to handle things. This is the perfect time to deal with it.'

'This will also force our two families to break the cold war we've had for years. I wonder what the Capital Immortals Dao's attitude will be.'

He looked up. "Guest Elder Qu, stay by my side for the next few months. When the time comes, there will be matters I need to discuss with you."

Chapter 824: Consultation

Li Jiangqian waited for more than a day before Cui Jueyin strode in from outside the hall. His emotions appeared to have stabilized; he bowed, his composed attitude restored, and reported, "Patriarch, the Second Young Master is outside the hall."

"Please, let him in."

After Li Jiangqian replied, Cui Jueyin immediately withdrew. A short while later, a man entered the hall.

He wore simple cloth robes and plain boots, his entire person unadorned save for the single sword at his waist. He was already at the late stage of Qi Refining, yet his brow was filled with an easy calm, as if he were a rogue cultivator just emerged from a temple. He approached Li Jiangqian and bowed deeply.

"Greetings, Patriarch!"

This was Li Jianglong. Over the years, he had governed Funan with stability and prosperity. There had not been a single disturbance from rogue or demonic cultivators. He had successfully walled off the chaos of Jiangbei, resolving the Li family's northern troubles while securing a significant income of spiritual resources. He was, by all measures, exceptionally competent.

He and his third brother, Li Jiangxia, had stabilized two fronts during the chaotic period when Li Ximing and Li Zhouwei had left the family. If not for the three brothers, the clan would have faced countless more troubles.

Li Jiangqian smiled at him and waved his hand gently. The guards stationed in the hall all retreated, closing the main and side doors tight. The spiritual lamps brightened, leaving only the two of them in the vast hall. Li Jiangqian's smile vanished. He strode down from his seat and personally helped Li Jianglong up.

He spoke heavily. "I have called Second Brother back this time because we are abandoning the Funan territory."

It went without saying how much heart's blood Li Jianglong had poured into Funan. The statement nearly shattered his composure. He took a moment to steady himself, frowning as he asked, "Patriarch, this is…"

Li Jiangqian said, "A True Monarch intends to reincarnate in Jiangbei. Right in the Sanxi region."

Li Jianglong stared at him blankly.

Shaking his head, Li Jiangqian clarified, "It is a True Monarch from the Northern High Sect. Zhang Duanyan of the Golden Feather Sect came personally to deliver the edict."

Those three sentences completely destroyed Li Jianglong's calm. His pupils dilated, his face flooded with utter disbelief. After several long breaths, he finally managed to ask, "Like Chu Yi, all those years ago?"

"Correct."

Li Jiangqian affirmed it and led him over to the main desk, spreading out a large map. He summarized the Golden Feather Sect's orders. When he finished, Li Jianglong's expression was one of profound gravity.

"If we mishandle this," Li Jianglong said, "it is a catastrophe that could implicate tens of thousands. It is an event that means death and the annihilation of our clan."

Li Jiangqian nodded. "Second Brother understands Funan best. The situation there, and how we make a clean break… that is the trouble."

Li Jianglong contemplated for a moment, studying the map. "When the Floating Cloud Cave was destroyed, the common folk were plundered by the other two caves and have never recovered. Our family's control there revolves around the spirit fields and veins, mostly garrisoned by cultivators from outside the region. Withdrawing them won't be difficult… but once we leave, the sparse local population cannot possibly produce many cultivators. They will be stranded and isolated; even self-governance will be a problem."

He continued, "If our family releases this land, Capital Immortals Dao will also have to release Midong. Midong is a tangled web of established families. Many

immortal sects from both Jiangnan and Jiangbei have people embedded there, and the population is dense. They will immediately move to swallow Funan."

Midong was difficult to govern for two fundamental reasons: first, the massive populations of the established families; second, the various major sects all recruited direct descendants from these families, supporting these local tyrants so they could acquire Jiangbei's spiritual resources at low cost or through outright plunder. Li Jiangqian knew this well.

"Based on your understanding of Jiangbei," Li Jiangqian asked, "how will the Midong situation develop? Is it possible these families will get the news?"

Li Jianglong pondered this. "They absolutely must not. All the major sects will pull their hands back. A 'local tyrant' is a tyrant precisely because their clan system is enormous, spanning both the overt and the covert. Their lineages are unrestricted and undecaying, resulting in a mix of the worthy and the worthless. This makes them difficult to eradicate, but it also makes it impossible for them to extricate themselves now. Even if they have clan members cultivating in the immortal sects… the light punishment will be the crippling of their cultivation. The heavy one will be execution following accusations of treason."

Li Jiangqian considered this. "Executing them also has drawbacks. What if the clan declines, and Heavenly Fate just so happens to land on their remnants? That would only cause more trouble. Since the edict mentioned sending them 'to Qi and Lu,' let them go there. The ones we should truly fear are the Northern powers. The immortal sects will make a clean break, but they won't be *so* ruthless as to burn every bridge. They must leave themselves a path of retreat."

Li Jianglong observed his brother's expression and replied, "This little brother was inconsiderate. In that case, we need not convict them. We just need to arrange for someone to… eliminate them. If trouble arises one day, we can simply push out the scapegoat. Since they won't be fleeing south, it will be an easy excuse to make."

"That is the correct logic."

The two brothers stared at the map. Li Jianglong mused, "Funan doesn't have many entanglements, but there are a few local clan cultivators who are difficult to handle. An excuse is easy enough to find. We grant them spiritual items and send them away. After a period, we tell them in advance that we are withdrawing and Capital Immortals Dao is moving in. They will flee for their lives with their entire families."

"There are also a few of our cultivators who… enjoyed themselves locally and fathered children. Treat them as Jiangbei rogue cultivators. Take them and their entire villages away. We won't leave behind a single dog or duck."

The Li family employed many cultivators originating from Jiangbei, but thankfully, most were rogue cultivators and easily handled. Li Jiangqian nodded silently in approval.

Suddenly, a light knock sounded at the main door, interrupting their conversation. Qu Bushi entered, his face a mask of suspicion and shock.

"Reporting to the Patriarch! That… that utterly shameless Capital Immortals Dao… they sent their fiend guest elder to request an audience!"

Li Jiangqian frowned. "This early? Surely not… How many people did Fellow Daoist Guan bring? It wasn't spread around, was it?"

Qu Bushi looked as though he had seen a ghost and nearly bit his tongue. He hesitated, "That fiend… uh… the person from Capital Immortals Dao… came alone. He just appeared outside the island… and asked someone to pass the message secretly. This old slave understands the gravity of the situation and did not let anyone see him."

Li Jiangqian let out a breath of relief. "Bring him up through the side hall. Do not let him be seen."

Qu Bushi hurried away. About the time it takes for half an incense stick to burn, a middle-aged man entered. He had been wearing dashing white robes, but the moment he stepped into the hall, his appearance shifted. He now had high brows, deep-set eyes, and wore black Daoist robes tied with a silk belt. He walked into the hall, his face a picture of bitterness, and sighed.

"Greetings, Patriarch!"

Li Jiangqian gave a slight nod, his tone perfectly neutral. "So, it is the Capital Immortals Sect Master."

It was, astonishingly, the Capital Immortals Sect Master Guan Gongxiao himself.

Guan Gongxiao had no temper to speak of right now, and he was already a mild-mannered man by nature. He shook his head and replied, "With this disaster

looming over us, there is no room for old grudges between our families. My family arrived hastily from overseas; we have never encountered anything like this. I came to see the Patriarch the very instant I received the order."

Capital Immortals Dao's territory was located even north of the Sanxi region; their situation was infinitely more precarious than the Li family's. Guan Gongxiao was naturally desperate. It wasn't just him; the Profound Wonder Temple and the Revering Radiance Gate were likely in the exact same predicament.

Li Jiangqian chose not to bicker. He only asked, "Does your Daoist Master have any orders?"

Guan Gongxiao silently shook his head. After a brief pause, he answered, "My family's Daoist Master entered seclusion many years ago. He is not currently in Jiangbei."

The absence of Daoist Master Yehui was not a critical secret. Many sects with Purple Mansion Realm cultivators had them stationed abroad for long periods, especially those without the reputation of a Supreme Yang Dao Lineage. The fewer Purple Mansion Realm masters a sect had, the less likely they were to remain stationary. Daoist Master Chuting of the Xiao family hadn't returned to Jiangnan in decades, yet the Xiao family remained as stable as Mount Tai.

But when Li Jiangqian heard this, he instantly understood.

'No wonder this fellow rushed over here so frantically,' he thought. 'His Daoist Master is out traveling or in seclusion, and who knows how many years that will last. This is serious. Yehui might be gone for ten years. When he finally emerges, there might not be a single person named Guan left in the entire White ye region.'

'Looked at this way, the Golden Feather Sect basically just saved the Capital Immortals lineage.'

He gestured to the side, inviting Guan Gongxiao to sit. "This is Jianglong, my younger brother."

Guan Gongxiao shook his head. "I have long heard of your brother's reputation. When Wang He was managing Midong earlier, he came to complain every other day. It later escalated to the point where he couldn't salvage the situation."

The brothers did not acknowledge the barb. Guan Gongxiao stood up. "I came here today, first, because I have something I must clarify with your clan."

His expression turned solemn. "My family's Daoist Master has never borne your clan any ill will. Regarding the Changxiao incident, he worked extremely hard to mediate and secretly assist, hoping only to protect your clan as much as possible. Perhaps the Patriarch finds this absurd. But to say something unpleasant…"

"Even if it meant earning your clan's hatred for nothing, my Daoist Master hoped Changxiao would gain one more blood feud. He least of all wanted to see your esteemed father come to harm. Even when a fatal weakness was held by others, he insisted on giving those secret warnings. That was the reason."

He lowered his voice. "Regardless of our families' relationship, on the matter of the Changxiao Sect, my Daoist Master earnestly hopes our two families share the same stance."

Li Jiangqian remained silent for a moment. He was not Li Ximing; he had no understanding of the situation back then. The best response was no response at all. "This is not a matter I can address. It must wait for the Daoist Masters to communicate. The issue currently at hand is the most urgent."

Guan Gongxiao sat back down and nodded.

Li Jiangqian began, "Your esteemed sect must abandon Midong. But a land full of warring factions is ultimately a bad thing. First, we need a 'leader' so that all consequences finally land on him. Second, we need some demonic cultivators or beasts, so the lords can amuse themselves to their satisfaction, saving them the trouble of finding replacements elsewhere. And third… both our sides need a valid reason to withdraw. The loose ends must be tied up so we do not arouse the suspicion of others."

Guan Gongxiao nodded. "The demonic beasts aren't urgent. If a territory is left empty for a year or two, they will naturally appear. The Fanyun territory still has several demon generals causing trouble. There will be plenty to clean up. A leader is also easy to find; the world is overflowing with the greedy. But your third point… that truly is a problem. The families in Midong aren't fools. If both our sides withdraw simultaneously, they will smell a rat immediately."

Li Jiangqian thought for a moment, then whispered, "This isn't without a solution. We just need an excuse."

He used a formation array to send an order. Qu Bushi immediately entered from outside. When he saw Guan Gongxiao seated nearby, the three of them appearing harmonious and even smiling, he felt an internal shockwave. He bowed.

"Greetings Patriarch, Young Master, and Sect Master."

Guan Gongxiao took a sip of tea. "What Sect Master? This humble one is Gongxiao of Jiangbei."

Guan Gongxiao hadn't even bothered to change out of his formal Sect Master robes, yet Qu Bushi saw the smiles on all three faces, nodded repeatedly, and began apologizing profusely.

Li Jiangqian paused briefly, then said, "Fellow Daoist Gong has brought news. There is a Secret Diffusion Direct Lineage Token somewhere in Jiangbei. Rumor holds that it contains a favor from a high-level cultivator. The holder can establish their own lineage there, and it even involves a Purple Mansion realm spirit treasury. It is something that even we and Capital Immortals Dao cannot interfere with. You are to send men immediately. Dig three feet deep if you must, but you are to find this thing."

Qu Bushi wiped sweat from his brow as he nodded.

Guan Gongxiao smiled slightly and added, "I hear this rumor has spread like the wind. Apparently, a direct disciple of Capital Immortals Dao revealed it while drunk. That disciple has already been locked up. Everyone in the Three Rivers area knows about it. The Lake is actually late to hear the news. You must hurry."

Qu Bushi was an old hand who had navigated Jiangbei for years. He had never heard of such a thing. Connecting this to Li Jiangqian's earlier intentions, he instantly understood.

"This old slave will absolutely ensure this matter is carried out to the fullest!"

He hurried away. Li Jiangqian then continued, "Your sect will first start a fight with my family in Funan. We will pull our people back, emptying the land. Simultaneously, fight us across the river, forcing your reserves to reinforce from that direction. Create a standoff. A feigned war."

"At this point, Funan will be abandoned by us. All we need is an ambitious Foundation Establishment cultivator from the Eastern Sea. We let him 'find' this Secret Diffusion Lineage Sect Master Token. With the path to the Purple Mansion realm laid out before him, how could he not be moved?"

"The moment he dares to try… my family will immediately send congratulatory gifts. Your sect will order the Midong families to march south and 'offer tribute' to this new power. Everything will click perfectly into place."

Guan Gongxiao nodded repeatedly. "Good idea! A brilliant idea! My sect has strong connections in the Eastern Sea; gathering information is easy. We already have several candidates on hand."

Li Jiangqian smiled, finding Guan Gongxiao much less disagreeable now. "Then we shall rely on your esteemed sect to lure this ambitious man over."

As for spreading the rumors and the details about the "locked-up disciple," they didn't need further discussion. Guan Gongxiao would handle it perfectly.

Li Jianglong considered the plan but remained worried. He looked at his brother. "But with the Daoist Master absent, things may not go exactly as we anticipate… What if this person gets the token but remains cautious? It could drag matters out."

Li Jiangqian shook his head, his voice turning hollow. "We do not need to concern ourselves with that. Someone *else* will ensure it happens. The rumor will certainly become truer than the truth. One, two, or perhaps even more scapegoats… everyone involved will be delighted to see it."

Both men nodded. Guan Gongxiao then said, "Regardless, in my humble opinion, I fear we must also find the Northern Brocade River King."

At the mention of this prominent follower of the dragon-kin, both brothers frowned.

Li Jiangqian adopted a thoughtful expression. "He likely also has thoughts of moving. He absolutely cannot be allowed to remain here. Leave the matter of this Demon General to us."

"Good!"

Smiling broadly, Guan Gongxiao raised his cup to the two brothers. The two lineages, regarded by the outside world as mortal enemies locked in a death feud, drank tea together like old friends.

Guan Gongxiao lowered his voice. "We must communicate frequently about this matter moving forward. I cannot come here often; it is too easy to expose myself. I will send disciples in disguise, carrying a token, to relay my words. The Lake should do the same."

Li Jiangqian nodded. They dispensed with the formal pleasantries of seeing him off, merely clasping their hands in salute. Guan Gongxiao stepped out of the hall, his appearance completely changed, and was escorted away by a servant.

Li Jianglong watched him depart, his expression unsettled. Li Jiangqian, too, was filled with doubt.

'During the turmoil on the East Shore back then,' Li Jiangqian mused, 'Capital Immortals Dao truly was conspicuously restrained… They later sent someone to actively ease tensions, even returning Protector An. I have no idea how much of what he just said was truth and how much was fabrication.'

His gaze locked onto the map on the desk. He suddenly recalled something:

"Zhang Duanyan hid several things when she spoke. When she listed the subordinate relationships, she didn't seem to mention Capital Immortals Dao… She listed the others in order but skipped right over them. And the Capital Immortals lineage name doesn't even begin with 'Xuan'…"

Chapter 825: The Manifestation of Earth Virtue

The East A-Wang Sea.

Within the deep, dark veins of the earth, only the faint, flickering glow of flames could be seen. A massive, man-high alchemy cauldron stood upon the primary earth-vein, its surface covered in complex patterns. Intricate carvings of ocean waves and fierce beasts adorned its body, and it rested solidly on three ancient, unadorned legs.

The spirit fire blazed. A ring of bright, surging flames encircled the jet-black cauldron, while a brilliant white inferno leaped and danced beneath it.

Li Ximing had been refining this pill for nearly two years. Though he was confident in the completeness of his alchemical theory, this was his first time attempting to form a pill using the Heavenly Heart Oneness technique. The path had been fraught with peril, but thanks to his exceptionally solid foundation, he had overcome each obstacle one by one.

'The power of the Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire was unexpectedly potent and a great help,' he mused. 'But the sheer dominance of the Heavenly Heart Oneness technique was just as formidable. Without both, this pill would have been impossible to refine.'

'Everything is going well, with one small exception… this cauldron can't take much more.'

The River-Heart Cauldron before him was an ancestral heirloom, acquired by his ancestors during the market place catastrophe. It was merely a Qi Refining grade tool. It only survived to this day because it was an ancient artifact forged from incredibly sturdy materials.

But no matter how sturdy, it couldn't withstand the combined power of a Purple Mansion Realm cultivator's divine abilities and True Fire. The intensity was

enough to melt the cauldron into a liquid state; it was only holding its shape thanks to the protection of his power.

'After this batch, this cauldron will be completely unusable.'

The pill's refinement was now approaching the final nurturing stage, and he could finally relax his focus. Li Ximing formed a hand seal and cast a spell. The divine ability enveloping the cauldron flashed, and he rose to his feet. Pressing two fingers to his lips, he spat out a speck of purple light.

This spark of Bright Yang flame, infused with his divine ability, pulsed with spiritual energy. It dove under the cauldron and merged into the Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire. Li Ximing then chanted:

"Three-Garrison True Fire, nurture this precious pill. With utmost care and focus, await the dawning of its light."

With that, he withdrew his consciousness completely, leaving only his divine ability to shield the cauldron. The spirit fire obediently took over the task of nurturing the pill.

The Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire had, after all, been praised even by the Daoist Master Yuandao, Tantai Lingtong, as an exceptional alchemical flame. It had been an immense help during the refinement process, and its own spiritual nature was gentle and not overly destructive, making it perfectly suited for this kind of nurturing work.

"Hah…"

A wave of relief washed over him. He had spent nearly two years in a state of absolute concentration, blending spiritual materials with a alchemy art he had never used before. Even for a cultivator of the Purple Mansion Realm, the strain was considerable, and he couldn't help but let out a long, heavy sigh.

He took out a few spirit-nourishing pills and consumed them, nurturing his divine abilitys. Thirty-six days passed. A faint flicker appeared between his brows, and a sudden premonition struck him. He opened his eyes.

'Tinglan of the Purple Smoke Gate has found me.'

Before entering seclusion in the East A-Wang Sea, he had left a jade pendant with Houfu, imbued with a wisp of his divine ability. They had agreed on a meeting point at the border of the two seas. Now, his Profound Light sensed that it had been crushed.

During the Foundation Establishment Realm, items like this spirit jade needed to be constantly nurtured to maintain a long-distance connection, and they would often lose their efficacy after a few years. Now that he had achieved his own divine abilitys, a single touch was enough to maintain the connection for over a decade. It was far more convenient.

He enveloped the area with a formation, reinforced it with a warning art, and then tore open the Great Void to traverse space. From within the Great Void, he first observed the meeting point. Sure enough, a purple cloud carriage was parked at the border of the two seas, golden ribbons fluttering in the wind. It was unmistakably a Daoist Master from the Purple Smoke Gate.

He didn't approach rashly. Only after confirming there was no ambush did he transform into a ray of Profound Light and descend, materializing before the carriage.

A young woman stood before the vehicle, her features pure and charming. The Profound Light revealed her to be a rabbit Demon beast in human form. She bowed repeatedly upon seeing Li Ximing. Before he had a chance to speak, the carriage curtain was whisked aside. Tinglan, still dressed in her autumn-yellow satin robe, emerged with a slightly embarrassed expression.

"Fellow Daoist Zhaojing!"

Li Ximing had barely survived his encounter with Changxiao, and his losses were surely not small. The incident had stemmed from an arrangement made by Purple Smoke, and though it was only a catalyst, Tinglan felt responsible. She offered a slight bow.

"It's been too long… The matter at Profound Peak has concluded. I'm so glad you're safe and sound, Fellow Daoist. Otherwise… I truly wouldn't have known how to face you…"

Li Ximing didn't blame her much. The fault lay with his own lack of caution; the Purple Smoke Gate could never have predicted such an outcome. Furthermore, now that he was gradually learning of the domineering origins of the Supreme Yang Daoist tradition, he knew he was in no position to blame them. He replied, "Changxiao's attack was unexpected. Your gate is not at fault."

Unwilling to attract attention here, and still concerned about the unfinished pill in the earth-vein, he continued, "The treasure medicines in my cauldron are not

yet finished. I must ask Fellow Daoist Tinglan to rest at my humble abode for a while."

Tinglan nodded in agreement. The purple cloud carriage immediately flew toward the sea, descending all the way to the seabed of rolling white sand. Tinglan dismissed the carriage and instructed her attendant, "Wait for me here."

The spirit beast acknowledged the command. Li Ximing activated his Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger technique, and a shroud of earthy yellow light enveloped him and Tinglan, carrying them deep into the earth-veins. Tinglan's eyes scanned their surroundings.

"The Great Dao of Profound Light Moving Mountains certainly has its merits. Earth-burrowing is no small feat, yet this Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger dharma treasure allows you to travel through earth-veins as if you were an Earth Virtue cultivator. It speaks to the excellence of your lineage."

Hearing the full name of Profound Peak's Dao lineage for the first time, Li Ximing remarked with curiosity, "A Comprehending Profundity lineage… no wonder they are so close to the Profound Wonder Temple."

Tinglan chuckled. "It can't be called a Comprehending Profundity lineage. Each of those lineages is distinct and meticulously recorded. The Encompassing Profundity category is a bit looser, but Comprehending Profundity is the strictest. Fellow Daoist Sumian at least possesses an ancestral portrait; Profound Peak has nothing of the sort."

As they descended, Li Ximing recalled the shady Qi-Stone Demon Embryo that Changxi had given to Sumian, but he remained noncommittal. Tinglan sighed. "An island belonging to my Purple Smoke Gate in the Vermillion Sea has run into trouble. We've been investigating for some time, but it's become quite vexing."

"Oh?"

Li Ximing prompted her. A suspicious look crossed Tinglan's face. "At first, we thought it was a shift in the earth-veins, a problem with the volcanic activity on the seafloor. But after several sweeps with another Fellow Daoist, we found traces of an Earth Virtue divine ability. We asked Zhu Gong to take a look, and she suspects a cultivator broke through to a new realm there."

Li Ximing frowned. "The number of Earth Virtue cultivators seems to be growing these days…"

In truth, most demonic cultivators could be considered Earth Virtue cultivators, but people like Li Ximing naturally didn't count them among the ranks. When they spoke of Earth Virtue cultivators, they were referring to figures at the Daoist Master level of the Immortal Dao. Tinglan nodded in agreement, her voice growing somber.

"Indeed. And the geological signs are somewhat similar to 'Proclaimation Earth'—one of the two ancient daoist traditions of Sheji, specifically the She daoist tradition, also known as She Immortals. This matter has been a headache for me for a long time. I discussed it with several other Daoist Friends, and their consensus was… the She Immortal dao is a leader of the Immortal Dao. It's best not to dig too deeply."

The daoist traditions of Earth Virtue were numerous and complex; Li Ximing himself had heard of at least six. He could faintly grasp how prominent this Dao must have been in ancient times. The two daoist traditions of Sheji were particularly famous. Although her own Green Pine Supreme Yang Daoist tradition was noble, its backers were either missing or in seclusion. It might even be a step lower than this She Immortal path. It was no wonder she felt uneasy.

Soon, they arrived at his cave dwelling. Tinglan's eyes lit up in surprise. "What a potent True Fire! This is… from the Three-Cycle lineage, isn't it? That is truly ancient."

That single sentence revealed the depth of knowledge possessed by the Green Pine Supreme Yang Daoist tradition. Li Ximing gave a slight nod. His divine ability had already concealed the cauldron completely. Tinglan swept the area with her spiritual sense and smiled. "Such skill and daring. To think a simple Qi Refining cauldron is enough for you to refine such a top-tier spirit pill!"

It was a prettier way of calling him poor, but Li Ximing took it in stride. "I came up with the formula for this pill on a whim, and it is not yet complete. Fortunately, it has reached the nurturing stage. The pill you require needs the Immeasurable Water and Fire and a different cauldron, so there is no conflict."

Hearing him finally bring up her pill, Tinglan crossed her arms and smiled. "Your formations were so well hidden with those mountain-piercing nails, I couldn't even find a trace of you. If I hadn't gotten word from Houfu, I might have ended up doing all this for nothing."

Tinglan's words were spoken in jest, but there was a kernel of truth in them. Li Ximing apologized profusely. "Although there was a delay, it was a blessing in

disguise. My skill in the Dao of alchemy has greatly improved, and I am now far more confident in refining your spirit pill."

Tinglan laughed, then her expression turned serious. "We can't delay any longer. I need this pill urgently. Otherwise, considering your recent troubles, I wouldn't have chased you all the way out to this remote sea."

"I have brought the Heavenly One Pure Origin and the Immeasurable Water and Fire. As for the cauldron…" Tinglan's already beautiful face became solemn. "I have even managed to borrow the spiritual artifact, the Xiukui Profound-Passage Cauldron, for you."

'What a grand display… this pill is no ordinary thing.'

Li Ximing was already very confident he could refine the Heavenly Oneness Essence Extraction Pill, especially with the aid of a better cauldron and Talisman Qi. He nodded slightly. "Then let us choose a place and begin… refining the ingredients for your pill will be a time-consuming process. The sooner we start, the better."

He considered for a moment. "Refining such a spirit pill is best done in a suitable treasure land… I wonder if the East A-Wang Sea has such a place."

Li Ximing was an alchemist, after all. At his words, Tinglan began to ponder. He glanced at her and smiled. "How about this? Refining the spiritual ingredients is a lengthy process, but fortunately, it isn't picky about the location. I will begin the initial refinement here while you take your immortal carriage to search for a suitable place. Once I have finished with the ingredients, we can move to the treasure land for the final step of forming the pill."

Tinglan nodded slightly, thinking it was a reasonable plan, but she remained cautious. "The method is good, and it's not that I don't trust you, Fellow Daoist. You can keep the Immeasurable Water and Fire here for refinement. However, the Xiukui Profound-Passage Cauldron was borrowed from the Great Xiukui Monastery and cannot be left behind. I can lend you my Treasure Elephant Cauldron to use instead. It's a Foundation Establishment Realm-grade furnace."

With his own pill on the verge of completion, Li Ximing's real intention was to send her away. The primary ingredient of his pill was a Supreme Yin spiritual item, and since her sect was once a subordinate of the Origin Mansion, he was

afraid she might recognize something. Hearing her offer, he could only grumble inwardly.

'Wonderful. Even a non-alchemist's cauldron is better than mine.'

Whether it was the Treasure Elephant Cauldron or the Xiukui Profound-Passage Cauldron, both were leagues better than his own River-Heart Cauldron. He had no objections. "That's fine," he said with a smile.

Tinglan produced an earthen pot, no bigger than her palm. Its surface was smooth and engraved with many gold and white patterns. Holding it, she explained, "This Supreme Minister's Gourd is also a spiritual artifact, crafted by Martial Uncle Zimu back in the day. The Immeasurable Water and Fire within it cannot be removed or escape. Even if lost, it will find its way back from the Great Void."

The Immeasurable Water and Fire was, after all, a precious item. Her words were a subtle warning. She opened the lid, and a ball of radiant flame immediately leaped out. Hues of azure and indigo, the colors of the two primal forces, swirled together. The spiritual energy in the cave dwelling instantly withered. His nearby Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire began to hum, its flames distorting rapidly, threatening to ruin his pill.

But Li Ximing simply reached out and gently grasped it. The Immeasurable Water and Fire instantly grew docile, settling quietly in his hand, its two colors stabilizing into a multicolored sphere.

Tinglan let out a visible sigh of relief, her hand that had been tensed over the lid finally relaxing. She nodded in surprise. "Impressive skill, Fellow Daoist!"

The Immeasurable Water and Fire was inherently violent, and having been bound to a spiritual artifact, it couldn't be truly refined, only borrowed. This added another layer of difficulty to controlling it. Tinglan's earlier repeated warnings were not without reason.

Seeing Li Ximing handle it with ease, she felt the endeavor was already halfway to success. Overjoyed, she took out a treasure box from her sleeve and said in a low voice, "The spiritual ingredients for the pill are all in this box. There are two portions for most of them. For the few that are exceptionally rare, if the refinement fails, please adjust the formula as you see fit."

Li Ximing scanned the contents with his spiritual sense and was left speechless. A sense of caution rose within him.

'This thing is far too important to Purple Smoke. Success would be wonderful, but failure would be both awkward and an offense.'

The woman in autumn-yellow robes beckoned lightly, and a massive cauldron woven from gold and ivory hues appeared from her sleeve. The heads of elephants were cast on its four corners, shimmering with spiritual light. This had to be the Treasure Elephant Cauldron.

Tinglan passed the dharma artifact to him as if shedding a heavy burden, her tone becoming much livelier. She quickly said her goodbyes, took a few steps back to exit the range of the Immeasurable Water and Fire, and vanished into the Great Void.

Li Ximing observed the azure and indigo flames of the Immeasurable Water and Fire swirling in his hand, a hint of envy in his heart.

'This spirit fire wasn't made for alchemy. Wielding something like this in a fight would make one virtually invincible. No wonder Zimu went to the trouble of binding it to a spiritual artifact. If you sever the connection while fleeing, an enemy can't just appear next to you. And for ambushes, it's even more potent…'

He could feel the raw, untamed nature of the flame, but with his Valley Wind Guide-Fire technique, controlling it was still effortless. The Supreme Minister's Gourd was an ingenious, masterfully crafted item that granted the Immeasurable Water and Fire a degree of autonomy. Even though Tinglan had left with the main spiritual artifact, what remained in his hand was not a mere magical flame, but the Immeasurable Water and Fire itself.

'The work of Daoist Master Zimu… judging by his age, he must be quite old now. Whether he's truly missing or just in hiding, it's hard to say…'

He activated the Immeasurable Water and Fire, moved the Treasure Elephant Cauldron into place, and sent a stream of spiritual ingredients flying into it.

'Refining the Heavenly Oneness Essence Extraction Pill is a troublesome task. This will give the Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire more than enough time to finish nurturing my own spirit pill!'

Chapter 826: Unraveling Doubts

Li Ximing scanned the area for a moment, and once he was certain Tinglan had departed, he activated the Treasure Elephant Cauldron to begin refining the pills. A torrent of Immeasurable Water and Fire coiled beneath the cauldron as a host of spiritual herbs flew inside in sequence, melting one by one.

The recipe for the Heavenly Oneness Essence Extraction Pill required the spiritual ingredients to be refined 18,600 times by the Immeasurable Water and Fire. This particular flame was not only the catalyst for alchemy but also an ingredient itself. He drew out a separate strand of azure-blue spiritual fire and fed it into the cauldron.

Under normal circumstances, this would have been an agonizingly tedious task. The Immeasurable Water and Fire was never meant for alchemy; much like Merging Fire, it was relentless, threatening to burn the ingredients to ash. With another portion of the flame already inside the cauldron as an ingredient, it was like dropping a hot coal into a cotton quilt.

By his own estimation, relying solely on his own efforts would allow him to complete only one or two refinement cycles per hour. The entire process would take two to four years—an immense amount of labor. This was only feasible because he had grown accustomed to arduous and repetitive alchemy from a young age. Anyone else would likely have taken much longer.

However, Li Ximing possessed the Valley Wind Guide-Fire technique, an art that could refine True Essence and granted him exceptional control over flames. As he put it to the test, he found the process surprisingly effortless, leaving him with enough spare attention to monitor the True Fire in his other cauldron.

Once the spiritual liquid in the cauldron had undergone all 18,600 refinements, he kneaded the entirety of the spiritual flames into the mixture. At the bottom of the cauldron, a hazy, grey substance began to form—the first sign of Valley Water.

Li Ximing gently nurtured it with the Immeasurable Water and Fire. When he checked the time, he was surprised to find that less than half a year had passed.

'Alchemy methods like the Heavenly Oneness Essence Extraction are actually quite suitable for me.'

Meanwhile, the River-Heart Cauldron had turned a fiery, incandescent red, and waves of dense medicinal fragrance began to waft from it, signaling that the pills were about to form. Li Ximing quickly freed a hand and unleashed a brilliant glow.

Hum!

A small, exquisitely detailed celestial gate sprang from his palm. Adorned with dragon banners, phoenix carriages, and intricate carvings, it hovered within the cave residence, flooding the space with a blinding light. It was the physical manifestation of his divine ability, Heavenly Audience Gate!

The moment Heavenly Audience Gate appeared, a torrent of iridescent light from the divine ability surged forth, cascading like a waterfall. It clung to the walls of the entire cave, forming a seal that isolated all sound and fragrance from the outside world.

Li Ximing knew this pill was no small matter and had to be handled with the utmost care. He pushed his divine ability to its full power, suppressing everything in the vicinity. After a quick scan of the Great Void confirmed there were no prying eyes and that Tinglan had not returned, he finally turned his attention to the cauldron, his other hand still resting on the Treasure Elephant Cauldron.

After all, while the Three-Cycle Garrison-Profound Fire could be trusted to gently nurture a pill on its own, the Immeasurable Water and Fire possessed no such patience. He could not step away and let it finish unattended as he had before.

Crack!

A dense network of fissures, like a spiderweb, suddenly appeared on the side of the River-Heart Cauldron and spread rapidly up its surface. Li Ximing pressed down with his divine ability as a layer of Bright Yang spiritual qi surged forth to stabilize the vessel. A sharp, resonant clang echoed through the cave.

BOOM!

The cave shook as if struck by lightning. The deafening roar was followed by an explosion of silver-white radiance. Several points of light shot out from the cauldron, darting through the brilliance, but how could they possibly escape the search of a divine ability? A look of delight washed over Li Ximing's face as he retrieved a jade box from his sleeve.

"Come!"

Instantly, the torrent of silver-white light flowed like water into the soft lining of the jade box. All fragrance and color vanished in that same moment, leaving only three pills, each the size of a longan, resting inside.

The pills were a milky white, their surfaces etched with fine, silver patterns resembling Moon Laurel leaves. Wisps of silver-white light swirled around them, twinkling like three brilliant stars in the dim cave, their light pulsing softly. It was a captivating sight.

Li Ximing dared not touch them with his hands, nor did he risk using his spiritual qi to handle them directly. Instead, he conjured a gentle breeze of spiritual energy to lift them for a careful inspection.

'Breaks through cultivation bottlenecks, calms the spirit, nourishes the physical body with the pure essence of the cold moon, increases lifespan… and holding it in the mouth grants the protection of a strand of Supreme Yin energy…'

Li Ximing didn't follow rigid pill recipes. Unlike ordinary pills, whose effects were known before they were even crafted, the properties of this fortuitous pill could only be deduced from its fragrance and the sensations he experienced during its creation.

'The bottleneck-breaking effect of this pill is decent, but unremarkable for my Bright Yang cultivation. Still, it is a spirit pill of the Purple Mansion Realm. As for nourishing the body with the pure essence of the cold moon… it's useless for my Bright Yang physique.'

'The increase to one's lifespan, however, is exceptionally rare. It has the faint aura of a fate-aspected pill—the first of its kind I've seen in this life. The final protective effect is something I can't quite decipher yet.'

'Regardless, it is superior to any other pill I have refined in my entire life. Perhaps the completed Heavenly Oneness Essence Extraction Pill might compare, but next to this, all others are but common trifles.'

He admired his creation with satisfaction. The bottleneck-breaking and lifespan-increasing properties alone were enough for him to treasure it immensely. A smile spread across his face.

"If the Xi family of the Pure Unity Dao Gate, who cultivate the path of Supreme Yin, knew I possessed this spirit pill, wouldn't their eyes pop out of their heads? Nourishing the body with the pure essence of the cold moon and a mouthful of Supreme Yin energy… the Xi family would probably weep with joy."

'With a sacred medicine of the Supreme Yin affinity in my possession, the Pure Unity Dao Gate… I must find a way to contact them.'

Li Ximing had access to a virtually inexhaustible supply of Supreme Yin moonlight essence. Even with some losses during refinement, crafting spirit pills of the Supreme Yin affinity was a simple matter for him. He closed the lid of the jade box, and the cool, serene light vanished, plunging the cave back into darkness, illuminated only by the flickering colors of the Immeasurable Water and Fire.

His expression grew serious as he surveyed the cave, his mind racing with caution.

'Having refined a sacred medicine of the Supreme Yin dao, a celestial phenomenon should have manifested, altering the spiritual aura of this area. Although I've used my divine ability to suppress and seal it, that aura doesn't just disappear. The moment I release the seal, I can't have Moon Laurel flowers suddenly blooming over the ocean. That would be impossible to explain away.'

Even in the desolate outer seas, Li Ximing remained ever-vigilant of watchful eyes. He rummaged through his storage bag and retrieved a luminous white flower.

This was a Suncrest Flower, a spiritual item of the Supreme Yang Dao he had received as a gift upon reaching the Purple Mansion Realm. It wasn't particularly valuable, but it was rare. A brilliant light flared between his brows, and as a purple flame erupted, the solar spiritual item dissolved into motes of light and vanished.

"That should be enough to obscure the phenomenon."

With that, he released his divine ability. Outside, the moon was bright and the stars were sparse, but there were no other unusual signs.

He sealed the cave once more with his divine ability and cast a pained glance at the heavily cracked River-Heart Cauldron, muttering to himself.

"This thing is useless now. It's more sentimental than practical. Repairing it would mean recasting it entirely, and it just wouldn't be the same."

He put it away. With one hand maintaining control over the fire, he took out the Treasure Scripture of the Body Guarding the Tiger Pass and began to read. Three months passed before he finally sensed a faint disturbance outside the cave. A closer look confirmed it was Tinglan. Not wanting to disturb him, she was waiting patiently outside.

Li Ximing, guessing that the time was right, sent a message for her to enter. A few dozen breaths later, she appeared inside the cave, having carefully navigated her way through the earth with an escape technique.

"Fellow Daoist Zhaojing?"

Li Ximing smiled and nodded in greeting. "The refinement is complete!"

Tinglan had expected she might be needed to lend a hand and was slightly taken aback by his words. She thought to herself with a hint of shock:

'It seems I've underestimated this Daoist Master Zhaojing… He just broke through to the Purple Mansion Realm, yet his skill in alchemy seems poised to surpass even that of old Daoist Master Sumian. Truly remarkable. Then again… how could the first Daoist Master to rise under the watch of the Immortal Clan be anything ordinary?'

'Sumian is from the Comprehending Profundity lineage, and he's an old man who appears warm on the surface but is cold-blooded to the core—he cannot be trusted. Hengxing is far too calculating, and I cannot afford to be indebted to her. Tianhuo is too playful; a task that should take a year, she would drag out for five. Old Daoist Master Shen Yuming is getting on in years. Li Ximing, on the other hand, has protected Profound Peak time and again. He is clearly a man who honors his word—loyal and sincere. If I need pills refined in secret in the future, his help will be indispensable.'

'It's just a shame he follows the Bright Yang path… who knows what he will become in the future. I still have that information about the Life Divine Ability. I wonder if it's the right time to tell him.'

Composing herself, she studied him for a moment and smiled. "Fellow Daoist, you are a true saint of alchemy. I have underestimated you time and again. My sincerest apologies!"

"Not at all!"

With a gentle wave of his hand, the Treasure Elephant Cauldron, which had been resting over the fire, shrank until it was the size of a small incense burner. He held it in his hand and said with a smile, "Please!"

The two of them departed the cave. Tinglan summoned a purple cloud carriage, and the rabbit Demon pulled back the curtain, inviting him to board.

Li Ximing, slightly surprised, took a seat inside the celestial carriage. The interior was quite plain and simple. An incense burner in the center held two smoldering pieces of golden, soft incense. Holding the Treasure Elephant Cauldron, Li Ximing remained perfectly composed.

Tinglan remained silent for a moment, gathering her thoughts before she spoke. "A few years ago, I sought out Yehui. He was cultivating in the Southern Sea. I asked him about a certain matter, which I later confirmed with Zhu Gong. It concerns Kong Haiying."

"Back then, the person who entered seclusion at the Profound Peak mountain gate to attempt a breakthrough was, without a doubt, Kong Haiying."

Li Ximing froze. He had personally verified it at the time; the aura from within the sealed cave was that of Fu En. He couldn't help but fall into deep thought. Tinglan continued.

"I… went to see Kong Guxi. They had misidentified the soul lamps of Fu En and Kong Haiying. Kong Haiying's seclusion was far longer than any of us realized. The person who made several appearances to meet with the Kong Clan juniors was actually Fu En in disguise. And the artifact that Fu En blood-refined… it belonged to Kong Haiying."

Li Ximing's expression grew grim. Tinglan pressed on. "It is no surprise that you were mistaken, Fellow Daoist Zhaojing, because the information they had was wrong. The only elder present who had actually met Kong Haiying was Kong Guli, but his memory was erased. The other elders had all perished over the years. Senior Changxi overlooked only one old man named Kong Yu. Fortunately for the plan, he took his own life on the spot."

Her words were laced with a chilling coldness, her eyes betraying a deep shock. "Senior Changxi made these arrangements long ago, swapping their identities. Perhaps it was to prepare a scapegoat. Perhaps. After all, Kong Haiying had once been to Encompassing Profundity."

Her words were intentionally vague, but Li Ximing silently understood the unspoken implications.

Yehui had met Kong Haiying in person. What good would a substitute be? Yehui would have seen through it immediately. That left only one terrifying possibility.

Daoist Master Changxi had coldly delivered Kong Haiying directly into Yehui's hands. He had even been kind enough to help Yehui and Li Ximing maintain the illusion that the victim was Fu En.

Though Li Ximing was not as adept at such schemes, the truth was now laid bare before him, and he was not so naive as to miss it.

'After Changxi's death, Yehui was bound to bring his blade down on the Kong Clan. Kong Haiying had to die. His death wasn't just about the blood feud for killing his wife and exterminating his clan; it was also tied to the secrets of the Encompassing Profundity lineage. If he remained alive, any power that took in the Kong Clan would live in unease, unwilling to offend Yehui.'

'Only with Kong Haiying's death would Yehui be willing to sheathe his blade and reconsider whether continued persecution of the Kong Clan was worth the effort. Yehui's attitude toward me improved so dramatically back then because he believed I had made a concession. This was the reason!'

'Changxi's choice was cold and calculated from the very beginning. Kong Haiying was right there, in seclusion at the Profound Peak mountain gate. If he could achieve his breakthrough in the window of time that Changxi's death had bought, then all would be well. If not, he would become Changxi's peace offering to Yehui.'

'The identity swap was likely a casual contingency at first, a move to give Profound Peak flexibility and to confuse outsiders, lowering their guard concerning Kong Haiying. Changxi never anticipated that Kong Haiying would fail to overcome his inner demons, that he would remain trapped for so long and ultimately betray his hopes.'

'Later, when that tactic had outlived its primary purpose, it was repurposed to strengthen my conviction—after all, from my perspective, it was Fu En who had died, while Kong Haiying was still somewhere out there, with a great chance of breaking through to the Purple Mansion Realm.'

'No wonder I felt that cultivator's foundation was so profound at the time, not at all like a guest elder such as Fu En. It was Kong Haiying himself!'

'So, in the end, the elusive Kong Haiying, whose whereabouts were a mystery, was personally delivered by my own hands to his execution.'

A chilling shock gripped Li Ximing's heart, leaving him speechless for a long while. He finally let out a deep, heavy sigh. "Daoist Master Changxi… regardless of the extent of his powers, everything he did after his death—be it cruel, cold, manipulative, or deceitful—was for the preservation of his clan. He can face his ancestors without an ounce of shame."

Tinglan could see that he had pieced together the entire sequence of events. She spoke in a low, haunting voice. "As for what he felt for Kong Haiying and Kong Yu, whether he wept in sorrow or burned with guilt, only the senior himself knew in his heart. Did Kong Haiying know what was happening during his seclusion? Did he silently consent? His failure to overcome his inner demons… is it possible Senior Changxi had a hand in that as well?"

Her question sent a fresh wave of ice through Li Ximing's veins. He answered in a low voice, "Daoist Master Changxi… though he manipulated me a great deal, he also taught me much. Ultimately, he is worthy of respect."

Tinglan's gaze was fixed on the space before them. Two faint, autumn-yellow lines lit up at the corners of her eyes. She rested her chin on her hand, her eyes looking out the window as she spoke softly. "He is indeed worthy of respect. After all, those in the Purple Mansion Realm who have not yet cultivated a Life Divine Ability often have many attachments to the mortal world. Once a Life Divine Ability is achieved, especially one of the Earth Virtue, they slowly let everything go. Sect, clan… they become mere tools. Lineage, master, and disciple… they become mere rungs on the ladder to immortality."

"Certain paths of the Purple Mansion Realm… their cultivators are either single-mindedly focused on attaining immortality or become uncontrollably violent and tyrannical. The only word to describe them is 'fearsome'—Fellow Daoist Zhaojing, Illumination of All Under Heaven is not a divine ability with a good reputation."

The woman's voice echoed within the celestial carriage. The incense burner in the center released a cool, crisp fragrance, the same scent that lingered about her, evoking the feeling of an autumn wind sweeping through a rice field. Suddenly, Tinglan's mask of clever pleasantries fell away, revealing a flicker of genuine worry.

"Fellow Daoist Zhaojing, you broke through your state of ignorance in a mere few years and then shattered the chains of limitless illusion. That is an incredible feat. But that is the karma of one who compromises and endures. To see into another's heart is to confront your own inner demons; the two are entirely different. Before the Grand Ancestor of Wei attained the Dao, the path of Bright Yang was not always so 'bright.' Traces of the Qilin and Cicada still remain to this day. Are you truly confident that you can grasp a Life Divine Ability?"

Chapter 827: The Hundred-Day Pill

Li Ximing held her gaze for several seconds, a thought suddenly flashing through his mind.

'What does she mean by this? Could it be that Purple Smoke has a lead on Illumination of All Under Heaven, but she's hesitant to offer it?'

When the Dongli Sect's Eastern Fire Grotto-Heaven collapsed, countless Bright Yang Dao traditions were scattered to the winds, claimed by the various families of the Azure Pine region. The Li family had yet to rise at the time and had only managed to acquire a copy of the Intercalary Sun Art through Tu Longjian, a technique that had benefited them to this day.

Both Yufu Prefecture and Mount Dongli lay on the border between the territories of the Purple Smoke and Azure Pond families. It stood to reason that those two had acquired far more from the fallout. The possibility that Purple Smoke had obtained a trace of the Life Divine Ability known as Illumination of All Under Heaven was extremely high, and the thought made his heart pound.

Yet, it was not in Li Ximing's nature to make bold, confident promises. He mulled it over before speaking.

"The divine abilities of each tradition are unique. Whether one can master them depends on one's disposition and the nature of the tradition itself. I have never read the cultivation method, so I cannot say for certain. Illumination of All Under Heaven is its ancient name; this Life Divine Ability is also called Luminous Heart. It was revised over the years by the emperors of Wei, the Zhaoyuan Immortal Estate, and the Dongli Sect. I imagine there must be a path within it to cultivate an open and honorable heart."

Tinglan looked away, seemingly having anticipated his cautious response. "It has indeed been greatly improved," she said quietly. "The Cui Clan cultivated themselves through rites, which led to the rise of Dongli. My Purple Smoke was

not prosperous back then, but we had some connection to them. The cultivation method for this Life Divine Ability has always been locked away. One can only seek this path after reaching the Purple Mansion Realm; one is not permitted to use this path *to* achieve the Purple Mansion Realm."

A strained smile appeared on her face, as if the words were difficult to say. "This Dao tradition… my Purple Smoke is quite familiar with it. If Zhaojing is interested in the Illumination of All Under Heaven tradition, after you achieve your second divine ability… you may visit the Purple Smoke blessed land."

'So she really does have news of the Life Divine Ability!'

Li Ximing nodded slowly. Though puzzled by the hesitation and bitterness in her tone, he kept his expression calm while his heart filled with light.

He had already made some progress with Heavenly Audience Gate. Once he consumed the pill refined from the Supreme Yin, his cultivation speed would soar. The spiritual medicine also had the effect of breaking through bottlenecks, putting the Body Divine Ability, Sovereign Treading Peril, within his grasp.

If Purple Smoke was willing to provide Illumination of All Under Heaven, then as soon as he mastered Sovereign Treading Peril, Li Ximing would possess the two most essential arts of the orthodox Bright Yang path—one for the body and one for life. Once accomplished, combined with Heavenly Audience Gate, he would instantly leap into the upper echelon of the Purple Mansion Realm!

Cultivators of other traditions were not so fortunate. Between the Cui family and the Dongli Sect, the path had been practically laid bare for him. His greatest worry had been the matter of his Life Divine Ability, and now an unexpected clue had fallen into his lap. How could he not feel his spirit brighten with joy?

'The Purple Mystery is difficult to cross, and I have no other desires. In this life, to wield divine abilities, to cultivate my body and command my fate—this journey will not have been in vain.'

Even the Heavenly Oneness Essence Extraction Pill in his hand now seemed more precious. The carriage soon came to a halt. A rabbit Demon robed in purple came forward to welcome them. The two alighted from the immortal carriage to the sight of a boiling sea and vast stretches of white sand. On the island, the mountain range billowed with thick smoke.

Li Ximing's Profound Light swept across the island from between his brows, revealing a complex web of interwoven fire and water veins. The entire island was

a landscape of either molten lava or hot springs—a peculiar place indeed. It appeared to be occupied by a demonic sect; black-robed disciples hurried to and fro. Li Ximing and Tinglan ignored them completely. He gave a subtle nod of approval.

"Finding a suitable place for alchemy on short notice was quite the challenge," Tinglan said with a smile. "I surveyed all the nearby seas, and only this one met the requirements."

She turned her palm upward in a gesture of invitation. Li Ximing accepted and walked ahead. As they proceeded towards the mountain at the island's heart, they saw a grim, blood-soaked formation. It was only at the Qi Refining level, but it covered a massive area, which was impressive enough.

This was the outer sea, at the very edge of the East A-Wang Sea. To construct such an array here, the sect must be a well-known demonic power in the local area.

Of course, for the two of them, the formation was non-existent. With a mere step through the Great Void, they passed through it, unseen and unheard. They materialized inside a lavish assembly hall where two guards, radiating demonic energy, stood sentry at the entrance.

Despite the two brilliant Daoist Masters appearing before them, the late-stage Qi Refining guards remained as if blind, seeing nothing at all. Li Ximing and Tinglan strolled leisurely into the hall, where a heated argument was already underway.

"We finally caught someone from the Han Family! On Changdu Island! He's trapped by the grand array!"

"We should attack in full force now and wipe out the Han Family!"

An insidious voice immediately cut in, cursing, "That Han Li is cautious and cunning! How many times has he escaped since Han Shihai died? We must go to the island together and annihilate him!"

"Nonsense! He's just a petty Qi Refining cultivator! Why should we care!"

Li Ximing raised an eyebrow at the exchange. Tinglan, however, had no interest in the grudges of these small-fry cultivators. "Let me handle this," she said casually.

She lifted her sleeve and pushed the great doors open with a creak. Inside, a hulking man sat sprawled on a throne of black and white bones. Li Ximing didn't bother to get a closer look. Tinglan simply pursed her lips and blew gently, as if extinguishing a candle.

Whoosh…

A purple wind swept through the hall. The domineering island master on his throne and the imposing guards at his side all seemed to be illusions. They crumbled like sand and scattered into nothingness. Their black-scaled armor and gleaming weapons were instantly sliced into neat, fingernail-sized discs that clattered across the floor.

Yet, the candlelight in the hall remained perfectly still, its gentle glow illuminating the now-empty seats.

In a single instant, the bustling chamber fell utterly silent, devoid of any living soul.

It was impossible to know how many Foundation Establishment Realm and Qi Refining cultivators had been extinguished in that single breath. As casually as if she were brushing dust from her clothes, Tinglan remarked, "A pity they aren't from the righteous path. Otherwise, a few could have been left alive to run errands."

She stamped her foot lightly. The entire hall shook violently, and a circular vent opened in the center of the floor, spewing forth a torrent of Baleful Fire Qi. Li Ximing simultaneously activated Mountain-Chasing, Sea-Crossing Tiger, stabilizing the mountain's earth veins. Tinglan turned to the rabbit Demon and instructed, "Ze Gui, clean this up. Don't disturb the Daoist Master."

Ze Gui bowed respectfully and withdrew. Li Ximing glanced at the shadows near the entrance; the two guards remained at their posts, completely oblivious.

'The profundity of Purple Smoke's Dao arts is truly remarkable, and Tinglan's cultivation is deep…'

He knew that whatever she had just done was not a divine ability. The purple qi exhibited no control over fire or earth veins, nor did it possess any illusory properties. Her actions, from start to finish, were the product of spell arts, not a divine ability.

Releasing his own power, Li Ximing summoned the Treasure Elephant Cauldron. It swelled like an inflating balloon and settled with a boom over the vent of Baleful Fire Qi. The Immeasurable Water and Fire surged forth once more. Tinglan, meanwhile, beckoned lightly, and a small cauldron appeared in her palm.

The cauldron was purple on top and black on the bottom. The black was not the usual bronze of an alchemy vessel but a dark, fabric-like grey, and it was adorned with images of birds like crows and owls. It was a rare five-legged cauldron.

'The Purple Mansion Realm spiritual artifact, the Xiukui Profound-Passage Cauldron.'

The value of such a spiritual cauldron went without saying. Purple Mansion Realm spiritual artifacts were already exceptionally rare, let alone one designed for alchemy. Li Ximing placed his hands upon it, and a profound sensation arose within him.

"A fine spiritual artifact…" he murmured in appreciation.

But his expression quickly froze.

Under the probe of his spiritual sense, two imposing, ancient seal characters materialized on the bottom of the cauldron: *Cultivation Transcendence*.

'The Great Xiukui Monastery has some nerve… Perhaps it was a gift from Yue Cultivating Sect. Surely they wouldn't have stolen it from the north… True Monarch Taiyue is a renowned, living True Monarch.'

Tinglan seemed not to notice his reaction. She solemnly took out a turquoise jade box and opened it.

Inside, it was filled with a pale white spiritual liquid from which a wave of potent spiritual energy washed over them. Submerged within was a walnut-sized, pure white object. It seemed both liquid and solid, tumbling about with a life of its own, occasionally poking its head above the surface as if observing the world.

Li Ximing's eyes blazed.

'Heavenly One Pure Origin!'

This was the core ingredient for the Heavenly Oneness Essence Extraction Pill, the extremely rare Purple Mansion Realm spirit water itself!

Among all the spiritual treasures of the Purple Mansion Realm, the Heavenly One Pure Origin was in a class of its own. This was because it possessed the miraculous ability to purify one's Dao foundation and correct a flawed cultivation path!

In the journey of cultivation, the techniques one practiced and the qi one absorbed created a chasm-like difference in future potential. For rogue cultivators who had no choice but to absorb impure qi, their futures were all but sealed. It was for this reason that nine out of ten tales told in the common marketplaces featured this spirit water. Whether the hero was gravely injured and received it as a gift from a beautiful maiden or seized it from an enemy, a single draught would heal his wounds and grant him a complete rebirth, setting him on a path to greatness.

Such stories were ubiquitous. From the scions of Purple Mansion Realm clans down to wandering Embryonic Breathing cultivators, everyone knew of its fame. This was the first time anyone from the Li family had ever laid eyes on it.

The item was clearly precious to Tinglan as well. She held it with extreme care. "Purple Mansion spirit water, the Heavenly One Pure Origin, preserved in the Mansion Water's White Partridge Origin Spring. Fellow Daoist Zhaojing, please!"

She even specified the water used to preserve it, clearly worried that it might affect his alchemy. As what came next involved the secrets of his own tradition, it was improper for her to watch. She immediately withdrew, closing the hall's great doors behind her and taking a seat cross-legged outside.

With a thought from Li Ximing, the Immeasurable Water and Fire parted. The jade box shot into the opening, and the Heavenly One Pure Origin plunged out of its preserving water and into the cauldron.

BOOM!

The sound of a roaring flood filled the air, like crashing waves on a stormy sea. The Heavenly One Pure Origin was Valley Water, and the cauldron was its valley. It was a spirit water perfectly suited for alchemy, and as Li Ximing began the refinement, the process felt smooth and natural. He enveloped the essence

with a refined medicinal liquid, slapped the side of the cauldron, and in a single breath, the alchemical aroma shifted several times as the Immeasurable Water and Fire boiled furiously.

A full one hundred days passed. Under Tinglan's anxious gaze, heavy rain clouds gathered in the sky. They hung dark and low but refused to release their rain, casting a humid, stuffy pall over the entire island. The once-dry sand quickly grew damp, threatening to turn to mud.

BOOM!

Muffled thunder rumbled from within the clouds, a sound without light. Tinglan looked up at the sky, a hint of joy on her face as she counted the days.

"A pill forged in a hundred days," she nodded. "That's a good omen."

Creeak…

The doors to the great hall slowly opened a crack. She looked up to see a thick, white vapor pouring out, cascading down the steps like a waterfall. It carried no fragrance, yet wherever it passed, grass sprouted, and insects began to chirp, creating a scene of vibrant life.

A Daoist Master in white and gold robes stepped out, a smile on his face. He looked up and made a congratulatory gesture.

"Congratulations, Tinglan!"

The woman's eyes sparkled. Li Ximing beamed.

"The Xiukui Profound-Passage Cauldron is a truly magnificent treasure! With its assistance, and with heaven, earth, and man all aligned, I managed to produce four pills!"

"Excellent!"

In the Dao of alchemy, a single batch at the Embryonic Breathing stage could yield a dozen pills. At Qi Refining, the number usually dropped to below ten, and by the Foundation Establishment Realm, it was typically between six and nine. At the Purple Mansion Realm, a yield of three or four spirit pills was already considered a fine result. Li Ximing had originally promised three or fewer, which was why Tinglan had so readily agreed.

To have two extra pills—nearly double the expected amount—how could Tinglan not be surprised and overjoyed? "Zhaojing is truly a master of the Dao

of Alchemy!" she exclaimed. "Even Senior Xiao would likely produce the same number! Truly… a talent that astounds the world!"

Tinglan's words were sincere. Li Ximing was not yet a hundred years old, yet his skill was comparable to that of an old master who had dedicated centuries to the craft. How could he not be described as astoundingly talented?

But Xiao Chuting was no ordinary figure. Though both were progenitors of an Immortal Clan's divine abilities, Li Ximing knew the vast gap between them. Setting all else aside, when Li Ximing broke through to the Purple Mansion Realm, he had faced Changxiao. When Xiao Chuting had his trial, he faced the Daoist Master Tianyuan of the Golden Feather Sect! In the end, the Man on Creek had emerged completely unscathed, and not a single direct descendant of the Xiao family had fallen.

Li Ximing dared not compare himself to such a figure. "Fellow Daoist, you exaggerate," he said seriously. "If Senior Xiao were here, he would have refined at least six pills."

Tinglan was filled with joy and cared little whether it was four pills or six. She watched as Li Ximing shook his sleeve, producing a jade box. He opened it gently to reveal four pure white pills, each with shimmering golden veins.

"Wonderful, wonderful…" she murmured.

Li Ximing smiled. "I refined these pills, so I know them well. As they are pills of Valley Water, they must always be kept in a container. Exposure to the world will diminish their properties, and exposure to the Great Void will annihilate them instantly. You must store them with care."

"Thank you for the reminder, Zhaojing!"

Tinglan may well have known this already, but she accepted his advice graciously. When she saw Li Ximing produce the golden Treasure Elephant Cauldron to return it, she quickly waved her hands.

"I cannot accept this. That you refined four pills is already beyond my wildest expectations. I should be the one thanking you. Please, accept the Treasure Elephant Cauldron as a return gift!"

"Oh?"

For a moment, Li Ximing was genuinely tempted. He didn't have an alchemy cauldron of his own, and while the Treasure Elephant Cauldron wasn't an

ancient artifact, it was a top-tier dharma artifact and felt comfortable to use. Such a cauldron was invaluable, but its worth couldn't compare to two Purple Mansion Realm spirit pills. Accepting it wouldn't be excessive. As he hesitated, Tinglan smiled.

"I obtained the Treasure Elephant Cauldron from the Thundercloud Monastery's grotto-heaven. I don't possess my master's great skill; he acquired both a spiritual artifact and a thunderstone, while I only managed to get some Dao traditions and dharma artifacts."

"This cauldron was forged after the monastery sealed its grotto-heaven, so it's not an ancient artifact, but its body is excellent. It was made with the True Fire dao's Trueflame Goldstone and the Supreme Yang dao's Cloudgaze Cursive Liquid."

Although both materials were of the Foundation Establishment Realm level, they were rare treasures even back then. Now, even Purple Mansion Realm cultivators rarely possessed them. After a few polite refusals, Li Ximing accepted the cauldron, holding it with clear admiration.

He returned the Xiukui Profound-Passage Cauldron to Tinglan, who then used her Supreme Minister's Gourd to collect the Immeasurable Water and Fire. Once they were seated, Tinglan smiled at him, placed the jade box on the table, and began to explain.

"The Heavenly Oneness Essence Extraction Pill, refined from the Heavenly One Pure Origin. In ancient times, it could bring the dead back to life and regrow flesh on bones. Now that souls dissipate first, the pill can no longer save them, but it has no problem healing the Dharma Body of a Purple Mansion cultivator and extending their lifespan."

"It can also resolve calamities of fire, heal injuries from golden gales, and purge impurities from one's immortal foundation, elevating one's Dao. It must never touch the ground; it will dissolve on contact with earth."

"The pill also has some minor uses that you probably won't need. It can resolve fertility issues for Purple Mansion cultivators, alleviate the weakness after childbirth, and accelerate the gestation of a divine ability after absorbing another's immortal foundation."

She smiled faintly. "The part about purging impurities sounds tempting, but it's not as powerful as consuming a whole Heavenly One Pure Origin. In my Purple Smoke, we typically use the pill like this…"

"For instance, if someone reached Foundation Establishment Realm with a third-grade technique and later switched to a compatible fourth-grade technique, they would take this pill when breaking through to the mid-Foundation Establishment Realm. It would not only expand their cultivation and solidify their foundation but also refine their immortal foundation."

Li Ximing had the recipe, but the pill's history, origins, and the extensive records of its effects were clearly known only to Tinglan's lineage. Her detailed explanation was related to an unspoken rule in alchemy.

When an alchemist succeeds, they typically estimate a yield. If they produce more than expected, the extra pills are often not mentioned and are silently kept as their fee. Although Li Ximing had presented four pills, Tinglan did not believe for a moment that he had only managed to make four.

Her being so clear was a gesture of goodwill. He had promised three or fewer but delivered four, which was no small matter.

'He probably made five,' Tinglan thought. 'He must know how precious the pills are, so he didn't take much for himself.'

This act not only gave Purple Smoke ample face but also demonstrated his restrained character. It was why she had gifted him the Treasure Elephant Cauldron as a sign of her gratitude.

Li Ximing simply smiled and nodded.

'The Xiukui Profound-Passage Cauldron is truly incredible,' he thought to himself. 'And my control over the Immeasurable Water and Fire is simple enough. This batch produced a full six pills…'

At least one of those pills was thanks to the Xiukui Profound-Passage Cauldron, and another was the result of favorable conditions and a bit of luck. He had discreetly kept two for himself, primarily to foster good relations with Purple Smoke.

The reason was simple: it was a Supreme Yang Dao tradition, and his own Life Divine Ability was still in their hands…

'Besides, if Tinglan profits greatly this time, she'll have to come to me for alchemy again. After a few more times, my own stores will be full.'

He was quite fond of the Heavenly Oneness Essence Extraction Pill. His junior, Li Minggong, had a slightly inferior immortal foundation. With this pill, he might be able to open up new paths for her.

With their business concluded, Tinglan considered for a moment, then her expression turned serious.

"There is something I must tell you, Zhaojing…"

Li Ximing raised his eyebrows.

"This matter is important, but not urgent," Tinglan continued. "It was another reason for my visit. I didn't want to affect your alchemy, so I didn't mention it before. Now that the pills are made, I should tell you."

She stated solemnly, "True Monarch is about to reincarnate in Jiangbei for his cultivation. There is just over a year left until it happens."

"What?!"

Li Ximing was stunned into silence, his face a picture of shock. Tinglan quickly explained, trying to placate him.

"The matter is significant, but thankfully it is in Jiangbei, not Jiangnan. His path will also take him north, so it has little to do with us here. However, your clan once had a presence in Jiangbei, so you should be aware."

A sense of unease settled over Li Ximing. He shook his head anxiously. "Sigh… It hasn't been that long. How could we run into this sort of thing again?"

Hearing this, Tinglan grew thoughtful. "Fellow Daoist, surely you aren't planning to return to the mainland? I'm afraid it won't be convenient… and even if you went back, it wouldn't help much. You would just attract unwanted attention. Luoxia is still respectful toward Purple Mansion Realm cultivators. They generally won't cause a Purple Mansion cultivator to lose face. As long as you don't court death yourself, at most one or two of your clan's direct descendants might get dragged in. It won't escalate to an existential crisis."

She sighed softly. "After all… Luoxia has to consider our feelings. If a Purple Mansion Realm clan were wiped out because of this, future reincarnations

would become difficult. It wouldn't look good to stir up resentment among cultivators and mortals."

"I asked Yehui; he doesn't seem to be planning to go back either. That Li Jiangqian is a capable person, so there's no need to worry."

Clearly, with a True Monarch involved, Yehui wanted nothing more to do with the Capital Immortals Dao. Li Ximing, however, was from an Immortal Clan and, among Purple Mansion Realm cultivators, placed an exceptionally high value on his family. Tinglan understood this and had deliberately waited until after the alchemy was complete to tell him, fearing he would act rashly and jeopardize her pills. Hearing her words, Li Ximing mulled it over.

"I just hope that he is sensible and maintains contact."

"He wouldn't dare be anything but sensible." A smile touched Tinglan's lips, as if she had recalled something amusing. "They are far more afraid than your clan is. A True Monarch's reincarnation needs antagonists. The Capital Immortals Dao has demonic origins, a very sensitive identity. Clans like yours, which have presented themselves as righteous for generations… in the stories, you're usually on the side with the beautiful maiden. The young mistress might be headstrong at first, but she'll eventually fall for him. You might even gain some benefits."

Li Ximing sighed and shook his head. "I've read more of those stories than you have, Fellow Daoist. There's another kind, where the protagonist is righteous and discerning, and my 'righteous' clan is exposed as ugly and corrupt. Meanwhile, the demonic sect's maiden is seen as genuine and lovable. No clan's history is perfectly clean. If someone wants to dig up dirt, they'll find it. It's best not to get involved at all. The potential benefits aren't worth the risk."

Tinglan chuckled. "You see things clearly… That's true… And that Moongaze Lake…"

"Hey!"

Li Ximing dared not let her continue. A True Monarch's powers were vast; who knew if he might draw inspiration from their conversation? If things really played out that way, Yehui would laugh his head off. He hesitated for a moment, then began to write a letter.

'Even though the younger generation at home is clever, who's to say one of them won't be influenced by fate? Li Jiangqian has a Talisman Seed in him, but

I should still write a letter by hand to ensure that power in the clan remains in the hands of my grand-uncle and Li Jiangqian.'

Chapter 828: Cold

Moongaze Lake was a far cry from its usual tranquility. A joyous, festive atmosphere pulsed through the air as the island's many halls were draped in crimson. Figures of great importance within the clan moved back and forth, signaling an event of grand celebration.

Dressed in red robes, Li Zhouming stood in the main hall, a proud and contented look on his face. Beside him, in a great jade chair, sat an old man in dark red robes, his white hair a stark contrast to his smiling face.

"Father… I've made you proud this time, haven't I?"

Li Zhouming's mother had passed away long ago, leaving only his father to witness this day. Li Chengzhi, who had already lost most of his teeth to age, merely shot his son a look.

"This marriage was arranged by your grandfather. What's there to be proud of?"

Despite his words, Li Chengzhi couldn't hide the pride in his heart. Seeing his son marry a powerful Foundation Establishment cultivator, a direct descendant of an immortal sect, was a source of deep satisfaction. The smile was plain on his face as he watched his son go to welcome the bride. He downed two more cups of wine, his face flushing with the heat.

Li Chengzhi was well-regarded in the clan, and as a member of the direct Purple Mansion Realm lineage, he commanded respect. Furthermore, Li Zhouming was a direct descendant of the main branch. The combination of these statuses made his wedding even more magnificent than that of the Clan Head. Every notable figure on the lake had come to attend.

The old man raised his eyes for a moment, scanning the crowd. He figured his own father, Li Ximing, wouldn't be coming. He settled back into his chair, unbothered. He was used to it.

Ever since he was deemed unable to cultivate at the age of six, his father had cast him from his thoughts. If he had possessed even a single spiritual aperture, no matter how poor his talent, he might have learned a trade. But as a mortal, he was confined to the foot of the mountain. The clan's rules had been even stricter then. To put it bluntly, Li Chengzhi considered himself a man who had suffered. The bitterness and hardship he'd endured were no less than what his cultivating brothers had faced.

Because of this, he'd never felt much connection to the clan's order or its legacy. It wasn't until Li Zhouming was born that something truly changed within him. He might offer a little help to his other children, direct or otherwise, but he didn't obsess over their fortunes. Only Li Zhouming was different. For him, he had swallowed his pride and begged Li Ximing, desperate to arrange the best possible future for his son. As for his other children who had been sent away, he no longer had the heart to manage their affairs.

From that day forward, Li Chengzhi stopped judging his father so harshly. He had, after all, become the same kind of man himself. With that realization, everything was forgiven. Li Chengzhi had to admit, he had just drawn a line of validation through a lifetime of his own pain.

The sound of gongs and drums filled the hall as the newlyweds entered amidst a chorus of congratulations. Seated in the seat of honor, the old man drank the wine his new daughter-in-law offered him. In that moment, he could no longer concern himself with who was right or wrong, nor could he distinguish between truths and falsehoods. Seeing Li Zhouming in his brilliant red robes, a searing heat coursed through him. His eyes reddened, and only one thought surfaced.

"Just be good to each other. That's all that matters. It's just a shame… I probably won't live long enough to see your children."

Though Li Zhouming could be playful, he was a good person at heart and easily moved. He couldn't bear to hear such words, and on this day of great joy, he nearly broke down in tears, letting out a few choked sounds.

The torrent of rituals and the press of the crowd swept away his sorrow, and soon he was swept away to the next location, his cheerful mood restored.

Once Li Zhouming left, the hall fell silent. The boisterous crowd had moved on, and a cold wind began to blow through the grand space. The jade chair beneath

him felt icy and sharp. With the effects of the wine now fading, Li Chengzhi felt a deep chill seep into his bones.

'These jade chairs are made for cultivators, after all,' he thought. 'So terribly cold…'

The Main Hall of the Island

Figures hurried through the great hall. An old man dressed in black ascended several flights of stairs, finally arriving in the spacious chamber. He knelt and bowed respectfully.

"Reporting to the Clan Head," he said. "Both Midong and Brahma Cloud Cave are searching for the token. The Brahma Cloud Cave has even sent a direct disciple from the Revering Radiance Gate to personally oversee the matter. The whole Sanxi region is in an uproar; they're making quite a scene."

Above him, Li Jiangqian sat with his eyes closed, pinching his fingers together in a meditative gesture. Wisps of Radiant Fire trickled from his lips as if he were practicing a technique. Hearing the report, he opened his eyes.

"Good," he said.

The White river Creek in the Sanxi region of Jiangbei was divided among three powers. Besides the Li Clan's Funan and the Capital Immortals Dao's Midong, the remaining territory belonged to the Brahma Cloud Cave, a vassal of the Revering Radiance Gate. The arrival of a direct disciple was certainly not about finding some token; it was a clear signal that the Revering Radiance Gate tacitly supported the arrangement.

This was undoubtedly excellent news. Without the approval of a Purple Mansion Realm power, Li Jiangqian had felt a persistent lack of confidence.

As for why the old man only mentioned Midong and Brahma Cloud Cave searching for the token—omitting the Li Clan's Funan—it was because Funan was sparsely populated. The cultivators sent there were subject to term assessments and had no opportunity to abandon their posts for a treasure hunt. Whether the various forces under the Li Clan's governance were making a move was a matter for Qingdu and Yuting.

Li Jiangqian considered for a moment. He felt the time was ripe. There was only one year and five months left until the sixth month of the twenty-second year of Shenxuan's reign.

"Have you… received any news from Midong?" he asked in a low voice.

Qu Bushi was currently responsible for communicating with the Capital Immortals Dao. The old man was flexible and knew how to think on his feet. He had also met Guan Gongxiao before and knew some of the inside details.

"I received a verbal message this morning," Qu Bushi replied. "They said the candidates have been chosen, but the token's whereabouts are still unknown. Lord Guan Gongxiao mentioned… that if he were to 'find' it himself, it probably wouldn't look authentic."

"As for the candidates, Lord Guan first selected a Daoist from the Southern Sea. He cultivates on a mountain there and is skilled in using venomous creatures and fierce beasts. He cultivates the 'Locust Shade Ghost' technique and goes by the Daoist name Bai. The other is a cultivator from the Northern Sea who cultivates the Bound Earth dao. His foundation is unknown, but his surname is Huang."

Guan Gongxiao had specified the two candidates for two reasons. First, to ask if there were any issues with his choices. Second, to inform the Li Clan, preventing them from accidentally making contact with the chosen individuals and ruining the plan.

As for Guan Gongxiao finding the token himself, it simply meant the Capital Immortals Dao would forge one. However, their tradition was not known for artifact refinement, so any creation of theirs would lack authenticity and would be difficult to pass off.

Li Jiangqian thought it over. "Go back and tell fellow Daoist Guan this: however many candidates they have, they should find a way to invite them over. Once they are established in the area, a token will naturally appear for them. If not, we will consider other options."

He paused, adding, "But the Three Rivers region needs to be thrown into chaos. It's too stable right now, which doesn't suit our purposes."

Having received his orders, Qu Bushi immediately withdrew. Li Jiangqian was lost in thought for a while longer before another report came from below, announcing that Chen Yang was waiting outside.

"Have Protector Chen come up," he instructed.

Soon, the black-robed Chen Yang strode in from outside. Despite his constant travels, his cultivation had advanced rapidly, and thanks to his immortal foundation, his aura was exceptionally potent.

"Greetings, Clan Head," he said respectfully. "This subordinate has a matter to report. The Sacred Writ Gate has sent someone with a gift."

Li Jiangqian's brow furrowed. His perception was razor-sharp. "What kind of gift requires a Protector to deliver it?"

The question cut straight to the heart of the matter, its insight almost startling. But Chen Yang was no simple character. He lowered his head and answered respectfully.

"When the Clan Head sent me to the Sacred Writ Gate to offer condolences, they treated me with great courtesy. Perhaps they felt they could establish a rapport with me, so they sent someone hoping to inquire about our clan's disposition through me. The Sacred Writ Gate wishes… to form a marriage alliance with Moongaze Lake."

"The messenger waited for me by the lake during my patrol and approached me when we were alone, presenting the gift. I was caught completely off guard and did not dare to be negligent. I haven't even replied to them. I came straight to the main hall to report!"

The Sacred Writ Gate's intentions were clear. Anyone else might have made some inquiries on their behalf, perhaps speaking of the current situation and accepting the gift. Reporting such a thing to the Clan Head could be awkward, after all. But they had the misfortune of running into Chen Yang, who brought the matter directly to the highest authority.

"No wonder," Li Jiangqian murmured, nodding slightly.

Some time ago, when Chen Yang went to the Sacred Writ Gate for Kong Guli's funeral, the Kong family had refused to see him, which was expected. But the Profound Immersion Daoist tradition had not made things difficult for him. Instead, a direct disciple had welcomed him, praised him, and treated him with courtesy throughout.

Li Jiangqian had initially thought it was due to their connection with Purple Smoke, but now it seemed they were here to propose a marriage.

"So that's what they were waiting for," he said with a slight, intrigued smile. "Who is the proposal for, and which of our own are they asking for?"

Chen Yang reported in a solemn voice, "The Sacred Writ Gate is proposing on behalf of their most outstanding direct disciple, Dai Jinquan. However, his age is a bit advanced, so they asked me to gauge your opinion. If the clan has reservations, they will make other arrangements. As for who they wish to marry… they briefly mentioned Lady Xinghan."

Strictly speaking, the wilderness was vast and a crossroads for many powers. The Sacred Writ Gate and the Li Clan had no significant territorial conflicts. Furthermore, the relationship between Purple Smoke and Moongaze Lake was currently on the rise. It was perfectly reasonable for Daoist Master Zhu Gong to want to strengthen ties.

But while the Sacred Writ Gate's thinking was sound, Li Jiangqian had a low opinion of their Profound Immersion Daoist tradition. Daoist Master Zhu Gong was a dignified Purple Mansion Realm cultivator, sought after by thousands.

'Whether Daoist Master Zhu Gong's divine abilities are vast remains to be seen,' he thought, 'but either her mind isn't on managing her sect, or she has other plans. The Profound Immersion Daoist tradition is a mess. Their inherent flaws haven't been purged, and their methods are crude. I've also heard they are arrogant and domineering toward smaller clans, relying entirely on Zhu Gong's personal prestige to stay afloat…'

'Furthermore, while the Dai family might not be generational demonic cultivators, they came from the Eastern Sea and have a poor reputation. They also cultivate Earth Virtue, and I've never heard of any outstanding members from their line. Although Dai Jinquan is at the Foundation Establishment Realm, he is similarly unknown. If he hadn't come to the lake to inquire before, I would never have even heard his name…'

Both sects had relocated from the Eastern Sea, but in terms of both their Daoist traditions and personal relationships, the Sacred Writ Gate couldn't compare to the Revering Radiance Gate. Moreover, to suddenly propose a marriage at this specific time… who knew what troubles might be waiting down the road?

The Sacred Writ Gate was only making an inquiry. If Li Jiangqian showed any interest and let slip any hint of it, Zhuang Pingye would likely pack his bags and slip away in shame. Otherwise, Zhuang Cheng would have to come to their door to apologize.

Fortunately, Li Jiangqian was not fond of the Profound Immersion Daoist tradition. Having considered all angles, he felt not the slightest temptation.

"You will simply reply to them," he said, "that the Profound Immersion Daoist tradition of the Purple Mansion Realm is noble, but the Daoist Master is not home, and her elders are seriously injured and in seclusion. There is no one in the clan with the authority to make such a decision."

"You know how to phrase it. Just say it's your own speculation; don't involve the clan."

Chen Yang understood perfectly. "As for the gift they sent…"

Li Jiangqian waved his hand. "Whatever gift they brought, you can deal with it as you see fit."

"This subordinate has already had it sent to the side hall."

Chen Yang's reply was seamless. As he was about to withdraw, Li Jiangqian stopped him.

"After you've replied to the eastern sect, make a trip to Funan. Jianglong is handling an extremely important matter over there. He has yet to reach the Foundation Establishment Realm, so his authority is ultimately limited. You are thorough and cautious. Go and help him."

He picked up a scroll decree that was already prepared on his desk and handed it to Chen Yang. "The clan has an abundance of Foundation Establishment cultivators now," he said gravely. "Take my order and have Miaoshui and An Siwei also travel to the wilderness. Have them station themselves on the riverbank to guard the north."

This was not only to provide backup for Li Jianglong, but also to prepare for the future "confrontation" with the Capital Immortals Dao in Funan and on the river. Sending a few people over just before the enemy's planned attack would seem far too prescient and would give them away.

Chen Yang hesitated slightly. "Is there something amiss with the situation in Funan…?"

Li Jiangqian knew Chen Yang's mind was racing. He waved his hand again. "Don't overthink it. When you get there, ask Jianglong for the details. Spare no effort in helping the Second Young Master see this matter through. If there are any mistakes, it will endanger both of your lives."

At these words, Chen Yang's expression changed dramatically. He bowed and retreated. A thought flickered through Li Jiangqian's mind.

'Protector White Ape has been in seclusion for years. He and the clan's elders were heavily injured back then. He should be close to recovery. I need to check on him through the formation array, lest something happens without my knowledge.'

After sending Chen Yang to the north, Li Jiangqian still had many matters to attend to. Although the wedding of his Purple Mansion Realm descendant's uncle was over, there were countless arrangements to handle. He was busy making notes on various memorials when a report came from below. A white-haired old man in a dark blue robe entered the hall.

Li Jiangqian quickly rose from the main seat and came down to support him, but Li Xuanxuan waved him off. The old man's face was grim. "Azure Pond Sect has issued some kind of order," he began. "Li Quantao has been urgently recalled from the north. He's returned in less than half the time he'd mentioned. He passed by Moongaze Lake but didn't even have time to stop and rest. He only left a letter."

"The letter was delivered by one of the lake's patrol cultivators… You should take a look."

"Li Quantao?"

Azure Pond Sect's assignments typically lasted for five years. Li Quantao had been on some important mission; he had even discussed the matter of Chi Zhiyun when he passed by the lake before. Now, only a year and a half later, he had been urgently recalled. Li Jiangqian frowned, a knot of unease tightening in his chest.

'Just after we mentioned his son being used as a weapon, he's urgently recalled… Please don't let this be about Chi Buzi's return…'

Although Chi Buzi's actions were cold-blooded and merciless, he was, after all, a Purple Mansion Daoist Master who commanded four divine abilities. Such a powerful direct descendant of the Green Pine Supreme Yang Daoist tradition would rank among the top five in all of Jiangnan. Moreover, this "Precious Tree of the Chi Clan" was still young. If Chi Buzi returned, it would surely throw Azure Pond Sect into utter chaos.

He took the letter from the old man's hand, his expression serious. He opened it and saw that the contents were brief. The beginning was filled with polite inquiries and greetings. On the next page, however, the handwriting became much more frantic, and the message was bizarre:

'On the twenty-second day of the tenth month, a sudden cold fell upon Yi Mountain City. Pine and cypress sprouted from bare rock as frost blanketed the ground. Then came a blizzard, burying the plains in over sixteen feet of snow. Hailstones the size of basins rained down, shattering trees and killing countless birds and beasts.'

Chapter 829: The Pine Snow Inquiry

The passage was brief. There was no mention of a transfer before it, nor any explanation after. It was just a short note inserted at the end of the letter, completely without context.

Yet this simple account of a great snow caused Li Jiangqian to hold the letter in stunned silence for a long time. He met the old man's gaze and said in a low voice, "It's snowing in Yi Mountain City."

Yi Mountain City was deep in the Southern Borderlands. Snow was unheard of; the city was like summer all year round, and even a frost was a rare event. When Li Xuanxuan heard this, he was momentarily taken aback, but understanding dawned quickly, and a look of shock crossed his face. "It must be Fairy Ning…"

Another family might not have guessed the secret, but the Ning family's Daoist Master Yuansu had entrusted his legacy to Li Xuanfeng before his death. The Ning clan had once tied its fate to Li Xuanfeng, so the Li family knew a great deal. They immediately understood this referred to Fairy Autumnlake, Ning Wan, who was in seclusion in Yi Mountain City, attempting her breakthrough to the Purple Mansion Realm.

She was not only the former master of Moonview Peak and Moongaze Lake's earliest direct superior, but also someone the Li family had known since their humble beginnings. She was an acquaintance of both Sword Immortal Li Chejing and Li Tongya, the Celestial Moon Sword… Furthermore, she cultivated 'Cold Qi,' a path similar to Li Xijun's. The telltale sign of this Dao was the scent of pine and a great, blanketing snow.

"No wonder they summoned him back in such a rush… and no wonder they said it was a matter of incredible importance. This truly is a world-shaking event…"

But a phenomenon was just a phenomenon. Whether it heralded success or failure, a great snow was inevitable. When Li Ximing had his breakthrough, the

sky above Moongaze Lake had brightened, yet Azure Pond still assumed he had perished. Li Xuanxuan murmured to himself for a moment before shaking his head.

"Let's just hope the spirit of Daoist Master Yuansu is watching over her. The Fairy must succeed!"

Li Jiangqian was of a younger generation. By the time he was old enough to understand such things, Ning Wan had already entered seclusion, and she wasn't mentioned specifically in the clan's histories. He was unfamiliar with Fairy Autumnlake and fell into silent contemplation at the old man's words.

The old man's eyes were filled with reminiscence as he shook his head.

"Back then, my second uncle and Wan Yuankai drove a carriage out from the lake, leaving Moongaze Lake for the first time. They met Senior Xiao Yongling, and it was from him they first heard the great name of Fairy Autumnlake… She was already at the eighth level of Qi Refining then, and the number one beauty of the Azure Pond Sect. If she can reach the Purple Mansion Realm now, it would be a truly celebrated tale."

Li Jiangqian thought for a moment. "In your esteemed opinion, what are Fairy Ning's chances?"

Li Xuanxuan considered this. "I'd say they're very high! I heard Daoist Master Yuansu personally chose her cultivation method, and the resources she received were his life's savings. She even has a Purple Mansion spiritual item of Cold Qi!"

Though Li Xuanxuan was only at the Qi Refining stage, his brothers and his descendants were all exceptional figures. The old man knew a great deal and was quite shrewd. He lowered his voice.

"Yuansu was one of the Three Yuans of Azure Pond, but he was different from Daoist Master Yuanxiu and Yuanwu. His status was likely on par with Chi Wei… both were close friends of the heir to the Origin Mansion. If his Dao lineage hadn't been broken, it's hard to say who would be leading Azure Pond these days."

"Think of the benefits Chi Wei, Zipei, and that one from Golden Feather received back then. How could Daoist Master Yuansu have any less? His mount was a Three-Eyed Chaoshan Beast. If it weren't for that ruthless, fearless madman

Situ Tang, that spirit beast would have lived to become a Purple Mansion expert itself."

"If you sold off my entire Li family, would it even be worth one of that beast's eyes? Do you really think the only thing he had was that Xinyou Pristine Marsh Seal? How could he not have other treasures?"

"When you look at it that way, Fairy Ning's breakthrough to the Purple Mansion Realm is, if not a certainty, at least seventy or eighty percent likely."

This was a real eye-opener for Li Jiangqian. He nodded slowly. "It seems this is most likely a good thing."

Li Xuanxuan nodded back. "This old man won't speak in absolutes, but it is indeed good news. After all, *that* one is getting old, as all the cultivators know. This is a cataclysmic event. If, in the future, our backer is Fairy Ning…"

Although Daoist Master Yuanxiu was the youngest of the Three Yuans, his lifespan was nearing its end. He was also a difficult character who had always harbored ambitions of pulling the Li family into Azure Pond Sect. If Ning Wan were to lead Azure Pond Sect, things would be much easier. Li Jiangqian understood completely. "I suppose it's too late to head to Yi Mountain City now. With Li Quantao rushing back so quickly, there's much to ponder."

Li Xuanxuan replied, "Ning Heyuan died in the north, and the spiritual artifact was lost. To this day, there's still no news of the Xinyou Pristine Marsh Seal. That's a Dharma Treasure! An ancient spiritual artifact! And since *that one* was already the prime suspect, he certainly has a lot to think about."

Having concluded their discussion, both agreed it was good news. Li Xuanxuan put the letter away and said, "I don't know how your arrangements in Jiangbei are proceeding, but this idle old man heard a piece of news. A sword cultivator has appeared in the Wu State, quite famous, with the surname Xu."

Though Li Jiangqian was swamped with duties, his Foundation Establishment Realm mind processed the information instantly. He pulled a letter from the pile on his desk as he spoke.

"You are correct, my lord. I've received news as well. First, Sword Immortal Youfu of the Northern Sea has achieved the Purple Mansion Realm and established a sect in the Feather-Shedding Land, calling it the Northern Mansion Sword Dao…"

He paused, his expression turning serious. "The crucial point is… this man is not only a sword immortal, but a Daoist Master of the Supreme Yang Dao."

Li Xuanxuan's heart skipped a beat. He nodded silently. Although Jiangnan was called the heartland of the Supreme Yang Dao, it had few such cultivators and not a single Daoist Master. No one knew how powerful they truly were. As for the Supreme Yin Dao, only the Pure Unity Dao Gate was of any consequence. Li Jiangqian continued.

"The other matter is this Daoist Xu. He killed a cultivator from Mount Changhuai and fled deep into the Southern Borderlands. This is the first time such a thing has happened in our era."

Mount Changhuai's authority in the Wu State was absolute. To kill one of their people and escape meant this was no ordinary person. Li Jiangqian shook his head. "With the great one's arrival imminent, these sorts of incidents will naturally increase. There are two or three others, but none as brazen as this Daoist Xu. He is also a master of sword techniques, with exceptional combat prowess."

Li Xuanxuan said softly, "That's the truth of it. Although the great one's chariot will land in Jiangbei, there are many cultivators on both sides of the river. If chaos breaks out, it will be a huge problem. Don't forget the lesson of Xu Xiao."

"This junior has been taught."

Li Jiangqian knew the old man was using the story of Daoist Xu as a warning. He nodded in acknowledgment and saw him out.

Yi Mountain City.

Yi Mountain City was the foremost city of the Southern Borderlands, standing guard over Mount Lingqiu on the border of Azure Pond Sect's territory. Beyond it, the land stretched south into an endless sea of jungle. The Southern Borderlands tended southwest, with North Dan Island and the Ten Thousand Mile Shitang lying to the east along the coast.

If one continued southwest, passing through the dense forests and the ruins of ancient Southern Yue, one would reach the nations of Shahuan and Piao, and even the more distant lands of Meng and Shendu. All of these were considered

within the bounds of the countless Demon Ranges deep in the Southern Borderlands.

Although humans were widespread, the traditionally recognized territory of the Xia descendants ended at Yi Mountain City. The rest were considered barbarians. The old state of Chu had been looked down upon by the Central Plains; those outside the city were the barbarians of barbarians, not even worthy of scorn.

This great city, which divided civilization from the wilds, had been named in the ancient texts of the Southern Fire Heavenly Mansion. When they first forged the city, it was wreathed in heavenly flames. The fire clouds only dissipated after the spiritual mines of Mount Lingqiu were exhausted, but the area remained rich in spiritual energy and was largely isolated from the atmospheric influences of other regions.

Yet this ancient city, which had not seen snow in centuries, was now draped in a thick white blanket. The snow was deep enough to bury a person, packing the streets solid. Countless cultivators stood on the rooftops that poked through the snow, gazing at the vast, white sky.

'What a snowstorm…'

After generations of cultivation by the Ning clan, nearly everyone in Yi Mountain City bore the name Ning. Faced with this celestial phenomenon, the cultivators naturally understood its significance. They dared not clear away the snow, watching the heavens with anxious hearts.

In the highest grand hall, a woman in plain clothes sat upon a high seat. She appeared to be middle-aged. Below her stood a man in full armor, his face fierce and forbidding. He was clearly not someone to be trifled with.

"Mother, the snow is letting up."

Li Yuanqin stood at the entrance of the hall, watching the falling flakes. Ning Hemian rose from her seat. In contrast to her son's composure, she was visibly agitated. She strode out of the hall and said gravely, "Let us go greet the Daoist Master together!"

Whether Ning Wan had succeeded or not, this was a journey they had to make.

Mother and son arrived at the outer chamber of a deep cave dwelling. The gate was already thick with frost. The stone statue of the Three-Eyed Chaoshan Beast still crouched before the entrance, its form painted white by the accumulated snow. Only its three eyes stared out with a ghostly light.

Ning Hemian reached out and pressed the statue's long horn. The mechanism, once impossibly rigid, had loosened. With a gentle turn, the frost-covered gate rumbled open. A dense wave of frigid, frosty Qi erupted from the gap, flowing out like a river of pure white.

Li Yuanqin felt a chill seep into his bones. Both mother and son were now in the Foundation Establishment Realm, but they still felt a deep fear before such intense cold. They waited for the thickest part of the blast to pass before pushing the gate fully open and stepping inside.

Daoist Master Yuansu had sealed the grotto's array. He had personally designed, modified, and empowered it with his own abilities, making it completely different from the original. Inside, he had placed a lamp of Blazing Fire. Only when this dharma lamp was extinguished by the invading cold Qi would the sealed array open.

The design was ingenious, solving nearly every potential problem. Even a traitor from within the Ning family could not interfere. As long as the Cold Qi surged within the grotto, entry was possible. If Ning Wan emerged, all was well. If she had perished, the Ning family could still enter to collect her remains.

Li Yuanqin braved the biting Cold Qi and entered. The first thing he saw was a jade lamp on a table by the inner door, long since extinguished, leaving the grotto lit only by a dim, yellow glow.

This was Ning Tiaoxiao's cultivation chamber. The jade platform, perpetually soaked in spiritual energy, stood silently in the gloom. The walls shimmered faintly with an eerie light. Li Yuanqin took a closer look and felt a chill crawl up his spine.

The stone walls flickered with a dark luminescence, as if many people were standing within them, looking out. Sweat beaded on the back of his neck. Ning Hemian pulled him back gently and whispered, "This is a Daoist Master's cultivation place. See little, hear little."

Li Yuanqin lowered his head. Ning Wan's seclusion chamber was on the other side of the grotto, only a dozen steps away. He took a single step forward, only

to hear his mother drop to her knees with a thud. She spoke with the utmost reverence.

"Greetings, Daoist Master!"

He snapped his head up. The jade platform, which had been empty a moment ago, now held a woman in a white dress.

She was tall with eyes that curved like crescent moons and long black hair that cascaded down her back. A single, vertical white mark adorned her brow. Her features were gentle and soft, but her eyes held a cool detachment that made it impossible to look away.

The woman appeared to be no more than twenty years old. Her sleeves were embroidered with golden patterns, and she sat quietly on the edge of the jade platform, her fair legs dangling over the side, her bare feet resting upon a bank of pristine white mist.

The entire grotto was suddenly filled with the scent of pine.

Li Yuanqin quickly stepped back and knelt behind his mother, listening to the Fairy's cold voice.

"Hemian, where is Li Xuanfeng?"

Ning Wan did not ask about Ning Tiaoxiao, as if she had long known the elder's fate. Though this was the day she attained her great power, her gaze held a deep sorrow as she looked around the empty grotto. Ning Hemian replied respectfully, "During the North-South War, my husband died fighting to stop the southward advance of the Buddhist cultivators."

A shadow passed over Ning Wan's eyes. "That sounds like something he would do."

She spoke again. "Has Chi Zhiyun emerged from seclusion yet? He was always so competitive, always trying to be one step ahead of me. Looks like he's fallen behind this time."

Ning Hemian answered deferentially, "Reporting to the Daoist Master, Chi Zhiyun has already perished. The Chi family's direct line is severed. There are no longer any cultivators named Chi in Azure Pond."

For the first time, Ning Wan's composure broke. After listening to their account of all that had transpired, she fell into a long silence, a look of loneliness in her eyes. "A pity. He was quite a character."

She made a quick calculation in her mind, and her expression grew solemn. "Heyuan fell. Where is the Xinyou Pristine Marsh Seal!"

"Its whereabouts are unknown…"

Ning Wan clenched her jaw and let out a cold snort. "How unsightly."

The Daoist Master stepped down from the jade platform as if walking on air. She turned to face the eerily glowing stone wall behind her and called out, "Who goes there?"

One by one, faces began to emerge from the stone, some clear, some blurry. But Ning Wan ignored them, her gaze fixed on a distant corner of the wall. Soon, the apparitions faded. She seemed to be calculating something. After a moment, she thought to herself:

'Nineteen… two are missing… The Great One said that when a face fades, it means they are seeking Fruition Attainment. Besides Senior Zipei, there's one other. Since no one has been heard to achieve the rank of True Monarch, they must have been reincarnated through a Metallic Essence.'

'Coincidentally, three streams of Metallic Essence have separated from Anhuai Heaven. One of them should correspond to 'True Qi.' Looking at the position… it's the one from Mount Changhuai. They're making a play for the position of 'True Qi.''

She pursed her lips, lost in thought for a long while, then lightly tapped the jade platform. The platform trembled and split down the middle, revealing a box containing twenty-eight small, white flags.

The woman beckoned gently, and the twenty-eight flags flew up together, circling her palm. A faint smile touched Ning Wan's lips as she stepped forward. The entire grotto array began to shake, and countless points of white light flared. From the Great Void, a massive, table-sized array disk covered in profound patterns emerged.

Setting up a Purple Mansion array was always a complicated affair. Even with a pre-made array disk, deployment and retrieval were troublesome. Yet for Ning Wan, it seemed as simple as taking a tool out of storage.

"Let's go. We'll pay a visit to Senior Yuanxiu."

The Fairy of Autumnlake rose into the air, borne upon the endless falling snow. Standing below, Ning Hemian was suddenly struck by a belated realization:

'The Daoist Master was called Fairy Autumnlake back then, and not just for her cultivation level… Her talent in the dao of arrays was something even Daoist Master Chi Wei, Daoist Master Yuanxiu, and the others had praised…'

Chapter 830: Omen

Moongaze Lake

As the days passed, the situation in Jiangbei grew increasingly tense. Though the lake's surface remained placid, its upper echelons were a hive of frantic activity. The flow of people in and out of the great hall swelled, particularly Qu Bushi, who, having been thrust into a position of great responsibility, was so busy he barely had a moment's rest.

Li Jiangqian had already dispatched his men and was waiting in the great hall. After a long while, he finally saw Wang Quwan enter from outside. A blue and gold sword hung at the man's waist. He carried himself with a steady gravity, his posture as firm as a pine, inspiring respect in all who saw him.

Li Jiangqian glanced at him and asked warmly, "How are your injuries? Have you had Elder Sun take a look?"

Wang Quwan cupped his hands in a fist. "Patriarch, I have been recuperating according to Elder Sun's instructions. He examined me again these past few days, which is why I have only just left my cave-dwelling."

The wounds he had sustained in Jiangbei were not severe, and after this period of recovery, he was almost fully healed. Li Jiangqian nodded. "And what of Daoist Shouding from Mount Jingyi? Is there any news?"

At the mention of this, Wang Quwan looked extremely embarrassed. When Daoist Shouding had returned with him, he had been terrified of being ambushed and dared not go back to Mount Jingyi. Instead, he had darted into a Li family cave-dwelling and immediately entered seclusion, refusing to leave or even show his face.

The Li family certainly didn't lack a spare cave, but Wang Quwan understood the sensitivities of the situation. The two families were not on the best of terms, and he himself was living under their roof; he knew he had to be cautious in all

things. As the one who had brought Shouding here, he felt both anxious and mortified that his guest was overstaying his welcome.

"This subordinate has inquired several times," he replied. "I even borrowed his seal to write letters to Mount Jingyi. At first, there were some replies discussing who they might send to escort him back. But a few months ago, the contact suddenly ceased. Every letter I've sent since has vanished without a trace…"

"I have troubled the clan," he continued, "and my heart is ill at ease. I am willing to lease this cave-dwelling on his behalf…"

Li Jiangqian nodded with a flicker of amusement. He knew perfectly well why Mount Jingyi had suddenly gone silent.

'How could they dare to write back?' he thought.

The Xuanyi Dao lineage was an Eastern Sea power; their intelligence network in Jiangbei was certainly no match for the Li family's. They likely only knew that a True Monarch was coming. Now, a token from the Secret Diffusion Dao lineage had appeared, and Shouding himself was a practitioner of that path. The connection was too obvious to ignore, and they were undoubtedly terrified.

'If Shouding were to walk out of Jiangbei openly right now, I doubt even the Pure Unity Dao Gate would dare ambush him. He could reach the foot of Mount Jingyi, and Xuanyi wouldn't even dare open the gates for him.'

'After all,' he mused, 'a mainland power might still show a sliver of decorum, perhaps sending someone to read an edict. But the overseas factions are demonic cultivators, and the entire Xuanyi sect cultivates Earth Virtue… If the reincarnated True Monarch were to slap Xuanyi across the face, they'd have to offer up the other cheek, worried that he wasn't fully satisfied.'

At that moment, Li Jiangqian felt that his family's reputation on the righteous path was rather useful. At the very least, major powers had to maintain some semblance of decorum and cared about appearances.

Seeing Wang Quwan's uneasy expression, Li Jiangqian smiled. "Protector Wang, there is no need for such courtesy. We are all family here. Elder Sun was once a capable aide under Daoist Master Changxi of the Profound Peak Dao lineage. His medical skills are more than reliable."

He paused briefly, steering the conversation toward the Profound Peak lineage. He recounted the story of the "One-Incense-Stick Family," leaving Wang

Quwan utterly dumbfounded. For a moment, Wang Quwan almost thought Li Jiangqian was mocking him, but then he continued.

"The one known as the 'Radiant Fire Spear' back then, who later became Daoist Master Chu, was a similar case."

The Profound Peak was a lofty Purple Mansion Realm sect. Though it had declined, its members were still honored guests of Daoist Masters. To Wang Quwan, such matters were distant. But Chu Yi, the "Radiant Fire Spear," had passed through Jiangbei on his journey north years ago; the Wang family was certain to have records of it. Understanding dawned in Wang Quwan's heart.

"So that's how it is… Daoist Master Chu is also a reincarnated True Monarch… No wonder he could break through to the Purple Mansion Realm in the middle of a battle…"

Hearing this, Li Jiangqian could only shake his head with a hint of resignation. "The words 'in battle' and 'breakthrough to Purple Mansion Realm' simply do not belong together. Not even the greatest genius could achieve such a feat. It is merely a game for a True Monarch. The reason I sought you out is because a True Monarch is about to be reincarnated in Jiangbei."

He paused, then added, "This is a celestial decree from the north."

Handling Wang Quwan was an exceedingly delicate matter. The Ding clan of Ding Weizeng had been persecuted and their numbers had dwindled; they had already been relocated to the lake. This left Wang Quwan as the most prestigious local cultivator remaining in Jiangbei.

The Wang clan's direct bloodline numbered in the tens of thousands, scattered throughout Jiangbei. Many sects in the region had members of the Jiangbei Wang clan within their ranks. Protecting the entire clan was simply not realistic.

The fatal blow was that the mortal members of the Jiangbei Wang clan were all either landlords or local gentry—figures essential for maintaining regional stability. On any normal day, they were the common folk the immortal sects spoke of protecting. But when a True Monarch was reincarnated, these were the very people who would become the first stepping stones.

From these mortals, one could easily trace a path back to the cultivators. The Wang clan was spread far and wide; following the threads could lead directly back to Wang Quwan himself. A reincarnated True Monarch didn't operate

on logic. If he toppled a landlord connected to the Wangs, he could very well slaughter his way to the river's edge, causing a massive embarrassment for the Li family.

Li Jiangqian still hoped to protect Wang Quwan. It wasn't because of the resources the Li family had invested in him over the years, but because of the fragment hidden within their secret vault.

But there were limits to that protection. Li Jiangqian would never endanger his own family's survival for one man. He carefully watched the shock on the other's face and said softly, "The number of people in the family who know of this can be counted on one hand. I tell you this because the Wang clan's entanglements in Jiangbei run too deep. If arrangements are not made soon, disaster is inevitable."

Sweat immediately beaded on Wang Quwan's forehead.

"To ensure your own safety, relocating your clan is the best option," Li Jiangqian continued. "Once the True Monarch has departed, it will not be too late to return to Jiangbei."

From the bottom of his heart, Li Jiangqian hoped Wang Quwan would choose this path. Wang Quwan was different from the family's other retainers and protectors. The Wang clan held immense sway in Jiangbei, a colossal entity that could answer his call. The Li family couldn't conveniently extend its influence across the river, and Wang Quwan had never truly committed his heart to the lake. He could never become one of the Li family's true, trusted followers.

If he could use this event to weaken the ties between Wang Quwan and the Wang clan, and bring people like him to the lake, the situation would be entirely different.

But Wang Quwan thought it over and said in a low voice, "The Jiangbei Wang clan numbers in the tens of thousands. I cannot simply sit by and watch. Furthermore, if the True Monarch is reincarnated, it is possible he could be born as a Wang. If I abandon them for the lake today, it could create hidden dangers for the future."

"In this subordinate's humble opinion," he continued, "the ties of blood cannot be cleanly severed, no matter how one tries. It is impossible to move every member of the Wang clan to the lake. If even one person who is left behind makes a

mistake, the True Monarch will see it as the mistake of the entire clan. Trouble will follow."

Whether such ties could truly be severed depended on the person in question. But for a man of Wang Quwan's character, being forced to do so would be more difficult than taking his life. Hearing his reply, Li Jiangqian felt a sense of apprehension and sighed internally.

'This man… is truly bound by fate…'

It was clear now. Since Wang Quwan was determined to share the fate of the Jiangbei Wang clan, he was embracing an enormous risk. Li Jiangqian could not force him, could not tie him up and drag him away. It seemed all he could do was arrange for a favorable outcome.

'So this is the work of destiny. Wang Quwan's fate was likely intertwined with the True Monarch's reincarnation from the very beginning. Now, as the day approaches, it is forcing my hand, making me send him to Jiangbei to play the role he was meant to play. Marvelous… truly marvelous.'

Li Jiangqian could only say, "Since your mind is made up, I will 'demote' you to a post in Jiangbei. You are to ignore whatever happens in Funan and head directly to your clan's territory. Do not speak of what you should not, or you will face annihilation. More than one Daoist Master is watching from the Great Void."

Wang Quwan bowed slightly. "This subordinate will depart immediately to stand guard in Jiangbei for six years. When the time is up, I will return to the lake to report."

Li Jiangqian shook his head gravely and watched him leave. Just then, Qu Bushi came to report. The old man spoke in a low voice, "Patriarch, a message from the north. They have already set out for Funan."

Li Jiangqian pulled his thoughts back to the present and nodded silently. "White Ape…"

He stopped mid-sentence, looking up thoughtfully. Outside the hall, a brilliant flare of fire descended, pulsing with light. A woman strode through the air.

She wore a long red dress, her features exquisite and captivating. She rode upon a roaring True Fire, holding a hexagonal lantern in her hand. Inside it, a

soft, downy flame flickered gently. She wore a slight smile. Li Jiangqian rose hastily.

"Greetings, Great Aunt! Congratulations on emerging from seclusion and advancing your cultivation!"

Li Minggong returned the smile. Following behind her was a tall, white-haired old man clad in stone armor. It was, without a doubt, the White Ape.

With two pieces of good news arriving at once, Li Jiangqian let out a small breath of relief. Li Minggong waved for Qu Bushi to leave, her expression turning serious.

"My recovery shouldn't have taken this long," she said. "But my cultivation had just been refined when I encountered the Inward Heart Surging Profundity, an auspicious state for fire-attribute cultivators seeking a breakthrough. I felt an insight and broke through to the mid-stage Foundation Establishment Realm. It was a stroke of luck, but my foundation was unstable, so I spent extra time solidifying my cultivation."

"So that's what happened!"

Li Jiangqian offered a few more words of congratulations, but Li Minggong said gravely, "This is not the time for celebration. Upon leaving seclusion, I first paid my respects to the Old Master. He told me of the current troubles, and I came to find you immediately. How have you arranged our forces for the riverbank?"

Li Jiangqian organized his thoughts and replied at once, "Protector Ding holds a grudge against the Capital Immortals Dao, so I've left him on the north bank. Protector Cui will guard the east bank. The rest will cross the river with me to spar with the Capital Immortals Dao. The Embryonic Breathing cultivators in the family need not go, but the Qi Refining disciples can join the fights to gain experience."

"I have instructed both sides that this is merely a period of probing and standoffs," he added. "They are to avoid lethal force in all matters to prevent bloodshed from escalating the situation…"

The matter of the True Monarch could not be spoken of freely, so this excuse was passable. Li Minggong nodded thoughtfully.

"It is for the best that Ding Weizeng is not involved. The Ding family was nearly wiped out by Wenhu and uprooted from their lands. Although the clan has

moved here, it's possible some of their bloodline remains in Jiangbei. It is not wise for him to get involved."

"Miaoshui and Qu Bushi are rogue cultivators…"

As Li Minggong was pondering, Li Jiangqian reminded her, "There are also two demonic cultivators with sealed cultivation on the east bank… Their surname is Wen. They migrated from the Eastern Sea and have been tending the furnaces on the mountain for many years. Since they hail from the Eastern Sea, it shouldn't be an issue… If Great Aunt has any concerns, I can go and deal with them."

Li Minggong shook her head, the hexagonal lantern in her hand swaying slightly. "That won't be necessary… I didn't expect so much to have happened. To think that in the end, we must join forces with the Capital Immortals Dao. If they truly are at odds with Changxiao, then so be it. But I fear that Daoist Master is a cunning one, deliberately saying such things to seize upon our moment of weakness and plot some other scheme."

A thoughtful look crossed Li Jiangqian's face, but the palace-gowned woman before him said, "There is no use in overthinking it now. You and I will go to the river together."

On Azure Pond Peak, white mist swirled and clouds drifted. This place was the hub of the Azure Pond Sect's Tianyuan One Dao Spiritual Array, a place where the spiritual energy should have remained constant day after day. Now, however, it held a touch of chill.

A blast of frost and snow swept in, landing before a cave-dwelling and solidifying into a woman in white. She was exceptionally beautiful, and the faint fragrance of pine spread from her. She took a step forward and announced in a clear voice, "Junior Ning Wan requests an audience with Senior Si!"

Ning Wan was a cultivator of Azure Pond. Her breakthrough had not been made public, nor had she yet called for a gathering of cultivators to celebrate. Instead, she had come directly to the main peak to meet with Yuanxiu.

After a moment's wait, an aged voice emerged, "Wan'er, you've come out of seclusion. Please, come in."

Ning Wan's form dissolved into white snow, reappearing over a large pool of Pristine Water that shimmered like a vast gemstone. In the midst of the cold snow, six ornate jade thrones carved from azure jade appeared even more brilliant. On one of the thrones sat an old man, looking his age. His face was a dense, overlapping mesh of wrinkles, as gnarled as old tree bark, and his eyes seemed somewhat vacant.

Ning Wan did not sit beside him. Instead, she took her place on the third-to-last throne. With one not taking the main seat and the other sitting two seats away on the same side, the arrangement looked awkward, as if each of the six thrones had a specific owner.

Unlike other Purple Mansion Realm cultivators who often concealed their aged appearance, Yuanxiu made no such attempt. "My heartfelt congratulations," he said in a raspy voice.

"I told my martial brother earlier that you went into seclusion too soon. You wouldn't be able to use the spirit pills that Yuanli and Xuanfeng obtained in Anhuai Heaven, which is a true pity. But he paid me no mind. I suppose he was certain you would succeed."

The relationship between the martial brothers Yuanxiu and Yuansu was complicated. They were once close but had later gone their separate ways. Ning Wan was in no position to comment, so she simply replied, "The Daoist Master had another spirit pill he obtained long ago… he allowed me to consume it. I was also quite fortunate, and thus I succeeded."

Yuanxiu let out a derisive snort. "When Chi Wei asked him, he gave a cold face and said he obtained nothing. It was a lie, of course. If not for the Dharma Treasure in Yuansu's hands, and the fact that Chi Wei was on death's door, who knows what he might have done."

Dense spiritual energy mixed with the glow of Dharma, illuminating the entire cave-dwelling with a radiant light that made Ning Wan herself seem to shine. She said gently, "Did anyone pursue the matter of Can Lufu's fake pill? When he was dying, everyone gave him leeway. After he died, he was dust returning to dust, and no one cared."

Her words were not pleasant and seemed to carry a hidden meaning. A gurgling laugh rumbled in Yuanxiu's throat. The five fingers of his exposed left hand were stretched taut. Then, one by one, they separated, revealing more than ten

fingers on that palm, like the gnarled roots of an old tree, clamped firmly onto the jade throne. He chuckled, “Indeed! Indeed!”

His eyes reflected the shimmering Pristine Merging Owl Pool, and the smile on his face grew wider. He suddenly said, “You may not believe me, but the Xinyou Pristine Marsh Seal is not in my possession.”

Chapter 831: Why Seek Another Path?

Ning Wan sat silently upon her jade-green throne, seemingly unmoved by Yuanxiu's words. This matter couldn't be dismissed simply because the old man claimed the item was no longer in his hands. The Xinyou Pristine Marsh Seal was an exceptionally precious Dharma Treasure, a renowned artifact even in ancient times, powerful enough to make any Purple Mansion Realm cultivator cast aside their pride.

Her gaze fell upon the old man's hand resting on the throne's armrest.

"Back then," she said softly, "the Xinyou Pristine Marsh Seal was in the hands of you seniors. It made scheming against others convenient and reaped you plenty of benefits. But no matter what, that artifact belongs to Azure Pond Sect. We are a proud Supreme Yang Daoist tradition. Even with our master temporarily absent, our treasures should not be so easily taken."

Ning Wan was clearly unconvinced. Yuanxiu, his back stooped with age, replied,

"That ordinary people would not dare only proves that it was no ordinary person who took it. What belongs to Yuansu is his. I would not hide it."

His words, contrary to her expectation, gave Ning Wan pause. A flicker of genuine doubt entered her heart.

"Senior, you refuse to say who took it," she pressed. "If the situation is truly so dire that it cannot be spoken of, why speak of it today? And if this is because our master is beyond the heavens, why did he not secure it long ago?"

Yuanxiu stood like an old, weathered tree.

"The Xinyou Pristine Marsh Seal is the seal of the Feathered Serpent, the progenitor of Pristine Water," he said in a low voice. "This item is far more useful than you imagine. The only reason it was in Ning Tiaoxiao's hands was because our master allowed it. Once he died, the item was naturally lost."

"But there was one thing our master did not anticipate. Even if Daoist Master Donghua, Li Jiangqun, had left a treasure for Ning Tiaoxiao's reincarnation within the seal, he would have died before ever using it. That was the sort of man he was. He would grit his teeth and swallow his own blood before ever nourishing his enemy."

Ning Wan's expression began to shift as the old man continued speaking calmly.

"When Ning Tiaoxiao fell, Zipei thought me greedy, that I wanted to seize the artifact from the Ning Family. She insisted on placing it in Ning Heyuan's hands… She overestimated me. As long as that seal remained with a Ning, the moment I looked away, it would be schemed away by others… I am a Great Daoist Master of Azure Pond Sect. They wouldn't know if I acted with our master's blessing. But Ning Heyuan was different. For him, possessing it was a death warrant."

"If he had been more perceptive back then, he might not have died."

Ning Wan wanted to speak but held her tongue. Yuanxiu went on, "You can't blame her. How could one speak of such matters to someone outside the Daoist tradition? She was fiercely protective of Yuansu. Had I tried to take the seal by force, she would have fought me. I could only leave. As I departed, I saw Pu Yu of the Penglai Daoist tradition performing divinations. His arts are profound; perhaps he had long suspected something."

Ning Wan listened in silence.

"I watched you grow up," the old man said. "For the sake of the bond between our families, let me offer you some advice. The Xinyou Pristine Marsh Seal is not something you can touch. Wait until I am dead, when you are sitting alone upon the Pristine Merging Owl Pool, and you will understand just how much trouble it is."

He let out a dry, raspy laugh. "By then, you won't be the master of the Ning Family. You will be the master of Azure Pond Sect! Whether you want it or not, it will no longer be the Ning Family of Azure Pond Sect, but the Azure Pond Sect of the Ning Family."

A complex look crossed Ning Wan's face. As a sect cultivator raised in Azure Pond and bound to the Green Pine Supreme Yang Daoist tradition, she was already marked. With the Pristine Speech Heaven watching from above, she could never truly leave. At most, she could emulate Chi Buzi, feigning a desire to travel

the world to abandon her clan. She would never have the power to break away and establish herself independently as a great immortal clan.

'Chi Buzi… that cold-hearted, parentless madman…'

Her expression darkened. Yuanxiu, however, seemed lost in thought. With his lifespan nearing its end, the old man's usually stern and stoic face showed more emotion. "The Cold Qi divine ability, 'Immersing in Pure Listening'," he said wistfully. "To select this superior technique for you, Yuansu went so far as to ally with Tianwan. He mastered it decades ago, and now you too have refined this Life Divine Ability. There is a matter in the north that requires your attention."

Seeing Ning Wan frown, Yuanxiu casually explained the situation. "I suppose you haven't heard… The Li Family is now a Purple Mansion Realm Immortal Clan. A Moongaze Immortal Clan, no less! If you pass through their territory, you might as well pay them your respects."

Suspicion colored Ning Wan's features. "A Purple Mansion Realm Immortal Clan… you don't mean Li Xizhi?"

A complicated light flickered in Yuanxiu's eyes. "It is Li Xizhi's younger brother, Li Ximing. He was once an unknown figure, but it seems he was hiding his true strength, cultivating diligently until he mastered the Bright Yang divine ability. He is known as Zhaojing. He is also an alchemist, though I do not know how skilled."

"From the looks of it, Bright Yang is not a path that excels in alchemy. He cannot be compared to Qing Tangyin. I estimate he is at the level of a Hengxing."

Ning Wan's brows arched in pleasant surprise. Geographically, the Li Clan was a natural ally for Azure Pond Sect, and their two families had always maintained a good relationship, built upon the bonds of their ancestors and strengthened by marriage. How could she not be pleased? She had helped Li Chejing in the past and let Li Xuanfeng go; these were all fortuitous connections.

'Aside from that lunatic Ning Hejing, my Ning Clan's relationship with the Li Clan isn't bad at all,' she mused. 'And Li Yuanqin was the one who pushed the Chi Family to their downfall. This is perfect.'

After some thought, she wondered if his temperament would make him a suitable ally. The world was full of eccentrics, after all. "This Daoist Master Zhaojing," she couldn't help but ask, "what is his character like?"

Yuanxiu narrowed his eyes. "Pure, kind, and gentle, holding no grudges. He cultivates Bright Yang with introspection, not aggression, much like the ancient cultivators of the Cui Clan. He is soft-hearted but discerning, benevolent and compassionate, and devoted above all to the legacy of his clan's ancestors."

Ning Wan nodded repeatedly. Yuanxiu did not have many days left; he had no reason to deceive her on such matters. His judgment of character had always been uncannily sharp and was worth considering. "To have such a Purple Mansion Realm master nearby," she said, "is truly a blessing for Azure Pond."

Yuanxiu grunted, a sneer touching his lips. "Without Chi Wei, Azure Pond would have had many more blessings…"

"My life is almost over. I once forced Li Xuanfeng to consume a pill that destroyed his path to the Purple Mansion Realm. Li Ximing will never trust me. You are far more suited to lead Azure Pond than I. The one currently managing the sect's affairs is a junior from Yuandao's line—from the Nine Mounds Tantai Clan. In the future, Azure Pond will not lack for Purple Mansion Realm masters. It falls to you to lead them."

Ning Wan knew she could not escape the orbit of Azure Pond. But to become a generational leader of the Azure Pond of the Supreme Yang Daoist tradition was an incredibly advantageous position for her own lineage. With this shift in status, her perspective changed as well. "A senior from Yuandao? That is also fate… Although the Supreme Mound follows the Supreme Yin Daoist tradition, they share a root with Azure Pond. Senior Yuandao once studied here, and now one from the Tantai Clan repays that debt. It is a fitting arrangement."

At the mention of Yuandao, Yuanxiu's emotions grew complex. He lowered his head. "Did you ask? Qing Tangyin… has he truly been reincarnated?"

Ning Wan nodded silently. Yuanxiu's gaze turned cold. "Zhang Tianyuan has also fallen. He was once a nobody, not worth a second glance, good only for bullying clan cultivators. Yuansu never gave him a thought."

Ning Wan had no desire to be entangled in their old grievances. That generation of Purple Mansion Realm masters had all advanced in unison due to the Origin Mansion's inheritor, and their relationships were a tangled web of favors and feuds. She simply rose from her seat. "I will go and oversee the matter in the north immediately."

"My breakthrough will be at the Shitang," Si Boxiu said.

She transformed into a flurry of frost and coalesced at the cave entrance, her white robes fluttering. Just as she was about to leave, his words struck her as odd. A rumbling, whooshing sound of wind began to build behind her.

Whoosh!

The rustle of trees echoed from behind. Ning Wan froze, glancing slightly over her shoulder.

The damp scent of the forest washed over her, and the chirping of crickets grew louder. She saw the old man on the throne struggling to his feet, his hands gripping the armrests, his chest heaving forward as if an endless gale was blasting out from behind him.

Yet Ning Wan felt not the slightest breeze.

Chirp… Chirp…

The gale behind the old man pulled his clothes taut against his front, the loose robes revealing Si Boxiu's thin, withered frame. His two knees moved inward, fusing together. His flesh sprouted roots, binding his legs into one, while his feet lengthened unnaturally, crawling across the floor.

He snapped his head up, a gurgling sound escaping his throat. Only then did Ning Wan notice what was wrong.

A slick, dark brown cricket was perched in Si Boxiu's pupil.

Its two greenish-black antennae extended out of the eye socket, waving lazily. Si Boxiu seemed unaware of the insect in his eye. He was completely focused, his lips pressed tightly together as the limbs of some foreign object repeatedly tried to push out from between them, only to retract as if in pain.

Ning Wan's pupils widened.

Si Boxiu's normal eye noticed her gaze, and a flicker of hope appeared within it. His left hand, now sprouting more branches and leaves, held fast to the armrest while his right hand suddenly let go.

With that release, most of his body lifted into the air, like an old tree in a storm with only a few roots left clinging to the soil. He waved his now-free hand at Ning Wan.

She still felt no wind. Her spiritual sense and divine abilities detected only calm within the cave; the pool below was without a single ripple. Yet Si Boxiu was utterly exhausted. The hand he had freed, now restored to its normal, wrinkled appearance, gestured toward her. He curled four fingers, leaving only his index finger extended, pointing. Then, the old man's mouth gaped open. In that instant, countless green insects flew out, taking wing. Ning Wan saw clearly that the inside of his mouth was like wood grain, rigid and unyielding.

But he bared his snow-white teeth and, like a pouncing tiger, bit down viciously on his own finger.

BOOM!

The Body Divine Ability of the Upright Wood path was incredibly resilient. The impact was like a thunderclap, sending sparks and violet lightning erupting. The old man raised his head, his one normal hand still facing him, but the index finger was gone.

Even one as composed as Ning Wan could not help but stumble back two steps. She watched as Si Boxiu offered a meaningful smile, the severed finger still held in his mouth. Slowly, his left hand released its grip.

"Ah?"

Finally, Ning Wan felt the wind. It was a roar louder than the preceding thunderclap. Her robes whipped about her as the old man, light as a bird, shot out of the cave with a *whoosh*.

She didn't even have time to react. She turned her head dazedly, watching Si Boxiu soar into the sky.

He flew higher and higher, not in a straight line south, but circling like an agile sparrow, spiraling diagonally toward the southern horizon.

The old man used neither dharma power nor divine ability. He simply held his arms out to his sides, carefully maintaining his balance, until he became a tiny black dot against the sky.

A green rain began to fall.

Ning Wan stood amidst the swirling wind and rain, her dress swaying. She held out a hand, palm up, catching the emerald droplets. Fear still lingered in her eyes, but it was being rapidly overtaken by a profound confusion.

The rain quickly formed a small green puddle in her palm. The woman stared at it, murmuring, "Pristine Water… How is this possible… This is Clear Dusk Rain. Why is it raining… why is the Clear Dusk Rain falling?"

"His path is Upright Wood!"

But she had no time for questions. Si Boxiu, the Great Daoist Master of the Azure Pond Sect, the foremost master of the Upright Wood path in this age, the number one talisman master in Jiangnan—today, he sought Fruition Attainment!

She raised a hand and flicked a finger. The great bell beside her immediately began to sway.

DONG! DONG! DONG!

The urgent tolling of the bell resounded throughout the Azure Pond mountain range. The sound of panicked footsteps drew closer. Ning Wan remained on the peak, gazing at the descending green rain. The Sect Master, Tantai Jin, practically scrambled to her side, prostrating himself without a moment's hesitation or question. "Greetings, Daoist Master!" he cried out in alarm.

Ning Wan glanced down at him. "You are the Sect Master," she commanded. "Whether to see our senior off or to broaden your own horizons, you should accompany me."

The Southern Sea, North Dan Island.

Upon the Ten Thousand Mile Shitang, the waves churned violently. When Ning Wan tore through the Great Void and arrived, the sky was already a maelstrom of roiling black clouds.

She looked up and could see the black dot circling high above. Group after group of cultivators stood in mid-air, their faces a mixture of awe and terror as they stared at the heavens.

The entire sea was in turmoil, great waves swirling on its surface. The sky grew darker, and the magical winds became harder to control, forcing some cultivators to descend. All colors faded from the world, save for the brilliant lights of divine abilities that pierced through the Great Void to hang suspended in the air.

Ning Wan stood her ground as the gale swept past. Beside her, Tantai Jin was shaking, his mind a complete blank as he stared at the circling dot in the sky.

'Senior Yuanxiu? Is he attaining his Dao?'

'Why so suddenly?!'

Before he could think further, snow-white clouds began to form beneath his feet. Thunder cracked across the sky. Tantai Jin looked into the distance and saw dozens of radiant lights within the storm clouds—at least several dozen Purple Mansion Realm masters had gathered around the sea of the Shitang, ascending together into the highest heavens.

A fine, dense static began to fill his ears. Tantai Jin realized the green rain was falling here as well. Now that they were closer to the zenith, he could finally see the old man circling in the sky.

'This… Old Senior…'

The Yuanxiu that Tantai Jin knew had always been meticulous and composed. The man he saw now was hunched over, soaring with outstretched arms. His eyes were terrifyingly wide, with several black crickets crawling across his pupils, and his entire body was overgrown with branches and leaves. The sight was horrifying.

"Senior Yuanxiu!"

Tantai Jin watched in silence. He had not been summoned here on a whim. Yuanxiu and Yuandao had made arrangements long ago; he had been chosen at the age of six to become Yuanxiu's disciple. He respected this old man more than his own father, who was always in seclusion.

But the old man who had picked him out from all the other Tantai children seemed to have vanished long ago.

Tantai Jin felt dizzy from the sheer number of divine ability projections in the sky. Ning Wan, however, suddenly looked up toward a nearby point. Two figures, one behind the other, had appeared on a cloud, their forms indistinct.

Ning Wan knew they were from the Underworld. With Si Boxiu in his current state, no one was there to greet them, but the two paid it no mind. They watched the circling Si Boxiu from afar.

"Such audacity!" one said.

The other sighed, his voice sharp. "It is as if the heavens themselves are helping him. Who would dare to leech off True Monarch Du's authority over Pristine Water like this? It is only because the True Monarchs are all beyond the heavens, with no time to spare for this world, that he can borrow this power."

"If not for that, how could you say he has audacity? And audacity is all it is."

Ning Wan listened quietly, until a gentle voice sounded from her other side.

"He has been pushed to a dead end. If not for that, how could he seek the Dao in this manner?"

"Hm?"

Ning Wan was horrified. She was a dignified Purple Mansion Realm master; for someone to approach her undetected was unthinkable. Her body instantly dissolved into ice and snow, only to rematerialize in the same spot a moment later.

"Greetings, Grand Martial Uncle," she said, looking slightly flustered.

The man beside her, dressed in an azure robe with golden tassels, stood with his profile to her, exuding an air of transcendent detachment. His pupils, however, held a faint green-blue light that seemed more demonic than immortal. He smiled faintly.

"Chou-Gui Hidden Form."

Ning Wan had met this man in her youth. It was Chi Buzi, who had been missing for many years!

She gave an awkward nod. Chi Buzi was clearly explaining how he had appeared beside her so suddenly. He was a Great Daoist Master now. All Ning Wan could do was stand by his side respectfully.

'The entire Chi Family was annihilated, Chi Zhiyun's cave dwelling was desecrated and he was murdered, yet none of that could move this Great Daoist Master. But for Great Daoist Master Si's breakthrough, he was already waiting here in the Southern Sea, without any prior sign.'

Chi Buzi completely ignored the two emissaries from the Underworld, leaving them to stand there like thin air.

"Ning Wan… not bad," he said in a low, ethereal voice. "You've reached the Purple Mansion Realm as well. It seems Senior Yuansu's spiritual resources were abundant enough to benefit you."

Hearing this, the hair on Ning Wan's arms stood on end. She almost turned and fled, but Chi Buzi chuckled twice. This man followed the heartless Great Dao, and was known to be aloof and cruel, yet his laughter was pleasant to the ear.

"You need not be afraid. I have no desire for the senior's meager possessions."

"The path of Upright Wood," he asked, "do you know what it is called?"

Ning Wan certainly didn't dare leave. Unsure of his intentions, she shook her head hesitantly. A smile touched Chi Buzi's face.

"Reflecting Metal is the orthodox position of Shen-You Metal (Metal Virtue). Likewise, Upright Wood is the orthodox position of Jia-Yi Wood (Wood Virtue). Its full name is the 'Exclusive Position of Upright Mao-Xun Wood'. The name alone tells you it is a righteous and true way. To seek this path while trying to supplement it with unorthodox shortcuts? That is a fool's dream."

"And yet… the inheritance of the Upright Wood path is scarce. Forget all five branches, even gathering three is a monumental task… The Sima Family has held onto their branch for so many years, yet no one has ever achieved Fruition Attainment with it."

"So, Senior Yuanxiu could only seek an unorthodox supplement. I do not know how he obtained the Pristine Water, but he intended to use it to temper the Upright Wood, in hopes of attaining a certain Wood Virtue."

He finally raised his eyebrows, a trace of melancholy in them.

"He has no certainty, no method to seek the required Metallic Essence, only a sliver of speculation. He can do nothing but offer his own body to this path."

Ning Wan lowered her head silently. The storm created by the old man in the sky was growing more terrifying. He raised his head, his eyes bulging as he stared directly at the heavens.

His lips moved, and he finally spat out the severed finger.

The moment the finger left his mouth, it transformed into an infant, then a boy, and in the next instant, a dashing young man who bore a strong resemblance to Si Boxiu. This was undoubtedly him in his youth. The two figures activated

their divine abilities and sat facing each other. In the sky, wood and water energies clashed, shaking the very heavens.

After a long moment, one of the blurry figures from the Underworld finally looked away, shaking his head in disappointment. He took out a net-like object, hiding it in his hand.

"A pity. He doesn't know you can only spit that out *after* you succeed."

The other watched with cold eyes.

"How could he know? He is no True Monarch Du Qing. And how many like True Monarch Du Qing are there in this world? True Monarch Du Qing only succeeded because he learned the methods of his predecessors. This man has no true inheritance. To borrow the power of Pristine Water at all is already impressive."

"And what if he did know? He wouldn't have the ability to succeed and then spit it out. If he had that kind of power, he wouldn't be in a state where he can't even greet us."

One of them seemed to catch something from the air, passing it to his other hand before scattering it outwards. Ning Wan noticed nothing, but Chi Buzi had already taken a step back, his expression complex as he watched the seeker in the sky.

Si Boxiu was rapidly withering. His hunched body curled into a dark ball like a pill bug, his high-quality robes being torn to shreds within it. Meanwhile, the younger man grew taller and more imposing. A triumphant smile spread across his face. He raised a fair hand and snapped his fingers.

SNAP!

All the wind, wood, and water energies between heaven and earth surged into his body.

His clothes became increasingly ornate and noble, while black veins spread across his face. His height continued to increase, and his appearance began to warp.

The man scanned his surroundings, then suddenly reached out and lifted the frail Si Boxiu. "You walked a true path," he laughed. "Why did you seek another?"

The crickets in Si Boxiu's pupils finally broke out, crawling down his cheeks. His lips parted and closed, forming silent words as the last wisp of life flowed from his body into the other's.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

The man's appearance was magnificent, but the laughter that erupted from his throat was sharp and horrifying. The nearby Purple Mansion Realm masters all retreated a step. The two blurry figures vanished, and the last ray of sunlight disappeared from the world.

"Abomination!"

BOOM!

A massive thunderclap shook the world. The winds howled, and sheet after sheet of lightning illuminated the sky. In the piercing flashes of light that broke the darkness, a figure could be faintly seen standing in the east.

He had the appearance of a young man, tall and slender, with an unnaturally handsome face and faintly red pupils. He wore a black robe, with a white and green sash tied at his waist, his long black hair bound behind his head.

BOOM!

When the next bolt of lightning flashed, the man was gone. All the radiant lights of the divine abilities over the churning sea vanished simultaneously, leaving only endless darkness and the man laughing wildly in mid-air.

Chapter 832: Seeking Guidance

The world went dim as the Great Void flickered. Ning Wan dropped Tantai Jin off on North Dan Island and flew for a thousand miles before the disquiet in her heart began to subside. Still, a cold sweat covered her body, and the lingering fear was palpable.

'So this is a demonic fiend of Metallic Essence,' she thought, her heart still racing. 'No wonder the ancient records say that after the war between Immortals and Demons, these fiends ran rampant, and even Purple Mansion Realm cultivators couldn't ensure their own safety. A great cultivator, empowered by divine abilities, could be killed in an instant… I always thought it was an exaggeration, but the reality is truly terrifying.'

The demonic fiend that Si Boxiu had become was likely of the Upright Wood dao, but it was mixed with some other unknown dao lineages, making it unnaturally horrifying. The sharp, majestic aura of Upright Wood, carrying with it wind, rain, and thunder, shot straight to the heavens with an intensity she had never witnessed before.

Such a fiend was born to live in the Great Void; outrunning it was impossible. At first, Ning Wan hadn't fully grasped the danger. But when she estimated she wouldn't last ten moves against it, a cold sweat of terror broke out. Only then did she notice that the surrounding Purple Mansion Realm cultivators were all fleeing, each faster than the last. Even Chi Buzi was nowhere to be seen.

'No wonder the Metallic Essence creature inside Anhuai Heaven was able to catch that Purple Mansion cultivator off guard and devour him in one bite. A fiend born from Senior Yuanxiu's failed apotheosis is already this terrifying… A Metallic Essence creature left behind by a True Monarch… it must be no different from a True Monarch's avatar!'

Still shaken from the experience, she was now on high alert, her senses sharpened to their absolute peak. At last, she detected a faint, azure shadow stepping

through the Great Void. When it was still several dozen feet away, she snapped, "Who's there?!"

Splash!

A sheet of Pristine Water coalesced before her, and Chi Buzi stepped from the Great Void into the mortal world, now only ten feet away. 'It must be the Chou-Gui Hidden Form,' Ning Wan thought, a numbing sensation creeping up her spine. 'The divine abilities of the Pristine Water dao are truly bizarre, capable of deceiving even the spiritual sense of a Purple Mansion cultivator. If Chi Buzi wanted to assassinate someone, anyone who hasn't crossed the immortal threshold of Purple Mystery would likely fall victim.'

Chi Buzi, however, simply smiled at her. "I came to ask fellow Daoist Ning," he said, "where is the Xinyou Pristine Marsh Seal?"

He had no ulterior motive. After all, Yuansu was dead, and the Xinyou Pristine Marsh Seal was an excellent treasure for trapping others. If he could borrow it, it would be a great help in his Demon-hunting endeavors. But the speaker may be careless, while the listener is not. Yuanxiu had just warned her before his death. The question struck Ning Wan with a jolt of fear.

"Reporting to Senior," she answered quickly, "when my elder fell, I was in seclusion. It happened that Lord Yuanxiu was also in Anhuai Heaven at the time. The seal was lost shortly after…"

"Oh?" Chi Buzi glanced at her, a smirk on his face. "What's the matter? Has the name of Azure Pond lost its weight? Or is Si Boxiu so incompetent that he doesn't even know who took it?"

In the next instant, understanding dawned on him. His expression turned grim. "There's a problem with that seal," he said coldly.

Ning Wan lowered her head, silent. Chi Buzi narrowed his eyes, took a step back, and studied her intently.

"Your elder… lost the seal. That is the seal of the Feathered Serpent. Is someone trying to use this as a pretext, using the methods left behind by the Feathered Serpent to destabilize the authority over Pristine Water?"

'Please, just stop talking…'

The question made sweat pour down Ning Wan's back. She didn't nod, nor did she shake her head, simply standing in place as if she hadn't heard a thing.

But Chi Buzi was a man of immense cunning. In the past, he might have been tempted to serve Du Qing to the death. Now, however, he only wished for the two sides to cause as much chaos for each other as possible, so Du Qing wouldn't come looking for him. As for contacting the party that was making trouble for Du Qing, the thought never even crossed his mind.

'Given Du Qing's personality, the only way the Xinyou Pristine Marsh Seal could have gotten out is if it poses no major threat to him. At most, it's a minor annoyance. If I truly sided with someone trying to shake his Fruition Attainment over Pristine Water, I'd be the first to die a violent death!'

'As for Ning Wan here, she needs to stay alive. It's best to have a few Purple Mansion cultivators at Azure Pond to keep Pristine Water busy, so he doesn't think of me.'

He thus said, "Don't touch it. Your life depends on it."

Ning Wan nodded emphatically. Satisfied, Chi Buzi rose on the wind, a cold sneer in his heart.

'I've witnessed the ceremony I came to see. Very good, a green-eyed ghost, is it? And you, mottled chicken… Your Lord Chi will have you join Yuse as a ghost!'

In the World of the Mirror

A brilliant hall of shimmering light stood amidst pristine white clouds. The white bricks gleamed, and a jade platform was set in the center of the courtyard. A woman in tea-white robes stood guard, a stark white circular pattern adorning the spot between her brows, her expression reverent.

Beside her sat a white-robed immortal, his hand resting on the jade platform. Before him hovered a circular screen of light, the size of a washbasin. Within it, winds howled and lightning flashed, but the muffled roars were contained, reduced to faint vibrations.

On the other side of the platform, six jade slips glowing with a soft light stood arranged in a circle on a table.

Lu Jiangxian watched the changes in the mirror intently. He saw the handsome young fiend being bound by a gray Dharma Treasure, then slowly dissolving into points of deep green light that were dragged into the Great Void. The wind

and rain over Shitang gradually subsided, but the once-clear weather had transformed into a humid, oppressive heat that seemed to radiate from the mirror.

He withdrew his gaze and pondered for a moment before picking up a jade slip. "He cultivated four paths of Upright Wood," he mused. "According to the Daoist scriptures in the archives, they were Journeying North, 'Position follows Exclusivity,' 'Perceive Word Scrutiny,' and 'Wood Becoming Principle'…"

"The fifth path he cultivated was 'Falcon Seeks Perch,' from the 'Gathering Wood' dao… Perhaps he hoped to be accepted by drawing on the ancient scripture's description of Gathering Wood: 'Cultivators gather like a flock of birds coming to rest.' "

"The logic is not flawed."

Lu Jiangxian's understanding of the Dao was profound, and he quickly analyzed the core of the problem, sighing softly. "Among the Five Virtues, the paths of Dui (Reflecting Metal), Kan (Pit Water), Li (Radiant Fire), and Gen (Bound Earth) are True Positions. These so-called supreme True Positions are inherently complete and reject supplementation. But the Upright Wood dao is a position of accumulation and reception; it naturally welcomes supplements but struggles with excess."

"A clever idea. The 'Falcon Seeks Perch' he chose fittingly casts the Upright Wood as a fierce, descending falcon, seeking to roost within the Intercalary Position of Gathering Wood."

He waved his hand gently, and the scenes replayed in the mirror.

"It's a pity," he lamented. "His four Upright Wood paths were too dominant, and the Fruition Attainment of Gathering Wood was empty, offering no branch to perch on. His method for seeking the Metallic Essecne was also a complete mess. Naturally, he failed!"

Though Si Boxiu had failed, his struggle and careful deliberation placed him in the top tier among the many Purple Mansion Realm cultivators attempting their breakthrough. It was a lamentable end.

He let the jade slip for Clear Dusk Rain dissipate, yet one question remained.

"But where did the Pristine Water come from? Even if he had concealed a measure of Pristine Water within him beforehand, it shouldn't have been enough to make the heavens rain, much less the Clear Dusk Rain that represents the

Fruition Attainment of Pristine Water. He must have used some method to borrow Du Qing's authority."

He looked down at his own palm in thought, replaying Si Boxiu's series of actions in his mind.

"Was it the Pristine Merging Owl Pool? The bird-like circling was a feint, a symbol of achieving Gathering Wood, and should have nothing to do with Pristine Water… As for swallowing the finger…"

Lu Jiangxian was almost certain that this method was not something Si Boxiu had invented on the spot! He must have been emulating the breakthrough method of some ancient Golden Core, or perhaps even Dao Embryo!

'To have figured out the method of combining Upright Wood and Gathering Wood without a master is commendable. But to inexplicably cause the heavens to rain down Clear Dusk Rain, there is definitely something more to it.'

Thinking of using Gathering Wood to ascend was the limit of his own genius. But the finger-swallowing method… even Lu Jiangxian was stunned by it. It wasn't a symbolic substitution from within the Fruition Attainment process; it was a direct imitation of the actions of some ancient Golden Core or Dao Embryo cultivator!

'The Sima Family truly has some hidden treasures… What else would one expect from a family that traces its lineage back to the ancient state of Zhou…'

Lu Jiangxian pondered deeply, murmuring, 'A pity… he didn't know you're supposed to spit it out *after* you succeed…'

Those were the exact words spoken by the Underworld emissaries. Lu Jiangxian had observed them with his spiritual sense; they were not the same two from Li Ximing's breakthrough, but likely the ones responsible for the Southern Sea or the Shitang region. They were just as bizarre-looking.

'This means the Underworld also knows of this method.'

Although Lu Jiangxian could read Daoist arts, the most critical secrets were obviously encrypted or passed down orally. He would likely never know the full story. He didn't dwell on it. 'There is still plenty of time… the clues will only multiply. I wonder what Chi Buzi thinks, having witnessed this. He values his own path to the Dao above all else; this should convince him that his future lies with my faction.'

In the time since Li Ximing had reached the Purple Mansion Realm, the number of Daoist scriptures Lu Jiangxian had accessed had grown exponentially. Most importantly, he had obtained a small portion of the Nine Mounds Daoist tradition!

Daoist Master Yuandao's lineage was well-ordered and meticulously preserved. Not only did the texts require sigils to decrypt, but each art had a corresponding oral incantation. Fortunately, the tradition was generous, and the library collections available to inner disciples were quite rich. Though they didn't touch upon many Purple Mansion Realm techniques, the knowledge Lu Jiangxian gained had opened his eyes.

'Nine Mounds is a Supreme Yin tradition, so these Purple Mansion techniques are of little use to me. However, this narrative of the Three Profoundities is worth studying.'

According to the writings of the Nine Mounds tradition, there were originally three progenitor paths in the world of cultivation, known as the Three Profoundities: Azure Profundity, Encompassing Profundity, and Comprehending Profundity. No matter how the great Daoist traditions of the world had changed, they could all be traced back to one of these three.

Jiangnan's famous Green Pine Supreme Yang Daoist tradition, and the Peacock Sea's Nine Mounds Daoist tradition, both originated from Azure Profundity.

'And according to the decree read by the Golden Feather Sect, both Luoxia's Wu Light and Golden Feather Sect itself are Comprehending Profundity traditions. Almost all of Jiangbei follows the Comprehending Profundity path.'

"As for Encompassing Profundity, I have yet to find any orthodox lineage. There are quite a few who have obtained remnant inheritances, like the Capital Immortals Dao and the Changxiao Sect, but they are not considered orthodox."

'This explains the Capital Immortals Dao's predicament in Jiangbei. Their tradition is completely different from the others, and they're seen as foreign imposters. The only ones who could be considered distant kin, the Changxiao Sect, are sharpening their knives… No wonder Yehui didn't dare to stay long in Jiangbei.'

Having sorted out the system of the Three Profoundities, Lu Jiangxian suddenly understood the framework of the current era and the source of the subtle discrimination and prejudice among Purple Mansion Realm cultivators.

As for how his previous incarnation, the leader of the Azure Profundity and Supreme Yin—who might have also embodied the Supreme Yang—had fallen to his current state, well, that was an interesting question.

"At the very least, this Mount Luoxia is almost certainly up to no good. While the Dragon-kin are slightly better, they are ultimately a different species. The road to recovering my strength is long…"

Right now, the fragment of his main body within the Secret Diffusion Secret Treasury was not an easy thing to retrieve.

'The Secret Diffusion Secret Treasury hangs in the Great Void, perpetually sealed. It opens for only a few days each year, hanging there in plain sight, yet I cannot take it.'

With all eyes in Jiangbei watching, and Li Qianyuan forced into the open, Lu Jiangxian was too cautious to even show his face. He had no idea how many True Monarchs were surrounding that small territory and had no intention of trying to retrieve the fragment by force.

Moreover, everything from the surge of spiritual energy in Jiangbei to Li Qianyuan's reincarnation had been obviously orchestrated. Almost everyone on that path had been replaced by followers of the Comprehending Profundity tradition. The Revering Radiance Gate was even controlled by Golden Feather people. The sense of danger was overwhelming.

"Perhaps, retrieving that fragment will depend on this True Monarch."

He flicked his sleeve, and the mirror and jade slips on the platform vanished. A speck of violet lightning appeared in his palm, his expression growing complex.

'Li Qinghong.'

Li Qinghong was one who had received a talisman from him. Back then, she had entered the Grotto-Heaven with Zikang. Lu Jiangxian had watched her fight her way from the south of the Grotto-Heaven to the north, all the way to the Hall of Thunder.

Finally, she had laid eyes on the endless draconic form of Beijia.

Li Qinghong had transformed into a Thunder Body by consuming lightning, but the connection through the Talisman Seed had not been broken. In fact,

Lu Jiangxian had even received some feedback from it, though it only slightly enhanced his spiritual sense—better than nothing.

Although Lu Jiangxian only had a vague understanding of the Dragon Monarch Beijia's plans, planting such a key pair of eyes among the Dragon-kin was an excellent move. Even if Li Qinghong could only guard the Thunder Pool, it was enough for Lu Jiangxian to glimpse a piece of the puzzle.

'This Dragon Monarch Beijia is not only extremely ambitious, wanting to become a True Dragon, but he is already preparing to assail the Dao Embryo realm!'

The matter of True Dragons involved that 'Azure Profundity Son,' but no matter how Lu Jiangxian looked at it, a True Dragon was an existence at least above the Dao Embryo realm.

"Something that even a True Hornless Dragon at the peak of the Dao Embryo realm could not achieve back then, how could it be done without the authority of a Dao Embryo? Although the Dragon-kin have improved generation by generation and have been plotting for ages, to continue the great undertaking of their predecessors, one must at least reach the Dao Embryo realm."

He pondered for a long time before finally looking at Shaohui, who had been waiting patiently.

The Lesser Yin Celestial Attendant immediately bowed. "Reporting to the Mansion Lord, your subordinate has completed the composition of the 'Wu-Gui Scroll for Seeking Yin Divinity.' It is complete with a table of contents and contains body arts and spell arts sufficient to cultivate a divine ability. I have come to offer it to the mansion's library!"

The Lesser Yin Celestial Attendant was formed from the Sparrow demon Fuyu and had cultivated the Lesser Yin in her past life. When Lu Jiangxian, speaking through the Zhengao, had tasked her with compiling a scripture, the Celestial Attendant had been quite earnest, organizing the entire scripture from her past life that had led to her divine ability.

This was no small feat. After all, she had been a Demon beast before and now had a human body. Without a decent grasp of Daoist arts, organizing such a thing would have been difficult. Lu Jiangxian took it and glanced through it, nodding to himself.

'Her efficiency is much higher than Dangjiang's!'

The 'Wu-Gui Scroll for Seeking Yin Divinity' led to the 'All-Fragrance Sinks' divine ability, a rare fourth-grade technique. Given Shaohui's own limitations, pushing this technique to the Purple Mansion Realm was her limit, so it naturally wasn't of the highest grade. Lu Jiangxian gave a slight nod. "It is adequate," he said casually.

One cannot make bricks without straw. After finishing this scroll, asking Shaohui to write another Purple Mansion Realm technique would be asking too much. "There are still Daoist scriptures in the mansion's library," Lu Jiangxian said. "Read them well. There is much to do over with Zhengao. Manage things properly."

The woman in the tea-white dress quickly withdrew. Lu Jiangxian thought to himself, "Given Chi Buzi's efficiency, Northern Buddhists are about to suffer!"

Chapter 833: A Meeting of Two Sects

"On the twenty-first of mid-spring, Daoist Master Yuanxiu of the Green Pine Supreme Yang Daoist tradition attempted his ascension at Stonetang Atoll in the Southern Sea. Heavenly thunder roared and colossal waves surged, but he failed. As the elements raged, malevolent forces emerged, and he was ultimately bound and slain by the Underworld."

"Three days later, the winds died, the rains fell, and the spiritual energy of the Southern Sea was forever altered."

Li Jiangqian stared at the letter, his mind reeling in disbelief. He read the words again, but they made no more sense than the first time.

'So abrupt…' he thought. 'There was no decree, no invitations sent to observe the ceremony. He just… suddenly went to the Southern Sea for his breakthrough. I wonder how his tribulation compared to those of the other Purple Mansion Realm cultivators.'

He clutched the letter, his thoughts racing.

'Then again, it's hard to say. News might have circulated among those at the Purple Mansion Realm, far beyond the reach of a minor cultivator like myself. I heard Daoist Master Yuanxiu cultivated the path of Upright Wood. That would explain the recent period of abundant resources in the Southern Sea.'

He turned the letter over and read the next line:

"Fairy Autumnlake has broken through to the Purple Mansion Realm, achieving the Frigid Animus Divine Ability."

Though the message was brief, its implications were immense. Ning Wan's cultivation method was far more well-known than Yuanxiu's. The Daoist Master's Upright Wood path was a rarity, unlike any conventional cultivation of the wood element, so few understood his divine ability. Ning Wan, however, had been famous even during her Qi Refining days. The Frigid Animus was a

common Daoist tradition in Jiangnan; its power evoked blizzards, and even whispers from the Azure Pond Sect spoke of its might.

'The Azure Pond Sect is about to change hands.'

The Si family had few descendants, and their grip on the sect was already tenuous. Now, with Yuanxiu dead and Si Yuanli in seclusion, Tantai Jin and Tongyi would have no choice but to take their cues from Ning Wan.

At his side, Li Xuanxuan understood immediately. He smiled, stroking his beard. "Send a congratulatory gift at once," he urged.

This was excellent news for the Li family. Li Jiangqian's spirits soared as he summoned an attendant. "I recall we have a portion of Pinefrost Dew in the treasury," he began. "Though it's only a Foundation Establishment Realm spiritual item, it aligns perfectly with her cultivation. Also…"

He paused, considering. Most of the family's valuable assets were currently with Li Ximing, leaving them with little to offer that was truly impressive. Yet a gift like this could not be delayed; its timeliness was as crucial a sign of sincerity as its value.

"Years ago, Father brought back a basket of Riverstream Pearls. They're quite precious. We planned to refine them into a set of Dharma artifacts, but the sheer number—a full sixteen of them—made it too difficult, so they've remained unused. Why not… send those as the gift?"

Li Xuanxuan winced at the suggestion. There was a reason that basket of pearls had never been refined: it was a set of sixteen individual Foundation Establishment Realm spiritual items, all with interconnected auras. The frugal old man couldn't bear the thought of giving away something so valuable. "That gift is far too extravagant," he said, hesitating. "It's on par with something a Purple Mansion Realm master would give personally. And it would be a terrible shame to break up the set. Let's think of another way…"

Li Jiangqian nodded. He had hoped to put the Azure Pond Sect further in their debt, his thoughts secretly drifting to Li Xuanfeng's heirloom, White Lightning. The artifact was likely a spiritual artifact in its embryonic stage, but whether anyone could wield it was another matter… Still, since Li Xuanxuan had spoken, he would naturally defer.

"Then transcribe a copy of the *Frigid Pine Dewy Snow Art* and send it to the Daoist Master," Li Xuanxuan instructed. "Also, make it clear that our family's Daoist

Master is cultivating abroad and is unaware of matters on the mainland. He cannot pay his respects in person but will certainly make amends in the future."

Li Jiangqian added, "We should have Li Chengpan lead the delegation, with Master Cui accompanying him, to show the importance we place on this."

Li Xuanxuan nodded slightly. "And summon that rascal Zhouming and Li Chenghao as well!"

Li Chenghao was one of the few remaining Qi Refining elders of the main family branch and the paternal uncle of the Li Zhoufang brothers. He had once made things difficult for Li Zhouluo and been demoted to managing affairs in Milin Prefecture, but he was recalled the moment tensions with the Capital Immortals dao rose.

Li Xuanxuan's reasoning was clear. Of the Xi generation, their family had one Purple Mansion Realm master: Li Ximing. Below them, in the Chengming generation, Li Chenghuai was set on going to the Southern Sea. That boy had the heart of a true seeker and couldn't be held back. That left only Li Chenghao and Li Minggong. Li Xuanxuan had summoned him now precisely so that Li Jiangqian would entrust him with more responsibility.

The three were all on the island, and they arrived soon after being summoned. Li Chenghao was at the front, his expression stern and his robes immaculate. Li Zhouming, dressed in vibrant red, was his complete opposite, sauntering along behind him. Bringing up the rear was Li Chengpan, his head bowed.

When Li Jiangqian explained the situation, Li Cheng's face lit up. "A truly joyous occasion! You can leave the matter to me!"

Years ago, Li Chenghao had caused trouble for Li Zhouluo while trying to protect Li Chengpan. His heart was fiercely loyal to his kin, and he had always felt the clan's leadership was too harsh, a sentiment that had kept him from positions of power. Yet he was also the one who cared most for the family's reputation. If an outsider dared to slander the Li name, he would be the first to fly into a rage. His competence was not in question, making him a suitable choice for this task.

'Besides,' Li Xuanxuan sighed internally, 'there aren't many left in the family who can properly represent us.'

His tone, however, was stern as he spoke. "Zhouming, you will go with them. Listen to your elders."

As the direct grandson of a Purple Mansion Realm master, Li Zhouming's presence would show adequate respect. The young man in red nodded repeatedly, a cheeky grin on his face. "Old Master, what are you saying? When have I ever disobeyed? It's always been whatever the masters say, goes!"

Li Zhouming had once put Li Chenghao and the others in an incredibly awkward position, and Li Xuanxuan worried there was still a rift between them, hoping more contact might mend it. Fortunately, the boy showed no signs of embarrassment, smiling broadly as if nothing had ever happened, addressing the others warmly as 'Uncle' and 'Master.'

Li Chenghao, for his part, would not dare show him disrespect. Li Ximing, the Daoist Master who had single-handedly elevated their family to the status of an Immortal Clan by reaching the Purple Mansion Realm, rarely appeared, but his prestige among the clan was absolute. If Li Ximing suddenly demanded a new palace built for his leisure, Li Chenghao would be the first to start digging the foundations. He bowed with great solemnity. "Greetings, Young Master… Please, after you."

Once the three had departed, Li Jiangqian couldn't help but sigh in admiration. "Old Master, your painstaking efforts are truly something this junior respects."

Li Xuanxuan stroked his beard and shook his head. "Our goals are merely different. You focus on the clan's worldly interests, while I only hope to mend the rifts between our branches. If we are not united within, any external gains are meaningless."

Li Xuanxuan paused, about to ask about the situation in the north, when a purple mist began to suffuse the air over the lake, flanked by billowing clouds. A female attendant in purple robes approached and knocked on the hall doors. "Reporting to the masters of the Moongaze Immortal Clan," she announced. "Daoist Master Tinglan of the Profound Grotto of Taixu Purple Qi Gate has come to visit."

Li Jiangqian froze for a second, realizing that Daoist Master Tinglan, a Purple Mansion Realm cultivator, was visiting in her official capacity representing the Purple Smoke Gate. He immediately descended the side steps and bowed. "Greetings to the emissary of the Taixu Purple Qi dao. Our humble clan awaits the Daoist Master."

At his words, the purple mist before the hall coalesced, and a female Daoist Master in autumn-yellow robes stepped out of the Great Void. Two faint, yellow floral markings at the corners of her eyes glowed softly. Li Jiangqian respectfully ushered her inside.

As she was a Purple Mansion Realm master, he led her directly to the seat of honor. The great doors swung shut behind them. Tinglan first offered a nod to Li Xuanxuan and engaged in some polite conversation—inquiring about the old master's health and the clan's prosperity. Li Xuanxuan was, after all, Li Ximing's grandfather, and she paid him the respect he was due. Only then did she get to the point.

"I have already met with fellow Daoist Ximing in the east," she began. "I have returned for two reasons."

She inclined her head. "First, the spirit pill that fellow Daoist Ximing promised me has been successfully refined. The Purple Smoke Gate is not a tradition that goes back on its word. Our business overseas is largely concluded, so I will be bringing my people over to construct the defensive array for your clan."

Li Jiangqian had no idea what kind of precious pill the two masters had concocted, but it must have been of monumental importance for her to repay the favor with an entire clan array. He cupped his fists respectfully. "We are grateful, Daoist Master!"

Tinglan smiled, clearly pleased. "The second matter," she continued, "concerns Jiangbei. Daoist Master Qiushui of the Golden Feather Sect had originally sought Senior Yuanxiu for aid. However, the senior declined, citing his imminent breakthrough. Soon after, he staked his life in pursuit of the Dao and ascended. We are all part of the Green Pine Supreme Yang Daoist tradition. To keep Jiangnan from descending into chaos, and to respectfully see the True Monarch off on his journey north, we must now turn our attention to the situation in Jiangbei."

Li Jiangqian could only bow his head in deference. "Thank you, Daoist Master!"

Tinglan's intentions were clear. The factions of Jiangnan wished to avoid being dragged into the unfolding chaos, and the collective of Supreme Yang Dao traditions had chosen her to manage the Jiangbei situation. Her presence at Moongaze Lake was a tacit acknowledgment that the Li family was considered part of their alliance.

'A blessing or a curse?' Li Jiangqian wondered. He knew well enough that the cultivators of the Supreme Yang Dao were an arrogant lot. They had held their territories in Jiangnan for centuries, their positions unshakable, and they looked down on both the Eastern Sea cultivators and rogue cultivators. The Li clan was only afforded a measure of courtesy because they held the title of Bright Yang and had been acknowledged as a righteous sect by the Origin Mansion long ago. But for them to be truly accepted? Li Jiangqian didn't believe it for a moment.

'This must be a personal gesture of goodwill from Tinglan,' he concluded. The Jiangnan sects wanted the True Monarch's activities to remain far from their borders, but the exact location of that border was flexible. By choosing Moongaze Lake as her base, Tinglan was subtly extending her protection over his family.

He waited for several moments, but Tinglan didn't press for details about Jiangbei. He was just about to broach the subject himself when a sound like falling snow rustled outside. Through the doors, he saw a woman in white step out of the Great Void. She wore a simple white dress, cinched with a delicate silk sash that accentuated her slender waist. Her features were gentle, almost demure, but her eyes held an icy clarity. The moment she set foot on the ground, a palpable chill descended upon the grand hall.

It was Fairy Autumnlake, Ning Wan!

'So, they were waiting for her!' Li Jiangqian realized. 'Even the Azure Pond Sect has to take a hand in this…' He quickly banished the thoughts from his mind, bowing respectfully to the newly arrived master before stepping back.

Tinglan rose to greet her, her expression polite but tinged with surprise. "Who could have been so foolish as to provoke such anger in my dear sister?"

Tinglan was only perhaps twenty years older than Ning Wan, and since both their families hailed from the Supreme Yang Dao, the familiar address was appropriate.

"Senior, you are too kind. You can just call me Wan'er," Ning Wan replied. "And I'm not truly angry. It's just… since I cultivated Immersing in Pure Listening, dealing with the people in my own sect has become quite unsettling."

Tinglan's expression shifted to one of understanding. "Of course. Immersing in Pure Listening is a Life Divine Ability. The power to hear the thoughts of others… it is bound to cause complications."

Ning Wan offered Li Jiangqian a faint, kind nod, but with another Purple Mansion Realm master present, she did not speak to him further. She took a seat to the side and said quietly, "When my elder was alive, he had many strange moods I could never understand. Now that I have my own Life Divine Ability, I realize he was an exceptionally patient man. The stray thoughts one happens to hear… they can be profoundly disappointing."

"It's not that I actively pry into people's minds; Immersing in Pure Listening doesn't work that way. But the moment someone harbors a malicious thought, the ability alerts me as a warning. It's a protective instinct, much like a defensive Dharma Art that activates on its own to block an attack. But the things I heard… By the time I left the Azure Pond Sect, I nearly lost control and killed someone."

Her face was grim, her normally gentle features frozen in a mask of cold anger. It was clear she had overheard a great deal within her sect, and the sight sent a fresh wave of fear through Li Jiangqian, who stood rigidly, staring at his own feet.

Tinglan gave a complex sigh. "The Azure Pond Sect is already in good shape, having been thoroughly cleansed by Senior Yuanxiu once. It would be far worse in a place like the Eastern Sea, where the moral climate is rotten. That senior I mentioned… he also possessed Immersing in Pure Listening."

Ning Wan had no desire to speak more of her own ability. She changed the subject. "Senior Yuanxiu… Daoist Master, were you able to observe his tribulation?"

"I was. I rushed back from the east and almost missed it," Tinglan said with a long sigh. "Daoist Master Zimu of my Purple Smoke tradition was also there to witness it. He watched for a long time before simply shaking his head and uttering a single phrase."

Ning Wan would not let such a chance to grasp a profound insight pass her by. Her eyes lit with anticipation. "And what did the Great Daoist Master say?"

Tinglan nodded. "The old falcon's body is heavy; where can it find a branch to rest? A mountain chamber is easily shaken, but the Upright Wood cannot be moved."

Ning Wan mulled over the sixteen words, but she could only grasp the most literal meaning: 'the Upright Wood cannot be moved.' She looked at Tinglan and

said, "The Great Daoist Master's cultivation has reached the level of heaven and earth. As expected of one who cultivates the Heavenly Purple Qi, his grasp of profound truths is far beyond our own." After a slight pause, she added quietly, "I saw Daoist Master Chi."

There was only one Daoist Master Chi she could be referring to: the long-missing Great Daoist Master, Chi Buzi.

Tinglan considered this for a moment. "A seeker of the Dao, so detached by his very nature. A true pity."

Ning Wan seemed to have her own suspicions and didn't press for an explanation of why it was a pity. Tinglan nodded with a smile, a faint purple light swirling in her hand. "Our meeting here today at the Li residence shows that we are of one mind. About the situation in Jiangbei…"

At last, she turned her gaze to Li Jiangqian. "What news does the Li clan have?"

Li Jiangqian dared not let his focus waver for a second, concentrating entirely on the matter of Jiangbei. "Reporting to the two Daoist Masters," he said respectfully. "Jiangbei is currently in a state of chaos. Most of the sects have withdrawn their influence and sealed their mountain gates. The Profound Wonder Temple has taken the most drastic measures. They controlled few prefectures to begin with, but now they have activated their defensive arrays and recalled all disciples from abroad, as if intending to seal off their mountain entirely. The northern sects are pushing further north, and the southern sects are retreating south, leaving sixty percent of Jiangbei's heartlands completely vacant. In many of these abandoned territories, demonic cultivators and Demon beasts are already on the rise, plaguing the land!"

- **Li Zhouming:** Sixth Level Qi Refining, Direct Descendant of Purple Mansion Realm
- **Li Chenghui:** Fourth Level Qi Refining, Direct Descendant of Main Branch
- **Li Xuanxuan:** Ninth Level Qi Refining, Direct Descendant of Main Branch
- **Li Jiangqian:** Early-Stage Foundation Establishment Realm, Cultivator of the *Great Scripture of Radiance*
- **Ning Wan:** Early-Stage Purple Mansion Realm, Direct Descendant of Ning Family
- **Tinglan:** Early-Stage Purple Mansion Realm, Purple Mansion Realm Array Master

Chapter 834: The Curtain Rises

After Li Jiangqian finished speaking, Ning Wan quietly observed, “By allowing demons to run rampant, don’t these Jiangbei powers fear being judged as villains by the True Monarch?”

Li Jiangqian hastily replied, “In the north, ever since the Golden Tang Gate’s master, Situ Mo, fell, the sect has completely collapsed. It’s in chaos, showing signs of splintering, and can no longer control the various powers under its jurisdiction.”

A flicker of regret crossed Ning Wan’s face. “If Xuanfeng had managed to hold on until today,” she added, “his great opportunity would have arrived.”

The Golden Tang Gate possessed the *Heavenly Beard Polished Metal Sutra*, the very Purple Mansion Realm cultivation method that complemented the ‘Engraved Gold Stone’ technique Li Xuanfeng practiced. If he hadn’t needed to rely on elixirs and had cultivated to this day, he might have had a chance to obtain it.

But Li Jiangqian was unsure of the Ning family’s stance toward the Si family, so he simply nodded respectfully and changed the subject. “The Daoist Master of Revering Radiance Gate has some conflict with the Lotus Temple to the north and has taken his forces there. In his absence, a monk named Yaosa Chengmi has taken the opportunity to stir up rebellion, spreading the ways of Buddhist cultivation…”

Jiangbei had been overrun by Buddhist cultivators several times in the past, so their teachings already had a foothold and were popular among the common people, allowing them to spread rapidly. This kind of rebellion was not uncommon. Tinglan added with a smile, “I’d say this Daoist Master Changyun is quite capable. He appears out of the Eastern Sea, brings his sect to heel, and then gets entangled with the Lotus Temple. It’s all a show, pushing and shoving. That Yaosa Chengmi probably thinks he’s clever, believing Minghui is keeping the Daoist Master occupied for him.”

Ning Wan seemed lost in thought. Seeing she wasn't going to speak, Li Jiangqian continued, "As for Profound Wonder Temple… they announced their Daoist Master is embarking on a long journey and that the temple will seal its mountain to face a tribulation. They've dismissed all their outer disciples and shut their gates."

"To the south, there's the Capital Immortals Dao. Their Daoist Master has vanished, and now the various commanderies are showing signs of self-governance. The situation at White river Creek is extremely volatile. My family has already withdrawn and is now in a standoff with the Capital Immortals Dao across the river in Jiangbei."

The two of them were both Daoist Masters, so they understood the situation without needing every detail. Ning Wan remarked, "Everyone is certainly showing their true colors!"

Tinglan said, "After all the trouble your family has gone through, the lands of the three Secret Diffusion families at White river Creek are indeed a suitable place for the True Monarch to build his power. What is the situation now?"

The 'three Secret Diffusion families' she mentioned were the Li family's Funan, the Capital Immortals's Midong, and the sole survivor, the Brahma Cloud Cave. These were key areas under close watch, so of course she was informed. Li Jiangqian replied, "Since my family's dispute with the Capital Immortals Dao began, the lands of those three families have descended into chaos. The great clans are still exercising some restraint, but people from the Eastern Sea and Southern Sea have stepped forward. A Daoist Huang and a Daoist Bai have both brought men, ostensibly to gather qi in Jiangbei, but in reality, they're using this opportunity to search for and seize spiritual items everywhere, making a fortune."

"On another note, I've also heard they are searching for a token… related to the Secret Diffusion orthodoxy."

He answered cautiously, but Tinglan just smiled. "That token you speak of… it does exist."

'It does exist.' How could Li Jiangqian not know whether it existed or not?

At a gesture from Tinglan, a woman in a purple robe approached, carrying a jade tray. She walked to Li Jiangqian and bowed slightly, allowing the black-robed man to see the object on the tray.

It was a token with a black base and intricate gold patterns, depicting ephemeral clouds and bowing malevolent spirits.

The token gleamed with a pure light, looking exceptionally precious. It was difficult to discern its material or grade, and faint wisps of black wind and white qi drifted over its surface. Li Jiangqian had seen his share of treasures, but one glance told him this felt like an artifact of the Purple Mansion Realm.

Even more remarkably, though its purpose was unknown, just looking at it conveyed a sense of noble authority that stirred the heart, kindling a desire to possess it.

'So they actually had a Purple Mansion Realm expert forge it… This thing is incredibly realistic. If I didn't know I'd made the whole story up myself, even with it right in front of me, I'd assume it was a secret treasure from some major power, just waiting for the right conditions to reveal its glory. I would never recognize it…'

Tinglan glanced at him. "This is the token," she said softly. "Take a good look, and make sure the Capital Immortals Dao recognizes it too."

Li Jiangqian bowed. "I obey!"

He was a Foundation Establishment Realm cultivator; a single glance was enough to memorize it. As the purple-robed woman carried the jade tray away, Tinglan added casually, "This item has many wondrous uses. It would be quite something if a cultivator from the Eastern Sea were to obtain it."

Tinglan didn't elaborate further for him, instead turning to Ning Wan. "Ning Wan, do you… have any other arrangements for now?"

Ning Wan naturally shook her head. It was better to let Tinglan, who had been in the Purple Mansion Realm longer, handle the planning. The question was merely a courtesy. "The Snow Wings Gate has been sealed for many years," Ning Wan said softly. "Is there any news of them?"

Cultivating the Cold Qi, Ning Wan was clearly already planning her next steps. Tinglan shook her head. "The Snow Wings Gate has its own history. Since they've sealed their mountain, it would be inappropriate to disturb them."

Having given Ning Wan that reminder, which she accepted, Tinglan pointed out another path. "Now that you have reached the Daoist Master realm, the

matter of Hongxue must naturally be handed to you. Wasn't Li Encheng protected back then for the sake of Hongxue's lineage? Now there's Li Quantao. Senior Yuanxiu sent him to guard the Hongxue ruins, but there hasn't been much movement."

"Once the news of your success came out, Senior Yuanxiu, who was also preparing to break through to the Golden realm, hastily recalled Li Quantao. He did it to preserve this path for you."

Ning Wan nodded in surprise. Tinglan continued, "Now that the True Monarchs is observing the mortal world, and the Hongxue ruins are located in the wilderness near Salt Lake, it's the perfect time to uncover the lineage. You can have him try. If he strikes it lucky, you'll gain at least two Purple Mansion Realm legacies, Mansion Water and Cold Qi. It's a worthy gamble."

"I specifically involved you in this matter with that consideration in mind."

Ning Wan was tempted.

Among the many Purple Mansion Realm cultivators in Jiangnan, Tinglan was one of the most trustworthy from the Ning family's perspective. Her master, Daoist Master Zipei, and her Martial Uncle, Daoist Master Zimu, were both close friends of Daoist Master Yuansu. Daoist Master Zimu was even still alive, so it was natural for her to offer some assistance.

She replied, "I will dispatch Li Quantao and his son back to their ancestral land to stand guard. I'll also send his son to investigate the matter of the Jiangbei token and try his luck. However, I'm not familiar with the details of this affair, so I must trouble you, Senior."

"Of course." Tinglan nodded slightly. "I'll send Qianli to observe the situation. If anything goes wrong, I can simply extract the two of them. We must protect the descendants of Hongxue."

The more Li Jiangqian listened, the more uneasy he felt. For Daoist Master Tinglan to bring this up here and now made her intentions obvious. Sure enough, the Daoist Master looked over with a smile and instructed, "This is not to be known by others."

How could Li Jiangqian not understand that this was directed at him? He bowed. "This subordinate understands."

The Moongaze Li Clan had a good relationship with Li Quantao. If Li Quantao were to come to Salt Lake, he might contact the Li family, learn about the situation in the north, and grow suspicious of the Ning Clan. While this wouldn't endanger Li Quantao's life—and might even benefit him—it was best for him to remain ignorant if they were to claim the Hongxue legacy.

With the matter settled, the two Daoist Masters departed for the Great Void, leaving only a letter from Li Ximing stating that the family had put Li Jiangqian and the other in charge.

Li Jiangqian respectfully saw the two of them off until they disappeared, then turned to Li Xuanxuan. The old man was stroking his beard, his brow furrowed in a deep frown.

Li Xuanxuan had surely understood the Daoist Masters' intentions. He held a great deal of affection for Li Quantao. He stood and said, "Think carefully before you act… Quantao once saved Zhi'er… Although… he is powerless in this matter. It would be better if Ximing were here; he could have a say. But he isn't, and we have no right to interfere."

Li Jiangqian replied, "You worry too much, my lord. The fact that the two Daoist Masters informed our family specifically shows they've considered Li Quantao's Wei-Li bloodline. But he is also a cultivator of the Azure Pond. With these two identities, the Ning family's reward will not be small. This is his good fortune."

Li Xuanxuan couldn't tell if Li Jiangqian was speaking this way because he suspected Ning Wan hadn't truly left, or if he genuinely believed it. He simply nodded and withdrew. Li Jiangqian, however, sank into thought. He summoned the Immortal Mirror in his mind, and only after confirming no one was in the Great Void did he dare to let his thoughts run free.

'With the Talisman Seed on me, Ning Wan's Immersing in Pure Listening shouldn't be triggered even if I harbor malicious thoughts. But if she were to focus on listening… what might she hear?'

He pondered this for a long time, troubled. Just then, Li Minggong entered the hall, also with a frown. Clearly, she had learned of the messes her father, Li Xixuan, had made while she was in secluded cultivation to heal.

Seeing Li Jiangqian, Li Minggong asked about the visit from the Daoist Masters, then said softly, "I just received a report. The Daoist from Mount Jingyi has come

out of seclusion. He read the letter we gave his mountain and wishes to see me. I told him to come here so we can question him together."

Li Jiangqian had his own questions. This Shouding had finally emerged. He quickly nodded and asked for him to be brought in.

A Daoist with narrow eyes soon appeared before them. His face was no longer as gaunt as when he was injured, but it was still pale. He bowed upon seeing them. "Thank you for the grace of the Moon-Gazing clan's shelter! Shouding will surely repay you upon my return!"

"There is no need for repayment." Li Minggong was polite enough, but after that one sentence, she fell silent in the main seat.

Li Jiangqian let out a small laugh and helped him up. "Years ago, Daoist Master Changxi entrusted Kong Gumo to Mount Jingyi's care. How is he now?" he asked in a low voice. "Daoist Master Changxi's foresight was incredible, managing to preserve that spark… My family was very close with the old Daoist Master. I wonder what instructions he gave your sect… He must have pleaded earnestly, ai!"

His eyes filled with sorrow, and he shook his head, one hand on Shouding's back, his voice thick with emotion. Moved by his tone, Shouding sighed. "Isn't that the truth! So the old Daoist Master explained it to your esteemed clan as well. Preserving that spark was the priority; the mainland was secondary. My mountain would have helped where we could, but then the great war broke out, and we had to let it go."

'Just as I thought…' Li Jiangqian sneered internally. 'So that was Daoist Master Changxi's plan. He told my family Mount Jingyi would help, but was vague about how much! Daoist Master Xuanyi only ever agreed to protect Kong Gumo!'

'And that Sumian, with his hypocritical act, secretly blaming Mount Jingyi time and again. Could that old fox not know? Adding fuel to the fire… I wonder what he was plotting. Wonderful… not a single one of them is any good.'

His expression remained unchanged. Not fully trusting Shouding's side of the story, he probed with a sigh, "For your sect to protect him so steadfastly, you must have a strong relationship with Profound Peak. In the east…"

Before he could finish, Shouding started waving his hands as if he'd seen a plague god. "You misunderstand, Clan Head! My lineage does feel sympathy for

the old Daoist Master, but our relationship was never deep. We weren't familiar back then…" He paused, then explained further, "It's not as if our traditions are similar. We had only met briefly. It's just that Yuezhou Island is close to our mountain gate, and we urgently needed a market like that to attract talent and resources… which led to today's situation."

His words screamed, 'Don't you dare associate Profound Peak with us.' Seated above, Li Minggong sighed internally for Kong Gumo. "I see," she said softly. "What are the mountain's instructions? Is there any way my family can assist?"

This was a question about his future plans, and perhaps a polite way of asking him to leave. Shouding immediately became awkward. "The mountain… hopes I can stay on the mainland for a while…"

Shouding said this, then quickly tried to justify himself. "It… it won't trouble your clan. I've already imposed for years. My Daoist Master has some friendship with the Chen Clan. I will head south now, to Tongmo Prefecture."

Just from that, Li Jiangqian could tell the man was a clumsy speaker. He could have simply said he had business with the Chen Clan, but he had to say so much more. Seeing his oblivious expression, Li Jiangqian sighed to himself.

'If you dare go south, the Yuyang Chen Clan won't dare to take you in… Are you trying to scare their Daoist Master into coming out of seclusion? That would just create an awkward situation.'

This was a free favor waiting to be claimed. The Yuyang Chen Clan had a past relationship with the Li family; they had worked together to eliminate Wang Fu during the struggle for the Radiant Sky Stone. Li Jiangqian immediately smelled an opportunity. He smiled. "I see your injuries have not yet healed, Fellow Daoist. There's no rush. Why don't you let our guest elder examine your condition while I send a letter to the Chen Clan to inquire? Wouldn't that solve everything?"

Shouding was at a loss, but he couldn't refuse Li Jiangqian's enthusiastic offer. He could only nod and go find Sun Bai. Li Minggong looked over, a thoughtful expression on her face, as Li Jiangqian wrote two letters.

One was for Mount Jingyi, stating that Daoist Shouding intended to visit the Chen Clan but was temporarily being hosted by the Li family. The other was for

the Chen Clan, with a similar message, saying he "suspected it might be inconvenient, and was thus writing to inquire."

He had them sent out immediately, then turned to Li Minggong with a smile. "It's a favor that costs us nothing. It's always good to be on friendly terms with Purple Mansion Realm powers. This saves the Chen Clan from future resentment, where they might feel our family should have stepped in to prevent an awkward situation for everyone."

The two discussed matters in Jiangbei until late into the night. Suddenly, they noticed the northern sky begin to brighten faintly. A pillar of intertwined black and white light shot towards the heavens, its presence immense.

Though it was too far to discern any specific aura, the intertwining black and white colors were identical to those on the token. It took no thought to realize a treasure had appeared.

'A Purple Mansion Realm Daoist Master is truly different. So efficient!'

Li Jiangqian strode out of the hall, gazing north for a moment. He tilted his head as if listening, then pulled his black outer robe tighter and chuckled. "Men!" he commanded. "Prepare fine gifts! We're going to meet this 'Successor of Secret Diffusion'!"

Qu Bushi quickly appeared from the side, carrying a jade tray laden with several spiritual items. He followed closely at Li Jiangqian's side, a chill in his heart.

'What a disaster… so there really is some heaven-defying token. The overseas world is a storm of blood and gore, where the demonic path runs wild—it truly is vicious… And this mainland… though it looks bright on the surface, it's just as stained with filth…'

Chapter 835: The Locust Ghost

Jiangbei, Funan.

The mountains in the Funan region were not particularly tall. In fact, all of Jiangbei had only three major mountain ranges. The nearest was the Golden Tang Gate's Saber Mountain. Here, the terrain was gentle, and the highest point, Funan's Main Peak, was barely a few hundred feet high.

"Funan's Main Peak" was a name given by the Li family. Ever since they had withdrawn from the region, taking the Cloud-Piercing Grand Formation with them, the mountain had been left empty. The rogue cultivators and demonic cultivators who flooded in afterward kept a low profile, silently occupying the abandoned cave residences.

They didn't dare rename the mountain, fearing they might displease the Li clan, so they all claimed to be merely "gathering spiritual Qi on the mountain." Besides, with so many rogue cultivators hiding out in the area, each claiming their own small territory, no one wanted to make waves.

A few months prior, a group of demonic and rogue cultivators had gathered to offer tribute to the Li family as a fee for "gathering Qi," but the offer was politely declined. The cultivators returned, feigning great regret, and within months, they had invited friends and allies, causing the cultivator population in the area to multiply several times over.

Jiangbei was simply too rich. Its lowest-grade spirit fields would be coveted and claimed territory if they were located overseas. Who would want to toil in the vast seas when they could live comfortably on the mainland, waiting for spiritual treasures to sprout from the earth with little effort?

And then there were the heart-pounding rumors that circulated in the shadows.

The Li family had always treated Funan as a buffer zone, a place for harvesting spiritual resources rather than cultivating a population. As a result, there

were few commoners. With the arrival of these cultivators riding the winds, however, the number of cultivator descendants began to grow. Small sects and temples were established, and the area slowly began to resemble the untamed wilderness of the eastern shore.

It was a scene of peace and tranquility, until a brilliant flash of light tore through the sky, shattering the calm.

"Hahahahaha!"

An intense, swirling vortex of black and white light shot into the heavens. An old cultivator in black robes, suspended arrogantly in the air, threw his head back and laughed maniacally. Rings of ghostly light pulsed around him, casting him in a sinister, malevolent aura.

The light was so potent that it was visible across the entire White river Creek region. One by one, cultivators took to the air, their faces a mixture of envy and astonishment as they looked up.

"I am Daoist Bai! Today, I have obtained the Edict of Abyssal Gloom and received the recognition of the Secret Diffusion Dao Lineage. I shall accept this inheritance and resurrect the ancient sect!"

As he spoke, dark clouds and lightning gathered, rumbling dramatically across the sky. The assembled cultivators stared, dumbfounded, glancing at one another in disbelief.

"Can the rumors be true? How can he be so brazen!"

"To obtain such a treasure and dare to reveal it so openly… Does he think the Capital Immortals Secret Gate and the Moongaze Immortal Clan are mere decorations?!"

A wave of commotion spread through the crowd below. The old man in the black daoist robe held his head high, tendrils of black mist coiling behind him. Just then, a figure emerged from the clouds to the east—a young man with high brows and deep-set eyes, holding a Daoist scripture. He had the unmistakable air of a direct disciple from a major sect. His expression was cold, but he managed to force a smile.

"I am Guan Gongxiao, here on behalf of the White Ye Immortal Sect to congratulate you, fellow Daoist! The re-emergence of the Secret Diffusion Dao Lineage is truly a joyous occasion for the cultivators of Jiangbei!"

He inclined his head slightly and commanded, "Present the celebratory gift from my Immortal Sect!"

At his words, a subordinate stepped forward with a jade platter and presented it. The crowd below fell silent, and Daoist Bai's tense expression melted away, replaced by a boundless joy.

'The gamble paid off!'

He let out a low chuckle and accepted the gift without ceremony. Masking the greed on his face, he cupped his hands. "Greetings, Gate Master! My actions were not born of arrogance, but this Edict requires such a public display to re-establish the mountain gate. I hope you'll forgive any offense!"

Guan Gongxiao gave a slight nod, displaying the magnanimity of a great sect. "I see!"

Daoist Bai wasn't sure what he meant by that, but his mind was already swimming with ecstasy. He proudly raised his head just as the clouds to the south parted, revealing a torrent of Radiant Fire. Another young man appeared.

This one's eyes were a noble gold. He was draped in an outer robe embroidered with Radiant Fire patterns and stood upon the churning flames. His eyes were narrow, his brows set low, giving him a formidable appearance.

'It's a golden-eyed direct descendant of the Li Clan!'

The reputation of the Moongaze Immortal Clan was formidable in Jiangbei. The tale of Li Zhouwei slaying the Golden Tang Gate's master and departing with his spiritual artifact was still told on both sides of the river. The crowd recognized his lineage instantly. The golden-eyed noble spoke, his tone even.

"Congratulations, fellow Daoist. Moongaze offers the lands of Funan as a gift. Protector Qu!"

An old man appeared, also carrying a jade platter. The cultivators below were green with envy.

'This Daoist Bai is incredibly lucky!'

Wreathed in the swirling black and white energy, Daoist Bai truly had the presence of a demonic titan. He returned Li Jiangqian's salute but said little, simply tucking the items from the platter into his sleeve.

Li Jiangqian studied him for a moment, noting the irrepressible joy on his face. The token's influence was clearly significant. 'I wonder if this is the True Monarch's influence or a Daoist Master's handiwork,' he mused inwardly. 'That expression, those movements, that uncontainable glee—he could be a stage actor.'

Beside them, Guan Gongxiao sneered. "Your family head is so generous. Can you still call Funan your territory? Gifting something that's already his—how shameless!"

Li Jiangqian shot him a venomous glare, his voice laced with ice. "Oh? Lord Guan isn't skilled in combat, but you excel at healing. It seems you've recovered quickly from the halberd blow my father gave you all those years ago."

Guan Gongxiao's face stiffened. He let out a cold huff, and a gale began to whip around him as he clutched his scripture. His other hand, however, remained behind his back, not even forming a seal.

'This Guan fellow is being so perfunctory…' Qu Bushi thought to himself, unable to watch any longer. With a furious expression, he stepped forward and brandished his wooden staff, looking ready for a fight at any moment.

The animosity between the two factions was no secret; it was the very reason the rogue cultivators in Funan and Midong were enjoying such prosperous days. The confrontation was exactly what the onlookers had expected. They watched with keen interest as Daoist Bai chuckled and stepped between them.

"Please, give me some face, my lords. Today is a joyous day for my lineage."

As soon as he spoke, the tense, sword-drawn atmosphere vanished. Daoist Bai hadn't expected his words to be so effective, and a fresh wave of elation washed over him. He raised his head and cupped his hands toward Guan Gongxiao. "I will have to rely on the Gate Master's care in the future!"

The cultivators below were no fools. The meaning was clear.

'The old man is siding with the Capital Immortals Dao.'

Objectively, Daoist Bai's choice wasn't wrong. He came from a demonic cultivation background and had resorted to all manner of underhanded tactics. The Li family was famously righteous; how could they compare to the Capital Immortals Dao, who also hailed from overseas and felt like kin?

He was already occupying the Li family's territory, which was an offense in itself. If he allied with them, he would be judged every time he used his blood-essence arts. And who knew if the Li family harbored secret ambitions to exorcise demons and defend the Dao?

The Capital Immortals Dao, on the other hand, would surely support him in holding this buffer zone against the Li family. It was a sound choice.

All eyes turned to Li Jiangqian. The Li family's head had been publicly humiliated, and the icy expression on his face was enough to chill the bone.

Inwardly, however, Li Jiangqian was celebrating. He could see that although his rival Guan Gongxiao was smiling and nodding, every fiber of his being was likely screaming in protest, wishing he could slap Daoist Bai across the face.

'Daoist Bai is nothing but a stumbling block on the path to the True Monarch realm,' Li Jiangqian thought gleefully. 'Now he's cozying up to Guan, and he'll drag the entire Capital Immortals Dao down with him.'

Maintaining his cold facade, he seized the opportunity to dash any of their hopes. Without a second thought, he turned, flicked his sleeves, and departed.

Guan Gongxiao saw him leave without a backward glance and panicked. The man was quick-witted, though. He turned to Daoist Bai with an urgent expression. "That Li fellow left. Our two families are still in a standoff on the river. You go ahead and get settled. I must return to my post."

Daoist Bai couldn't possibly stop him and naturally let him go, even accompanying him for a short distance out of a misplaced sense of courtesy. The gesture sent a shiver down Guan Gongxiao's spine.

'How can I dare to gift him Midong now?' Guan Gongxiao fretted as he flew. 'The closer we get, the more he'll come to my home for aid…'

He flew faster and faster, practically fleeing the scene. Back in Funan, Daoist Bai turned to the cultivators below, a cold smirk on his face. "Fellow cultivators of Funan," he announced calmly, "I, Daoist Bai, have received the Secret Diffusion Dao Lineage here. It is my duty to establish this lineage and spread its teachings. Is there anyone among you… who is unwilling to establish this Dao with me?"

With that, he raised the token high. Streams of light shone down, and not a single person dared to move. Even his rival, Daoist Huang, stood pale and silent.

Who knew what divine powers that token possessed?

Daoist Bai threw his head back and laughed. He felt that by absorbing so many powerful cultivators at once, his strength could now rival that of a lesser immortal sect in decline. 'Those righteous sects are so insular, only promoting their own year after year,' he thought with smug satisfaction. 'How can they compare to my all-embracing approach?'

He descended on the wind. Immediately, a sycophant scurried forward. "Gate Master, our Dao lineage ought to have a name."

Daoist Bai stroked his beard, pleased. He thought "Secret Diffusion" sounded unpleasant and had no intention of using it. "The inheritance is not yet complete, so it's not right to call it Secret Diffusion," he declared. "I cultivate the Locust Shade Ghost. With the combined power of all you cultivators, let's call it the Hall of the Locust Soul. What do you think?"

How could anyone object? The cultivators mumbled their assent and dispersed, awaiting individual summons from their new master.

Moongaze Lake.

Li Jiangqian rode the wind all the way back to the lake and landed in the main hall. Only when the doors were sealed behind him did a smile touch his lips. He rolled up a scroll on the table and looked at Li Xuanxuan's puzzled expression.

"A deranged madman with a bit of petty cleverness has Guan Gongxiao terrified," he chuckled. "And he can't even see two steps ahead. He's the one who lured that man here in the first place."

He briefly explained the situation to Li Xuanxuan. The old man simply stroked his beard. "No wonder Zhouming enjoys watching plays. The mortal world is just a stage, with one performance layered on top of another."

Though the old man was strict with Li Zhouming, often calling him a scoundrel or a beast, he clearly doted on him, letting the affectionate 'Ming'er' slip out. Li Jiangqian shook his head with a smile. Soon, Qu Bushi entered and reported on the events in the north.

"The Hall of the Locust Soul? Truly a character from overseas. Can't even pick a proper name." Li Jiangqian sneered. "It doesn't sound like anything good. 'Cave' would be the most he could claim… A 'Hall'-level power? Is he worthy?"

There were not many 'Halls' or 'Mansions' in the current era. There was the Northern Dark Mansion of the North Star Lady, which was a residence, not a power. The closest was the Shengbai Hall on the Great Western Plateau, now known to the outside world as the White Victory Dao.

'The White Victory Dao claims the lineage of the Lesser Yang Demon Monarch, passed down by the demon Xiyan,' Li Jiangqian mused. 'It has produced two Purple Mansion Realm cultivators, which is no small feat. What sort of character is this Daoist Bai to dare call his sect a Hall…'

While these naming conventions weren't strictly enforced these days, they still carried weight. A review of the last few centuries of records showed no power in either Jiangnan or Jiangbei that called itself a 'Hall'. Only the ignorant were fearless.

Now Li Xuanxuan also shook his head with a helpless sigh. "He's completely lost his sense of proportion. Does he think he's Daoist Master Chang Yun? He's only in the Foundation Establishment Realm. I fear he'll destroy himself long before the True Monarch has to deal with him."

Li Jiangqian shook his head.

"I doubt it. He'll last a few years at least. After all, he is 'favored by fortune'."

With Daoist Bai acting as a shield, they could afford to wait and see how the situation in Jiangbei developed. Li Jiangqian had someone escort Li Xuanxuan out, then summoned another subordinate. "Daoist Master Ning is in Jiangbei. The people we sent to Azure Pond will surely find nothing. The Daoist Master cultivates Immersing in Pure Listening. Recall them at once, lest they offend the immortal's presence."

As he sent the messenger off, his mind was already spinning with plans.

'Li Quantao is on good terms with our family, and now he's getting involved in the northern affairs. The two Daoist Masters will certainly protect him. If he manages to obtain the Hongxue Dao lineage, Daoist Master Ning will be the main beneficiary, but Li Quantao will also gain greatly.'

After all, the Hongxue sect belonged to the Wei-Li family. Their lineage was strong; they had only been wiped out overnight due to the fall of Daoist Master Guansue. The Daoist repository they left behind must be substantial…

'Li Quantao doesn't seem like someone who can reach the Purple Mansion Realm, but with these resources, anyone would be tempted to try. If he dies, there will be no need to protect the Hongxue descendants, and the Daoist repository will go to Azure Pond. If our Daoist Master can intervene, he can both watch over the Wei-Li descendants and perhaps get a piece of the pie.'

Eastern Sea.

The waters around Zongquan Island were calm, with a few fishing boats drifting on the surface. A blazing, golden illusion streaked across the sky from afar, kicking up furious waves.

Li Zhouwei had traveled straight from Lie Sea, making a stop at Crimson Reef Island to see the Deng family.

Deng Yuzhi had been overjoyed, practically inseparable from the artifact Li Zhouwei had given him. He had traded the White Yin Fan for it and even refused to accept the promised resources from the Golden Tang Gate, insisting the two items were now of comparable value and there was no need for the extra trouble.

He had happily brought his son out—a lively boy named Deng Buyan. Father and son escorted Li Zhouwei far out to sea, inviting him to visit again next year.

Li Zhouwei could only marvel at their sincerity. He followed the water veins, stopping at two market-islands without finding anything of value before continuing on toward the Vermillion Sea and Zongquan.

Riding the Profound Light, he approached the island and paused, taking stock. The island seemed a fair bit larger than he remembered. Feeling a flicker of doubt, he didn't descend immediately.

However, the cultivators on the island recognized him. Soon, a white-haired old man rode the wind to greet him. It was Zong Yan.

Zong Yan was the original master of Zongquan Island, having scraped by in humiliating servitude under the Hui Clan. After Li Yuanjiao arrived, he had remained to help manage the island. Li Zhouwei had reached the Foundation Establishment Realm here, so the old man knew him well. He came to the edge of the defensive array to welcome him but did not open it.

It was a Li family rule, a precaution against demonic cultivators using transformation arts to trick their way in. Li Zhouwei deactivated the array and entered. The old man bowed respectfully. "My lord…"

Li Zhouwei waved his hand. Zong Yan was an earth-nurtured child with no descendants. He had an adopted son who was killed by a demonic cultivator two years prior, and he hadn't taken another since. He lived a solitary life, yet his mindset was good.

At least he didn't have to worry about being eaten.

Li Zhouwei glanced around, setting aside his earlier question for a moment. "Old senior, how old are you now?"

Zong Yan understood what he was asking and sighed. "I reckon I have another twenty or thirty years left…"

The earth-nurtured children from the Nurturing Spring on World's Navel Island could not pursue an immortal foundation. Zong Yan had been stuck at the late stage of Qi Refining for many years, simply waiting to die. Li Zhouwei made a mental note and returned to his original question. "Why does Zongquan seem larger than before?"

"My lord," Zong Yan replied, "a few years ago… there was a great movement in the earth's veins to the north. A great, rolling cloud of smoke. Many of the surrounding islands were affected. Zongquan is on one of those lines. Not only did the island grow, but the defensive array was also impacted and has become much weaker."

Li Zhouwei now understood. He pinched his fingers, calculating the direction. "No wonder. The market-city of Purple Smoke is to the north. So they're on the same vein."

Zong Yan nodded eagerly. "Exactly! A few years back, Miss Queyi joined the Purple Smoke Immortal Gate. She visited Zongquan once to ask if the island lacked anything. She's on duty at the nearby market-city and is usually very busy."

"Queyi…"

As a Foundation Establishment cultivator, Li Zhouwei had a good memory for names. He recalled her in an instant—a gentle, soft-spoken girl who was very likable. A rare smile appeared on his face. "So she's been recognized by Purple Smoke. Good. I have some spare things on hand. I'll make a trip to the market-city."

He left some low-level spiritual materials he no longer needed on Zongquan and flew northwest. After some time, he saw a vast expanse of purple—a large island floating before him.

It was the Purple Smoke Gate's New Rain Archipelago.

The place had once been a single large island, but the shift in ley lines had transformed it into a cluster of reefs. It was bustling with people, and many smaller powers had set up outposts. Li Zhouwei watched for a moment, then smiled faintly and descended as a streak of light.

Near the market-city, a young woman in purple stood on a dark, violet reef. Her face was round and cute. Her hands were formed into the shape of a small flask, drawing in the colorful light shimmering above the sea's surface with intense concentration.

After a few breaths, a wiggling strand of rainbow light fell into her palms, swimming like a fish before she carefully bottled it in a jade vial. Suddenly, a deep voice sounded beside her.

"What are you doing?"

The round-faced woman quickly turned her head and saw a tall man standing beside her. He was clad in soft gold and white armor inscribed with black, esoteric patterns. Though a faint smile played on his lips, his eyes held a natural authority that commanded respect without anger. In his hand, he held a halberd, standing effortlessly in the air above the sea.

"Uncle?!"

Li Queyi's eyes widened in disbelief, and the jade vial nearly slipped from her grasp. Joy flooded her face. "My lord, it's so good to see you're safe!"

Coming to her senses, she answered his question before he could ask again, speaking respectfully, "I am merely collecting the purple qi of the azure heavens to complete a sect mission."

"Oh?"

Li Zhouwei nodded slowly. His mere presence seemed to emanate waves of warmth. After being alone for so many years, Li Queyi had never felt so secure. Even the magical wind beneath her feet felt more solid. "Uncle, are you here to…"

Li Zhouwei didn't answer right away. He glanced at the jade vial in her hand. "Instead of having you cultivate in the sect, Purple Smoke sent you out here to gather qi? How much time does this take each day?"

"I chose this myself, for the experience," she replied quickly. "It's only half an hour a day. This month, my senior sister, who shares my duties, is in seclusion, so I'm covering for her. It takes an hour."

Li Zhouwei seemed dissatisfied with this answer. Thoughtfully, he relaxed his grip, and the long halberd vanished. He raised an eyebrow. "Is this really for experience? Where are your senior brother and your Master? Has the family arranged for anyone to watch over you?"

Li Queyi hesitated. "Master and Senior Brother are in the sect. I felt the peak was a bit oppressive, so I came to the sea. There's work to do, but it's very quiet."

"Quiet?"

Li Zhouwei immediately sensed something was wrong. Seeing her lower her head, he wondered who in the family was in charge of her affairs and whether they had made the proper arrangements. After a few more questions, Li Queyi replied, "It was Uncle Zhouluo, some time ago."

Li Zhouwei understood. "Come," he said in a warm voice. "Take me to see the person in charge. I'll handle this for you."

At his words, Li Queyi's eyes turned red. She led him inside, explaining everything in bits and pieces along the way.

The buildings of Purple Smoke were brand new, clearly recent constructions. Faint patterns on the ground glowed with a soft light. The cultivators they passed all smiled and nodded at Li Queyi, showing their good relationship with her, but they whispered amongst themselves when they saw Li Zhouwei. Many of them clearly recognized him.

A middle-aged man descended from a higher level. His eyes were bright and sharp, and two talismans, one gold and one white, hung from his waist. He looked at Li Zhouwei with a mixture of shock and awe before bowing.

"Wen Wu of Mu Zuo Peak, greets you… my lord!"

The title 'my lord' was a great sign of respect, showing he saw him as a future Purple Mansion Realm cultivator. It was Li Zhouwei's first time meeting the man, and he found that despite his ordinary appearance, his demeanor was quite remarkable.

"So it is fellow Daoist Wen," Li Zhouwei said warmly. "I am Li Zhouwei of Moongaze."

No more needed to be said. Wen Wu, his suspicions confirmed, hurriedly led him upwards. With Li Queyi in tow, Li Zhouwei explained with a smile, "I have been away from the lake for many years. Only recently did I learn that a direct descendant of my family was favored by Purple Smoke, so I came to visit. I happened to run into her gathering qi… after waiting for quite some time, we came to pay our respects to the Immortal Gate together."

"I see."

Though the words were polite, they made Wen Wu's scalp tingle. He looked hesitantly at Li Queyi and said kindly, "Queyi has always been a diligent and obedient disciple. It is the fortune of Ziqi Peak to have her."

Li Queyi glanced at Li Zhouwei's back. The senior family member nodded. "Ziqi Peak… I remember now. That's Ling Yanzi's peak."

Their exchange ended. Led by Wen Wu, Li Zhouwei took a seat in the main hall. Purple-robed disciples immediately came forward to serve tea. Li Zhouwei did not drink it.

"Ziqi Peak is poor… and not very peaceful, is it?" he asked.

Wen Wu understood perfectly. But he had been urgently dispatched overseas and hadn't even known Li Queyi had come out ahead of schedule. He could only let out a long sigh and explain, "This matter… I must explain it to you properly, fellow Daoist."

Chapter 836: Chaos Stirs

Although Li Zhouwei's tone was calm and even, Wen Wu was no fool. How could he not sense the dissatisfaction when the man refused his tea, skipped the pleasantries, and opened with a comment about things not being 'peaceful'?

This was no good-tempered master before him. Wen Wu had been stationed in the Eastern Sea years ago and had met Situ Mo, secretly considering him a formidable figure of their generation, a shoo-in for the Purple Mansion Realm. Yet, in the hands of the White Qilin standing before him, Situ Mo had been as helpless as a chick. How could Wen Wu not be terrified?

This wasn't just a matter of offending a peak Foundation Establishment Realm cultivator; this was clearly offending a future Purple Mansion Realm expert!

Ziqi Peak had made this mess, yet he, Wen Wu, was the one left to deal with it. As the intermediary, he did have some obligation to see to things. A bitter taste filled his mouth. Desperately searching for a solution, he began to speak, trying to stall for time.

"Ziqi Peak… it was once quite glorious. But after certain events, it fell on hard times. It holds little standing in the sect now, and they've grown accustomed to hardship. The peak itself is not very tranquil… ahem! My fellow disciples there are not the most steady individuals. It's true that things aren't always peaceful…"

He quickly tried to mend the situation. "However, training in the overseas territories is a sect assignment. Your clan's Li Quexi is a junior disciple of my Mu Zuo Peak. She is currently in seclusion, breaking through to the next stage. In a few years, she too will need to come out and experience the Eastern Sea, lest she become too sheltered. Li Queyi can complete her two years first, and then she won't have to venture out anymore."

He adjusted his robes, the movement causing the two Spiritual Talismans on his lap—one white, one gold, both glowing with a soft light—to settle on his thighs. Li Zhouwei glanced at the bowing Li Queyi and understood.

'So Wen Wu's Mu Zuo Peak took on a disciple specifically to foster good relations between the Li Clan and Purple Smoke. Ziqi Peak was never the priority. For Purple Smoke to devote resources to one direct descendant of the Li family is already giving us considerable face; any more would not benefit their future. And Queyi isn't the type to fight for it…'

'Besides, if I were in Purple Smoke's position, I'd also be more inclined to take a hands-off approach with a cultivator who values their family so much… It might not be intentional. With Quexi already there, and Queyi being so gentle and unassertive, it's a convenient outcome for them.'

He lowered his hand and replied, "Queyi is the daughter of my eldest brother, Li Zhoufang, a direct descendant of our Yuandu branch. Senior Ling Yanzi is a good friend of our family and naturally looks out for her. But he is getting on in years, and it's normal for him to lose track of things sometimes. I am simply concerned that if these disciples of yours stir up trouble, it will harm the stability of Purple Smoke."

Wen Wu shifted, embarrassed and uneasy. He knew the man before him was phrasing his words diplomatically only out of respect for Purple Smoke's background. There was no avoiding this. "You are right," he conceded. "The supervision of those peaks has been lax. The discipline has indeed gotten poor, and it needs to be corrected…"

Li Zhouwei chuckled and shook his head. "That would be difficult for you to manage, wouldn't it, Daoist Wen? I am not familiar with the internal affairs of your peaks, but I doubt it has reached the point of needing a full-blown rectification. There's no need to make a scene. Queyi doesn't care for commotion; she is fine here in the overseas territories. Let things proceed as they should…"

Rectify the discipline? Li Zhouwei had no intention of making Li Queyi the target of everyone's resentment. The girl had never mentioned this to the clan, precisely because she feared ruining the relationships within her peak. He wouldn't put her in such a difficult position.

"Besides," he added casually, "Purple Smoke follows the Supreme Yang Dao. How could its culture be anything but righteous? Even the cultivators of Jiangnan wouldn't dare to underestimate a blessed land like yours. My family's Daoist Master also has a good relationship with Purple Smoke. Queyi being in the Eastern Sea is for the best. The Daoist Master is nearby and can look after things."

At these words, a genuine sweat broke out on Wen Wu's brow. He understood Li Zhouwei's meaning perfectly.

'*Today, it's me, Li Zhouwei, who has come, and I'm willing to give you some leeway. But Daoist Master Zhaojing is also in the overseas territories. If, on a whim, he were to stumble upon this… wouldn't you, Wen Wu, lose a layer of skin?*'

Daoist Master Zhaojing, Li Ximing, was known to be good-natured, but that was his attitude toward fellow Purple Mansion Realm masters. If Li Ximing had come today and personally witnessed a direct descendant of his clan doing menial qi-gathering work, and if Li Queyi had burst into tears and knelt before him, Wen Wu would have had to remove his own cap, bind his hands, and kneel before the master of Tinglan Seat!

But was today any better? Li Zhouwei's golden eyes were fixed on him, and they held no shortage of frost.

Wen Wu no longer felt like he was riding a tiger; a chill was creeping into his heart. He immediately said, "This isn't about the sect's disciples. It was my negligence. I was busy with other matters, which led to you having to come and ask… It is truly…"

Li Zhouwei, still showing no sign of anger, replied, "You misunderstand, Daoist Wen. I simply came to see my junior, check on her, and browse the market…"

He waved a hand, leading Li Queyi out. The tea on the table remained untouched. Wen Wu hurried after them. "What about Queyi's arrangements going forward…"

Li Zhouwei smiled. "A Daoist Master wishes to see her. She will remain here among the reefs. No need to transfer her."

Wen Wu could only nod, escorting them down from the main hall. When Li Zhouwei politely declined his offer to accompany them further, Wen Wu could only turn back, his heart weary and bitter.

'That bunch of idiots from Ziqi Peak…' he cursed internally. 'I just got assigned here, and they dropped this huge pot of blame right on my head! If it weren't for the respect I owe to old Senior Ling Yanzi… I'd have given those bastards a sound thrashing!'

Still uneasy, he thought, 'I must send a letter to my master… and inform the Daoist Master in advance… These powerful figures don't listen to reason when

it comes to family. When the time comes for blame, I won't even have a chance to explain…'

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As Wen Wu departed, Li Zhouwei led his junior into the market. He enveloped them both in a soft glow, separating them from the bustling crowd. Only then did he speak in a low voice.

"Queyi, you handled this matter incorrectly."

Li Queyi, who had been on edge the entire time, bowed in apology. Before she could voice her regrets, Li Zhouwei stopped her with a gesture. The man in white and gold armor said, "You are a direct daughter of a Purple Mansion Realm Immortal Clan, yet you are far too gentle. Forget immortal sects, anywhere you go, if you are merely polite and kind, gentle without a hint of authority, people will always doubt you… You take one step back, and they will see you as a pushover. Then they will take a step forward, certain you won't bare your fangs and bite. The most they expect is a reprimand, so they will kneel and beg. If begging doesn't work, they'll cry. As long as they see you might soften, the benefits they can squeeze from you are worth more than a little lost pride."

Li Zhouwei casually surveyed the many spiritual items in the market. "You must carry yourself with an air of authority. You must learn to frown. These cultivators, once they have a status that makes you care about their feelings, will hope to suck a little blood from you. Even if they can't, they'll resort to petty tricks. Today, they claim an urgent matter and have you help gather qi. Tomorrow, they can go into seclusion, and when you come looking for them, they'll be nowhere to be found."

Li Queyi knew he was talking about her senior sister on the island. She nodded silently and murmured, "We are all from the same sect. Some of them knelt and wept while they begged… They said they had families, old and young, depending on them to make a breakthrough. I just wanted to help where I could, to soothe my own conscience."

Li Zhouwei glanced at her. He knew that while she was intelligent, her nature was fundamentally gentle, making her easy to read. She lacked any sense of superiority. "Don't think that by giving them some spiritual items, these senior brothers and sisters will remember your kindness. And don't mistake them for being important. Maybe they're just acting shamelessly, maybe they have grand

ambitions… so what? What does that have to do with you? Why should you have to use your resources to support them?"

He took a silk pouch from his sleeve, one containing the wealth he had taken from Situ Mo's body and exchanged for resources suitable for her cultivation level. He tossed it into her hands.

"Today, I was able to stand up for you, but that is only because our families have a relationship. Purple Smoke has an obligation to guide you, and they certainly shouldn't stand by and watch you suffer. But once you leave this blessed land, once you are far from Moongaze Lake, no one will be watching over you every moment. If you are harmed somewhere, the most the clan can do is avenge you after the fact."

"These resources are enough for you. Cultivate well. Your own strength is all that is real."

Li Queyi nodded and replied respectfully, "I will remember your teachings, my lord."

This was all Li Zhouwei could say. In Li Queyi's generation, most of the Li family had been born into privilege and had grown up without vicious struggles. Such a disposition was inevitable.

'It's not a bad trait,' he thought, 'just ill-suited for the times.'

He finished his business in the market, having exchanged most of the goods he'd plundered. Soon, Wen Wu returned with others to invite him back. Li Zhouwei sent his junior away and suddenly asked, "Daoist Wen, you mentioned before that Ziqi Peak was once glorious… How did it fall to its current state?"

Wen Wu's expression immediately turned awkward, as if the topic were difficult to broach. But after the earlier unpleasantness, he was here now to smooth things over. Hiding the truth would only seem insincere. He had no choice but to explain in a low voice.

"Daoist Li… Ziqi Peak once had a master who committed a dishonorable act. He later died… and his lineage declined. Senior Ling Yanzi knows why, so he never complains about the sect's favoritism. Many in the sect are aware of the story…"

Li Zhouwei nodded thoughtfully, clearly waiting for more. Wen Wu shook his head, looking pained. He dismissed the people around them and whispered,

"This… this master's Daoist name was Ting Qian. He once instigated an internal rebellion and was later suppressed and slain by Ling Shu… The details of the incident were contained within the blessed land, so the other major families don't know much about it, only that a period of turmoil occurred… Ziqi Peak is his legacy. And Senior Ling Yanzi… is not only his martial grand-disciple but also his great-grandson."

Li Zhouwei frowned. He sighed inwardly and said, "Senior Ling Yanzi has no heirs and recruits almost exclusively rogue cultivators. Surely the resentment from that rebellion ends with him?"

Wen Wu nodded repeatedly, hinting, "That was the sect's intention in having Queyi join him. After all, his other disciples were raised by him from a young age, but their talent is limited, and none are suitable to inherit his position. Queyi can step in perfectly, and while she's at it, give the peak a new name. Then the matter will be considered closed."

Li Zhouwei gave a slight nod. 'This Ziqi Peak is certainly interesting…' he mused.

Wen Wu was unwilling to say more. Li Zhouwei exchanged a few more pleasantries, then rose into the air on a beam of light and departed from the market, heading for the sect's spiritual spring to cultivate his secret arts in seclusion.

He had perfected his Imperial Command. Along the way, he had also progressed with his Great Fissure, bringing it to sixty percent completion, while his Myriad Arms Prefecture was at thirty percent. He estimated it would take him two or three years to master both.

As for his other secret arts, they would not progress as quickly, though he figured Primal Yang wouldn't take too long. All in all, Li Zhouwei calculated that mastering four secret arts would take him at least three or four years.

"Four secret arts, and it only increases my chances by twenty percent. Time is tight."

Not only was time a concern, but Li Zhouwei also had no Radiant Sky Stone to use. Though he was hailed as a future Purple Mansion Realm expert, cultivation was a personal journey. The more secret arts he could master, the better.

'I fear the family may not be able to cope. I must also consider breaking through sooner.'

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The Southern Sea, Shitang North Dan.

After Daoist Master Yuanxiu, Si Boxiu, failed his breakthrough here, the skies over Shitang had remained overcast for three days. The winds grew chaotic, blowing north one moment and south the next. Erratic gales swept across the regions, rising and falling without warning. At times, the winds were so strong that even low-level cultivators couldn't control their flight, let alone the mortal fishermen at sea.

Muffled thunder rumbled intermittently within the clouds, entirely different from the downpours and rising thunder of the Eastern Sea years ago. Not a single drop of rain fell, leaving the entire sea region oppressively hot and humid, a place that made all who approached turn back.

The Ginseng-Timber Wood on the various islands ceased to sprout. Their leaves fell, leaving them bare, their hard bark exposed and dripping with condensation.

Amidst the raging winds in the clouds, a point of rainbow light hovered in the air. The figure within stared into the distance at the water vapor that was thick enough to condense, sighing deeply. He was trapped before an array, unable to leave.

In these recent days, cultivators found themselves with an abundance of spiritual resources, but life for the common people had become difficult. The damp heat seeped into their bodies, causing countless deaths.

Li Xizhi had been working on this problem for a long time. He had dispatched all the cultivators under his command, but their eyes were all fixed on the newly emerged spiritual items, their minds elsewhere.

Worse, with Yuanxiu's death, Li Xizhi had lost his protector and now had to be constantly on guard. Although the Purple Mansion Realm masters of Thunder-Hearing Island might hesitate to act against him personally out of fear of Li Ximing, he could not afford to let his guard down.

Azure Pond finally had Ning Wan, another Purple Mansion Realm cultivator, but she was tied up with matters in Jiangbei. She couldn't possibly remain in the Southern Sea. She had only sent a letter, telling him not to leave the island.

Li Xizhi could only gaze out at the ocean and sigh, knowing in his heart that all his years of effort to save Shitang had been undone by the death of Daoist Master Yuanxiu.

'Tantai Jin also came to North Dan, likely to witness Yuanxiu's breakthrough. He was deeply grieved but will soon return to the Azure Pond mountains. Based on the messages he's sent me these past few days, he intends to recall me…'

With the Azure Pond Sect having suffered several heavy blows, Li Xizhi was now one of its few remaining prominent figures. The recall was not unexpected. He could have ignored the world outside his island, but he wanted to save whom he could before he left, and the thought exhausted him.

"Grandfather!"

As Li Xizhi was lost in thought, a youth in black robes approached and bowed respectfully. Just as he was about to speak, Li Wushao rushed over from the side, followed by a horrified Quan Yuduan. Before either could say a word, Li Xizhi looked up, his expression turning grave.

Golden light pierced through the layers of clouds overhead. One by one, bare-armed Master Monks appeared, standing in the air with palms pressed together and pious expressions. Seated in their center was a golden effigy as large as a mountain!

"The Merciful One?!"

The entirety of Shitang North Dan had been surrounded by Buddhist cultivators. Dozens of Master Monks stood faintly visible among the clouds, while an incalculable number of monks stood upon the sea below, supported by some unknown artifacts. A serene, solemn atmosphere descended upon the entire area.

Quan Yuduan gritted his teeth, staring at the golden light above. "Master!" he said in a low voice. "It's the monks from the Great Konghai Temple on Songzhou to the south! They have entered the sea!"

Chapter 837: Baoqing

The sky was filled with Buddhist cultivators, their expressions as rigid and imposing as statues. Within the clouds, a brilliant golden light shone forth, revealing a colossal, golden-bodied effigy. Its face was serene—devoid of compassion, yet also of joy—as it loomed silently over the world below.

A palpable sense of fear and apprehension gripped the cultivators on the ground. The entirety of North Dan Island was bathed in the overwhelming radiance. Li Wushao took a step back with a deep frown, clearly repulsed by the celestial light. His face soured, and one could only imagine the curses running through his mind.

All eyes turned to Li Xizhi.

He remained perfectly calm. Crushing a jade talisman in his hand, he made a quick assessment before rising on a trail of rosy mist. Channeling his spiritual energy, he projected his voice, clear and strong.

"May I ask why the Great Konghai Temple has suddenly graced our Azure Pond's Shitang? I am Li Xizhi, Lord of the Heaven-Probing Pavilion."

None of the Master Monks in the sky answered. The Merciful One remained as still as a sculpture. Instead, a nun stepped forward, leading a contingent of her peers. Dressed in loose, dark monastic robes, she pressed her palms together and intoned:

"Our master, Lord of the Great Konghai Temple, through a profound karmic destiny, has attained the mystical Dao of the Five Skandhas and disseminated the wondrous teachings of the Three Vehicles. He has dispatched the Arhat Dharma Protector, the Merciful One and great cultivator of the highest order, Zhuzhen, to come and guard Beidan."

The moment she finished speaking, an uproar swept through the ranks of the Azure Pond cultivators.

The history of Buddhist cultivators was far shorter than that of Immortal cultivators, and their titles were consequently a mess of overblown and convoluted names. The Immortal Dao, by contrast, had inherited its traditions from a golden age in antiquity, and its conventions were firmly established. A cultivator in the Purple Mansion Realm was simply called a Daoist Master, and in many places, those in the Foundation Establishment Realm didn't even merit the title of Daoist.

This Buddhist cultivator, "Zhuzhen," was called both a "Merciful One" and a "great cultivator," titles that sounded ridiculously exalted. In reality, he was just a Merciful One. Many so-called "Great Master Monks" among the Buddhist cultivators were only at the level of the Foundation Establishment Realm.

What truly horrified the crowd was her final declaration—*to come and guard Beidan!*

What was the meaning of this? The Azure Pond Sect was, for all its troubles, part of the Supreme Yang Dao lineage. Although the Southern Sea had many powerful Buddhist and Daoist cultivators, and the Great Konghai Temple was backed by a Maha, there was no justification for such an arrogant, demanding attitude on another's territory. This was tantamount to a declaration of war on Azure Pond.

Li Xizhi raised his head, his eyes cool and composed. "I wonder what promise the Great Konghai Temple has received," he said in a measured tone, "and from which Daoist Master's immortal edict you derive the authority to simply take Shitang?"

"Beidan has received no such edict. If the Great Konghai Temple intends to seize Shitang while my sect is vulnerable after the fall of our Great Daoist Master, then forgive this junior for being unable to comply."

The nun in the sky returned his words with a cold glare. "With Lord Zhuzhen present, what right do people like you have to speak? Even with your great reputation as the Heavenly Pavilion Heavenly Glow, do you expect a great cultivator to explain himself to you?"

Li Xizhi frowned. Seeing her obstinance and the way she twisted his words instead of listening, he knew they had come with ill intentions. Azure Pond was weak, and there was no way they could spare a Purple Mansion Realm cultivator to intervene at this moment.

Just then, his wife, Yang Xiao'er, descended on a cloud of mist to his side. "Are all the members of the Great Konghai Temple so unreasonable?" she asked softly. "I am Yang Xiao'er of the Yang Clan from the Yue State…"

The nun was about to retort when the statue-like Merciful One in the sky finally spoke, his voice deep and resonant as thunder.

"So, an Imperial Scion."

His eyes were filled with a stern authority. "My Great Konghai Temple has crossed paths with Daoist friends Si, Tang, and Ning in the past," he said coldly. "Beidan itself was a treasured place where I discussed the profound mysteries with two of them. Shitang, moreover, was the very place where my master attained his enlightenment. A great battle was fought here long ago, and the three Daoist Masters declared that as long as they lived, Shitang would belong to Azure Pond."

He paused briefly. "Out of respect for the Azure Pond's lineage, my master promised to withdraw from Shitang. Now, your sect's karmic tie to this place has ended. We have simply come to take back what is ours."

Li Xizhi's expression darkened.

The Merciful One's meaning was clear: in his telling, the Three Yuans of Azure Pond had stolen Shitang from the Great Konghai Temple. Now that the Three Yuans were gone, they were here to reclaim it.

The sect's most secret archives were beyond Li Xizhi's access, but he had never heard any mention of Shitang being seized from others. If the matter had been so significant as to require the intervention of three Purple Mansion Realm masters, it was impossible that no record of it would exist within the sect. Even if this man wasn't lying outright, he was certainly omitting crucial facts.

But the facts no longer mattered. They were already surrounded, leaving no room for negotiation. They had come to strike while the iron was hot. How could Li Xizhi possibly debate the matter with a Merciful One?

Since they came with hostility, he dropped all pretense of politeness. "And what is it the Merciful One suggests?" he asked flatly.

Addressing him directly as "Merciful One" was a custom from Jiangnan. It was not common in the Southern Sea and carried a distinct flavor of the northern Buddhist Dao. The Merciful One's brow furrowed, and a Sanskrit chant escaped

his lips. "My Great Konghai Temple has no desire for needless slaughter. Out of respect for Daoist Master Zhaojing and the Yue State, take your families and disciples and leave. Cede Beidan to us."

Li Xizhi fell silent.

Cede it? Or not?

The protective array on North Dan Island was formidable, but using it to resist a Merciful One was a fool's dream. Li Xizhi had no desire to die a martyr for Azure Pond, and he knew that Tantai Jin and the Ning Clan wanted him to preserve his life. He weighed his options, trying to gauge whether they would actually kill him.

'It wouldn't take long for Daoist Master Ning to get here from Jiangbei,' he thought, 'but notifying her is the problem. I've already crushed the talisman to alert Tantai Jin, but he might not have the nerve to immediately ring the bronze bell and summon a Daoist Master back.'

He quickly looked up. "We must have a Daoist Master's immortal edict to retreat," he said softly. "I must ask the Merciful One to wait. As soon as the edict arrives, I will have an answer for you."

For Zhuzhen to wait here would be a joke. The statement was a clear refusal. The golden light emanating from the Merciful One began to shimmer, a clear sign of his growing anger.

Furthermore, after so many years in the Southern Sea, it was impossible that Li Xizhi didn't know the local customs. His refusal to call him "Great Cultivator," using "Merciful One" again and again, was like adding oil to a fire.

"You've refused the easy way," the high-level cultivator snarled, "so you'll get the hard way!"

As he spoke, the surrounding group of Master Monks let out a unified roar. The sky thundered with a sound that shook the heavens. Li Xizhi swept his gaze across them and began to form hand seals.

A torrent of brilliant light descended from above as the Master Monks pressed toward the array. Li Xizhi remained motionless, but a host of rosy-hued doppelgangers leaped from his body, and a magnificent rainbow of light erupted.

"Rainbow Pierce!"

This Dharma Art, which had once failed to even scratch Tuoba Chongyuan's physical body, was now completely transformed. The splendid, colorful light coalesced into massive beams the size of houses, which danced and scattered through the air, streaking past the faces of the Master Monks.

As the spell arts shot toward the heavens, the nun attending the Merciful One was startled. She descended on her cloud, shouting, "Vicious fiend! You still dare to be arrogant!"

Even Zhuzhen frowned slightly, musing to himself.

'He truly is exceptionally skilled in spell arts… his reputation is well-earned… a pity he cultivates Heavenly Glow arts. With no path forward unless he joins Luoxia… he is indeed a sharp sword for any Immortal Daoist Master.'

He seemed less rash and unreasonable than he appeared on the surface. He was observing, scrutinizing. Seeing this, Li Xizhi felt his resolve harden.

"All cultivators on the island, join me in resistance!" he commanded.

The cultivators immediately descended onto the array platforms. The formation on North Dan Island had been constructed by an array master during Chi Wei's era, when the Azure Pond Sect was at its zenith with five Purple Mansion Realm Daoist Masters presiding over it. The materials used were of the highest quality. With more than ten Foundation Establishment Realm cultivators channeling their energy in unison, the great array blazed to life.

But the Master Monks in the sky were more numerous and more powerful, and the array began to tremble almost immediately. Li Xizhi took a step into the air, his hands forming a new seal as he chanted an incantation.

'Screen of Cinnabar Cloud, from light manifest as you will, embrace the nine mountains, connect with the Nine Serene and reveal the truth… light of misty clouds, emerge at my command…'

A six-colored radiance shot from his palms. It soared like a swallow toward the outside of the array, transforming into a rainbow mist that spread out to reinforce the formation.

This was Li Xizhi's immortal foundation, Universal Dawn Mist, which excelled at evasion, rainbow-gathering, and casting. It could coalesce rainbow mist to confuse enemies and fortify a location. He had rarely used it in recent years,

but now, its appearance immediately weakened the momentum of the attacking Master Monks.

The disorienting power of the mist was formidable, and combined with Li Xizhi's potent spell arts, it threw the cultivators outside the array into disarray. Above them, Zhuzhen's eyelids twitched with annoyance. The nun beside him immediately spoke in a respectful tone.

"Great Cultivator, shall I…"

Before she could finish, Zhuzhen shot her a cold glance. It was clear the Great Konghai Temple was starting to lose face, but the Merciful One seemed preoccupied with something else, his gaze wandering over the island.

He observed Yang Xiao'er closely, as if trying to confirm something. Seeing her composure and complete lack of fear, he frowned inwardly. But he couldn't allow Li Xizhi to hold them off. The Merciful One finally had to act. He let out a soft, casual breath.

"Hah!"

With that single exhalation, a fierce gale swept across the island. No matter how powerful the rosy mist was, it was instantly dispersed by the Merciful One's breath, once again revealing the white-robed man at the heart of the array.

Li Xizhi's expression was grave. As the crowd of Master Monks closed in again, he finally placed his hand on the hilt of the longsword strapped to his back. His pale, slender fingers rested on the gem embedded in the sword, yet he hesitated.

Beside him, Yang Xiao'er's face was also tinged with anger. Seeing her husband's hesitation, she took a step forward. "Act freely, husband…" she said in a soft, warm voice.

The understanding between them needed no words. Yang Xiao'er knew he was unsure of the situation and worried that injuring these Master Monks would give the Merciful One a pretext to retaliate without restraint. And Li Xizhi knew that his wife was confident.

His trust in her was absolute. She had been his wise partner through countless near-death experiences over the years. He gave a slight nod, and with a flick of his wrist—

Shing!

The longsword, shimmering with colorful light, was drawn partially from its sheath, revealing a section of pure white blade, its edge sharp, smooth, and exquisitely curved.

Above, the previously distracted Zhuzhen's eyes suddenly lit up. He whipped his head around as if jolted by lightning and let out a thundering roar.

"How dare you!"

At the same instant, a brilliant, warm white light leaped from within the array. It split into yellow and white streams, which in the very moment they appeared, each divided again into three points of interweaving, fluid light.

'Flowing Light of the Triple Moon!'

The many Master Monks surrounding the array finally recoiled in unison, a heart-stopping sense of danger flooding their senses.

Clang!

A gigantic golden hand shot through the Great Void and materialized in front of the Master Monks. Rippling with immense spiritual qi, it shielded them all behind it.

Zhuzhen was a Merciful One, after all, and traversing the Great Void offered him immense advantages. The six points of brilliant, warm white light were seized at once. The nearest stream of light had almost reached a Master Monk's neck, making his spiritual body shiver and a faint red line appear on his skin.

A cold chill ran down the backs of all the Master Monks as they exchanged horrified glances.

'He almost killed someone…'

Only Zhuzhen's swift reaction had prevented it. If the Great Konghai Temple had arrived in force, only to have several of their Master Monks killed right in front of a Merciful One, the loss of face would have been catastrophic.

In that single instant, the golden hand had barely managed to grasp the sword essence. A series of fine, sharp, ear-piercing metallic clashes rang out. Then, like a rainbow appearing after a storm, multicolored lights intertwined as streaks of radiance seemed to fall from the sky.

Li Xizhi had already sheathed his sword.

'Autumn Moon's Accord!'

It was the third style of the Celestial Moon Sword Canon!

Li Xizhi had achieved his sword essence and crossed the threshold to practice this sword art more than twenty years after his younger brother, Li Xijun, had. He had only managed it with the aid of the Five-Colour Sinking Expanse Sword Art. But his innate talent was no less than his brother's. By combining the Five-Colour Sinking Expanse Sword Art with the Flowing Light of the Triple Moon, he produced six streams of sword light. Executing Autumn Moon's Accord on this foundation made it even more devastating.

The next moment, a violent, piercing, earth-shattering shriek erupted from within the palm. The sound was so sharp and brittle that the Master Monks winced in pain, while the monks below clutched their ears as blood trickled out.

The great golden palm flinched as if it had clamped down on a steel nail. It faltered in a pained reflex, then, as if in a fit of rage, it slammed down onto Beidan's great array.

BOOM!

The dozen or so Foundation Establishment cultivators within the array all spat blood and were sent flying like arrows shot from a bow. The great array of Beidan exploded with a deafening roar, emitting a thick golden smoke. Like a glass dome struck by a hammer, it was instantly covered in a web of fine cracks.

BANG!

A tremendous crash echoed from the main hall atop Beidan's peak as thick white smoke billowed out. The central array plate had clearly been shattered beyond repair.

Silence fell over the scene.

Crack…

The sound of the great array of Beidan breaking apart filled the air. Whether it was the monks on the sea or the cultivators on the island, no one had yet recovered from their stupor. They were not shocked that Zhuzhen had broken the array with a single palm strike—on the contrary, it would have been stranger if he couldn't.

What left them stunned was Zhuzhen's pained reaction.

'This is a great cultivator of the Great Konghai Temple…'

In the last few centuries in Jiangnan, only one person had fought a Merciful One as a Foundation Establishment cultivator: Duanmu Kui.

Li Xizhi had merely caused Zhuzhen a flicker of pain. If not for the array absorbing the blow, he would have been annihilated instantly. Of course, he couldn't be compared to Duanmu Kui, who, wielding an Immortal Scripture, had beaten a Merciful One from the south so badly he was forced to retreat.

But that was with an Immortal Scripture. And who was Duanmu Kui? He was a legendary figure who had dominated his era, a man who had almost single-handedly redeemed the reputation of the Locust Shade Ghost immortal foundation. Not just anyone could be said to have dominated an era. Even without an Immortal Scripture, how many in Jiangnan could have fought him?

The current scene left the entire area of Shitang speechless. No one dared to look up at the Merciful One. Even Yang Xiao'er was startled, not expecting her husband's sword strike to be so incredible. She immediately clutched a talisman in her hand.

'Please don't let him fly into a rage…'

The Merciful One Zhuzhen slowly raised his head, studying his palm.

The golden palm was perfectly smooth. Of course, there was nothing there. No matter how hastily he had acted, Li Xizhi could not possibly have broken through his spiritual body or even left a mark. But he had undeniably felt pain.

'It must be a sword art capable of harming the Shengyang Acupoint… such magnificent swordsmanship…'

Zhuzhen's guess was correct. The strike of Autumn Moon's Accord, followed by the Flowing Light of the Triple Moon, merged three into one to simultaneously extinguish the Shengyang, Qihai, and Juque acupoints. It required sword essence to execute. If combined with a sword intent that could pierce the Great Void, the technique would be even more terrifying.

'A shame the gap between us is too vast,' Zhuzhen thought. 'It was merely a surprise.'

His thoughts flashed by in an instant. His gaze fell upon the white-robed swordsman on the island, his face burning with rage, his voice turning colder.

"Good… very good… they all say your sword can shake the heavens and earth. You are truly a descendant of a Sword Immortal."

As his voice grew low, Yang Xiao'er slowly tightened her grip on the talisman in her sleeve. Li Xizhi had already given quiet orders for the other cultivators to retreat. He himself remained unhurried, cupping his hands in a salute.

"This junior was merely clever. I thank Senior for the guidance."

The next moment, a blast of black wind shot from Yang Xiao'er's sleeve. But at the same time, Zhuzhen's colossal golden body vanished from the sky. The other Master Monks gave chase to the retreating Azure Pond cultivators, while the sound of the array crackling and shattering continued. Swarms of monks began to climb onto North Dan Island like ants.

BOOM.

A great golden palm materialized and seized the black wind, its five fingers tightening and yanking it back forcefully. Li Xizhi and Yang Xiao'er, caught within the wind, both coughed up blood. Yet Li Xizhi saw that his wife was completely unafraid. She simply guided the wind calmly and whispered:

"Daoist Master Ning has made her move."

By his calculations, it was too soon for Ning Wan to have arrived from the north. Li Xizhi couldn't tell if 'Daoist Master Ning has arrived' or 'Daoist Master Ning was here all along.' Zhuzhen's behavior was equally strange.

'Is he unable to catch us, or unwilling?'

He could only lower his head slowly, pushing all such thoughts from his mind.

As soon as Yang Xiao'er finished speaking, flurries of cold snow began to fall from the sky. A woman in white emerged from the Great Void. Unlike Zhuzhen's posturing, feigned coldness, this immortal's chill was laced with genuine fury.

"The Great Konghai Temple certainly has a lot of nerve."

The cultivators on the island let out a collective sigh of relief. Li Xizhi and his wife also relaxed. Zhuzhen, secretly relieved himself, manifested his full golden spiritual body and replied:

"Daoist Master Ning, you've arrived just in time. Regarding the matter of Beidan, my Maha wishes to discuss it with you in detail."

He stood his ground, a pillar of golden light soaring behind him. A thin figure slowly materialized within it—a monk in grey robes, holding a staff.

The monk's eyes were set high on his face. He held one hand before him, and his chin was sharp, giving him a somewhat malevolent look. Unlike the colossal spiritual bodies of the seven Mahas of the north, he appeared to be an ordinary monk. But when he struck the ground with his staff, a crisp sound rang out, and all the wind and snow ceased.

Ning Wan looked at him quietly. "With the Three Yuans fallen," she said softly, "a creature like you comes out to make trouble."

An exaggerated expression of joy spread across the monk's face. He grinned, revealing a set of perfectly white teeth. "No matter how invincible they were, they are dead now, while I have become a Maha. My path to eternal life has just begun. That is the difference between Immortals and Buddhists. What's the use of letting you be proud for a few more years?"

"Beidan belongs to my temple, so we will naturally take it back. Fellow Daoist Ning, my temple will give the Supreme Yang Dao lineage some face and not harm anyone. Go back to where you came from!"

Ning Wan smiled faintly, a smile like the spring thaw, and her tone became gentle. "Even if Senior lives another four hundred years, you'll never erase the incidents of 'Yuanwu Treading on the Face' and 'One Talisman is Enough.' In the past, for the sake of friendship between our two houses, we didn't speak of it. But now that the world has heard that Baoqing has achieved the Maha realm, perhaps it's time to tell the old stories again."

Her calm words struck like a thunderclap. After all of Baoqing Maha's posturing, Ning Wan's single sentence made him clench his fists. A dangerous light gleamed in his eyes as he forced a smile through his rage.

"You bitch, you'd better worry about yourself!"

Moongaze Lake

On the grand hall, light streamed and flowed. A man in black robes with crimson trim stood before the gallery, watching the heavy rain fall upon the lake. His hand rested on the stone railing, tapping lightly, a picture of leisure.

After a while, a white-haired old man approached from the other end of the gallery. The old man was small and thin, his face a web of wrinkles, giving him an extremely shrewd appearance.

He bowed before the younger man. "Reporting to the Patriarch," he said respectfully, "the Hall of the Locust Soul from Jiangbei… has taken the lands of Midong, expanding their territory by a thousand li. Many of the great families of Midong have already pledged their allegiance. Their strength has grown considerably."

Li Jiangqian nodded with great interest. "How did they manage it? Did the Capital Immortals give Midong away? Couldn't Guan Gongxiao come up with a better plan?"

Qu Bushi quickly replied, "Patriarch, there was unrest in Midong. Several families defected to the Hall of the Locust Soul… Daoist Bai was initially unwilling to accept them… but those families brought news that the whole of White river Creek was the territory of the Secret Diffusion lineage. Lord Guan simply went with the flow and gave them Midong… Daoist Bai didn't harm those families, seeming to intend to make use of them once the storm passes."

Li Jiangqian nodded. "That's a passable explanation. Daoist Bai isn't a fool, just exceedingly greedy. He won't do anything truly unforgivable, but for a small grievance, his greed will make him overlook it."

Qu Bushi nodded eagerly. "Precisely because of this news, I've heard… that in recent days, Daoist Bai intends to conquer Fanyun and unify White river Creek."

"That Hall of the Locust Soul is leakier than a sieve…" Li Jiangqian sneered. "People are all the same. After one or two successful ventures, they think everyone is just like them. My family and the Capital Immortals Dao have kept our distance, so he's gradually lost his fear of Purple Mansion Realm powers. He thinks they're nothing special. Seeing Revering Radiance Gate and Lotus Temple locked in a fierce battle, unable to even manage the chaos in their own territories, he decided to make his move."

"And Revering Radiance Gate is happy to let them fight. With the Secret Diffusion lineage gathered, Fanyun's purpose no longer exists. They can cleanly rid themselves of their vassals in the area. It's killing two birds with one stone. And they have the perfect excuse of being tied up by the Buddhist Dao… they have nothing to fear."

He surveyed the entire situation, thinking to himself:

'Revering Radiance Gate is truly formidable. Their planning, before and after, has been flawless, and they've managed to distance themselves from everything completely. After all, when orchestrating something like this, even the puppeteer has to be wary.'

Qu Bushi didn't know what he was thinking and dared not speak. He saw Li Jiangqian suddenly become thoughtful.

"Guan Gongxiao… I believe he has a sister, named Guan Lingdie? I hear she is quite beautiful… hmm… the Saintess of the Demonic Dao… Has she been in Jiangbei recently?"

Chapter 838: The Great Rat

Qu Bushi hurried forward, his voice respectful.

"Reporting to the Family Head, it was indeed Guan Lingdie. The Capital Immortals Dao sent her to the Eastern Sea. As for the Capital Immortals Dao itself… they've been shuffling their personnel quite aggressively, replacing several cultivators stationed near the borders of White river Creek."

"Guan Gongxiao still dotes on his sister," Li Jiangqian mused, nodding to himself. It was understandable. Though opportunities abounded at a True Monarch's side, if he were in Guan Gongxiao's shoes, he wouldn't have been willing to send Li Quewan either, even if she hadn't already entered seclusion for her breakthrough.

'A personnel shuffle… Don't tell me that Guan fellow scoured his entire sect and sent every female cultivator he could find? Knowing Guan Gongxiao's personality, it's not out of the question…'

When it came to matters surrounding a True Monarch, female cultivators were always more convenient than males. Over the past few years, Li Jiangqian had already been gradually replacing the cultivators stationed on the northern shore with members of the Fei family and women, just to prevent any unforeseen incidents.

Qu Bushi lowered his head slightly and continued, "The two families have been in a standoff for several months, with skirmishes beginning to break out. Many great families and demonic cultivators have come to spy. One of them, a fellow with rather paltry skills, was spotted at a glance by Lord Cui on the river and captured."

"He has been taken to a side hall, awaiting your judgment, my lord…"

This was no surprise to Li Jiangqian. "I am aware," he replied calmly. "He's one of the Hall of the Locust Soul's people. Protector Cui already sent a message. I will question him myself."

A chill crept into his smile. "They have some nerve. Not just on the river—demonic cultivators have been spotted snooping around our northern shore as well. Give them an inch and they take a mile. A mere Foundation Establishment Realm demonic cultivator, gathering some rabble, dares to spy on my family's mountain gate…"

'If it weren't for more pressing matters…' he thought coldly, 'I'd dispatch a protector to fetch his head!'

A shiver went down Qu Bushi's spine. He hadn't expected the faction across the river would dare to spy so openly. That old Daoist Bai had clearly underestimated the reach of a Purple Mansion Realm power and overestimated his own sect's ability to keep secrets. The old man could only bow his head in silence.

Most of the clan's Foundation Establishment cultivators had been sent to the river, and Li Jiangqian once again felt he was short on manpower, especially those from the direct lineage.

Li Jianglong had returned from the north and was now in seclusion. Having reached the eighth level of Qi Refining, he could attempt his breakthrough to the Foundation Establishment Realm after consuming the Talisman Pill and the Three Perfection Breakthrough Pill. Jiangxia was a bit faster, but not by much.

As for the rest of the Li family, a new generation of cultivators—Fei Chingyi, An Xuantong, and even Li Zhoufang, Li Zhouyang, and Li Xinghan—was gradually reaching the later stages of Qi Refining. Li Jiangqian made a quick mental calculation.

'In about ten years, our family will see its peak number of Foundation Establishment cultivators. It won't even be a problem to have one for each mountain peak… We will truly become a behemoth, just like the Xiao family of old…'

As the two were discussing matters of the north, a cultivator approached from the side, drew a small letter from his sleeve, and presented it. Li Jiangqian's expression turned peculiar as he read it.

His gaze swept over the heavy rain outside the window. He dismissed Qu Bushi, then turned and walked back into the hall, sending someone to summon Li Xuanxuan and Li Minggong.

The old man arrived quickly, riding the wind. He moved with haste, yet his face was wreathed in smiles, as if he had heard good news. Li Minggong, however, was nowhere to be seen, likely at a critical juncture in her cultivation of

spell arts. The current conflict with the Capital Immortals Dao wasn't a full-blown war, and they had enough people. Moreover, Cui Jueyin was in charge and knew the secrets behind the situation, so he was more than capable of handling things. Thus, they let Li Minggong focus on her training.

Li Xuanxuan took the letter from Li Jiangqian. As he read, Li Jiangqian poured a cup of tea for the elder.

"Daoist Master Qiuhu fought in the Southern Sea… and was forced to retreat by Maha. Beidan is lost…"

Whenever Li Xuanxuan came to the main hall, Li Jiangqian would personally pour his tea, always at the perfect temperature. It was just the man's way, making others feel at ease in his presence. Li Xuanxuan quietly accepted the cup with a smile.

"It's rare to get news of Li Xizhi… This is a good thing… A family of sword immortals should have a sword cultivator, after all."

The letter had evidently mentioned Li Xizhi drawing his sword, but Li Xuanxuan's smile was strained. Li Jiangqian's frown deepened. He set down the teapot and lowered his voice.

"Something is very wrong with this. It's been wrong from the start. Tell me, this Zhuzhen Merciful One… why would he suddenly take Shitang? Was it necessary for the Great Konghai Temple? Even if we assume there's some secret we low-level cultivators don't understand… why would he take Shitang without harming a single cultivator from the Azure Pond?"

"Daoist Master Qiuhu was clearly stationed to guard the north. How could she appear at Shitang in a flash? Not even traversing the Great Void is that fast, unless the Daoist Master possesses supreme wisdom and knew about it long in advance."

"Furthermore, after the Zhuzhen suffered such a humiliation, it wouldn't have been excessive for him to strike someone down in anger…"

Li Xuanxuan had been worried that Li Xizhi was drawing too much attention, but he hadn't considered Li Jiangqian's line of reasoning. Hearing it now, he asked, "What are you implying?"

Li Jiangqian's expression was unreadable. "I received news some time ago that the Lotus Temple also ceded territory to the Revering Radiance Gate."

As Li Xuanxuan pondered this, the pieces seemed to fit. Li Jiangqian continued in a low voice, "They are both leaders of the Immortal Dao, after all… They shouldn't be on such friendly terms with Buddhist cultivators…"

The old man understood his meaning, but it was hard to say whether the Azure Pond had deliberately given up Beidan as part of a secret trade, or if they were secretly colluding with the Great Konghai Temple on some grander scheme.

Li Jiangqian glanced at him. "The one who suffers most is the Lingu Family."

The old man stroked his beard and nodded.

As Li Jiangqian saw it, with Ning Wan supporting the Azure Pond alone, it was understandable that she would trade Beidan for some form of aid. And what kind of place was Shitang? The Lingu Family had been operating there for years, using the Wu Oakworm and Ginseng-Timber Wood to bleed it dry day by day. Ning Wan couldn't possibly have been unaware. There was also a marketplace there that benefited the Ning and Si families, but with Yuanxiu's death, that market was doomed to fail.

Seeing the old man remain silent, Li Jiangqian whispered, "Daoist Master Ning should still be in the Southern Sea."

Li Jiangqian was not one for idle speculation; he was hinting to the old man that he had already used the Immortal Mirror to check. Li Xuanxuan's face filled with worry. "I just fear… that things are not stable for Xizhi."

This was precisely what unsettled Li Jiangqian. "Who would reveal their true strength for no reason when they could keep it hidden?" he said softly. "Stepping into the limelight is never a safe path. It seems like he's earned everyone's praise, but with his status, does he really need such accolades? From start to finish, there's no benefit for him in this, only for the Azure Pond."

"I don't believe Daoist Master Ning is the type to push Xizhi forward for her own gain," the old man countered. "She is not like Yuanxiu, and the Li family is not what it once was… And don't forget… he is Zhaojing's brother."

'Once you reach the Purple Mansion Realm and attain a Life Divine Ability, your heart changes, no matter who you are.'

Li Jiangqian could only nod silently. Though he thought otherwise, it was not the time to say more. "In any case, this doesn't bode well. Daoist Master Ning

is the most powerful figure involved. It would be best for you, my lord, to meet with her on the lake. There should be no obstacles."

Li Xuanxuan nodded grimly, then changed the subject. "I've heard about the matter with the Hall of the Locust Soul. Do not be rash…"

Li Jiangqian smiled. "You underestimate me, old master."

Li Xuanxuan said no more, but his heart was heavy with concern.

'If it weren't for Daoist Bai, and if our family wasn't in Jiangbei, we would have found it difficult to escape this entanglement. This Li family rules their domain with an iron fist, commanding factions from afar, their background profound. They are all so-called young masters of a great family, and the one governing them is a cunning youth in black and crimson robes, a golden-eyed scion with great ambitions who will stop at nothing… This young man's father was a peerless talent among Foundation Establishment cultivators, and above him is an ancestor, a Daoist Master whose whereabouts are unknown…'

'They're the protagonists of this drama, while we are just clowns on the side! If my family were in Jiangbei, we would have already packed up and fled overseas by now.'

He left without another word to write his letter. Li Jiangqian set down his brush, only to see a young man in a red robe approaching the hall from outside, a folding fan in his hand. It was his uncle, Zhouming.

Li Jiangqian smiled. "Uncle, you seem to be in a leisurely mood today, to have time to visit me."

Zhouming, a blissful newlywed, had lost his usual debonair flair. His face was a mask of misery as he shook his head. "These past few months… I haven't been able to visit a single pleasure barge. I don't know how Shouyu gets her information, but every time I slip away, she shows up moments later. She doesn't say a word, just sits there smiling and watching…"

"I break out in a cold sweat every time. And those poor girls? They usually end up kneeling on the floor, weeping…"

Li Jiangqian was well aware of his uncle's recent antics and stifled a laugh. The red-robed man before him shook his head again. "I thought I could get a breath of fresh air on a trip to the Azure Pond, see the sights, but I was called back as soon as I arrived. I didn't even get to see anything…"

He sighed. "In this rainy season, there's nothing more relaxing than drifting on the lake in a boat and watching the rain. But I have no heart for it anymore. I came here to hide."

Zhouming loathed tedious duties more than anyone. To be driven to seek out work in the main hall showed just how desperate he was. Li Jiangqian clicked his tongue and offered some comfort. "Aunt is from a prestigious family, a Foundation Establishment cultivator, a first-rate figure… If you put in more effort, Uncle, a happy marriage is the best thing you could ask for…"

At the mention of this, Zhouming's face paled slightly, and he sighed. "She's a direct disciple of an immortal sect, very capable… You should find something for her to do… A dignified Foundation Establishment cultivator, tormenting me day in and day out? I can't take it anymore…"

Li Jiangqian understood at once. He smiled inwardly but put on a thoughtful expression.

'He has a point. A woman of her standing, the wife of a Purple Mansion Realm direct descendant, should have a position. It's only proper.'

He had been so busy lately that he had overlooked the matter. "What you say is reasonable, Uncle. I recall that Aunt cultivates the Blazing Fire. Coincidentally, the clan is re-establishing the Qi-gathering division, to be called the 'Furnace Tribute Division.' We will have to trouble her to lead it!"

The Li family's Qi-gathering branch possessed a treasure, an ancient artifact called Stray Fragrance that Li Xuanfeng had acquired. It was originally from the Si Family and could store spiritual qi without letting it dissipate. His words implied that Xia Shouyu would now be in charge of it.

Spiritual qi was always a finite resource, making this no easy job. The one in charge needed not only status but also cunning. Li Jiangqian's arrangement was perfect. Zhouming didn't grasp all the subtleties, but he nodded repeatedly. "My thanks, Family Head. There is one other matter… My brother Zhoufang's eldest son, Li Jiangzong, has broken through to the Qi Refining realm. He cultivates the Pheasant Fire March Art from the True Fire lineage. My brother dotes on him and hopes he can study under our aunt, Li Minggong. If you could put in a good word for him…"

Li Zhoufang had been blessed with many children. First there was Li Queyi cultivating at Purple Smoke, and now there was Li Jiangzong. All of them were quite

promising. With Li Xinghan from the Yuandu branch as well, their lineage had become the most prominent of the main branch.

Li Jiangqian naturally agreed. A new, promising member of the direct line was a good thing. Although Li Minggong was from the Yuanwan Branch, she held no such sectarian prejudices and would surely be delighted. He smiled and asked, "How old is this young cousin of mine?"

Zhouming snapped open his fan. "Twenty-three, a little younger than Queyi."

Just as he finished speaking, a figure appeared outside the hall. It was Li Minggong, dressed in a white gown, the lantern in her hand unlit—a stark contrast to her usual attire.

Li Jiangqian then remembered that today was the anniversary of Li Chenghui's death. She must have been paying her respects, which was why the person sent to summon her couldn't get through to her manor.

Affection fades when one is gone. For the first two years, the anniversary rituals had been grand affairs, but now, few people still remembered Li Chenghui. Only the three clan members who stood to inherit his legacy made a lively show of it every year, organizing ceremonies more splendid than those for their own ancestors. Whether their sentiment was false or genuine, Li Chenghui had left no children, and at least someone was there to manage his affairs.

Li Jiangqian's black robe was appropriate enough, but Zhouming was still clad in bright red. He wasn't a bad person, just utterly thoughtless. He had barely met Li Chenghui a few times in his life, and even seeing his aunt in mourning white didn't seem to register, which made Li Jiangqian cringe.

Fortunately, Li Minggong wasn't one to fuss over such things. "I've recently mastered the Art of Wondrous Transformations," she said gently. "It was a congratulatory gift from the Slaughter Jun Gate to the Daoist Master back then. The art is highly compatible with my immortal foundation, and that pocket of purple malevolent qi on Gardenia Scenery Mountain was a wondrous aid in my training… Its potential is immense."

"You cultivate the Radiant Fire, which is even more compatible than my True Fire. You should give it a try. There's more to this art than meets the eye."

The Slaughter Jun Gate's Art of Wondrous Transformations was a method of consuming Radiant Fire and Malevolent Earth to exhale Earth Fire malevolent

qi. It was quite difficult to cultivate. Li Minggong's expression was one of pleasant surprise, having mastered it with the aid of the purple malevolent qi.

If it could excite Li Minggong, who cultivated True Fire, it would surely be even more effective for him with his Radiant Fire. Li Jiangqian's interest was piqued. He nodded eagerly and sighed. "Nothing from that Daoist Master Junjian is ever subpar… And he has such good relations with our family, the things he gives us are bound to be better than what he gives others… Have you had a look at the juniors in the family, my lady?"

Li Minggong moved to take a seat. "I was just about to speak with you about that. I've seen Jiangzong. He is modest and eager to learn. While one might not call his temperament exceptional, his magnanimity already surpasses most."

Hearing this, it was clear the boy was quite promising. Not even his father, Li Zhoufang, had received such praise, and Li Zhouluo had only been described as "talented." Li Jiangqian looked up slightly, breathing a sigh of relief.

'Among the Jiang and Que generation, aside from my own younger brothers, we finally have someone presentable!'

He now understood Li Xuanxuan's joyful expression when he had arrived. The old man cared most about such matters and must have known early on. Li Jiangqian sighed. "The lack of promising successors has been a constant worry for the old master and the other elders. Having a talented one at last should ease their minds and quench their thirst."

Among the Zhou and Xing generation, only Li Xinghan could be considered prominent. In the Jiang and Que generation, besides the golden-eyed children, Queyi and Quexi were at Purple Smoke, leaving only Quewan on the lake, and her cultivation was so rapid she had no time for thoughts of offspring.

Zhouming finally seemed to grasp the situation. He asked a few questions about family affairs, careful not to mention the abandoned Funan. "I hear there's been some fighting on the river," he said. "Our cultivators have clashed with those from the Capital Immortals Dao, and we've captured a demonic cultivator. Which faction is he from?"

Li Jiangqian shook his head. "Let's bring him up for the elders to see."

He gave a quiet order, and Qu Bushi entered from outside the hall, dragging a young-looking demonic cultivator. The man's hands were bound tight, his cultivation sealed. His face was pale, and he was drenched in a cold sweat.

Zhouming looked at the man, but the youth was unable to speak. Li Jiangqian said with a thin smile, "My family is in a major conflict with the Capital Immortals Dao, and this fellow was spying from the sidelines. Lord Cui's ocular arts are formidable; he plucked him right out."

He held up the letter from Cui Jueyin, read from it, and then passed it to Zhouming and Li Minggong. "He's already been interrogated. He's from the Hall of the Locust Soul. The Secret Diffusion Dao lineage has a long history, so he has some backing."

He turned his head, his voice turning sharp. "Your name! Your position!"

The young man immediately dropped to his knees. "This lowly one… this lowly one is a protector under the Hall of the Locust Soul, called Protector Black Rat. I am one of the seven protectors before the main hall, in charge of taxes on spiritual items in the Funan area, and I also manage a storehouse…"

"The Hall Master was unsure what was happening on the river and specifically sent me to investigate. I had no intention of spying, I swear! Please, my lords, see the truth!"

Zhouming, unaware of the underlying situation, reacted genuinely. He smacked his fan into his palm, clearly displeased. "Is there truly such a thing as owing a favor to a Purple Mansion Realm cultivator? But he only has a favor, while our family truly *has* a Purple Mansion Realm expert. We can't let them bully us as they please…"

Li Jiangqian sighed dramatically. "Uncle, you don't understand. This Secret Diffusion Dao lineage is no simple matter. The Purple Mansion Realm faction behind them has deep roots, possibly even tracing back to a True Monarch… The family must avoid this conflict at all costs!"

Zhouming was taken aback. This gave him a much better understanding of why they had lost Funan. He shot to his feet. "What should we do then?" he stammered. "Should we… release him?"

"No…"

Li Jiangqian made no attempt to hide his intentions from the kneeling demonic cultivator. His eyes, light and sharp, flickered across his uncle, and he changed his words mid-sentence. He laughed in fury. "But we cannot be bullied like this either. I will kill him and make the other side taste some pain."

As the words left his lips, a sense of unease washed over him. He saw Zhouming jump to his feet, a look of shock and terror on his face. "You can't kill him! If there's a True Monarch involved…"

Even Qu Bushi was stunned and quickly pleaded, "My lord, I'm afraid you can't kill him…"

Li Minggong, too, frowned slightly, clearly disagreeing. She was mindful of his position and remained silent, but if he persisted, she would likely speak up as well.

Li Jiangqian surveyed the room with amusement, his feigned anger subsiding slightly. "He may have received a token, but that doesn't mean his entire lineage has it! Just because of one token, everyone wants to put him on a pedestal?"

The two men resumed their persuasion. After a long while, Li Jiangqian finally relented.

"Fine, I won't kill him, but he can't just come and go as he pleases. Take him down and let him taste some suffering first."

Zhouming let out a long breath. Before Li Jiangqian could change his mind again, he hurriedly had Qu Bushi take the man away. Li Jiangqian simply raised an eyebrow, taking it all in, a realization dawning in his mind.

'Protector Black Rat… an important figure. Good, very good.'

Qu Bushi hadn't left yet. He paused to ask for instructions. "Where should he be imprisoned?"

An idea immediately formed in Li Jiangqian's mind—it was time to make use of the Roaming Rampart Lapis Pagoda on the lake.

The Roaming Rampart Lapis Pagoda was a gift from Li Xizhi years ago. It was extremely valuable and had been kept in Qingdu, intended as an artifact for training the younger generation and punishing disciples. Yet, it had seen little use over the years.

Firstly, just after they acquired it, Li Jiangqian had come out of seclusion to reorganize the family's affairs. The entire Li clan was incredibly busy, so no one had the time to figure it out.

Secondly… its power was simply too unbalanced. Forget the Li family disciples, even Chen Yang had entered it once and came out covered in soot. After braving

the Supreme He Fire, he found the Crop-Injuring Wind in the middle to be pitifully weak, while the final Autumn-Perishing Water was overwhelmingly powerful. Among the many cultivators of the Li family, only Cui Jueyin and Ding Weizeng could complete the full trial.

The benefits gained were not that significant either. For cultivators of Cui Jueyin's and Ding Weizeng's level, refining their true essence or clearing their spiritual sense was of little use. As for Qi Refining cultivators, they had no hope of withstanding the Supreme He Fire.

'It's an ancient artifact, after all. With the changes to Fruition Attainment, everything is different now. It's not very practical.' he thought. 'But the artifact is controllable. Unless the Northern Palace Thunder at the very top is activated, it won't be fatal. No wonder they said it was for punishing disciples; that's its best use.'

"This fellow is weak," he said coldly. "Send him into the Crop-Injuring Wind. Let him have a taste of suffering!"

The Roaming Rampart Lapis Pagoda wouldn't kill, but it would inflict continuous torment, enough to leave an indelible mark on the man's mind. As Qu Bushi dragged him away, Zhouming returned to his seat to discuss some family matters before taking his leave.

Li Jiangqian sat quietly in the main seat, a chill spreading through his heart.

'It's already begun… Black Rat's capture wasn't an accident. No wonder it was so sloppy… Now we'll see if the Hall of the Locust Soul wants him back. If they really send someone to retrieve him, he must play a significant role.'

The True Monarch was prophesied to descend within six years, which meant it couldn't be an infant. The descent would be into a host who had long felt the connection, or a reincarnation whose destiny had only recently awakened… in which case there probably wouldn't be any grand omens.

'He's been captured for some time now. News from the north should arrive soon.'

Li Minggong had watched the entire performance without a word. Seeing Li Jiangqian lost in thought, she spoke up, her brow furrowed. "From his description, this man seems extremely important to the Hall of the Locust Soul. They will send someone to ransom him."

Li Jiangqian sighed internally. It seemed Li Minggong also had her suspicions. He remained silent on the matter and simply said, "I'll go see for myself."

The woman departed on a trail of fire. Li Jiangqian waited, trying to read through some scrolls. After a while, he grew agitated, unable to distinguish which thoughts were truly his own. He strode outside and leaned against the corridor railing once more, sighing as he gazed out at the ceaseless storm over Jiangbei.

"This great rain… the blood of the great families and the Hall of the Locust Soul… It would be best if none of it splashes onto my family."

Chapter 839: A Farewell

The Hall of the Locust Soul did not keep Li Jiangqian waiting long. Before the heavy rain could even begin to subside, a black wind swept down from the north, arriving on the northern shore with a menacing roar.

But as soon as it crossed over Cold Cloud Peak and left Jiangbei behind, the storm seemed to lose its nerve. The black wind dissipated and the malevolent aura vanished, leaving only a withered, bald old eccentric flying low over the lake. He approached the grand formation array and bowed, his voice a wail.

"This humble one is Daoist Wu Gui, one of the eight great protectors before the throne of the Jiangbei Hall of the Locust Soul… I beg an audience with the noble of the Immortal Clan!"

Li Jiangqian had already given orders to have Daoist Wu Gui watched, so a guide was immediately dispatched to lead him in. Wu Gui hurried inside, and upon entering the main hall, he was struck by an oppressive and terrifying majesty. His gaze lifted to a pair of golden eyes gleaming from the shadows, and he immediately dropped to his knees.

"This humble cultivator greets the noble of the Immortal Clan! My Hall Master is engaged in a dispute with the Brahma Cloud Cave and could not come himself. I am here to apologize to the Immortal Clan on his behalf…"

With a single glance, Li Jiangqian knew this Wu Gui was far more astute than that old rat. Perhaps he had a better understanding of the powers in the Purple Mansion Realm, or perhaps he was just a natural coward.

'Hmm… this one seems more sensible. He might even end up serving under a True Monarch someday.'

Li Jiangqian adopted a stern tone and replied, "So, it is you, the men of the north! The Hall of the Locust Soul may have inherited its sacred lineage, but does that give you the right to ignore the rules of the Immortal Dao? To slaughter commoners at will and send this fiend to wreak havoc upon my river!"

Of course, Li Jiangqian had no idea if the man had actually used any blood qi techniques on the river, but he knew in his bones that this Daoist was far from clean. The accusation terrified Wu Gui, who stammered, "My lord… my lord… That beast Black Rat has committed many evils, and our Hall Master is also greatly displeased with him. He gave this humble one a direct order to capture him and bring him back for severe punishment. This is also our way of thanking you, my lord, for teaching him a lesson on our behalf…"

'Daoist Bai could say something like that? That donkey-brained idiot… could words like these actually come out of his mouth?'

Li Jiangqian understood that the man before him was merely smoothing things over to complete his mission. Since he had no intention of getting involved anyway, he took the offered olive branch and relented. "The Hall Master is right. He does indeed require proper discipline. As the leader of a major power, such actions are unacceptable."

Hearing this, Wu Gui hastily explained, "Precisely! Precisely! The Hall Master also said he intends to punish him by sending him away… to a remote outpost in the east to supervise low-level cultivators mining spirit veins. He will only retain his post as a warehouse keeper…"

Li Jiangqian shook his head inwardly. One plague after another. He drew out a token, intending to let Wu Gui retrieve the prisoner himself, but a wave of caution made him reconsider.

'I can't let them meet. This Black Rat is clearly a dead man walking, marked for death by someone else. Wu Gui is a complete fence-sitter. If he sees my family's treasure and lets his tongue slip later, he might bring some great power down on us to take our Roaming Rampart Lapis Pagoda.'

He changed his tune. "Wait here. I'll have someone bring him up."

Wu Gui nodded repeatedly. Li Jiangqian, meanwhile, pulled a message from Wang Quwan from his desk. Recalling that the man was in seclusion at Panglu Ridge, he asked in a low voice, "A remote outpost? To which mountain has he been assigned?"

Wu Gui quickly replied, "It is near the White Ye Immortal Sect, beside White Treasury Prefecture. As for mountains… there seem to be several ridges nearby, but no major peaks."

Li Jiangqian acted as though he had only asked out of idle curiosity and quickly lost interest. Secretly, however, he unfurled a map under his desk. A quick check confirmed his suspicion: Panglu Ridge was located in White Treasury Prefecture. The dominant local clan was even the Wang clan, a branch of Wang He from the Capital Immortals Dao.

'Hoh.'

Not daring to involve himself any further, he watched as Qu Bushi escorted the prisoner in. The man, having spent only a few hours within the swirling winds of the Roaming Rampart Lapis Pagoda, was already trembling uncontrollably. His Foundation Establishment Realm was clearly built on a weak foundation, likely a fluke achieved with blood qihe was nothing compared to the Wen brothers.

'Perfect. Since he reached the Foundation Establishment Realm through blood arts, his healing abilities will be exceptional. Once he returns and supplements his energy, these minor wounds will vanish. He'll be ready to handle the True Monarch's business right away…'

As he mused, a sudden uproar filled the hall.

"You damned plague! You dare to refine blood qi on the territory of the Immortal Clan! If I don't beat you to death, you plague-ridden cur, I won't be able to face the Hall Master when I return!"

The moment Wu Gui saw Black Rat, he began to curse and beat him. His words, of course, were a desperate attempt to save the man's life. Li Jiangqian watched in amusement, allowing the tirade to continue. Black Rat's face contorted with resentment, and he opened his mouth as if to retort.

Slap!

Daoist Wu Gui's hand was a blur, a single strike filling Black Rat's mouth with blood. Li Jiangqian clicked his tongue inwardly and gave a slight wave of his hand. Qu Bushi immediately shoved both men out of the hall.

Wu Gui's curses faded as the doors closed. Li Jiangqian gazed at Wang Quwan's letter and decided against a reply.

'A man as clever as him will understand something is wrong when I don't respond.'

The envoys from the Hall of the Locust Soul were sent on their way. As expected, Daoist Bai was caught up in a conflict with the Brahma Cloud Cave. The master of the cave was Pingwang Zi, the very same man who, years ago, had come with Wenhu to pay respects to Li Ximing, using the name of Revering Radiance Gate to secure his escape. Now, the tables had turned, and it was this old fox's turn to face misfortune.

'I wonder if he'll die at the hands of the Hall of the Locust Soul, or perhaps sooner, at the hands of Revering Radiance Gate… He is, after all, a man of Revering Radiance Gate in both name and deed. And then there was that Daoist Wenhu. If Wenhu hadn't died, he would be the one playing this role now…'

Li Jiangqian pondered this again and again. In his time, Wenhu had been a master of schemes and deception, yet Li Ximing had annihilated him with a single breath. Though Li Jiangqian had not been present, he remembered how Li Chenghuai had returned from the mountain deeply shaken, his skin slick with a cold sweat.

The young man in the black robe, seated upon the main throne, slowly set the letter down. His gaze was fixed on the vortex of fate that was Jiangbeia massive, swirling maw that could tear any genius to shreds. His expression was nearly cruel as he murmured a silent refrain.

"Fortune exhausted bars the Mansion's gate; a shallow fate prevents a greater state."

When Li Ximing had spoken those words, they were filled with melancholy. When Li Chenghuai had recounted them, he was full of lingering fear. Now, from Li Jiangqian's lips, they carried a cold cruelty and a deep-seated vigilance.

He sat with his back to the light, crumpling Wang Quwan's letter ever tighter in his fist. A brilliant flare of Radiant Fire leaped from his palm. Red and yellow flames twisted and writhed, swiftly incinerating the paper. A fine, gray dust drifted from between his fingers, scattering across the steps below his throne.

Purple Smoke Gate

Within the blessed land of Purple Smoke, ethereal clouds of mist drifted and coiled. A rosy dawn broke, its golden radiance weaving through the purple light

that flickered in and out of view among the clouds. At the very highest point, upon the Purple Terrace, the lights merged into a single, dazzling purple-gold brilliance.

The two protectors standing before the terrace wore solemn expressions. Beyond the flowing river of purple qi, the throne at the head of the hall was magnificent, its carvings profound and mysterious.

Daoist Master Tinglan, clad in autumn-yellow robes, stood amidst this vast sea of clouds. Today, however, she was not in the seat of honor but stood to the side, her body slightly bowed in a gesture of immense respect.

For on the throne sat another, a man dressed in a purple-gold Daoist robe, a scripture held loosely in his hands as he read with quiet intensity.

His face was strikingly young, with eyes like stars and slightly thin lips. His features were so perfect they seemed sculpted, like an immortal statue in a temple, yet he possessed an air of transcendent aloofness that set him far apart from the mortal coil. The simple act of him lowering his head to read was enough to captivate any gaze.

Tinglan's own bearing was exceptional, but standing beside this man, she seemed like a mere attendant deity, not daring to move an inch.

After an unknown amount of time had passed, the purple-gold light on the terrace began to recede. The man closed the book in his hands. Only then did Tinglan raise her hands, respectfully presenting a box of pills.

"Reporting to Martial Uncle, the Heavenly Oneness Essence Extraction Pill has been successfully refined. We requested the aid of Daoist Master Zhaojing of the Li clan of Wei. A total of four pills were created… they are here."

After speaking, she also produced the original clay pot. "The Immeasurable Water and Fire is here as well!" she announced with reverence.

The man she called Martial Uncle closed his eyes for a moment. He took the pills with a turn of his hand, revealing irises of purple-gold. Then, pinching his fingers together, he began to calculate, his every movement as serene as a temple deity's.

The Purple-Robed Daoist Masters voice was like a deep, resonant bell. "The Great Ancestor… has manifested in the world."

Tinglan nodded respectfully. "Reporting to Martial Uncle… after I returned from meeting you in the Southern Sea, all the lineages of the Supreme Yang Dao gathered to discuss the matter. It was decided that our gate and Azure Pond Sect would handle it."

Hearing her words, it was clear this man was none other than the long-missing Daoist Master Zimuthe only great Daoist Master in the entire Yue State's Supreme Yang Dao lineage who had perfected all five Daoist divine abilities!

Daoist Master Zimu had clearly only just arrived. He listened to her report and stated flatly, "Xiukui sent Houfu, and the Hengzhu Immortal Dao sent Hengxing."

Tinglan cupped her hands in deference. "Martial Uncle's divine abilities are vast. Though you were not present, you knew exactly who each sect would send."

Zimu's perfectly sculpted face remained unchanged, but his tone was laced with disappointment. "The heavens do not favor our Supreme Yang Dao."

Tinglan paused, uncertain. Zimu sat quietly and continued, "Lou Xing was once hailed as the Dao Child of the Xiukui Dao, seen as the next great Daoist Master. His combat prowess is formidable, but his cultivation is lacking. He has been stagnating at the Purple Mystery stage for countless years, wasting endless life-shortening remedies in a desperate attempt to break through. If an event of this magnitude cannot even stir him from his seclusion, it seems he does not have much time left."

Daoist Master Lou Xing was of the same generation as the Three Yuans of Azure Pond. Zimu could lament his fate, but Tinglan wasn't a match for even a single one of the man's divine abilities; she would never dare to comment. She lowered her head and listened as Zimu spoke on. "When he and I pass from this world, the Supreme Yang Dao will have no more champions. The final rays of the Green Pine Temple's last golden age will be extinguished."

His words made Tinglan's head snap up. Zimus voice was soft. "The great Azure Pond Sect, a power on the level of an upper sect, nearly collapsed entirely. Now, it leans on a Daoist Master who cultivates frost and has only just entered the Purple Mansion Realm. The Sword Gate's reputation was once so great it sought to emulate the Thunder Palace and uphold the morals of Jiangnan. For centuries, it has been in steady decline, now relying on the Li family for backing, too timid to even step outside its own gates."

"Xiukui and Hengzhu are both branches of the Moon Radiance Branch. The Great Xiukui Monastery will soon be left with only Houfu and Kui Qi. The Hengzhu Immortal Dao is fierce and unyielding; their war with the Murong family shattered the very lineage that had just begun to show promise. Hengli and Hengxing… they were propped up by the very last dregs of the Hengzhu foundation…"

"Cultivation Transcendence has entered seclusion and is no longer in the Yue State. Once I am gone, this blessed land of Purple Smoke will be left with only you."

Tinglan was speechless. "But… but no matter what, we are still the Supreme Yang Dao…"

Zimu gave a cold laugh. "A fine Supreme Yang Dao, indeed. A Supreme Yang Dao that doesn't even cultivate the 'Supreme Yang'!"

Tinglan dared not speak again. The great Daoist Master took a step forward, his voice low. "The Origin Mansion has been in seclusion for years. Li Jiangqun was even besieged and killed at Moongaze Lake. Where do you think the deterrent power of the Supreme Yang Dao comes from? It used to be our Dharma Treasures! One Pristine Water, one Cultivation Transcendencethose two are still fighting in the heavens! Others may not know what kind of person Pristine Water is, but how could we not? The only one who might have intervened to protect us, Cultivation Transcendence, no longer even comes to Jiangnan. And that 'Yuzhen' has gone to the Northern Sea to establish a new lineage!"

"Ultimately, it is the Supreme Yang Dao. All five houses can sit at the same table. A Purple Mansion Realm expert from one house is an expert for all five. A great Daoist Master is a great Daoist Master for the entire Yue State. To put it nicely, it's mutual aid. To put it bluntly, it's collusion, a force to intimidate all of Jiangnan… Now, with Lou Xing and myself gone, tell me, can the five houses combined even compare to a single Golden Feather family?"

"Most importantly… there are no more great Daoist Masters. Yuandao will not get involved… and so, the Supreme Yang Dao will have no more great Daoist Masters."

His gaze drifted to the distant sea of clouds as he spoke grimly. "Li Jiangqun bought the Supreme Yang Dao another five hundred years, but even that must come to an end. Our cultivators fail time and again to break through to the

Golden Core Realm. Azure Pond was forced to cede Shitang, and a man as domineering as Lou Xing didn't even raise a single question…"

Tinglan met his solemn, statue-like eyes. "Whether he is still alive remains unknown."

After a long moment of contemplation, Tinglan said respectfully, "But… how can the Supreme Yang Dao truly decline? The younger generation has its share of brilliant talents. We could summon a dozen Purple Mansion Realm experts at a moment's notice. If a great war were to break out in Jiangnan, surely the Underworld would not allow it."

Zimu held the scripture in his hands, his tone placid. "The Underworld has been too lenient with you, so much so that you now see them as your protectors. When the time comes that Jiangnan not only lacks great Daoist Masters but also cultivators with the *potential* to become one, who knows how long they'll have to wait to harvest Metallic Essence. Do you think the Underworld can't devise another plan? If they change their minds one day, all of you will become little more than stray dogs."

He continued with detached coolness, "The mortal world's Fruition Attainments of Wu Light and Luoxia make you all tremble with fear, keeping you on edge day and night, too afraid to even voice a complaint. Yet the Yin Division of the Underworld and the powers of the North are factions of the same caliber, and you feel no fear of them. It seems you have been kept in this pen for so long that you can no longer even see where your masters are placing their game pieces."

Tinglan was speechless. She could only bow low. "I beg Martial Uncle… for guidance!"

Zimu's figure was imposing, making Tinglan appear small and delicate before him, barely reaching his shoulder. Her expression was a mixture of confusion and unease.

Zimu smiled faintly. He paced once around the Purple Terrace, as if bidding a final farewell to the blessed land that had birthed and raised him. He reached out and gently patted her head in a comforting gesture.

"Rest assured. No matter how bad things get, you can always hide in the blessed land. The spiritual shield will be left for you. There is no need to return the Immeasurable Water and Fire to me. As long as there is no news of my demise,

the blessed land will remain safe. Should I perish, you can offer the Dharma Treasure as tribute, following the example of the Tuoba family."

"The legacy left by my own master, my martial sisters, and even Ancestral Master Taixu has allowed me to perceive the mysteries of the Heavenly Cultivation Purple Qi Immortal Origin Metallic Essence. I will now journey to the far east, to the source where the purple qi flourishes, to seek my path."

He raised his eyebrows, and his eyes began to glow with a purple-gold light. His lips were as red as vermilion, his face as smooth as porcelain jade. Layers of purple qi billowed from beneath his feet, and his voice took on the resonance of a Brahma chant:

"On this journey to the far east to seek Fruition Attainment, if I see the purple qi coming from the east, behold the Celestial Capital's Purple Tenuity, hear the vast music of the Empyrean Heavens and the chorus of a hundred immortals; then the dying embers of incense will be restored, fallen wood will become scripture, and the deer and birds will all come to bow before me. The twenty-three mountains and one realm of this Purple Smoke Blessed Land will then rise from the earth, ascend beyond the heavens, and transform into a grotto-heaven."

Hearing his proclamation, Tinglan fell to her knees, kowtowing endlessly. When she had completed the nine prostrations and finally looked up, the throne before her was empty. All that remained was a single, sparkling, perfectly round purple-gold orb.

"A Dharma Treasurethe Purple Qi Immortal Origin Mystic Shroud!"

Chapter 840: Entrusted

Tinglan carefully held the spherical purplish-gold pearl. It was cool to the touch, and though it appeared unremarkable, it was a priceless treasure coveted by all in this realm. She couldn't sense its grade or any magical energy; only its substantial weight was palpable.

She held the pearl up, standing against the brilliant morning glow. The golden light of the dawn, reflected by the purple pearl, caused the throne on the Purple Terrace to radiate a soft brilliance.

The world around her gradually brightened. The Purple Terrace cave dwelling, sealed for years, finally stirred. Tinglan stepped into the void and found herself in a small, enclosed Immortal Palace.

The palace's location was unknown, and its interior was a vast expanse of shimmering purple and gold. There was nothing but a single jade seat and a small platform.

This platform, roughly a palm's width in size, was carved from a single piece of purple jade. Its intricate patterns were a pale purple, hidden within the jade itself, giving it a serene and elegant look. At its center was a circular groove that reflected a faint, white light.

Tinglan stepped forward and placed the Purple Qi Immortal Origin Mystic Shroud into the groove. A ripple of power from her hand caused a wisp of faint purple light to leap from the platform, flying into her brow.

At the same moment, the Shimmering Purple Profound Grand Array of the Purple Smoke Blessed Land finally resonated with a sense of perfect harmony. Tinglan stood motionless, gradually taking control of this immensely powerful grand array.

Though small, this jade platform was the very hub of the Purple Smoke Blessed Land—the formation core of the Shimmering Purple Profound Grand Array left behind by Taixu!

Though Tinglan had single-handedly managed the Purple Smoke Gate for many years, she hadn't been qualified to control this array. She had only been granted the right to open and close its gates. To truly gain its recognition, one had to possess either the Dharma Treasure, Purple Qi Immortal Origin Mystic Shroud, or the Taixu Purple Qi Scroll.

Now that Zimu had departed, and the Dharma Treasure had fallen into her hands, Tinglan had finally entered this hallowed ground, a place only the great Daoist Masters of the Wen and Kan families had ever been allowed to enter. Yet her heart was filled with worry.

'Is it really that serious?'

The Supreme Yang Dao has been a pillar of the Jiangnan region for so many years, simply watching the clouds rise and fall, occupying a position of such dignity that other Purple Mansion Realm Daoist Masters would come to pay their respects. At its peak, a single immortal decree was all it took to summon any other Purple Mansion in Jiangnan.

Although it was weaker now, it was only because the great Daoist Masters of several sects were of similar age, and their periods of weakness happened to align. Chi Buzi, too, treated the Azure Pond branch of the Supreme Yang Dao as a burden, a terrible stroke of bad luck. Otherwise, a dignified tradition like the Supreme Yang Dao wouldn't have been so weakened.

If Zimu hadn't said these words herself, Tinglan would have dismissed any talk of trouble for the Supreme Yang Dao as a joke.

'It's a laugh, really… Hengli and Xiukui both see themselves as inheritors of the Origin Mansion lineage. My Purple Smoke and Myriad Radiance maintain the ancestral teachings, ensuring that at least our main bloodlines won't practice the Path-Extending Wondrous Art. Only Azure Pond has the ability to produce a great Daoist Master in a short period of time.'

'However… every sect has a fallback plan… my family and Hengli have our blessed lands, the Sword Gate has the various mountains of the Great Western Plateau, and Xiukui has its mountain observatories. Even if Martial Uncle is right, it merely means the Golden Age of the Supreme Yang is coming to an end…'

Her gaze fell on the jade platform before her. Dense, cloud-like Purple Qi swirled around her. Tinglan then cast her eyes toward the Immortal Seat beside her.

This seat was not grand; in fact, it was quite small and delicate, clearly built for a person of petite stature. Tinglan took a step back, performed a deep bow, and then circled the seat.

Curiously, as she reached the back of the seat, all the surrounding light dimmed. It was pitch black, but her Purple Mansion level sight was not to be obstructed by mere darkness. With a glance, Tinglan discovered several lines of elegant calligraphy inscribed on the back of the seat:

'Cultivate the truth to attain immortality, be neither impatient nor boastful, seek the ultimate state of Purple Qi, and sleep embracing the Valley Water.'

These twenty words seemed to hold a mesmerizing power, and Tinglan couldn't tear her eyes away. Her gaze was filled with deep thought, as if she had gained a new understanding of Zimu's words. The female Daoist Master moved a step away, her chest suddenly aching with a sharp pain. A powerful sense of suffocation filled her nostrils, and her lips trembled as she began to cough.

"Cough… cough, cough…"

Tinglan coughed for a long time, her world spinning, until she finally coughed up a stream of gray air from her parched throat, landing in the palm of her hand.

She opened her left hand and squinted. It was a handful of incense ash.

A chill ran down Tinglan's spine. Suppressing the urge to cough, she retreated from the back of the throne, transforming her palm into a blade and carving deeply into her chest.

Boom!

A cloud of gray smoke erupted, a large handful of incense ash spewing from her internal organs. It sprayed out in a radial pattern, mixing with the purplish-gold clouds in a harmonious sight.

'It's… a True Monarch's handwriting!'

Tinglan's form instantly transformed into a wisp of thick Purple Smoke and dispersed. The strands of smoke flew towards the jade platform, reforming into a hand as white as jade that grasped the Dharma Treasure. Her body then slowly returned to normal, and the rolling incense ash dissipated.

"Cough… cough…"

After a final two coughs, she slowly returned to normal. The blood returned to her pale face, and Tinglan immediately bowed, kowtowing nine times.

The scene before her slowly faded. The solid feel of the ground returned to her feet, and the purplish-gold pearl in her hand disappeared. Tinglan, however, didn't panic and slowly let out a breath.

The Purple Qi Immortal Origin Mystic Shroud had returned to its purplish-gold illusionary realm, and Tinglan had secured the array's recognition. She could now return to the illusion at any time from this Purple Terrace. Whether the Dharma Treasure was in her hand or not no longer mattered—she would neither take it out to fight nor would she take it out of the Blessed Land.

She stepped down from the platform with lingering fear, standing alone by the stairs and looking at the ethereal clouds.

'Since this is the case… securing the support of the Li family is even more important than I thought. At the very least, Li Zhouwei and Li Ximing… will become two Purple Mansion cultivators, one an alchemist and the other a genius whose fighting prowess is no less than Hengli's.'

'As for Ning Wan… I can try my best to win her over, but I don't have to help her with everything. It makes sense for the True Monarch to go north to deal with the Shi and supplement the south as a result of the north's loss. But I received no news about the Shitang matter, which means that girl is still cautious around me…'

Tinglan stood silently on the steps. The morning light had long since vanished. She focused her senses on the distance, where dark clouds loomed over Jiangbei, and the rain fell without end.

"Someone!"

She called softly, and a purple-robed cultivator from below hurried up. Tinglan asked, "How are things in the north?"

The man's face was very similar to Wen Wu's. He said respectfully, "Everything is under control. Daoist Bai's ambition is growing and can no longer be contained. Brahma Cloud Cave has been forced into a desperate retreat, asking for aid several times without success… And Pingwang Zi doesn't dare to abandon this place and flee, so he can only remain trapped day after day."

"A few hours ago, Daoist Bai already breached his main formation and captured Pingwang Zi alive, claiming he used infant souls to forge a spiritual artifact, a great and unforgivable evil. He has now been imprisoned."

Tinglan asked, "Oh? He could think of that crime? How much of this is true?"

The purple-robed man immediately replied, "It is likely true…"

Tinglan nodded, lost in thought. The man looked a bit embarrassed and whispered, "There is one more thing… news from overseas says that Li Zhouwei of the Li family appeared in our Xin Yu market…"

"That's good news."

Tinglan smiled faintly, but seeing the man's expression, she took a closer look. The man immediately replied, "He ran into Miss Li Queyi of the Li family, who was gathering Qi. He reportedly waited for a while."

Tinglan's expression changed. She frowned. "A while ago, they said she was being transferred overseas. Qianli told me she suspected it was the Li family's own arrangement. Since Zhaojing and others were already overseas, she gave the order to let her decide for herself… and now… why is she gathering Qi?"

She looked directly at the man. "Wen Wu has always been a smooth talker. I can't just listen to him. As his older brother, did you find out the situation from an outside source?"

The purple-robed man nodded hurriedly. "Queyi has a gentle personality, and Ling Yanzi is senile and unable to control anything. The disciples below, eager to advance to the Foundation Establishment Realm, wanted to borrow things from her…"

Tinglan understood the moment he spoke. She let out a cold laugh. "Senile and useless? Not necessarily. He's no simple character. He calmly emerged from the grotto heaven, and not even a Purple Mansion could get a word out of him. He just said it might be related to the True Monarch and kept everything under wraps… On the surface, he looks like a useless glutton, yet he was still able to break through to the Foundation Establishment Realm when he was over a hundred years old. You say he can't control his disciples today? I think he just chooses not to."

"Don't you know whose descendant he is?"

The man dared not say more. Tinglan's anger subsided, and her mood shifted. She sighed. "Alright… if he wants to go into seclusion, then so be it. After all, he has suffered enough in his life. Don't cause him any trouble over the Li family's matters."

"Should I… recall Wen Wu?"

He asked. Tinglan replied, "No need. There's no one more suitable than him. He will handle things. The disciples of Ziqi Peak are all in seclusion anyway, and there are no other tasks to be assigned. We will wait for news from the Li family."

She dismissed the man and let out a sigh of relief. She then took to the air, summoning a wisp of Purple Qi. She passed through the dense clouds and disappeared into the Great Void, where she suddenly froze.

The Great Void was dark and empty, stretching infinitely, but a woman stood not far away.

The woman was dressed in yellow, wearing a veiled hat. The white veil hung down, and she stood still. Her pale hands hung at her sides, hidden by her pale-yellow sleeves, clutching two intertwined golden rings.

As she stood in the boundless Great Void, a crimson light cascaded down on both sides, transforming into silver and settling into a leaden gray. Tinglan took a small step back and said respectfully, "I greet Daoist Master Qiushui. May I ask what brings you to my Purple Smoke Blessed Land?"

Daoist Master Qiushui's gaze penetrated her veil and rested on Tinglan's face. She said softly, "I came to pay my respects to Senior Zimu."

Tinglan's heart sank, but her clever mind immediately caught on.

'She cultivates the Whole Pill, and is naturally adept at observing the nature of things. It seems the Shimmering Purple Profound Grand Array's reaction was observed by her…'

This meant that Qiushui was not in the grotto-heaven but was in the Jiangbei area. Perhaps she was there because of the True Monarch's reincarnation. Thinking more terrifyingly, perhaps she had been waiting near the mountain gate all along…

These great Daoist Masters, who were about to break through, were one more terrifying than the last. The current Qiushui at the peak of the Purple Mansion

Realm was probably a match for Zimu. Tinglan bowed again and replied, "You are a step too late, Martial Uncle has already departed."

"Oh?"

Qiushui seemed a little surprised. She said softly, "Daoist Qingzhou is truly formidable."

Wen Qingzhou was Zimu's full name, which was now known to very few. Even fewer were those who could address her as Daoist Qingzhou. Tinglan didn't know if Qiushui meant that she had failed to predict Zimu's departure or that Zimu had departed right under her nose. She merely bowed, and the woman before her said:

"A few years ago, he obtained the Valley Water and Heavenly One Pure Origin, and began his preparations. I don't know if Qingzhou got a taste of that Valley Water; I was hoping to lend a hand. Since he did not meet with me, he must be confident in his own ability..."

"That is good. With only a few of us left in the world, I hope he succeeds..."

Her brows were filled with melancholy, as if she had only come to offer a few words of blessing.

Daoist Master Qiushui's backing was Reflecting Metal True Monarch. Everything must have been arranged for her. She was the most outstanding figure of the Zhang family in recent years and had even met the inheritor of the Origin Mansion. Tinglan could only feel envious. After thanking her on behalf of her Martial Uncle, Qiushui said:

"After the True Monarch's matter is settled, I will return to the grotto-heaven. But now that Ning Wan has successfully broken through, I must attend to what happened with... what happened with Tiaoxiao..."

The Daoist Master Yuansu once had some entanglement with Daoist Master Qiushui, and they almost became Dao companions. This incident was once considered a great joyous occasion for the Golden Feather and Azure Pond. There was also a time when Situ Tang killed a Three-Eyed Chaoshan Beast, and Daoist Master Qiushui cast a shadow of revenge for Yuansu.

Although the matter was later dropped because of Li Jiangqun, as a disciple of Zipei, Tinglan had naturally heard a little. However, this kind of thing was a

taboo, and she dared not say a word, listening to the great Daoist Master before her say:

"Back then, Tiaoxiao and Zipei were also very good friends. It was Tiaoxiao who introduced me to her. The three of us have a bond. It is only right that I look after the Ning family now…"

"I came to you for this very reason. You can both fulfill your master's last wish and my trust…"

Tinglan felt a slight sense of relief. She bowed and said, "The great Daoist Master may give any order!"

Qiushui took out a palm-sized mirror from her sleeve, held it in her palm, and said softly, "Since Yuanxiu has died, both the"Please, Lord Take This Golden Talisman" and the Huai River Map are nowhere to be found. Yuanxiu may not have given them to her, but many people are coveting these items. I ask that you help her when necessary."

"After all, my family is not of the Supreme Yang Dao tradition. It's truly inconvenient for me and my fellow sect members to help her with certain things. Once we offer a little help, it will immediately lead to a hundred times the trouble… I can only entrust this to you."

She revealed the mirror in her palm. It was small and adorable, but it shimmered with a silvery-white lightning. Qiushui said earnestly, "My ancestor once attacked the Thunder Palace and obtained this treasure from it. It was originally a pair, but the other one was lost, leaving only this single one. Its power, however, is not to be underestimated."

"I entrust this spiritual artifact to you as a reward."

'A spiritual artifact from the Thunder Palace!'

In the current world, a spiritual artifact from the Thunder Palace was definitely a very popular item. Firstly, its power was immense and its mystical uses endless. Secondly, it usually had no negative side effects, as the Thunder Palace had been gone for so many years…

"It's just to look after her… there's no need…"

Tinglan just responded when Qiushui immediately spoke up:

"If you don't accept it, where is the favor? You'll also lack the power to care for her."

Although Qiushui's words were not pleasant, they genuinely persuaded Tinglan. Previously, she might have had the thought to decline, but Martial Uncle Zimu's words had completely stripped her of any sense of security. She secretly calculated, and this spiritual artifact seemed even more important.

"I will not fail the great Daoist Master's trust."

Tinglan accepted the item. Qiushui smiled faintly, seemingly lost in thought. She lowered her hands, and the two golden rings fell from her wrists back into her hands with a crisp sound.

Qiushui rode on a surging crimson sea of waves. Tinglan felt a sense of awe. She finally looked up and asked, "The great Daoist Master's cultivation has reached its peak, unmatched by anyone in the past three hundred years. When will you seek the Golden Core… to allow this junior a glimpse of the Whole Pill's brilliance…"

Qiushui just smiled and shook her head, transforming into quicksilver in the Great Void. She left a fleeting reply:

"It's all too early."

…

Inside the Immortal Mirror.

It was snowing heavily in the Supreme Yin Manor. The round pond in the small courtyard shimmered with white light, and the white bricks on the ground were spotlessly clean. Four jade-white lanterns stood in the middle, emitting a hazy white glow.

A young man stood by the white circular pond. His forehead was smooth and his eyes were light green. He stood with his hands tucked into his sleeves, peering into the pond, waiting for the water to ripple and a faint light to appear.

"I'm just waiting for this mad dog to come here. It's the only fun I get… now that Fairy Shaohui has given her cultivation method, she's gone to the Immortal Pavilion to cultivate. There's one less person to see…"

This person was, of course, Dangjiang.

Although Dangjiang's status was not as high as Shaohui's, he was still a separated soul of the Seven reincarnations Maha Jinlian. Shaohui, on the other hand, was the soul of an early Purple Mansion realm Demon. Over time, if they were to truly compare, Shaohui would not be Dangjiang's equal in any way other than her cultivation of the Lesser Yin Dao.

Therefore, no matter what tradition Dangjiang obtained, as long as the grade wasn't too high, he could always modify it and erase its origin. Shaohui, however, found it a bit more difficult. Besides specially modifying Lesser Yin Dao traditions, she was also studying in the pavilion to increase her cultivation.

Dangjiang, naturally, did not know the details. He only knew that Shaohui had gone to a higher-level Immortal Pavilion to take up a position, and that place was empty again. There was not even a single person to talk to, so the moment his token lit up today, he rushed over.

After waiting for a long time, the sound of chanting finally began. The young man immediately pulled his head back and turned to the side, raising his chin. A man in green robes with golden tassels gradually emerged from the pond.

The man had a young face, light green eyes, wide sleeves, a loose robe, and his hair was unbound.

"Great Daoist Master Chi!"

Upon hearing this, Chi Buzi slowly opened his eyes and looked around, finally settling his gaze on the young man before him. He stepped out of the pond and said casually, "Lord Dangjiang!"

Dangjiang loved to hear this and nodded repeatedly, laughing. "Who's the unlucky one you've brought in this time?"

"An ignorant fool of a peacock…"

Chi Buzi had clearly come with a great accomplishment, but his expression was not good. He seemed preoccupied and replied, "It's that same old broken Peacock Temple. I've captured another one this time. The higher-ups will definitely blow up, so we'll have to find a new location next time…"

He observed Dangjiang's expression, sighed, and replied, "Yuanxiu failed his breakthrough and even turned into a Demon. He had many ideas, but he died a miserable death."

Chi Buzi explained casually. Dangjiang had once shared a body with him, so he naturally knew of Yuanxiu. He pursed his lips and said, "Oh, so it was that rigid old man. He just broke through to the Golden Core and died so miserably."

Chi Buzi was absent-minded, seemingly weighed down by a heavy worry. He was a person of deep thought, and yet he appeared so preoccupied that Dangjiang noticed something was off and whispered, "Why did you come up this time? A single peacock doesn't seem to be enough to exchange for that Purple Mansion cultivation method… there was no need for you to make this trip…"

Dangjiang naturally hoped he would come up every time so at least there would be someone to talk to. But Chi Buzi put seeking immortality first in all things and would not waste time on anything. There must be a reason for him to come up.

Sure enough, when Dangjiang asked, Chi Buzi immediately spoke. His face was grim, and he said in a low voice, "I went to the Shu region a few days ago and saw a thousand miles of drought. The heavens did not rain, and the springs dried up. This is a sign that the Pristine Water is not flourishing."

Upon hearing this, Dangjiang was surprised. "Isn't this a good thing? The person above your head wishes all Pristine Water cultivators were dead. If it weren't for the fact that severing all their inheritances would offend the Underworld, he wouldn't show any mercy! If he gets a little hurt, it's a perfect chance for you to make some small moves…"

Chi Buzi shook his head slightly and said in a deep voice, "Is this a place to talk?"

This courtyard was empty, without even a table or a chair, clearly not a place for conversation. Dangjiang led him to a small side courtyard. Once the door was closed, Chi Buzi said, "Whether Pristine Water is more or less hurt, it doesn't affect me much. But since the sign of Pristine Water has appeared, it's likely that the battle has reached a crucial point, and he might be coming back!"

Dangjiang was stunned and whispered, "He comes back, so what…? You don't cultivate Purging Dew, and you're going to cultivate Morning Cold Rain. How can he even suspect you? Even if he comes back… when he sees your path is cut off, he should be even more relaxed and let his guard down…"

Chi Buzi's face was grim. He said in a low voice, "You don't understand… you don't understand what Pristine Water is like… I have been to his Pristine Speech

Heaven. He is a stingy True Monarch, a sinister person who pays attention to every detail… A person like that… a person like that will not let go of the slightest doubt…"

Dangjiang grew suspicious, looking at his grim face. He asked, "What do you want to do?"

Chi Buzi looked at him deeply, his tone cold. He replied, "I have been to his Pristine Speech Heaven. My life, my death, and my progress in cultivation are all within his sight. When he returns from beyond the heavens, all the clear ponds in the world will be his followers."

"I have cultivated the Chou-Gui Hidden Form. If he returns, he might pay attention to me."

Dangjiang understood even less. He shook his head and said, "The Chou-Gui Hidden Form is not the Purging Dew. The cultivation method is available, and there's no shortage of spiritual energy. So many people in the world cultivate it. It's not surprising that you succeeded. He can't investigate every single one, can he?"

Chi Buzi slowly shook his head and whispered, "I didn't use the 'Path-Extending Wondrous Art,' yet I still succeeded. To Pristine Water, where this Purple Mansion cultivation method came from is worth investigating."

His light green eyes looked over, filled with extreme calm. His hands on the table clenched into fists, and he said in a low voice,

"If I were him, I would definitely investigate. That's enough."

Chapter 841: A Place of Secrets

A chill crept through Dangjiang. “Then what are you saying?” he asked.

Chi Buzi fixed him with an intense gaze, his pale azure eyes unwavering. “This is unavoidable,” he began, his voice low. “The moment Pristine Water sees me, he’ll grow suspicious of my cultivation. Do you really think he’ll politely ask where I acquired the Chou-Gui Hidden Form, a Purple Mansion Realm technique? Whether I have it or not, he won’t say a single word. He’ll simply reach out and read my memories!”

“Once that happens, this will be about far more than a single Dharma Art!”

“And whether he finds anything or not, my death is certain. While you might remain safe in the heavens, you’ll suffer a catastrophic loss and can forget about seeing anyone ever again.”

Anxiety tightened its grip on Dangjiang. “What are you talking about? Weren’t you chosen by the Immortal Lord? That Pristine Water True Monarch is only at the Golden Core realm. How could he possibly kill you?”

Chi Buzi shot him a somber look. “Chosen? What ‘chosen’? When destiny presents an opportunity, the Immortal offers a path. If you can walk it, you do. If you fail, who cares if you die? Do you think the Immortal is short on Purple Mansion Realm cultivators? Is he going to return from beyond the heavens just to save me? It’s one thing to borrow his name for a bit of clout, but you can’t be naive enough to believe it’s a guarantee of safety.”

At his words, Dangjiang’s brow furrowed, his own anxiety mounting. ‘He has a point,’ he thought. ‘Is there anyone in the heavens who doesn’t possess some unfathomable power?’

Seeing Dangjiang at a loss for words, the hope in Chi Buzi’s heart faded into faint disappointment. “My cultivation is insignificant,” he said. “But if something were to happen to me, I fear it would jeopardize the Celestial Palace’s plans.”

Dangjiang glanced at him as Chi Buzi continued, "I'm counting on you to plead on my behalf, to find a way out of this for me. If you could just get an audience with that Lord Zhengao from before, I believe there would be a chance."

Dangjiang hesitated. He himself needed Shaohui's help just to see Zhengao, so he had little confidence. But this was a matter of life and death for Chi Buzi, a threat to his very path of cultivation. He had to try. He rose to his feet.

"You know how it is with that Lord," he said. "You can't just see him when you please. I only know the location of Lady Shaohui's celestial pavilion. I will go and ask for you."

But Chi Buzi was still filled with doubt.

He was a direct descendant of the Green Pine Supreme Yang Daoist tradition, and his mind was sharp. Over the years, he had learned more than a few secrets. He grabbed Dangjiang's arm. "The Immortal Lord… he governs yin and yang. It's possible he has an incarnation in the mortal world. Ages ago, there was an immortal named Yingze who also held dominion over yin and yang. I wonder if they could be one and the same."

The suggestion made Dangjiang's scalp tingle with dread. He wouldn't dare speculate on such a thing. "You want me to ask about the Immortal Lord's mortal incarnation? First, I have nowhere to ask. Second, I don't have the lifespan to survive asking! I couldn't even find out the name Immortal Official Li used when he descended to the mortal realm. This is a profound secret, a matter of celestial mystery. How could I possibly have the authority to inquire?"

"I'm not asking you to investigate…"

Chi Buzi looked at him, a headache forming. He knew for a fact that many people in the world were searching for Yingze, but the immortal never appeared, which was a deeply ominous sign. "This Pristine Water," he explained, "is known as one of the Six Scions of Chongming. His master *is* that immortal who governs yin and yang. He belongs to the orthodox Azure Profundity Daoist tradition, and the number of immortals in his lineage is more than you can count on one hand. I'm not afraid of him picking a fight with the heavens. I'm afraid of what he might uncover, and the upheaval it could cause."

As Chi Buzi spoke, Dangjiang felt his blood run cold. His memories of a past life were of a minor water official in the Underworld; he had no frame of reference

for figures of such terrifying power. "I understand," he said, his voice laced with fear.

"Be subtle," Chi Buzi urged. "Ask carefully."

At the instruction, Dangjiang lifted his head again. Masking his unease, he strode out, grumbling as he went, "Hmph. When it comes to delicate words, you think you're better than me? I don't need your coaching!"

He left through the courtyard gate. Only then did Chi Buzi allow himself to sit back down. He was, after all, in another's grotto-heaven. Even when alone, he dared not reveal a hint of emotion. He closed his eyes, entering a meditative state right where he sat.

White snow drifted down around him, slowly blanketing the courtyard. The fragrant scent of osmanthus blossoms filled the air—a scene that should have brought peace to one's mind. But as he sat in stillness, his heart was a raging storm.

Chi Buzi's words had been both a plea for help and a test. In that brief exchange, he had gauged Dangjiang's position and keenly identified the crucial truth: he, Chi Buzi, was not important to the heavens. The Immortal's favor had been a casual gesture, and Zhengao had given Dangjiang no special orders concerning him.

This single piece of information gave rise to a deep-seated suspicion in the man's dark and cynical mind.

'This Immortal Lord is almost certainly Yingze. But he's been missing for years, which means he doesn't want the world to know of his existence. He must be advancing some secret plot. His relationship with Pristine Water can't be good. Since he's an immortal, the opportunity he gave me would never expose himself, nor would it allow Pristine Water to have any suspicions.'

'Once Pristine Water probes my memories, he'll find nothing. As for me… because I failed to complete my tasks before his return, I'll lose my life. No matter what Pristine Water does to me, my end will be a silent, unnoticed death. So, what role does Zhengao play in this? The method for seeking a Golden Core is priceless. How could I possibly earn it in just a few short years?'

He smelled a trap. A shadow instantly fell over his heart.

'Could it be that they're just using me? Making me hunt Demons for them all these years, knowing my offerings would never be enough. Then, when Pristine Water returns, I die, and that's that. They've already profited handsomely. They never had to find me a path to the Golden Core at all.'

Although Chi Buzi knew little about the true power behind the Immortal Palace, his mind worked in a particular way. He could extrapolate an outcome from the barest threads of self-interest in an instant. The conclusion was chilling: if his fortuitous encounter was not a deliberate part of some grand celestial scheme against Pristine Water, then the heavens would never disrupt their established plans for a pawn like him. He would most likely be left to die at the hands of Pristine Water.

Meanwhile, Dangjiang left the courtyard, walking with his head lowered. After a short while, he found a large pavilion within the palace. He presented his token, and a heavenly soldier went inside to announce him.

Soon, the soldier, clad in shimmering, scale-like armor and possessing handsome features, emerged. "Proofreader of the Profound Seven Pavilion," he announced in a clear voice, "the Celestial Attendant will see you."

Dangjiang had worried he would be turned away. Flooded with relief, he hurried forward, passed through a magnificent corridor, and entered a room where stacks of silvery-white jade slips were piled high. A woman in tea-white robes sat primly at a desk.

Shaohui looked weary. The stark white glow between her brows flickered faintly, a clear sign that recent days had not been easy. Seeing Dangjiang was no longer as irritating as it once was. "So it's you," she said. "Has something happened?"

Although Shaohui had been reassigned, Dangjiang was still nominally her subordinate, which was why he had been granted an audience. He immediately prostrated himself and cried out, "Years ago, Immortal Official Liu entrusted me with the duty of looking after the talented individual selected by the Immortal Lord! But now he has encountered a heavenly calamity and his life is in peril! I came to ask for your guidance, my lady!"

Shaohui frowned at his words. She knew he was talking about Chi Buzi. She had no time for such trivial matters, but she also wanted to avoid any blame. "What sort of trouble?" she asked.

"It's the same matter as before," Dangjiang said from the floor. "The True Monarch who oversees his Fruition Attainment, Pristine Water True Monarch, is about to return from beyond the heavens. My subordinate's breakthrough was achieved through a connection I facilitated, a connection that leads back to the heavens. The True Monarch will likely seek him out, and we fear it will cause trouble."

Shaohui shook her head. "Who would dare make trouble for the heavens? Let him be. When that True Monarch hears the heavens are involved, he won't kill him. The only issue is that the heavens have not yet revealed themselves to the mortal world. A sudden exposure might draw the ire of those above."

Shaohui's words resonated with Dangjiang's deepest fears. He wasn't as concerned about Pristine Water as the cautious Chi Buzi was; he was terrified of messing up the plans of his superiors. After he finished his obeisance, Shaohui spoke.

"Wait here. I will go and see the Lord."

Overjoyed, Dangjiang nodded eagerly and began to wait in the pavilion. After an anxious half-hour, there was finally movement. The woman in the tea-white celestial dress re-entered the pavilion, her expression thoughtful.

Seeing Shaohui step inside, Dangjiang hurried forward and asked respectfully, "My lady?"

Shaohui gave a slight shake of her head. "I consulted the Lord and received a few pieces of information. I will share them with you."

Her expression turned grave. She spoke with deliberation. "First, the Lord has issued no decree. The Immortal Lord taught him a Dharma Art merely as a reward for watching over you. He has no other connection to the heavens. It is not yet time for the heavens to manifest in the world. If he is captured by this Pristine Water, the trail of the immortals will simply go cold. There is no risk of exposing any trace of the heavens."

The words left a bitter taste in Dangjiang's mouth. He finally understood the full weight of Chi Buzi's suspicions.

Shaohui continued, "Second, considering his sincere desire for immortality, Lord Zhengao has left him a sliver of a chance. If he truly feels that Pristine Water will harm him, he may request a celestial official from the heavens to assess his situation and see if there is any room for maneuver."

Dangjiang's heart sank. "And which official might he request?" he asked weakly.

A wry, helpless smile touched Shaohui's lips. "Me."

She rose from behind the desk. "Go on. Bring him here."

Dangjiang had no choice but to retreat. He hurried back to the courtyard, where Chi Buzi sat unmoving at the table. With a grim face, Dangjiang quietly relayed the two messages.

Chi Buzi, however, let out a sigh of relief. He lowered his head. "Good. Take me to see her."

The news Dangjiang brought was not surprising. Chi Buzi had anticipated that Zhengao would leave him a path to survival, however narrow. This was enough. In fact, he had felt the shadow of this danger looming for a long time.

'The moment I went to that island to see Li Qinghong, I had to be prepared to be crushed by Pristine Water at any time. His return is neither unexpected nor premature.'

Back when he had spoken to Li Qinghong of betraying Pristine Water, Chi Buzi had only one thought:

'If I die, I die. I have to try!'

His resolve today was exactly the same.

He lowered his head, a look of grim satisfaction and burning ambition on his face. He wound his way through corridors past celestial generals and attendants, climbed the steps of the pavilion, and slowly approached Shaohui's desk. With a thud, he fell to his knees.

"Many thanks to my lady for saving my life!" he said with utmost respect.

Shaohui had never liked him, but seeing a great Daoist Master prostrate himself before her so completely, she composed herself and said softly, "Do you have a plan?"

Chi Buzi looked up, his pale azure eyes bright and full of spirit, without a trace of despair. "I am unwilling to give up this chance to enter the grotto-heaven and meet the immortals," he said in a low voice. "Nor am I willing to abandon my path. The only strategy now is to deceive Pristine Water."

"And to deceive him, I must not remember anything myself. As long as I know I'm lying, the True Monarch will know I'm lying."

Shaohui studied his expression. Though she had always disliked the man before her, she couldn't help but be moved by his conviction. "Continue," she said.

"I believe the only way for me to not know is to have my memories removed and stored somewhere else," Chi Buzi said softly. "After Pristine Water has inspected me and left, the memories can be returned. Only then can I escape his scrutiny. Once he returns to the Pristine Speech Heaven to recuperate, it will be much harder for him to keep an eye on me."

Shaohui frowned slightly as Chi Buzi continued, "I need a method to alter my memories right under the nose of a True Monarch without being discovered."

The celestial attendant before him shook her head. "It's more complicated than that. No jade slip can be used to record memories related to the heavens. The only way is to peel away a part of your soul to store them. But splitting a soul is far beyond the abilities of you or me."

"Besides," she added, "the pain of splitting one's soul is worse than being flayed alive."

Chi Buzi had not even considered the pain.

From his humble beginnings in the Azure Pond to his current station, he, Chi Buzi, had survived by unscrupulously seizing every opportunity that flashed before him. No matter how small the chance, even if it was a mere crack, he would scrape bone and shed skin to squeeze through it like a weed.

Chi Wei, Zhengao, Demons, or gods—whatever the powers that be needed him to be, Chi Buzi would become. With the Golden Core realm ahead, nothing was too precious to discard, and nothing was too bitter to accept.

'By my power alone, even if I were flayed alive a thousand times, I could never escape Pristine Water's grasp. He would crush me like an ant. But I don't need much. With just a sliver of assistance from a power on his level, I will have the right to deceive him.'

But upon hearing Shaohui's words, Chi Buzi did not nod in agreement. A chill went through him. "If I split my soul, how could Pristine Water not see it?" he countered.

"He won't waste time wondering what tricks I have up my sleeve. He doesn't need to. He won't bother with countermeasures. The moment he sees a matter involving a Golden Core breakthrough that could shake his Fruition Attainment, combined with a profound technique like soul-splitting, he won't permit anyone to interfere. He'll ignore any pressure from the Underworld and kill me with a single glance."

Shaohui pondered this for a moment. "I can ask about a method for separating memories," she said quietly. "Perhaps there is a spiritual artifact that can accomplish it. But how can you guarantee Pristine Water will leave? If he is as cunning as you say, he might return without a trace and leave just as stealthily. Without your memories, how will you know when to restore them? It's practically impossible!"

"Furthermore, even if you wait for him to leave and regain your memories, how will you know when he might suddenly reappear? A Golden Core cultivator can manifest in the mortal world in an instant! If the thought ever crosses his mind, he only needs to take half a step out of the Pristine Speech Heaven, and he'll immediately know everything!"

Seeing Shaohui shaking her head repeatedly, Chi Buzi remained calm. "This may seem difficult," he said in a low voice, "but in truth, I only need those memories when it is time to make an offering."

"As long as you, my lady, can find a way for me to deceive his eyes, I can arrange it so that I am drawn to hunt Demons, arrive at a certain secret location where I will remember this matter, make my offering to the heavens, and then forget it all again before I leave."

Shaohui's expression grew serious. She stared intently into his eyes, a deep and profound doubt surfacing. "Is there truly a secret place that even a True Monarch cannot see?"

Chi Buzi's eyes narrowed slightly. As he looked down, his expression took on an icy, calculated calm.

"I do, in fact, know of such a place. A corner of the world that even a True Monarch cannot perceive."

Chapter 842: A Plea for Help

"In his travels through Yue State all those years ago, Li Jiangqun once mentioned a place, a place that is normally hidden by layers of grand barrier formations. It not only severs all connection to the Great Void, but the final layer is an Immortal Dao array so potent that not even a True Monarch can see through it!"

"That area also holds a Merging Fire called the 'Immortal Dao Wall', left behind by an ancient Immortal Lord. Li Jiangqun himself said that True Monarchs shouldn't even get close to this place. In fact… they dare not!"

Chi Buzi lowered his voice. "Such a place, and yet Li Jiangqun had a way to get in. He told Ning Tiaoxiao, he told Zipei and Qiushui, and he even told… Xiao Xianyou! In the end, this place was no secret to the Supreme and Golden Feather Sect Daoist traditions…"

"Although that Immortal Dao Wall can't connect to the Great Void, the spiritual essence and laws there are the same as in ancient times. Disciples from both the Green Pine Supreme Yang and Golden Oneness of Highest Azure traditions often visit it."

Shaohui nodded as she listened. Though she had no impression of the names spoken, she had a rough idea of what was coming. Se frowned and asked, "Are you saying it's hidden in that…?"

Chi Buzi bowed again.

"If you, esteemed lady, have a suitable method, perhaps a spiritual artifact or a sensory array, I only need to determine the location beneath the Immortal Dao Wall. Once I'm there, I'll remember."

"Beyond that… I also have a Chou-Gui Hidden Form Life Divine Ability. Unlike the Purging Dew, this ability's inheritance is not completely broken in this era. Some in the Purple Mansion Realm have it. Pristine Water deliberately didn't pass it down, which is why it's not at Azure Pond… I heard the copy at Azure Pond was obtained from the Pure Unity Dao Gate."

"When I entered Anhuai Heaven, I couldn't find this method… If I don't obtain its origin, Pristine Water will certainly grow suspicious of me…"

He was subtly trying to get Shaohui to solve his problem. Shaohui frowned. "I knew this was going to be a hassle, but I didn't know it was this much of one."

Fearing that Shaohui was getting intimidated, Chi Buzi reported in a low voice, "This cultivation method isn't without origin. The Feathered Serpent once had it, and after being swallowed by the Hornless Dragon, it fell into the hands of the Dragon-kin… The Dragon-kin even have the Purging Dew's Purple Mansion Realm cultivation method."

"The Wu State's Mount Changhuai, the Great Western Plateau's White Victory Palace, and North Star Lady of the Northern Sea have all produced Daoist Masters of the Chou-Gui Hidden Form. Both the Origin Mansion and the Pure Unity Dao Gate have the Pristine Water Daoist orthodoxies."

"The Origin Mansion might not be suitable, but as long as it exists in the present world… it's perfectly reasonable for me to have obtained it. It's worth a try."

A glimmer of intelligence sparked in Chi Buzi's eyes as he rattled off a string of names. "I was once puzzled why all five Pristine Water traditions weren't cut off. Only Purging Dew was, and I thought it was due to offending the Underworld…"

"It was only later, after listening to Immortal General Zhengao explain, that I understood another reason: those three Chou-Gui Hidden Form traditions are a supplement to Valley Water. It's not just an issue for Pristine Water alone; it might concern certain people's pursuit of Valley Water, and even several Daoist orthodoxies that achieved enlightenment through it. Therefore, they couldn't just cut it off…"

"And as for the cultivators of Azure Pond, all he could do was not pass down the Chou-Gui Hidden Form cultivation method and instead spread the Clear Dusk Rain's Fruition Attainment to sever the path for lower-level cultivators."

Shaohui sighed deeply, signaling that she understood. She lowered her voice. "You go report this to me first, then ask someone to find Immortal Official Liu. After all, it was he who pushed this matter onto Dangjiang, so it should rightfully be his to manage now… You go back and try to find a cultivation method for yourself. I don't have the ability to arrange everything for you."

Chi Buzi bowed respectfully. "Don't worry, esteemed lady."

Shaohui stood up, and Chi Buzi followed, a slight worry in his heart.

'The heavens should be able to receive me from the Merging Fire… but if they can't bypass the Immortal Lord's techniques, then this is a dead end!'

Dangjiang, who had been listening to the conversation, couldn't help but interject.

"If it doesn't work out… why not seize the opportunity to push for the Golden Core? Isn't that better than living so subserviently under him? Besides, when he returns, won't your chances of a breakthrough be even smaller?"

Chi Buzi gently shook his head. "A breakthrough? Where would I suddenly get a cultivation method and Golden Core formula from? And how do I know when he'll return? If I don't prepare, I'll just be waiting to get my head cut off. A battle like that wouldn't last for decades. He might already be back, just healing from his wounds in his cave dwelling."

He lowered his eyes. "Besides… I doubt what the outside world is fighting about. Who knows what Pristine Water's plans are?"

After walking for a while, the three of them soon arrived at Zhengao's high platform. The Immortal General was still sitting there, but the decor on either side had slightly changed, and the bamboo scrolls that were previously in front of him were gone.

"We meet again," Zhengao said calmly, watching the three of them bow.

"Shaohui has already told me about your matter."

Chi Buzi's self-rescue was not an accident. From beginning to end, Lu Jiangxian's attitude towards him was to stall for as long as possible. From his abrupt arrival at Moongaze Lake, to his pledge of allegiance on Zongquan Island, and even the final supplement to Valley Water, it was all forced by Chi Buzi's step-by-step eagerness for the Dao.

But none of this could avoid the problem of Pristine Water.

'Erasing my own traces from Pristine Water's eyes is easy, but protecting Chi Buzi is much more difficult!'

Years ago, when Chi Buzi rashly came to the lake, Lu Jiangxian's strength was far from recovered. After examining Chi Buzi's soul, he discovered the technique

Pristine Speech Heaven had left behind. To avoid awakening the secluded Pristine Water, he could not use soul-searching to change the memories, so he resorted to a less direct method, using Dangjiang, a split soul of Maha, as a failsafe to restrain him.

As Lu Jiangxian's strength grew exponentially after obtaining that Immortal Dao spell art, Chi Buzi's threat diminished. Dangjiang eventually returned to the Origin Mansion, and Chi Buzi also gained a patron, but Lu Jiangxian always held a utilitarian attitude towards this Demon.

Now, after receiving several offerings from the Purple Mansion Realm, he truly did not want to lose such a powerful aid. So, he gave Shaohui a reply in Zhengao's name, and Chi Buzi also gave his answer.

'The most critical part of this matter is modifying memories… It's not impossible now. If he opens up his mind, I can bypass Pristine Water's technique. But whether Pristine Water believes it or not, or if it succeeds or not… how can Chi Buzi, under his watchful eye, continue to inexplicably gather Demon beasts for me? Not only is the risk great, but the benefit to me is almost nothing now.'

'What's more, Chi Buzi is deliberately holding back some information to make this seem less difficult. Pristine Water can't possibly fail to recognize which cultivation method produced that Life Divine Ability. The Chou-Gui Hidden Form was formed by Talisman Qi inducing a celestial foundation, which means only his copy of the Chou-Gui Hidden Form's Purple Mansion Realm chapter would work. Any other copy would be a mismatch.'

The only good news was that Pristine Water hadn't bestowed the Daoist tradition. The copy of the Chou-Gui Hidden Form at Azure Pond was obtained by the Chi family from the Pure Unity Dao Gate. If that copy had been given by Pristine Water, with the Purple Mansion Realm chapter in his hands, then Chi Buzi would be at a dead end.

Lu Jiangxian weighed the options in his mind, already sighing inwardly.

"How difficult it is to deceive a Golden Core cultivator! He's just talking big. If Chi Buzi can get the Chou-Gui Hidden Form's Purple Mansion Realm chapter, it might be worth saving him, at least to ensure I leave no trace myself."

In comparison, Lu Jiangxian was much more interested in that Merging Fire!

After all, what caused his strength to leap forward was the Three-Drum Wall in the Green Pine grotto-heaven. Ultimately, this Three-Drum Wall was also a

Merging Fire, which meant that the immortal spell art Lu Jiangxian had been looking for finally had a lead!

"No wonder… no wonder I was wandering all over the Eastern Sea with the Li family and never found a trace of this thing. It was hidden deep in the sea… and with several layers of barriers and even an Immortal Dao array strengthening it, I wonder if I can pass through it."

He fell silent for a moment, listening to Shaohui report the news. He paused, showing a hint of interest. "A treasure trove that can hide from a True Monarch? Perhaps it's a trace of my heavenly origins. You should go there and see if you can contact the heavens."

Chi Buzi immediately bowed respectfully. In terms of cultivation, only this one Immortal General in the heavens could earn his respect. That lecture on the Dao was so profound it would not be an exaggeration to say he was a celestial being!

After asking this, Zhengao said casually, "To break through your Divine Ability, you need to find the Chou-Gui Hidden Form's Purple Mansion Realm chapter from the lower realms. How could the heavens have a record of something written by some cultivator from the recent past?"

Hearing this, Chi Buzi suddenly felt a rush of relief and both surprise and joy.

'That incredibly mysterious item… it really did use the celestial foundation to cultivate the Divine Ability through resonance!'

He, of course, knew that different cultivation methods led to slightly different Divine Abilities, but his Divine Ability had broken through without any cultivation method. He was worried that he wouldn't be able to find a corresponding one and hadn't dared to ask. Now that Zhengao had mentioned it, he felt immense relief.

'It's true! It's true! As long as I can find the source of the Purple Mansion Realm cultivation method, it will be fine… The Pure Unity Dao Gate is full of fools from top to bottom; there are so many loopholes to exploit!'

His eyes immediately sparkled. He bowed and said, "Thank you for your guidance, esteemed sir!"

Zhengao gave a slight nod of his chin, indicating that he understood. He said softly, "Since you've made this decision, you'll have to face that True Monarch

sooner or later. It's better to plan early. When you get the cultivation method, report back to Shaohui."

Upon hearing this, Chi Buzi was relieved, but Dangjiang grew tense. He asked in a low voice, "May I ask, esteemed sir… what is the cost of this Immortal Merit…?"

Lu Jiangxian was anxious for Chi Buzi to quickly settle his retreat and start gathering Demon beasts for him, so he immediately said in a gentle voice, "No need to worry. This will be recorded under Immortal Official Liu's name… But you, Chi Buzi, you need to hurry and exchange for the Morning Cold Rain cultivation method. At the very least, you should cultivate a celestial foundation. After you've had your memories altered, cultivating it to the Divine Ability realm will be the best kind of protection. It's more reassuring than a thousand words, and it will quell that True Monarch's suspicions."

In reality, Lu Jiangxian added this extra piece of advice because he was already halfway done writing that cultivation method and could hand it over to him soon.

The Morning Cold Rain was not a rare cultivation method to begin with. The vault had at least a dozen copies. The Foundation Establishment Realm chapter was done in a blink, and the Purple Mansion Realm chapter didn't require any specific rank or secret technique, so he wrote it smoothly. It was a cinch.

Chi Buzi understood what he meant. He was more eager than anyone to cultivate this technique, and his heart was filled with anxiety. He nodded repeatedly, bowing respectfully.

"Thank you for your guidance, esteemed sir. This humble cultivator will go at once."

He bowed respectfully and said, "As long as I can get my life back from Pristine Water's clutches, Buzi will not disappoint you!"

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The Saintly Palace of the Supreme Yin's Luminous and Primordial Purity.

The moonlight was crystalline and clear. Lu Jiangxian stood beside the white, translucent jade throne, his gaze piercing through the many residences, falling upon the two individuals in the small pavilion.

Several rays of colored light emerged from thin air, converging in front of him, and flowing within his palm. They quickly condensed into a tiny speck of light.

"Chi Buzi is truly efficient. Yu Guang and Merciful One have already been offered up to me…"

This peacock was far more capable than the previous female one. The one who had been refined into Talisman Qi had only Buddhist cultivation methods in her mind from beginning to end. This one, at least, had some Immortal Dao foundation, and scattered spell arts. What was even more rare was that he also had a Merging Fire cultivation method.

A fifth-grade Purple Mansion Realm cultivation method, the 'Karma Flame Binding Heart Art,' which forges the 'Black-Eyed Desire' immortal foundation.

Besides this 'Karma Flame Binding Heart Art,' Yu Guang also had a couple of secret arts related to the Great Peacock Karma, and Lu Jiangxian learned that this Demon peacock's ancestors once had a great Buddhist cultivators, and was even a mount for the Revered One Su Xikong!

'No wonder they say peacocks have a great voice in the Buddhist Land. With a background like that, how could they not?'

He flicked his finger, and placed this 'Karma Flame Binding Heart Art' on a high shelf. The peacock's soul was then separated.

These Merciful One were indeed easy to get, but their cultivation was truly pitiful. Their understanding of the Immortal Dao and talent were equally underwhelming. Yu Guang was a bit better than the female peacock, but only slightly. If he were to be released, it would simply be one more person to talk to.

He had no choice but to store it away for later use, his mind pondering deeply as he looked at the soul.

'At least it's a Purple Mansion Realm soul. It's very useful for performing shamanic arts. With this soul in hand, I'll at least have a trump card.'

'As for Pristine Water… he might be returning soon.'

Chi Buzi was just a useful chess piece to him. Once Pristine Water returned, this chess piece would be either dead or useless. In any case, he wouldn't be able to provide Demon beasts for him anymore. His memory would be temporarily

lost, but even a useless Chi Buzi was better than a dead one. When the time was right, if Chi Buzi were to achieve enlightenment on the Valley Water path, it could lead to a massive turning point.

'I'm bound to face Pristine Water sooner or later. One more piece is better than one less.'

He calmed his mind and looked out through the mirror.

In the depths of the Great Void, in places no one could see, a vast, bright light was slowly descending. A powerful sense of resonance rose from a distance, and the world within the mirror also shimmered with a bright radiance, making Lu Jiangxian slowly raise his eyebrows.

Even with Lu Jiangxian's mastery over Metallic Essence, the sliver of Bright Yang Metallic Essence locked in the mirror began to stir. The tallest and most luxurious heavenly gate at the entrance of the entire palace shone brilliantly and trembled slightly.

Various Bright Yang spiritual energies and Bright Yang radiances intertwined in the sky, dyeing the entire firmament a golden yellow.

Lu Jiangxian raised his hand, and that sliver of Bright Yang Metallic Essence emerged from his fingertips, like a handful of conical golden light. It rapidly expanded and changed, condensing into a series of faces.

All the radiance suddenly contracted, finally transforming back into a single scene at his fingertips.

It was a dark and eerie mine. The first ray of sunlight in the sky was pouring down from the clouds, landing on the various miners, their bodies mixed with blood and sweat. A young man with a slightly pale, yet resolute, face slowly raised his head.

'The Bright Yang Fruition Attainment… has chosen its person.'

Chapter 843: The Heir Apparent

Moongaze Lake.

The lake water was a serene azure, and a continuous spring rain fell. Gentle breezes drifted along the shore, leaving the small courtyard on the islet in silence. The two kumquat trees by the gate swayed slightly, their leaves droopy and listless from being shaded by the eaves and denied sunlight, even with the spring wind stirring them.

Li Xinghan stood in the courtyard, a precious sword hanging from her waist.

She was now at the seventh level of Qi Refining, firmly in the late stage. As a direct descendant of the Li Family, she was due to enter the mountains, take pills, and go into secluded cultivation once she reached the late stage of Qi Refining. She had heard that a few pills would be enough to help her attempt a breakthrough to the Foundation Establishment Realm. Not knowing how many years this journey would take, she had come home to see her parents.

Hearing the commotion, her mother came out of the house with a smile to greet her, while her father sat sideways on the doorstep, his head bowed.

Ever since her maternal uncle, Chì Tiàozōng, had been promoted and the matter of her brother's official position had led to a falling-out with her parents and brother, Li Xinghan had rarely visited home. She mostly sent letters. Now, looking at the courtyard, it was eerily quiet, the laughter of previous years long gone.

It was clear that the influence of her uncle, Chì Tiàozōng, and her own influence were worlds apart. Although her brother had managed to secure a government post, it was a poor one in some remote place. Her brother and sister-in-law had moved out, leaving only their two aging parents to live in the quiet courtyard.

Seeing this, Li Xinghan's heart felt heavy. She tried to say a few pleasant words, but her father was clearly still angry with her. He answered with a curt face

and a few clipped words, perhaps also blaming her for the pain of their family's separation.

Unable to stay any longer, Li Xinghan announced her impending secluded cultivation for Foundation Establishment. As it was an endeavor where one either succeeded or died, her mother froze in shock, her eyes welling up with tears.

Her father finally lowered his legs from the threshold, his mouth opening as if to speak, but his face remained cold. Li Xinghan sighed, saying, "The family head still needs to see me… I've already visited my uncle. I just came to bid you both farewell."

She looked at her father, who had aged significantly, and her voice softened.

"Father… my brother isn't very capable. Even when he was managing the hands at a mining branch, he was a total mess. The only reason Qingdu didn't arrest him was because he finally listened to my uncle's advice and stopped taking bribes.

"Now, Jiangqian is in charge of the family. He's sharp-eyed and surely saw through my brother's ineptitude. The one overseeing the eastern shore is the Second Young Master, Li Jianglong. He has shown me favor, and I often hear news that he is tolerating my brother's actions out of consideration for me…

"If I fail my breakthrough and word of my death reaches you, please have my brother resign from his post early. Brother Zhoufang has already gone through enough trouble for our kin. There's no need for us to bother him again later."

She wasn't sure if her father had listened, and she turned to leave. He remained motionless, watching her go, while her mother saw her out of the courtyard and quickly returned, crouching by his side to wipe away tears.

Only then did her father stand up, listening as his wife whispered, "Look at you, you agreed to him… to say a good word for Zhoutui to inherit Master Chenghui's legacy, but you got cold feet again… and now you can't give him an answer…"

Her father closed his eyes and shook his head. "Forget it. Our daughter is stubborn and proud. Now that she's attempting Foundation Establishment, how can she possibly listen to such talk? It might even affect her state of mind. Whether Li Zhoutui lives or dies is not worth her life… and as for his legacy, he can go die somewhere far away and not get involved with my family."

He sighed and said, "Aren't there a few temples for the immortals on the eastern shore? Tomorrow… come with me to pray."

"I heard the Merciful One Temple by the river is more effective," his wife suggested.

Her father shook his head vigorously. "You're confused, too. A member of the Li Family praying to the Merciful One? Aren't you afraid of being crushed by a falling beam inside the temple? Forget it… we'll go to the eastern shore!"

Li Xinghan summoned the wind and soared into the air, landing inside the main hall. She lifted her gaze and saw a Qi Refining cultivator standing near the hall's entrance. He had a remarkably ugly face with a pointed jaw and sunken cheeks. Her brother, Li Zhoufang, was speaking with him, his expression awkward. Seeing Li Xinghan, he looked as if he had been granted a great pardon and hurried over.

"This is Fifth Young Master," he said.

It turned out this man was Li Jiangnian. By his age, he was only around eighteen, so his talent must have been decent. His appearance, however, did not reflect his age at all.

His gaze was downcast, as he dared not look at Li Xinghan. This wasn't directed at her personally; on the Immortal Dao, where everyone was stunningly handsome, his ugliness was especially pronounced, causing him to hunch his shoulders and mumble, "Greetings, Aunt."

Li Jiangnian's voice was unremarkable, at least much better than his face. Clearly, his resolve was far weaker than his brothers', as he lacked the courage to look others in the eye.

Li Xinghan sighed internally and exchanged a polite greeting before entering. The seat for Li Jiangliang on the other side was empty. The Fourth Young Master must have gone to the river with Cui Jueyin.

The two sisters of the Jiangque generation were both at the Purple Smoke Gate, and of the Zhouxing generation, only she and her brother, Li Zhoufang, were allowed into this hall. She glanced around and immediately went up to bow to Li Minggong and Li Xuanxuan.

"Greetings, masters!"

Li Minggong smiled and nodded, gesturing to a square-faced young man who stood nearby. He looked about twenty, with bright eyes. Li Xinghan was familiar with this one; he was Li Zhoufang's treasured son, the recently cultivated Li Jiangzong, who was currently by Li Minggong's side.

Li Jiangzong was very familiar with her and paid his respects. Only then did Li Xinghan return to her seat beside Li Zhouming. The red-robed young master had broken his bad habit of being late and had arrived early, sitting properly, which made Li Xinghan smile.

"Swish!"

Li Zhouming opened his fan, using it to cover his mouth as he spoke in a low voice.

"I say, little sister… I'm a bit strapped for cash these days. Shòuyú has confiscated all my things and will only let me make hairpins for her… do you have one or two pieces of spirit iron or materials I could use to pay off some debts to other families…"

Li Xinghan let out a laugh. "You've got some nerve. Go see Uncle Chenghao for spirit iron… I'm not in charge, nor do I manage things. Where would I get such things?"

Just then, Li Jiangqian's soft voice echoed through the hall. "Now that all our clansmen have arrived, let's discuss the matter of Grand Uncle Chenghui."

At his words, the gathered clansmen quieted. Li Jiangqian continued, "This matter should have been settled long ago, but our brothers are either away or in secluded cultivation, so it has been difficult to gather everyone. Now that Aunt Xinghan is also about to go into seclusion for her breakthrough, it's the perfect time to make a decision."

Li Chenghui had no heirs and left no written will, making the matter of his succession very complicated. After so many years of delay, Li Zhouda, the oldest and most talented, was already in the middle stage of Qi Refining and was nearing the age to attempt Foundation Establishment in just a few years. He had personally visited Li Xuanxuan, hoping to put the matter on the agenda.

After all, a breakthrough to Foundation Establishment was a life-or-death moment, the very time when one most needed the legacy of Li Chenghui, from cultivation methods and spell arts to spiritual artifacts and resources. Even his official lineage and status, if not decided now, would become meaningless later.

Not only would they lose their greatest value, but it would also breed resentment.

And that coveted Six Thunder Profound Punishment Talisman, although said to be a clan item and not part of the inherited Daoist tradition, everyone knew that whoever first obtained the Daoist tradition and successfully cultivated the way of lightning would ultimately wield the spiritual artifact.

In addition, there was an even more critical issue: Li Chenghui's father, Li Xì'è, had passed away a few days ago.

Although Li Xì'è was a mere mortal, he was Li Chenghui's father! While he never said anything, his heart must have favored his closest blood relative, Li Zhoutui, as the successor. With his death, the lineage of Li Zhoutui suffered a major blow.

Of course, even if a few of the higher-ups felt this way, they continued to publicly state that they were waiting for the elders to return, as pleasantries still needed to be said.

Li Jiangqian paused slightly. Li Xuanxuan spoke in a hoarse voice, "There were originally three candidates: Zhouda, Zhoutui, and Zhouxun. Zhouda is the most talented and has the fiercest temperament, which is well-suited to the way of lightning. However, his fiery nature also presents difficulties…"

"Zhoutui has a closer bloodline, but like Zhouxun, he lacks talent…"

Everyone present was well aware of the three candidates. Li Zhoutui was the closest in bloodline and the most suitable. Had he not made that impatient, presumptuous wail back then, the matter would have been settled in his favor. This whole long process would have been avoided.

But his family elders lacked self-control, and his outburst had soured the goodwill of several Foundation Establishment cultivators towards him. Over the years, Li Zhoutui had enjoyed excellent resources, yet his cultivation was only comparable to Li Zhouxun, who had gone out to manage the fields. Both were still in the Embryonic Breathing stage, which only made things worse for him.

As for Li Zhouxun, his talent was passable. In the past, he came from a poor family and was taken in by Li Chenghui, thus gaining some rights to the inheritance. However, Li Chenghui might have only been observing him and never said a word about it, so he couldn't have been named the successor at the time.

Yet, he later voluntarily gave up and went to the island to manage the spiritual fields. If Li Zhouda hadn't been an option, he would have had a great chance, but compared to him now, his prospects had dimmed.

After Li Xuanxuan finished speaking, he looked around. The others lowered their heads in thought, and no one spoke up, knowing there was no dissent. He then said, "Let's have Zhouda come in and see for himself!"

Soon, a stocky man in leather armor entered from the side. He was robust, with a square face, thick brows, and large eyes. He looked somewhat similar to Li Wen, but while Li Wen had a simple-minded demeanor, this man was clearly someone who had seen blood, a great deal more ferocious, with eyes that shone brightly.

He quickly walked to the front of the hall and, without fear, bowed and said, "Greetings to all the elders and brothers!"

Li Xuanxuan nodded and said, "This is Li Zhouda. He currently holds a position at Yùtíng, handling tasks like slaying Demons and expelling evil."

The old man looked around again. Only Li Zhoufang hesitated for a moment, glancing at Li Xinghan, who, having a good impression of Li Zhouda, spoke softly, "I have stayed by the lake for a while. This brother is diligent and responsible. Among the clansmen, he's one of the most hardworking."

With Li Xinghan's endorsement, Li Zhoufang remained silent. As both were his kinsmen, he certainly wouldn't speak up for Li Zhoutui against his promising sister. The old man noticed this and nodded. "All the elders think highly of you. You just need to temper your personality a bit."

"This junior accepts your guidance!" Li Zhouda grinned and bowed to everyone. Li Minggong stood up and said, "I'll take you to Qingdu. All the rituals on the mountain should be ready."

The clansmen followed Li Minggong to Qingdu, leaving only Li Xinghan and a few others. Li Xuanxuan sighed, "He is good, yes, but only because we have Jiangqian and others to oversee the big picture. We won't rely solely on him in the future. That's why I dared to choose him. We won't need him to be the head of Qingdu, but he can certainly hold down a few peaks."

Li Zhouda was exemplary in every way, save for his overly righteous and volatile temper and his lack of verbal skill. He would often champion justice within the

clan, which earned him the support of many clansmen, but it was not considered a safe path on the road of cultivation.

Li Jiangqian had been waiting for this matter to be settled. His gaze was profound as he sipped his tea. "When word of this gets out, it will be alright for the lone Zhouxun, but the Zhoutui faction will likely have some complaints.

"That's one thing. The other is that Uncle Zhouda has a fiery temper and can't stand petty gossip… my suggestion is that as soon as the formalities are complete, he should be sent into secluded cultivation immediately. That way, he won't hear any of it, and by the time he comes out in a few years, the matter will have faded, and there will be far fewer disputes."

Li Xuanxuan was most afraid of such trouble and could only sigh. In truth, they all understood that at this point, they had no choice but to pick Li Zhouda. Li Zhoutui would likely remain a Qi Refining cultivator forever.

The old man glanced at Li Xinghan and said in a gentle voice, "As for that Essence Gathering Pills of yours, I sent people to inquire with various families a couple of years ago. We eventually obtained one refined by Yùzhēn from the Sword Gate and traded it for one of our own.

"I will also take you to your cave dwelling later and teach you the proper sequence for taking the pills needed for your breakthrough to Foundation Establishment."

Since the Li Family possessed a Talisman Pill, they could achieve a breakthrough without any side effects. As they could not reveal the pill, the Li Family had devised various methods over the years. Li Jiangqian had even managed to mix the Talisman Pill into a selection of other pills by wrapping it in a pill skin, so that when the final breakthrough occurred, it would simply be attributed to an unusually effective combination of medicines.

Li Xinghan bowed in gratitude and withdrew from the hall. Li Jiangqian then waved his hand, dismissing the others on either side. Seeing Li Xuanxuan's worried face, he smiled and said, "Elder, you don't need to worry so much. He may be temperamental and enjoy a good fight, but he's not an idiot. Look at how he spends his days fighting and brawling, sticking up for his clansmen, and how he fights Demons without regard for his life. Isn't he building a reputation? A family needs a direct descendant who is a powerful fighter and a hothead, willing to risk his life, and with such high cultivation… it's a very interesting way of getting what you want."

Li Xuanxuan stroked his beard, and Li Jiangqian spoke in a low voice, "I received news that Li Quantao is already stationed at Salt Lake, and his son has gone to White river Creek to travel around that area. The surrounding families aren't bothering him.

"Master Li Xizhi has been transferred east to guard the Eastern Sea for Azure Pond. He has been given a larger area, from Green Pine Island all the way to Tai'e Island near Crimson Reef Island. He has full authority to command it. His status now… is comparable to that of Sect Master Tantai Jin."

A smile appeared on his face as he continued, "There's also news that Fei Qingyi has made her first public appearance since marrying Qín Xiǎn. It's said she's been invited to guard the Eastern Sea and will be placed under Master Li XIzhi's command. Tantai Jin sent a large group of people with her, and she is highly valued.

"This person is sharp-eyed…"

Li Xuanxuan shook his head. "When the Sima Family was at its peak, she avoided them and didn't even contact her own family, yet she never forgot to fawn over our family, even giving away a spiritual artifact for Foundation Establishment. Now that Ning Wan has come out of seclusion, it's immediately seen as a signal from the Sima Family to show goodwill to the Ning family… Call it good fortune or cleverness, she has finally escaped the sinking ship of the Fei family and is soaring higher and higher."

Li Jiangqian paused, then rose from his main seat and walked out the door. He seemed to sense something and looked north.

'Inward Heart Surging Profundity is beneficial for the Immortal Dao and secluded cultivation, and it can clear the twelve vital breaths.'

'To break through at the very moment a True Monarch descends… there is something suspicious about this.'

In the north, heavy snow fell, blanketing the distance in white. Spring snow was not a particularly surprising phenomenon, but Li Jiangqian observed the extent of the snowfall and smiled.

"They've come just as I expected… After all these years, the Fei family has finally produced their own Foundation Establishment cultivator… but Fei Qingyi… might be in for another headache."

Chapter 844: Baiku

At Cold Cloud Peak, snow drifted through the small courtyard and thick frost clung to the steps. A group of cultivators in white robes knelt outside a cave dwelling. The stout man leading them pressed his forehead to the ground, his face a mix of awe and delight.

"Welcome, honored sir, from your closed-door cultivation!"

The wind and snow before him stirred slightly, and a young man emerged from the courtyard, the very elements clinging to his robes. He bent down slowly, helping the middle-aged man to his feet. He clapped him on the shoulder and chuckled.

"This is a day for celebration, Uncle Tongcai, there's no need for such formality," said Fei Chingyi with a laugh. "The North-South conflict drained our family's vitality, and with only a few elders like you remaining, we must all shoulder the burden together."

Though a bit stout, Fei Tongcai had a certain mature charm. All members of the Fei family were blessed with good looks, and Fei Chingyi, who cultivated the Cold Qi, possessed an added aura of cold sternness. Hearing his words, Fei Tongcai nodded repeatedly, reminding him, "The first thing… we must go to the main family…"

"I understand," Fei Chingyi replied, his head bowed. "This matter can't be delayed. There are a hundred, a thousand eyes on the Lake. If not for the alliance our ancestors forged with the Lake, we wouldn't even have this single mountain peak to call our own. The venerable elder is a man who values old ties. Fetch some of the spiritual items from the mountain and come with me."

He continued in a low voice, "You are the only one left in our family who met Li Qinghong all those years ago. If you come with me to pay our respects to the Lake, you'll have an excuse to speak a few words with the venerable elder… That venerable elder… is truly our family's protective charm."

"Understood! Understood!" Fei Tongcai hurried to prepare the items. As he walked with his kinsman, he heard Fei Chingyi's cold voice.

"In any case, since Fei Qingyi has clung to a powerful branch and submitted herself to the Si family, we can't count on her to help with family matters. We only have ourselves to rely on…"

After they had flown for a time and exited the great formation, they saw a man in black robes waiting quietly before it, his hands clasped. Upon seeing Fei Chingyi, he lowered his head slightly and spoke in a calm voice.

"Fellow Daoist Fei, let us go to the island together!"

"Ah, it's Protector Chen," Fei Chingyi said, forcing a smile. He nodded. "Yes, we were just on our way… just on our way…"

Chen Yang found him utterly displeasing. As the leader of a new generation of elders, including people like An Xuanxin, he had always regarded the Fei family as a thorn in his side. He could not tolerate this semi-autonomous clan in northern Jiangbei, yet he had never been able to find a pretext to act.

He had been sent to Funan to clean up the traces of past events and had handled the matter jointly with Li Jianglong. He was keenly aware of what had transpired in the north, especially concerning the True Monarch. With his cautious nature, he had wanted to turn over every single blade of grass in all of Funan at the time.

At such a critical juncture, Chen Yang had no goodwill whatsoever toward Fei Chingyi. His hand tightened slightly on the hilt of his sword, but a smile bloomed on his face, and he chatted and laughed with them all the way.

Following behind Chen Yang, they flew into the Lake's midst. The hall they entered was utterly silent. Passing through the doorway, they saw the man in crimson robes who had been waiting for them. Li Jiangqian sat on the seat of honor, a smile on his face.

Fei Chingyi was actually terrified of that smile; it sent a shiver down his spine. The Li clan had battled their way out of the remote and desolate lands of Eastern Yue to become the rulers of Moongaze Lake. This bloody history made everyone in the family, from top to bottom, seem utterly formidable. Even after reaching the Foundation Establishment Realm, Fei Chingyi couldn't shake this feeling. He knelt on the floor of the hall, bowing respectfully.

Li Jiangqian offered a few words of congratulations, and Fei Chingyi answered each one, steering the conversation back to how honest and loyal the Fei family was, and that they harbored no ulterior motives.

Li Jiangqian wasn't satisfied with his answers. He still had doubts about the younger man's breakthrough. He watched him for a while in silence before speaking.

"The Floating Cloud Territory in the north was once deeply entangled with the Fei clan. The Lake protected the north bank for ten years, allowing you to weather the storm. Now, that territory has been freed up for a few Purple Mansion Realm cultivators to work. The Fei clan should have withdrawn its hands from there. We've given this order before, but it seems it hasn't been carried out to our satisfaction."

The Fei clan should not have dared to act in Jiangbei, but the Fei family lacked the Li clan's efficiency and speed. Li Jiangqian guessed they still maintained numerous, unintentional ties. When Li Jiangqian asked about it, Fei Chingyi didn't even know which aspect of his family's affairs was lacking. He simply answered, "This subordinate is incompetent. I will go back and take care of it properly…"

Li Jiangqian had no intention of letting him handle it blindly. The difference between the Fei family with and without a Foundation Establishment Realm cultivator was massive. He had specially sent Chen Yang to intercept Fei Chingyi before he could head north. Now, he simply said, "That's not necessary. You will stay on the Lake for now. All news concerning the north will be sent to the island for us to handle. If you conceal even a single detail…"

Fei Chingyi nodded frantically. Li Jiangqian's gaze, however, suddenly locked onto Fei Tongcai, who was sweating profusely beside him. He didn't have to say a word. The nearby Chen Yang immediately stepped forward, drew his sword, and placed it against the middle-aged man's neck, shouting, "Speak!"

Fei Tongcai glanced anxiously at his nephew, a sight that terrified Fei Chingyi out of his wits. If not for the fact that cultivating the 'Snow on the Pine' physique prevented him from sweating, he too would have been drenched. He knelt down as well, giving Fei Tongcai a meaningful look before answering, "This subordinate… this subordinate has only just come out of seclusion… I don't know what news the family has received…"

Li Jiangqian watched the two men silently. Fei Tongcai began to kowtow, muttering timidly, "Reporting to the Venerable Sir… we received a secret letter a few days ago. A former clansman… is cultivating in Baihu County. They sent a secret letter back recently, hoping for assistance with resources and supplies…"

He called him a "former clansman," but Fei Chingyi knew he was a descendant left behind by the older generation as a contingency plan. A feeling of dread took hold of him. Chen Yang, who held the sword, received a subtle cue from his lord. His face instantly turned grim and menacing. "We told your family to withdraw your hands long ago. To knowingly hide information and secretly contact others… you are truly rebellious!"

"This humble one didn't know about this before!" Fei Tongcai could only kneel on the ground, trembling. Li Jiangqian still wore a smile, but his heart was filled with dark clouds.

'Baihu County… so he is indeed in Baihu County. That means Protector Black Rat is in Baihu County. Wang Quwan and Wang He are also in Baihu County, and the core of the Wang clan of Jiangbei is in the area of Baihu County…'

But if the Fei family had someone in Baihu County, the matter was completely different. Li Jiangqian strode down, helped Fei Chingyi up, and said with a hint of reproach, "Protector Chen is too harsh… this matter isn't clear yet, there's no need to rush."

Fei Chingyi finally relaxed a little. Fei Tongcai stopped stuttering, and when Chen Yang asked, he spoke softly.

"That person is of my generation. He made a mistake years ago and was driven out by the family. He no longer keeps in contact with us. He once cultivated at Salt Lake, and later went to Baihu County to work as a tearoom owner."

"Recently… we heard that there was turmoil in the county. The great formation of the ore vein was destroyed, which angered Protector Black Rat. His business was affected, and he also reached a crucial period in his Qi Refining breakthrough… so he sought help from the Peak."

"Patriarch, please rest assured! Our family will no longer have any contact with this person!"

Li Jiangqian stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his fists clenched so tight that the veins on his knuckles bulged. A few wisps of Radiant Fire leaked from his palms, flickering erratically.

This matter seemed harmless—after all, the person had been exiled by the Fei family. If he happened to gain favor with the True Monarch, the Fei family would be in trouble, and if he offended the True Monarch, the Fei family would also be in trouble. But a little thought revealed that this "exile" was a pathetic ruse.

'What if this person was forced to be exiled due to my pressure, a part of a 'cunning rabbit with three burrows' plan? If he does gain favor with the True Monarch, it would mean my family will be a target for attracting hatred!'

He spoke with a gentle tone, "Why would you drive away a family member for no good reason? Speak the truth now."

His voice was faintly chilling. Chen Yang's face turned even darker, and he stood silently. Fei Tongcai finally couldn't hold on any longer. He kowtowed and confessed, "Reporting to the Venerable Sir… this was the doing of Fei Tongyu… back when he led our Fei family to swear allegiance to the Lake, he made a secret plan to send out four branches of our clan. He was even afraid of being discovered and didn't dare to contact them for all these years… He said… those who are outside only need to know they are of the Fei clan, and we don't need to know where they are. That way, if Cold Cloud Peak's Fei clan were to one day disappear, he would have a chance to rebuild the clan and continue the lineage!"

"This family… only recently made contact again…"

Li Jiangqian, a man of great cunning, understood immediately. Though Fei Tongyu had led his clansmen to pledge allegiance, he clearly held deep misgivings about the Li clan, fearing his family would be slowly worn away until the north bank was fully occupied. He had dispersed his bloodline as a contingency. As for why they hadn't dared to contact them all these years? It was to guard against the Li clan, of course!

That was the true meaning of the so-called "exile!" It was originally a backup plan, but now, due to the fate of Jiangbei, one branch had ended up in Baihu County. They might truly encounter the True Monarch!

He swept a grim look at Chen Yang, who also looked sullen. He was disgusted by Fei Tongcai. Chen Yang was no simple man; he had probably also guessed this layer of deception. Holding his sword, he said grimly, "The Lake has treated your family well all these years, haven't we?"

At these words, the two could only kneel and kowtow, unable to say another word. This was Fei Tongyu's doing, a mere retreat plan. Who could have foreseen that such a thing would happen in the future, or that it would cause trouble in this way?

'The Fei clansmen are all quite attractive. Perhaps one or two of the daughters will offer their beauty and be favored by the True Monarch. If he really lets this Fei Tongcai cut off contact, and the matter comes back to bite them, will it be the Fei family's fault? Naturally, it would be seen as my, Li Jiangqian's, persecution…'

Lost in thought, he returned to the seat of honor. He sat down and told Chen Yang to sheathe his sword. At the moment, he was wary of the True Monarch's methods, so he maintained a pleasant demeanor.

"This matter is simply a case of a predecessor being overly cautious. There is no need to dwell on it now. Qing'yi's breakthrough to the Foundation Establishment Realm is a great blessing. There's no need for a clansman to be wandering about outside. Send someone to bring him back and have him complete his breakthrough within the Peak!"

This intention confused the two Fei clansmen. They didn't know if it was a good or bad thing, or why this order had been given. They could only kowtow and thank him. Chen Yang spoke in a low voice.

"And the person we should send…"

This was a critical matter. It would be best to send someone who knew the inside story. If it weren't so strange for Li Jiangqian to go himself, he would have considered making the trip. He, too, possessed a Talisman Seed.

He shook his head slightly, troubled by the thought. He sent the two men away to wait before answering, "Perhaps Protector Chen should go. There's no need for Fei Chingyi to go. Take Fei Tongcai to gain his trust, and also find a few direct descendants of the Fei clan from the north bank who have been promoted because of their closeness to our family. Have them go together to welcome him. Using Fei Chingyi's breakthrough as a reason to welcome him won't cause too much of a problem."

Chen Yang nodded respectfully. He did not take the opportunity to speak ill of the Fei family, but instead voiced his doubts. "This is bad news. I wonder if we

will be in time… and as for the ore vein incident, there are almost certainly some tricks at play."

Li Jiangqian understood the trickery better than he did, which was why this Fei clansman had to be brought in. He shook his head and replied, "This isn't necessarily a bad thing. Jiangbei is so vast. The Capital Immortals Dao and our family, our shadows here can't be erased. The True Monarch's script always needs actors. There's no way to avoid it, only to decide if the role is good or bad."

"If we can detect this in advance, it is a blessing in disguise. By bringing him in this way, we might not even run into the man himself. Things have only just begun to change. Everyone's cultivation shouldn't be too high yet. A Foundation Establishment Realm cultivator at this time won't be an enemy, so nothing too terrible should happen… but if we don't bring him in, something terrible is bound to happen in the end."

Chen Yang nodded heavily, his head lowered, lost in thought. Li Jiangqian didn't really want him to go, but he didn't have many capable Foundation Establishment Realm cultivators, and each had their own shortcomings.

Cui Jueyin was skilled at internal affairs and acted with grace, but it would be difficult to get him to engage in deception or underhanded methods. Ding Weizeng was a fighting champion. Qu Bushi was clever, but old and cowardly, always trying to keep his head down. Li Jianglong and Li Jiangxia had not yet broken through. He truly did not have a single Foundation Establishment Realm cultivator who was as steady and effective in both overt and covert actions as Chen Yang.

'It's best if I go with him in secret. I'll watch from the river. If anything truly happens, there will still be room to maneuver…'

As Chen Yang left the hall, Qu Bushi brought the Fei clansmen forward. They were all in high spirits after hearing the good news. Fei Tongcai had also collected himself and was waiting quietly outside the hall. Chen Yang put on a grave face, apologizing and sighing as if he had been overly impulsive just moments before, which made Fei Tongcai's forehead break out in a cold sweat, slightly easing the tension.

With a wide smile, Chen Yang took Fei Tongcai's arm and pulled him forward, offering a few words of congratulations. The Fei clansmen were soon full of laughter, and they flew north on the wind.

Upon reaching Jiangbei, the sun grew noticeably hotter, and the early spring chill was gone. Chen Yang chuckled. "The Capital Immortals Dao is not on good terms with my family. All of you can wait on the riverbank while Fellow Daoist Tongcai and I go to retrieve him."

The purpose of the rest of the group was to prevent Fei Tongcai from having too much time alone with the other Fei clansman. Once he was retrieved, the clansman would simply be introduced to a group of Fei family members who had prospered under the Li family's rule. Chen Yang was too lazy to bring along this group of burdens, fearing they would stir up trouble.

When they reached Baihu County, the southernmost part of the White ye Creek territory, the area was in utter chaos. The rule of the Hall of the Locust Soul was worse than no rule at all. Cultivators flew about the city as if it were an unowned realm.

Corpses littered the main road, a stench of death hanging in the air from the thick, yellow dust. There were no pedestrians, only a few people kneeling on the ground, groaning, whether from sickness or hunger.

Fei Tongcai frowned repeatedly at the sight. Chen Yang swept his spiritual sense across the area and said in a low voice, "It seems it's because the formation in Baihu County was destroyed… and the spiritual mineral dust from the ore vein has spread throughout the Baihu County area…"

Metal Malice and Metal Taint were lethal poisons to mortals. The former was often found in artifacts—the Li clan would even put away their artifacts when meeting mortals—while the latter was a cold and fierce toxin often found in ore veins. Back then, who knew how many people from the Rui clan had died mining Cuiyuan Copper Essence for the Xiao family due to this very toxin.

'This Protector Black Rat doesn't care about mortals… he'll just let them die…'

Fei Tongcai followed the instructions to the tearoom. The surroundings were indeed desolate. The courtyard was in disrepair, and the nearby streets were littered with corpses. It was impossible to find a place to stand.

Still, the tearoom was a place for cultivators and appeared clean and tidy. Standing far away, they saw a commotion. A group of people was kneeling on the ground, and a man in luxurious robes stood haughtily in the courtyard.

Amidst the kneeling cultivators, a slender figure stood. His handsome face was full of defiance as he listened to the man in luxurious robes shout.

"You dog! You dare to not kneel before me, the son of the esteemed County Governor!"

The handsome youth merely replied in a cold voice, "Why should I kneel to you? I, Lin Feng, only kneel to the heavens above and the earth below. Are you, a scoundrel who only relies on his father's prestige, worthy of making me kneel?"

He raised his head, and a certain imposing air emanated from his slender body. The scoundrel's face immediately contorted in anger. A retainer standing beside him stepped forward, his face grim, and said in a cold voice, "Kneel!"

Everyone was shocked. They saw that the retainer was a Qi Refining cultivator. A pair of delicate sisters nearby hurried to pull at the youth. "Brother Lin…"

But the youth stood unyielding. Soon, the crowd parted, and an old man came forward, whispering, "Please don't be angry… don't be angry. This old man is here to hand over the spiritual supplies to Protector Black Rat… please, for the Protector's sake…"

At his words, the retainer and the scoundrel hesitated, looking as if they were about to back down. But the youth took a step forward and shouted, "You, surnamed Wang! Do you dare to duel me?"

"Ridiculous!" The scoundrel named Wang's eyes turned cold. "You are just at the third layer of Embryonic Breathing! You dare to challenge my fifth layer? There is nothing I don't dare to do!"

"Good! Three months from now, you and I will fight a duel to the death right here! We shall not only determine who is superior but also who lives and who dies!"

Lin Feng's shout made the scoundrel named Wang laugh in anger. He gave the old man who had come to his aid a cold stare before flicking his sleeves and leaving, leaving behind a flurry of hushed discussions in the shop.

Chen Yang watched, frowning. He patted Fei Tongcai beside him, but Fei Tongcai just shook his head.

"This Baihu County is interesting. The stage is set so realistically… and the protagonist truly has a noble bearing. He is quite admirable."

Chen Yang gave him a quick look before slowly approaching. He nodded. "He is indeed an extraordinary person, one not easily seen on the Lake…"

Fei Tongcai had completely shed his previous caution and sorrow. He walked quickly into the tearoom, taking the old man's hand. "Hey! Second cousin, it's been a long time!"

The old man also recognized Fei Tongcai. He was full of shock. "Why have you come here… is the family…?"

"Qing'yi has broken through to the Foundation Establishment Realm! We are here to bring you back to enjoy a life of ease!"

The two sighed with emotion. Fei Tongcai's face showed not a single trace of worry, completely immersed in the joy of seeing an old friend. Chen Yang, meanwhile, went to look at Lin Feng, his face now a picture of simple honesty. He patted the youth's shoulder and praised him.

"Good boy! I saw from afar just now. This is truly the demeanor of an Immortal Dao genius!"

"A Foundation Establishment Realm cultivator!"

The courtyard erupted in a clamor. The group of cultivators knelt down in fear. While the son of the County Governor had only inspired fear of his authority, this person inspired fear from the bottom of their hearts. The two delicate sisters beside the youth also knelt, but the young man remained fearless, standing proudly. He bowed and said, "Greetings, Senior!"

Chen Yang nodded constantly, his expression full of admiration. He sighed. "In my life, I admire those who cannot be intimidated by power the most! And I despise those scoundrels and schemers with twisted minds! Good boy! For Jiangbei to produce such an unafraid person… it is indeed a blessed land!"

He pulled Lin Feng to a table and sat him down. "But in just three months, how can you defeat him?"

Lin Feng slowly shook his head, his eyes firm. "This junior has his own way!"

"Good!" Chen Yang praised him repeatedly. He reached into his sleeve and took out a talisman. "It's a pleasure to have met and spoken with you. If you ever face danger in the future, you can use this talisman to escape. Consider it a way to save a friend."

"Thank you, Senior!"

Chen Yang laughed heartily. "I am from Moongaze Lake. A cultivator from the Fei family has achieved the Foundation Establishment Realm, and so has gained a higher status on the Lake. I am here to bring this elder back. He is about to have a breakthrough to Qi Refining… so he will cultivate on the Lake."

The two sisters by the youth's side gasped. Chen Yang smiled. "Seeing the two of you, you must also be from the Fei family. You are both truly beautiful… Do you have spiritual apertures? You can come and cultivate on the mountain as well."

The older sister hesitated, while the younger one looked disappointed. They spoke at the same time. "Brother Lin saved our lives. We only wish to cultivate by his side…"

But Lin Feng silently shook his head. "Qingya has a spiritual aperture and should naturally join the Moongaze Lake Sect to cultivate… as for Qingfei… she will have to suffer with me as we wander…"

The three of them became lost in their heartfelt conversation. Chen Yang watched with a smile, but drops of cold sweat rolled down his cheeks and into his collar. His lips trembled slightly, but he could not speak, only maintain the stiff smile on his face.

When Lin Feng's gaze finally turned to him, the subtle struggle on Chen Yang's face shattered instantly. A jovial smile appeared once more. He motioned to Fei Tongcai to come over, laughing.

"It's almost time to go. This is someone else's territory, after all, and our Daoist tradition is not on good terms with theirs, so we should not stay long…"

Fei Tongcai took the older of the two sisters by the hand, nodding repeatedly. His old cousin followed. Lin Feng sighed lightly, holding his sister as he saw them out of the hall. He spoke with deep affection.

"Qingya, don't worry… wait for me for three years! In three years, I will reach the Foundation Establishment Realm and personally go to Cold Cloud Peak to ask for your hand!"

The younger sister pouted with jealousy, while Fei Qingya's face flushed. His words were utterly absurd, yet no one present found it strange. Even Fei Tongcai nodded with a smile, his face full of gratification.

Chen Yang soared into the air with the group and flew south. Lin Feng silently put the talisman away. He raised his head and said in a cold voice, “The Wang Clan… covering the sky with a single hand, acting with impunity. Just you wait!”

Yellow sand swirled past him. He stood tall and proud as his cultivation rose. In just a few breaths, another Embryonic Breathing wheel had condensed within his body.

Chapter 845: Entering the Fray

Riding the winds, Chen Yang led the lively group on their journey home. The black-robed man stroked his beard with a contented smile, while Fei Tongcai and his cousin, Fei Tonglu, laughed until their sides ached, reminiscing about days long past.

During their early years of cultivation, their ancestor, Fei Wangbai, had been struck down by a single sword strike from Si Yuanli in full view of the clan. The event had become an inner demon for nearly every member of the Fei family. Yet here the two were, recalling those times with faces full of blissful joy, not a shadow of gloom in sight.

After they crossed the river, a crowd of Fei family members came to welcome them. They called out greetings, puzzled by the group's infectious cheerfulness but joining in the festive mood as they headed toward the lake.

They had just reached the northern shore when they saw a refined, scholarly-looking Foundation Establishment Realm cultivator waiting for them. It was Cui Jueyin, who was supposed to be guarding the river.

Cui Jueyin's smile was frozen. He came face to face with Chen Yang and was about to speak when Chen Yang's bright, cheerful voice boomed out.

"Greetings, Lord Cui! What a coincidence!"

The shout left Cui Jueyin stunned and suspicious. 'Who is this man?' he thought. 'The Chen Yang I know speaks in a deep, measured tone and rarely smiles. When has he ever laughed so heartily?' With his brows unfurrowed and his features relaxed, he looked almost like a different person.

"Protector Chen…" Cui Jueyin replied, his suspicion slowly fading. He adopted a gentle tone. "I am under orders from the Family Head to lead you and Fellow Daoist Fei to the lake. The grand array on Cold Cloud Peak requires maintenance. The rest of you may find lodging at a nearby peak. I will not see you off."

Fei Tongcai nodded repeatedly and sent the others back with Fei Qingya. He and Chen Yang then joined Cui Jueyin, and the three of them flew toward the lake. When they arrived at the great hall, it was completely empty.

Cui Jueyin closed the heavy doors and smiled at Fei Tongcai.

"Fellow Daoist, please rest for a moment. I will take Protector Chen to make his report."

Fei Tongcai nodded with a smile.

His attitude toward Cui Jueyin was bizarre. He was merely at the Qi Refining stage, yet when facing a peak Foundation Establishment Realm expert like Cui Jueyin, he neither bowed nor lowered his head. Not only did he lack the usual fear of a higher-level cultivator, but he also treated him with the casual familiarity of a colleague.

Chen Yang observed this without a hint of displeasure. As he walked out with Cui Jueyin, he began to chat amiably.

"Lord Cui, I met a true genius in Jiangbei… such indomitable pride, unbending in the face of power…"

Cui Jueyin, however, wore a conflicted expression and seemed reluctant to listen. He cut in, "About Fei Qingya…"

"We can discuss that in detail later!"

The two entered the main hall, which was also deserted except for Li Jiangqian, who sat in the center with a grim expression. He squinted, his gaze filled with apprehension as if he were facing two monstrous beasts.

As Chen Yang and Cui Jueyin came to a stop, Cui Jueyin dropped to his knees in a deep bow. Chen Yang offered a slight, casual nod of respect. Li Jiangqian set down the vermilion brush in his hand and lowered his head to read a scroll, saying nothing.

The atmosphere in the hall instantly froze. The cheerful smile on Chen Yang's face grew stiff. Cui Jueyin, kneeling firmly on the stone floor, felt a sheen of sweat form on his neck. Silence reigned.

As time ticked by, Cui Jueyin finally broke the quiet, his voice low.

"Reporting to the Family Head… I fear… Baiku Prefecture is indeed… where *that one* has taken residence."

Chen Yang remained standing ramrod straight, a look of utter confusion on his face. Seeing this, Cui Jueyin began to sweat profusely. He heard Li Jiangqian's soft command.

"Wake Lord Chen up."

Cui Jueyin scrambled to his feet and began casting spells, unleashing one Dharma Art after another, but the Chen Yang before him remained unresponsive. Finally, Cui Jueyin rolled up his sleeves, and while Chen Yang was distracted, he delivered two heavy slaps across his face.

Smack! Smack!

He had put his full strength into the blows. Chen Yang's cheeks flushed crimson as he staggered back two steps, a dazed look in his eyes. He collapsed to his knees with a thud, his lips trembling as if he wanted to speak, but no sound came out.

Li Jiangqian rose, still averting his gaze from Chen Yang. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw wisps of Purple Smoke drifting out and coiling on the floor. He immediately bowed low, his voice respectful.

"Greetings, Daoist Master!"

A woman in autumn-yellow robes stepped into the hall. Cui Jueyin reacted just as quickly, bowing reverently. Only Chen Yang remained standing stiffly in the center of the hall. He cupped his hands in a salute and asked, "May I ask which Daoist Master has graced us with her presence…?"

At this, even Li Jiangqian was at a loss for words. He remained kneeling and pleaded, "I beg the Daoist Master… to save him…"

Fortunately, Tinglan was magnanimous and chose to ignore the remark. She formed a sword finger with two fingers and lightly tapped the spot between Chen Yang's brows.

Chen Yang instantly stumbled back a step. His eyes flashed a brilliant yellow before erupting in a blinding light that burned them to cinders, leaving only two dark, empty sockets. He fell to the floor with a crash, the back of his robes visibly soaked with sweat.

He fumbled on the ground, kowtowing repeatedly while ignoring the bloody tears that dripped from his empty sockets. Tinglan casually plucked a sheet of

paper from the desk, picked up the vermilion brush, and with a few deft strokes, drew a pair of eyes.

She tossed the paper toward Chen Yang's face. In an instant, two new eyeballs popped into the blackened sockets, and a blank sheet of paper fluttered to the floor.

Tinglan had not yet mastered the Life Divine Ability; destroying his eyes before recreating them was clearly a clever workaround. She allowed Chen Yang a moment to recover before speaking softly.

"Now that all the players are assembled on your side, the True Monarch will naturally appear. Not bad. Finding the Monarch so quickly saves a lot of trouble later…"

Her tone was light. She glanced at the still-bowing Chen Yang and chuckled. "You're quite capable yourself, to still have some sweat left to shed in the Monarch's presence."

Fear and apprehension were the only emotions left in Chen Yang's eyes. His hands, pressed against the floor for support, were pale and trembled slightly. Li Jiangqian spoke up respectfully, "Daoist Master, there is still a Qi Refining cultivator who personally saw the Monarch and returned. He is nearby… should we have him come in?"

Tinglan shook her head and took the main seat, a hint of shock in her expression. "There's no need to see him," she said gently. "He's beyond saving. His original consciousness has been completely annihilated. What's replaced it is whatever the Monarch imagines him to be. If the Monarch thinks he's cheerful, he's cheerful. If he thinks he's optimistic, he's optimistic. If one day the Monarch thinks he should go rescue him, he'll grab a sword and go. No one can save him."

"As for… you…" Tinglan looked at Chen Yang. "You are a Foundation Establishment Realm cultivator, after all, and I intervened in time. Just lie low until the Monarch leaves, and this matter will be over."

In that short time, Li Jiangqian had observed a great deal. Chen Yang had been acting strangely, yet Cui Jueyin had been completely oblivious until the end. The influence was clearly far more widespread than he had imagined. "Should we isolate him… have him stay alone?" he asked quietly.

Tinglan considered this for a moment. "That's up to you. As long as you don't mention the Monarch's affairs, he's harmless. But it's best to have as little contact as possible."

"As for that young lady..." Tinglan's gaze swept over them again. "Give her a quiet environment, and assign a few female cultivators from the Fei family to live with her. There's no need to pick the talented ones."

Li Jiangqian nodded quickly. "This junior understands."

Tinglan's voice took on a meaningful tone. "You must understand, the Monarch will leave sooner or later, but *they* might not be able to. Even as a mortal, they are a prize. Not even a corpse would be left of them. If she's a cultivator... her uses are even greater. The willful and arrogant ones are not useful, but the obedient, cute, aloof, and cold ones... they are excellent material..."

Li Jiangqian looked up slightly, sudden understanding dawning in his eyes. A flash of killing intent sparked within him before he quickly suppressed it. "Thank you for the guidance, Daoist Master!"

Tinglan continued in a leisurely manner, "Ning Wan is watching over Li Quantao and his son, as well as matters in Jiangbei. It was convenient for me to make this trip."

She looked at Li Jiangqian and smiled. "The Li clan is truly of the Wei-Li lineage, and Li Zhouwei is a true White Qilin. Excellent, indeed. A match for Tu Longjian!"

The remark seemed to come out of nowhere, but Li Jiangqian understood her meaning perfectly. She was complimenting him for remaining largely unaffected, for being able to command the situation calmly through these bizarre changes. It had deepened her and the other Daoist Masters' conviction in the Li family's bloodline.

'A son of the White Qilin... a Golden Core bloodline... Only that can grant one a slight escape from the Monarch's influence.'

With those words, she dissolved into Purple Smoke and vanished. Li Jiangqian respectfully bid her farewell, then calmly raised his head and sat in the main seat. Below, Chen Yang was drenched in sweat, clearly terrified by his own actions on the journey back.

Li Jiangqian paused for a moment, then smiled. "Protector Chen! Regarding the Daoist Master's decree… how should we select these women from the Fei family?"

Chen Yang replied respectfully, "The jealous, the restless, the troublemakers, and those from branches unrelated to ours… supplement them with one or two gentle, kind ones who are our kin."

"A group of female cultivators will always have drama," he continued. "We'll just send them resources. If the Monarch arrives here and becomes displeased, should he want some entertainment, this will give him a quick way to vent. No matter what, the Fei family is his maternal family, and his time is tight. He won't linger in Jiangnan."

Li Jiangqian smiled. "It seems Protector Chen has returned to us."

He picked up his brush, his mind racing. 'The Daoist Master's meaning is clear. I wonder which immortal sects will get ideas about Fei Qingya. Driving a wedge between her and the Fei family in advance is good for my clan and for the other sects. After all, it's an awkward situation.'

'Thinking back, the incident with Chu Yi last time was in Yufu Prefecture, right near the Purple Smoke Gate…'

Making the connection, Li Jiangqian looked up and asked, "The current rising star of the Purple Smoke Gate's Mu Zuo Peak, Qian Lizi… she must be around a hundred years old now, right? Protector Cui, do you know her name?"

Cui Jueyin thought for a moment. "I believe… her surname is Han? As for her given name… that's difficult to know. She has used her Daoist title since joining the sect, so it's hard to find out her original name."

"I understand." Li Jiangqian nodded, deep in thought. "Protector Chen will be fully in charge of the Fei Qingya matter. Replace everyone who has had contact with her with female attendants. Lock down the mountain peaks where she cultivates, and don't let anyone in…"

"Especially my family members."

A plan had already formed in Li Jiangqian's mind.

'Since Daoist Master Tinglan said the Monarch makes things what he thinks they are, Chen Yang has already become an amiable and approachable senior in

his mind. Perhaps if he goes over early, that wastrel will make a move, letting Chen Yang step in to help and set up some three-month agreement…'

'And since an amiable senior is representing my Li clan, whatever happens at Cold Cloud Peak probably won't be blamed on us. Let them deal with the fallout themselves…'

He added another instruction to put Chen Yang's mind at ease. "You don't need to have contact with her normally. When the True Monarch arrives, find an excuse to go into seclusion. There's no need for you to meet him again."

"Yes!"

Chen Yang's expression finally calmed. He received his orders and exited through a side door. Li Jiangqian considered for a moment more, then commanded:

"Have Fei Chingyi come up."

Soon, a man entered from outside the hall. He had been stuck on the island since his breakthrough, unable to even leave the main hall. His face was etched with anxiety as he bowed before the throne. "Greetings, Family Head," he said cautiously.

Li Jiangqian's face was a mask of profound disappointment. He descended from his seat, his tone laced with frustration. "Daoist Master Tinglan just left!"

The words terrified Fei Chingyi, who immediately kowtowed, his body tense with nervousness. Li Jiangqian pressed on, "How many times have I told you! The matter in Jiangbei is of utmost importance to the Daoist Masters! Who knows how many Purple Mansion Realm experts are involved, and you nearly ruined their grand plans! If not for our clan's intervention, the entire Fei family would have become a stepping stone for others!"

Fei Chingyi had never imagined the situation was so dire. He remained frozen in place as Li Jiangqian continued coldly, "Listen well. The current Fei Tongcai has been afflicted by a spell art. No one is to see him. I will send him to guard a ferry crossing near Jiangbei, a post within our territory. His resources will be several times what your branch receives, and the benefits will be far greater. When the time is up, we will bring him back."

Fei Chingyi started to thank him, but Li Jiangqian waved his hand dismissively. "There is something more important… Although Fei Qingya is unaware, she is

the reincarnation of a Daoist Master. She is no longer a member of your Fei family. The Daoist Masters have given specific instructions: her cultivation technique is special and cannot be tainted by worldly ties. She is forbidden from seeing anyone and will cultivate on your Cold Cloud Peak. I will seal off those mountain peaks and leave a few people to accompany her. If anyone from your family disturbs her, it will be a crime punishable by the extermination of your entire clan."

Fei Chingyi could never have predicted such a turn of events. A chill washed over him. 'Without a Purple Mansion Realm expert, we have no right to know anything… we're just cannon fodder.'

Li Jiangqian continued, "I am telling you this secret so you can control your family members. If it leaks and attracts enemies, not only will your Fei family be wiped out for harboring her, but my clan will also suffer greatly."

His tone softened slightly. "Fellow Daoist Fei, these matters are top secret, known only to myself, Lord Cui, and a few others. I am telling you this out of the deep friendship between our families, so you understand the gravity of the situation. It is extremely serious. Because a direct descendant of your family appeared and disrupted their plans—and they couldn't just kill him out of respect for my clan—the Purple Mansion Realm experts are very displeased."

"This subordinate understands!" Fei Chingyi's hand, extending from his sleeve, was trembling.

Li Jiangqian sighed. "This being reincarnated into Fei Qingya… in her past life, she cultivated the Way of Heartlessness. That's why she cultivates Cold Qi. If you behave, nothing will happen. But if you get too involved, too close, and something goes wrong when she is proving her Dao… and she needs to kill to sever her emotional ties, that is no laughing matter."

He had thoroughly intimidated Fei Chingyi, who now began to thank him with fawning gratitude. Beside them, Cui Jueyin didn't dare lift his head. Only then did Li Jiangqian say, "Lord Cui, go with him. Handle this matter properly. Do not meet her personally; let the people we arranged earlier handle everything."

The two men quickly retreated. Li Jiangqian returned to his seat and let out a long, frustrated sigh.

He could never tell Fei Chingyi the truth. One could never underestimate human greed. If Fei Chingyi learned that his own relative had become a True

Monarch's consort, it would undoubtedly trigger a terrifying disturbance. No matter how much he warned him to stay away, the man would assume it was a bluff and try to get closer.

However, the excuse for bringing Fei Qingya back had been Fei Chingyi's breakthrough; he couldn't just lock him up and be done with it. He would remain a huge liability. For now, this elaborate deception was the only way to make everything fit with the series of commands that had been issued.

'I'll just have to play it by ear…'

He picked up his brush and wrote several more orders, frowning. "I also need to see the Old Master. I'll have him confine Uncle Zhouming. He'll have to suffer for a bit…"

Chapter 846: Immortal Dao Wall

The Eastern Sea.

The water was a profound, abyssal dark. A long canyon, its bottom lost to sight, was shrouded in gloom. A streak of azure light shot through the depths, weaving through the water like a fish. Yet, there wasn't a single living creature to be seen—only the oppressive, dark sea.

After an unknowable amount of time, the pale gray canyon floor came into view. Layers of fine, light gray debris drifted in the currents, revealing the stark white reef below. The azure light shifted, transforming on the seabed into a man in azure robes.

The man wore fine azure clothing, a golden tassel hanging from his belt. With his handsome face, azure eyes, and long, unbound hair, he stood firm on the seafloor and surveyed his surroundings.

It was Chi Buzi.

The seabed near the coast was shallow and rich with spiritual energy; it had all once been land, much like the six great prefectures to the south. But past Green Pine Island and Splitreed Island, the seafloor plunged dramatically, marking the ancient coastline.

This place was not far from Splitreed Island. To reach it, one had to traverse the densest region of spiritual energy, travel near Bamboo Creek Island, and then descend between the earth veins to find this deep canyon and follow it to the bottom.

The inner records of the Azure Pond Sect mentioned that Daoist Master Yuansu had cultivated at the bottom of this canyon for a very long time. The deepest

parts here plunged far below the floor of the Vermillion Sea, likely even deeper than the great chasm on Splitreed Island itself.

What made it truly exceptional was the complete absence of spiritual energy within the canyon. It was like traveling through the Great Void. No Purple Mansion Realm cultivator, even if they searched for a hundred or a thousand years, could ever hope to discover this place.

This lack of spiritual energy also made travel treacherous. Even a mighty Purple Mansion Realm cultivator had to rely on their own dharma power to descend, a journey that would take no less than four or five days at their speed. As for a Foundation Establishment Realm cultivator, they might possess the ability to get down, but they would most certainly lack the power to fly back up in such a null environment.

Chi Buzi stood on the pitch-black canyon floor. He crouched down and, with a push of his dharma power, swept aside the rolling white sand. The movement revealed a flat stone platform, upon which was inscribed a single, simple golden circle.

He formed a hand seal, recited an incantation in his mind, and pressed his palm onto the platform. As he poured his power into it, layers of profound light began to glow. The dark, lightless canyon floor was finally illuminated by faint golden specks.

But Chi Buzi's expression was grave. He remained perfectly still, not daring to move.

He knew this place was protected by countless layers of restrictive formations. The slightest ripple of power could unleash more trouble than he could handle. The very bottom layer was an immortal formation; if he triggered its defenses, annihilation would be certain.

He waited for a long while before the golden light on the platform finally shifted to white. The circle flared brightly for a moment before dimming, leaving a single, sparkling point of light at its center.

Shing!

With great caution, Chi Buzi drew the Dharma sword from his waist. He flicked a mote of azure light from its tip into the glowing point. After waiting a moment, he reached out and drew the light back, confirming there was no ambush

waiting for him. Only then did his form blur, transforming into a streak of azure light that shot into the portal.

An unknown time later, a dim light appeared before him. He found himself on another seabed entirely.

The first thing he saw was a towering undersea cliff adorned with fields of coral. The area was littered with ruins and rubble. The remains of collapsed, grayish-white stone walls lay at the cliff's base, and the ground was scattered with broken tiles of all sizes that shimmered with faint, colorful light. Sunlight, filtering down from above, dappled the ground like shimmering scales.

Looking up, he could see the glittering surface of the sea, a sheet of brilliant white from his vantage point. The sun was blazing in the sky. He estimated the cliff was thousands of feet high, its peak nearly breaking the surface.

Chi Buzi paused, a little lost in thought. He took a few steps forward. When nothing happened, he retrieved the tripod-shaped spiritual artifact from his robes and began to scan the entire area.

He moved east until he reached the edge of this pocket sea. Though he could still see endless coral reefs stretching into the distance, his hands met an invisible barrier. He followed the boundary, circling the entire area to ensure he was alone before he began his ascent up the cliff.

The higher he climbed, the brighter the sunlight became. Halfway up the cliffside, Chi Buzi discovered a large stone table surrounded by more than a dozen high-backed stone chairs, most of them overturned and scattered. The scene was one of ruin and desolation. On the single intact chair, a white Daoist robe was draped, swaying gently in the unseen currents.

The tabletop was a mess of bronze wine goblets, some standing, some toppled over. A single jade flask sat silently amidst the clutter. There was nothing else.

Chi Buzi had been here many times. The first time was with Chi Wei, and it was here that the first seeds of defiance against Pristine Water had been planted in his heart. The stone table had been here even then, and a suffocating sense of danger arose whenever he drew near.

As before, Chi Buzi carefully skirted the area and continued his climb. At the very peak of the cliff, he finally saw it: a shimmering stone wall. It was about the height of a man and as thick as two palms pressed together. Countless tiny, ant-sized golden characters floated across its surface. Here, he was only a few yards from the surface; it felt as if a single leap would allow him to break through into the open air.

Chi Buzi paid it no mind and slowly sat down.

According to Chi Wei, the space beyond the water's surface was filled with the ancient Golden Crow's Transmuting Radiance. Anyone who dared to stick their head out would be instantly incinerated. Even a Purple Mansion Realm cultivator would face certain death.

As for the Immortal Dao Wall, Chi Wei and Ning Tiaoxiao had been here. Qiushui and Daoist Master Tianyuan had been here. Even Zimu, who was once hailed as the cultivator with the highest Dao attainment of his generation, had come. Every Daoist Master who had visited this place was a prodigy of their era, yet not a single one could remember a single word written on the wall. The name "Immortal Dao Wall" itself had come from Li Jiangqun.

Whether Li Jiangqun himself could remember its contents, only he knew.

Chi Buzi bowed slowly. With his dharma power, he traced a series of arcane patterns on the ground. His voice was low and resonant as he began to chant.

"I, the humble cultivator Chi Buzi… pray to the Heavenly Officials to ward off disaster and exorcise evil…"

In the world within the Immortal Mirror.

Wind and clouds surged across the land. Lu Jiangxian stood quietly inside his snow-swept cave dwelling, the image of the undersea stone wall swiftly reflected in his pupils.

His gaze lifted slightly, sweeping over the reflection of the Golden Crow's Transmuting Radiance. Golden runes streamed from his eyes, spiraling around his body, growing ever brighter until they coalesced before him into lines of elegant small seal script.

The Wondrous Art of the Unified Golden Core!

As the techniques from his memory surfaced one by one, Lu Jiangxian looked up. Sheets of profound light rained down around him.

The full name of the technique was the *Supreme Technique of the Immortal Dao for Seeking Transformation through the Unified Golden Core*. It shared the same origin as the *Wondrous Technique of True Attainment* he had obtained from the Three-Drum Wall; both were recorded in small seal script.

The difference was that the *Wondrous Technique of True Attainment*, contained within the Dharma Treasure known as the Three-Drum Wall, was an immortal art for cultivating a Golden Core. The *Wondrous Art of the Unified Golden Core*, however, was a supreme method used by ancient immortals to evade calamities and establish a domain in the azure heavens. It taught one how to hold a Fruition Attainment while simultaneously achieving an Surplus Position, or how to gain an Intercalary Position without ever abandoning the first.

The text of this art was concise, yet its variations were infinite, spanning nearly ten million words of detailed explanations for its different permutations. Its primary purpose was to guide a cultivator on how to hold a Fruition Attainment while seeking one of several Surplus Positions, and how to achieve an Intercalary Position without relinquishing their Fruition Attainment. The "cultivators" it spoke of were what modern practitioners would call Dao Embryo immortals—beings of whom only a handful existed in the current era.

For now, the art's primary function was beyond Lu Jiangxian's reach. At most, it offered some minor convenience in helping him write a Golden Core attainment method for Chi Buzi, but the principles of dual cultivation and achieving an Intercalary Position were not very similar. The art was only helpful due to its incredibly high-level perspective.

But its second function was not to be underestimated: *evading calamities and establishing a domain in the azure heavens.*

This art could erase one's traces from the mortal world, preventing detection by others. It could also use one's personal status to conceal a grotto-heaven and construct an immortal realm.

'The Immortal Mirror's status is already incredibly high, so it can erase my tracks by default,' Lu Jiangxian thought. 'But the second ability… this is a genuine ancient method for constructing an immortal realm!'

This was no simple matter of hanging a grotto-heaven in the Great Void. In ancient times, when Surplus and Intercalary Positions were common, opening a grotto-heaven was simple. Even a spiritual artifact could contain a cave dwelling. The lowest tier of these were the secret realms opened by ordinary cultivators inside spiritual artifacts or on auspicious lands, known as halls or caves. With the changes in the world, these have all long since collapsed.

Only the secret realms established in the Great Void or anchored to powerful auspicious lands by great sects and factions had a chance of surviving to this day. The imperial clans typically created "palaces," while immortal cultivators favored "halls." If properly sealed, these could still exist. The Great Ning Palace was such a place. However, even these realms could be affected by shifts in the mortal world's spiritual atmosphere, causing them to suddenly manifest or for an entrance to appear.

Among these was a special category: the blessed lands of the Purple Smoke and Hengzhu families. Only after obtaining the *Wondrous Art of the Unified Golden Core* did Lu Jiangxian truly understand them. Blessed lands were typically the work of Golden Core-level experts. By expending their cultivation and divine abilities, they could link a physical location to a Fruition Attainment. This would cause all sorts of phenomena to occur in the area, making it more favorable for certain types of cultivators, even aiding breakthroughs to the Foundation Establishment Realm, the refinement of divine abilities, or the quest for a Fruition Attainment.

The highest tier of all were the grotto-heavens, created by a True Monarch and anchored to their Fruition Attainment. These were known as "heavens." If the True Monarch was exceptionally powerful and their grotto-heaven vast, it might even be called a "dharma-realm," a domain of astonishing size.

The *Wondrous Art of the Unified Golden Core* provided a method to construct such a grotto-heaven, a way to partition reality itself. This immortal realm would be anchored to one's status, not to the Great Void or a magical artifact. As an immortal-grade art, it relied on only two things: status, and the user's own dharma power and divine abilities.

With this method, the two effects combined meant he could use his status to open a grotto-heaven and silently create a gateway in the mortal world, allowing people to enter with their physical bodies!

And status was the one thing Lu Jiangxian had in abundance. The Immortal Mirror itself already contained a world! He simply hadn't understood the principles before, which was why he could only pull in souls.

He turned his head sharply, his gaze falling upon the world within the Mirror, which loomed, half-hidden, in the clouds behind him. In that instant, his understanding of this realm soared to its absolute peak.

This world was a creation of supreme skill, anchored to the Immortal Mirror and completely isolated from the Great Void. It was half-real, half-illusory, which was why he was nearly invincible within it. To contact the Great Void from here, one had to go through the Immortal Mirror, and since the Mirror itself was beyond perception, the entire realm remained undetectable.

But this came with a drawback. The Immortal Mirror did not simply draw people in. The only way for an outsider to enter was to come into physical contact with the Mirror's body. Only by using methods like scrying or soul-searching to link a person's soul and destiny to the Mirror could they possibly gain entry.

When Lu Jiangxian had first obtained this world, it was nothing more than a single mountain range under a dreary, gray sky. Even then, he was its master, sealed off from the outside world. As his strength grew, the world within the Mirror had gradually transformed.

This realm was a mix of real and illusory. The Immortal Palace above the clouds was a manifestation of his will, but the mountain range below was tangible and real. Now, with the *Wondrous Art*, he could forcibly create an entrance in the mortal world for others to enter.

Take Chi Buzi, for example. He could now enter this place in his physical body. To him, once inside, there would be no difference between the celestial palace in the clouds and the ruined mountains below; both would seem equally real. However, if he tried to take something out, an object from the celestial palace would dissipate into a mere wisp of Supreme Yin moonlight. But the stones and soil from the mountains below? Those could be brought out into the real world.

'Real or fake, it makes little difference to them,' Lu Jiangxian mused. 'And I would never allow them to take anything out. Even a single pebble from this world could become a fatal poison if it reached the outside!'

As his power continued to grow, he found it increasingly difficult to imagine the terrifying power of the enemy who had shattered the Immortal Mirror. It must have been a being on the level of an immortal. What cataclysmic battles had this mountain range witnessed? What traces remained? He could not afford to be careless.

More importantly, it wasn't just a matter of entry and exit. Lu Jiangxian strongly suspected that the Immortal Mirror contained a complete Supreme Yin Fruition Attainment. If he directly linked it to the outside world, the *Wondrous Art* could hide his tracks, but the response of heaven and earth to the appearance of a Supreme Yin Fruition Attainment could not be faked. Auspicious phenomena would erupt everywhere. Mount Luoxia and the Underworld would be thrown into a panic. Even if they couldn't find him, it would alert his enemies.

But this was the world inherent to the Immortal Mirror. It did not mean he couldn't use the *Wondrous Art of the Unified Golden Core* to create an entirely new one. The immense status granted to him by the Mirror and the high-quality, unending supply of power he now commanded were the perfect fuel for constructing a domain in the azure heavens!

He raised his hand, his robes fluttering around him as boundless light gathered in his palm. Countless brilliant ideas flooded his mind. Specks of white light appeared in his hand, coalescing into a sphere of pure whiteness.

This sphere of pure white expanded rapidly, yet it had no connection to the Great Void. Shielded by the power of the *Wondrous Art*, earth, water, fire, and wind began to surge within it, releasing waves of profound light.

'I will rely on my own status to forge a new realm—a true Immortal Palace domain. I will use it to interact with the mortal world, to allow the Li clan to enter, to influence the great powers of the world, and to collect the fragments!'