

**According to an ancient saying, time flying by is like catching a glimpse of a white colt flashing past a chink in a wall. That is exactly what happened for Bai Xiaochun. A month later, cold winds blew down the Heavenspan River and through the Spirit Stream Sect. All of a sudden, Bai Xiaochun realized that he had been in the sect for a year already.**

The past year had been chock-full of one event after another. He had left the world of mortals to become a cultivator, elevated his cultivation base to the third level of Qi Condensation, and had resolved all the conflicts that cropped up due to him joining the Ovens. Xu Baocai never showed up at the Ovens again, and when Bai Xiaochun left on supply runs and saw him from a distance, he would scurry away, clearly terrified. Despite all of that, however, after a month went by, Bai Xiaochun looked as anxious as ever, and was sighing constantly. He didn't talk to Big Fatty Zhang and the others about his concerns; he simply wallowed in his helplessness. "One year of longevity...." he thought, looking at a tree off in the distance, whose leaves had already begun to turn yellow and fall to the ground. "I'm just like that tree, and those falling leaves are just like my one lost year of longevity...." Having reached this point in his train of thought, Bai Xiaochun suddenly felt very sentimental. During the course of the past month, he had come up with countless ideas on how to restore the lost longevity, and yet, that white hair on his head remained as white as ever. He made some roundabout inquiries of Big Fatty Zhang, and learned that in the cultivation world, methods did indeed exist which could restore longevity. However, such methods were either well-kept secrets, or as easy to track down as a phoenix feather or a qilin horn. Soon, he even lost interest in eating and drinking, and his face became wan and pallid. Eventually, he decided that he had no choice but to give up and accept the fact that he had lost the longevity. However, the following day when he went out on an Ovens supply run, he happened to catch sight of an enormous stone stele below the Third Peak, and all of a sudden, he started to pant. On the south bank of the Spirit Stream Sect, all of the mountain peaks had stone steles like this one. It was covered with dense script, lines and lines of writing that glittered with bright light. Occasionally, the lines of script would flow like water as old characters were replaced by new ones. That stone stele was where missions were handed out by the Spirit Stream Sect. Anyone in the sect who wanted to could accomplish the missions to earn the spirit stones necessary for cultivation, as well as merit points. The merit points could be used to pay admission fees to scripture sermons or the Magical Arts Pavilion. They could also be used to gain access to all sorts of special places in the sect set aside for certain aspects of cultivation. Virtually everything in the sect could be acquired with merit points, and they were actually viewed as more valuable than spirit stones. At the moment, quite a few Outer Sect disciples were gathered around the third peak's Mission Stele, staring at the missions. When one of them selected a mission to take, they would respectfully notify the middle-aged cultivator sitting cross-legged beneath the stele. There were even some servants mingling with the Outer Sect disciples. The servants wore their uniforms, and the Outer Sect disciples wore green robes embroidered with cloud and river designs, making it very easy to tell who was who. There were certain missions that only Inner Sect disciples could accept, but missions like that wouldn't show up on this particular stone stele. The missions here could be accepted by Outer Sect disciples and servants alike. Many ambitious servants viewed this place as their first step in becoming like that fish which leaped over the dragon gate, achieving a meteoric rise. Bai Xiaochun stood there for the time it takes an incense stick to burn, face grim as he stared at one particular line of script in the middle of the stone stele. Eventually, a look of

hesitation appeared in his eyes. "Age-Prolonging Longevity-Enhancing Pill...." he murmured. "I never imagined that this stone stele would offer a medicinal pill like that as a reward. From the name alone, you can tell that the pill probably increases longevity." After a bit of thought, he approached the middle-aged cultivator. When the Outer Sect disciples sensed Bai Xiaochun approaching, they completely ignored him. Considering their status, they didn't care at all about servants, who they viewed as beneath them. Bai Xiaochun waited until the crowd around the middle-aged cultivator thinned a bit, then, looking as charming and innocent as possible, clasped hands and bowed in greeting. "Good afternoon, Elder Brother," he said. The middle-aged cultivator looked Bai Xiaochun up and down, then nodded slightly. The problem of his own longevity swirled in Bai Xiaochun's mind as he asked: "Elder Brother, one of the missions is to go search for some medicinal plants. The reward is an Age-Prolonging Longevity-Enhancing Pill. Might I ask whether or not that pill is useful for extending longevity?" "Age-Prolonging Longevity-Enhancing Pill.... Yeah, it's this mission right here. That pill really can prolong your age and enhance your longevity. In fact, it adds a whole year. However, it has a lot of limitations. It can only be used if you're at the fifth level of Qi Condensation or lower, and can only be consumed once. If you take the pill more than one time, it simply won't do anything. You could say that it's valuable, but unfortunately, one year of longevity doesn't really count for much." Seeing how charming and innocent Bai Xiaochun looked, the middle-aged cultivator decided to add a bit more information. "Generally speaking, this is a pill that disciples will give to their mortal family members who are reaching the ends of their lives. However, it's still very expensive. Do you want to accept the mission?" Bai Xiaochun looked back at the stone stele, did some calculations, and then nodded. The middle-aged cultivator waved his finger at the stone stele, and the mission turned gray. At the same time, he produced a jade slip which he handed over to Bai Xiaochun. "Greenspirit leaf, earthdragon fruit, and stonebeetle husk," the man said coolly. "Collect the proper amounts of those three medicinal ingredients, and you can exchange them for an Age-Prolonging Longevity-Enhancing Pill." After that, he paid no further heed to Bai Xiaochun, and instead turned and began to explain other missions to the nearby Outer Sect disciples. Bai Xiaochun left, clutching the jade slip in his hands, the term "Age-Prolonging Longevity-Enhancing Pill" echoing about in his mind. His eyes began to glow with decisiveness. "I'm definitely going to get that medicinal pill and make up for the one year of longevity I lost." Bursting with determination, he hurried to the Four Seas Room, where he poured over the information available to servants. He soon found an introduction to greenspirit leaf, a type of medicinal plant that only grew in habitats occupied by hopespirit birds. Hopespirit birds lived in large colonies, and usually grew to the second level of Qi Condensation, making the greenspirit Leaf difficult to harvest. As a result, it tended to be expensive. Unfortunately, there was no record in the Four Seas Room of the earthdragon fruit or the stonebeetle husk. Bai Xiaochun patted his bag, smiled bitterly, and left. After returning to the Ovens, he asked Big Fatty Zhang and the others about them. Nobody had ever heard of earthdragon fruit, but Third Fatty Hei knew about stonebeetle Husk. Apparently, it was nothing more than the molted exoskeleton of a type of spirit bug called a stonebeetle. Supposedly, those exoskeletons were extremely tough and heavy, but were uncommon on the south shore. However, they were common on the north shore, a result of the fact that most of the techniques they cultivated there were shamanic magics. Unfortunately, despite the fact that both the north and south shores were part of the Spirit Stream Sect, they were separated by the main mountain bridge. Furthermore, only Inner Sect disciples qualified to be able to cross that mountain bridge to get from one shore to the other. "What are you asking about these medicinal ingredients for?" Big Fatty Zhang asked, patting his stomach. "You can't eat them, you know. Besides, if you try to buy them at the south bank market, the prices are ridiculously high." When Bai Xiaochun heard the word 'market' mentioned, his eyes suddenly lit up. After offering a quick explanation, he hurried down the mountain. In the year he had been a part of the Ovens, he had only been out of the sect on a few occasions, and yet, was very familiar with the market outside of the sect. Most of the stalls were run by various cultivator clans related to sect disciples. There were even some establishments that were owned by disciples, and catered specifically to other disciples. Gradually, a set of unspoken rules had come to be established that everyone abided by. Generally speaking, any supplies that the Ovens needed could be found here. Bai Xiaochun strolled around the market for a while and visited several medicinal plant shops. By the time he got back to the Ovens, his brow was furrowed and he was heaving sighs left and right. "What a rip-off! Especially the

earthdragon fruit. All it is is a kind of fruit that grows underground. Why is it so expensive!?” Bai Xiaochun was dismayed to discover that, given his current situation, he was essentially incapable of getting the Age-Prolonging Longevity-Enhancing Pill. He basically had no concept of money. To him, no amount of wealth could compare to longevity. Unfortunately, he was currently embarrassingly short on funds. Furthermore, he knew that although his Elder Brothers possessed extremely ample bellies, their bags were as empty as his. They definitely weren’t any richer than he was. Although nobody would go to the trouble of calling them to task for eating a bit of the food from the Ovens’ supplies, if they tried to sell that food, the Supervisors Department would definitely catch on, and would not be happy. After thinking about the matter from numerous angles, Bai Xiaochun couldn’t come up with any ideas for how to make some money, other than to sell some spirit enhanced items. However, that didn’t quite seem like the appropriate thing to do. He continued to ponder the matter for a few more days. On one particular morning, he was sitting cross-legged in his hut practicing cultivation when he heard the sound of bells echoing out through the sect. The sound wasn’t very loud, and quickly faded away. Bai Xiaochun slowly opened his eyes. He wasn’t surprised by the tolling of the bells. In fact, they rang out every month. He had learned from Big Fatty Zhang that the bells indicated that a trial by fire was beginning for servants. Whoever succeeded would be given a spot as an Outer Sect disciple. For those extremely ambitious servants who wanted to become Outer Sect disciples, the first step to becoming the fish who leaped over the dragon gate was to reach the third level of Qi Condensation. Then they could select one of the trials by fire. The trials by fire were nothing more than a path of stone steps that led to the top of the mountain peak. However, that path was imbued with magical power, making each step extremely arduous. Anyone who managed to make it to the top would be qualified to become an Outer Sect disciple. Unfortunately, spots in the Outer Sect were limited, so only the first three competitors to the top, the best of the best, would be able to get in. After all, there were many servants in the Spirit Stream Sect. There were thousands and thousands on the south bank alone. Therefore, there were always fierce struggles to succeed. Of course, the members of the Ovens would rather die of starvation in the Ovens than try to climb the ladder in the Outer Sect. Therefore, on this particular day every month, they turned their noses up at all the hustle and bustle. Bai Xiaochun closed his eyes. However, a moment later, they snapped open, and a strange expression could be seen therein. Then, they began to glitter with excitement as a new idea formed in his head. He shot to his feet and began to pace back and forth inside his hut. After considering this idea for quite some time, a delighted expression appeared on his face. “This is the ticket!” he exclaimed. Then he pushed his door open and cried out to Big Fatty Zhang and the others, who were currently debating about which unlucky servant would be promoted to be an Outer Sect disciple. “Elder Brothers, I’ve figured out how to get rich, but I need your help. Then, we can all get rich together!” He licked his lips and looked at Big Fatty Zhang and the others, eyes gleaming. Big Fatty Zhang was familiar with this expression; it was the same look Bai Xiaochun had on his face when he brought up the idea of making the bottoms of the bowls thicker. Considering how much that idea had benefited the Ovens, Big Fatty Zhang couldn’t wait to hear Bai Xiaochun’s idea. “Ninth Fatty, what’s your plan? To tell you the truth, we’re all completely destitute, and it’s all the fault of that damned Supervisors Department. If it weren’t for them, we could sell some of our stuff and get totally rich!” Big Fatty Zhang clapped Bai Xiaochun on the shoulder, eyes shining with anticipation.