

The next morning at dawn, Bai Xiaochun woke up early. As soon as he walked out of his log cabin, he looked over at the spiritwinter bamboo and saw that it was already taller than half the height of an average person. He nodded his head in satisfaction, then left the courtyard and headed in the direction of the 10,000 Medicines Pavilion.

The sun rose up over the horizon, sending scintillating beams of light out in all directions. The multi-colored sunlight dancing among the mists like golden carps was a truly spectacular sight. Bai Xiaochun was currently hurrying along a path along with numerous other Outer Sect disciples. He didn't recognize any of them, which caused him to suddenly miss his Elder Brothers from the Ovens. "I wonder how Eldest Brother is doing, and Third Fatty Hei...." Sighing inwardly, he walked along for about an hour, until the sun was high in the sky. Finally, he saw the 10,000 Medicines Pavilion off in the distance, and the ten shocking stone steles set up outside of it. Those stone steles were the identifying feature of the 10,000 Medicines Pavilion. Green light emanated off of them, rising a hundred or more meters up into the air. It was an amazing sight, like ten giants standing there, completely intimidating. Visible on the surface of the stones steles were lines of text, a ranking system that went from one to a hundred. Toward the top, there were no names, only various images, which were in fact the insignias of various Outer Sect Chosen who had become famous apothecaries in the 10,000 Medicines Pavilion. Every apothecary had a unique insignia which they would use to mark the satisfactory spirit medicines they had concocted. It was a tradition that went back throughout the ages, and therefore, it was an important honor to all apothecaries. The last time he had come here, Hou Yunfei had explained all of these things briefly. But now that Bai Xiaochun was coming here alone, he couldn't help but stare at the ten stone steles. The first thing that caught his attention was the eye-catching insignia on the first place position of the foremost stone stele. It was a magic bottle! [1] According to Hou Yunfei, that magic bottle was the insignia of... Zhou Xinqi! The name was not unfamiliar to Bai Xiaochun. Back when he was a servant, he remembered sitting under the moonlight once as Big Fatty Zhang munched on a ginseng rootlet and sighed about Zhou Xinqi. She came from a clan of mortals, and several years ago had been discovered by one of the Senior members of the sect, who sensed that she had unusual latent talent. When she arrived in the sect and was formally tested, her latent talent caused a huge commotion in the Spirit Stream Sect. She had a rare plant and vegetation spirit meridian, which not only made her speed of cultivation many times greater than the average person, but also gave her astonishing potential when it came to concocting medicine. After joining Fragrant Cloud Peak, she became Li Qinghou's only apprentice, and was actually viewed as the most important apothecary next to Li Qinghou, and a future pillar of the sect! According to the rules of the Spirit Stream Sect, it didn't matter how high a person's latent talent was, they couldn't automatically become an Inner Sect disciple. Therefore, Zhou Xingqi was just like all the other Chosen from the other mountain peaks on the south bank. They all started out as disciples in the Outer Sect, where they trained hard to improve. However, the cultivation resources they had access to were actually provided by the Inner Sect. Everyone knew that it wouldn't be long before Zhou Xinqi would prove herself and become an Inner Sect disciple. On top of all that, she was astonishingly beautiful, which earned her the wide admiration of countless male disciples. Because of all of these reasons, she was very famous on Fragrant Cloud Peak. In fact, the Inner Sect disciples didn't view her as belonging to the Outer Sect. Even the conservative Inner Sect as a whole feared her. As Bai Xiaochun considered all these matters, he suddenly felt very curious about Zhou Xinqi. Then he

made his way from one stone stele to the next, closely looking at all ten. Soon, he was virtually struck speechless. "Zhou Xinqi is amazing. Of these ten stone steles, her name is in first place on eight! I don't see her name at all on the other two; presumably she hasn't competed for those yet!" Bai Xiaochun's eyes were as wide as saucers as he looked at all the stone steles. By now, the crowd of disciples that had gathered around the 10,000 Medicines Pavilion had swelled to quite a number. Bai Xiaochun looked away from the stone steles and found the location where he could exchange his jade slip for the second volume of plants and vegetation. As he looked around, he realized that there really were a lot of people present, almost as if they were gathering in advance for some reason. Suddenly, he heard people talking excitedly. "Elder Sister Zhou is coming!" "Hahaha! So the rumors were true! Elder Sister Zhou is coming today. We didn't come in vain!" "Elder Sister Zhou has already taken first place in the five volumes of plants and vegetation and three volumes of spirit creatures. This time she'll definitely challenge the fourth volume of spirit creatures!" The buzz of conversation rose and fell, and the crowd grew more packed. Bai Xiaochun was stuck in the very middle, but thankfully he wasn't as fat as he had been before. After jostling around a bit, he managed to get out in front. Just as he did, he looked up and saw a bright beam of light flying through the air. It was blue flying silk, standing atop which was a young woman wearing the clothing of the Outer Sect. Long black hair flew behind her in the wind; she had narrow, phoenix-like eyebrows and eyes that shone as cold as the moon. Her complexion was lovely, her frame thin and lithe. As she flew toward one of the ten stone steles, a cheer rose up from the surrounding Outer Sect disciples. She landed and, without even glancing around, headed directly toward one of the log cabins erected beneath the stone steles. It was only at this point that Bai Xiaochun noticed that all ten of the stone steles had log cabins beneath them. In fact, there were currently people going in and out of all of them, and that included the one the young woman had just entered. The surrounding disciples were very excited. Bai Xiaochun looked around and found one particular disciple who looked skinnier and weaker than the others, and sidled up to him. Then, he cried out loudly, "At long last, I can lay eyes on Elder Sister Zhou again. This time she's definitely going to take first place on the ninth stone stele!" After that, he turned and asked the skinny guy for more details about what was going on. Considering the young man was in such a good mood, he quickly gave a detailed explanation. "Elder Sister Zhou wants to be the first person from ancient times to now to have first place in all ten stone steles. And she's the only person who could possibly do it. All she has to do is take the test for the fourth and fifth volumes of spirit creatures, and she'll definitely take first place in both!" Bai Xiaochun decided that the most important thing was to get the second volume of plants and vegetation, which meant that he had to go take the test in the appropriate log cabin. If he succeeded, the volume would be his. Therefore, he began to push his way through the crowd to the first stone stele. It wasn't easy, and after he got there, he found that all the cabins were already occupied. After waiting a bit, he saw a crestfallen disciple moping out from one of them, but that didn't discourage him at all. He immediately entered the log cabin. Once inside, it was as if he was completely separated from the cacophony of sound on the outside; everything here was peaceful and quiet. The log cabin wasn't very large, and in the middle, a prayer mat was laid out in front of a small stone stele. Bai Xiaochun sat down cross-legged in the prescribed fashion, then pulled out the jade slip that contained the first volume of plants and vegetation. He placed it up against the stone stele, and it sank down inside. The stone stele shuddered, and began to shine brightly. "According to what the Elder Brother outside said, now is when I'm supposed to decide what insignia will identify me as an apothecary." After thinking for a moment, he chuckled and drew the image of a turtle. He loved turtles, and although his drawing was a bit misshapen and ugly, in his eyes it was pretty good. The turtle insignia flickered a few times, and Bai Xiaochun took a deep breath. He settled his qi and cleared his mind, and his eyes began to shine brightly. Finally, he slowly reached out and put his hand onto the stone stele. In the moment that he touched it, rumbling sounds filled his mind, and his vision swam. When it became clear again, he was no longer in the log cabin, but in an illusory world. Before he could size up his surroundings, light flashed in front of him, and countless medicinal plants appeared, filling his field of view. None of the medicinal plants were intact. Instead, they were broken up into pieces of ten or more, all of which were scattered about. Just by looking around, it was impossible to tell how many plants there were in total. This testing method of the 10,000 Medicines Pavilion was what countless Outer Sect disciples of the Fragrant Cloud Peak dreaded. Throughout the years, numerous disciples had taken the test, only to

feel completely useless at the end. Because of that, if your name made it into the top 100 on the stone stele, you would be the object of mass envy and approval. That was especially true of the first place spot, which led to total fame. A cold, emotionless voice suddenly rang out: "In the time it takes an incense stick to burn, re-assemble the spirit plants. Your test results will be based on the total number you put together. You may begin now." "That's it?" Bai Xiaochun thought. He almost couldn't believe it. He had immersed himself in studying the medicinal plants in the jade slip to the point where even now, he could already spot hundreds of medicinal plant parts that he could piece together. He had been really worried about this test, but now that he saw what it was like, he heaved a sigh of relief. However, he still wasn't completely at ease. "It can't be this easy. Considering the test is so simple, the final target to pass must be incredibly high." Once again feeling nervous, he quickly waved his finger through the air, pointing at a dozen or so medicinal plant fragments. Immediately, those fragments pieced themselves together, forming two medicinal plants. Next he waved both hands in the air, not even pausing as he sent countless plant fragments flying around and forming together. One medicinal plant after another was formed, until soon he had 100 medicinal plants. He looked up in thought for a moment, and his spirits lifted. Tuning everything else out, he focused completely on the medicinal plant fragments, his hands flying about rapidly. Then, he suddenly thought about how terrible it would be to fail the test, and went all out with even more vicious determination. His eyes were completely bloodshot, and his hands moved even faster. 100 plants. 200 plants. 300 plants. 500 plants.... 1,000 plants! Sweat poured down his face, white steam rose from the top of his head, and his hands flew. He looked around, instantly identifying more medicinal plant parts that could be pieced together. Back when he had been memorizing the medicinal plants in the jade slip, he had been so devoted to the process that he had reached the point where he wished he could grind the plants into powder to study them further. However, that wasn't possible, so he could only study them in minute detail until he felt that he understood them completely. If any of the disciples on the outside could see what was happening, they would gasp in disbelief. To them, this test was so terrifying it made the hair on their necks stand up straight. None of them could possibly imagine how thoroughly Bai Xiaochun had researched the medicinal plants in the jade slip. Time passed. 2,000 plants. 3,000 plants.... Bai Xiaochun's eyes were completely bloodshot as he forced his hands to follow his train of thought. He even relied on the power of the fourth level of Qi Condensation, fearful that he wouldn't be able to keep up. Despite how fast he was going, he wasn't sure if he would be able to pass, so all he could do was grit his teeth and keep going. 4,000 plants. 5,000 plants. 6,000 plants. 7,000 plants.... He wasn't sure how much time had passed, and there were still some plant fragments left. Suddenly, light began to shine everywhere, and his vision swam. The log cabin came back into view again, and the jade slip appeared on the surface of the stone stele. It was the same slip he had put in before, which contained the first volume of plants and vegetation. "I missed a few, but only a few...." he thought apprehensively. After picking up the jade slip, he walked out of the log cabin, feeling completely crestfallen. It was at this point that he heard the cheering on the outside. He looked up in the direction of the log cabin Zhou Xinqi had entered. As she walked out, her name suddenly appeared in first place. 1. If you look up this word for "magic bottle" in the C>E dictionaries, it is often defined as Aquarius (the western constellation). While the term has come to be an accepted translation for Aquarius, the original meaning of the word, especially as it pertains to xianxia, is a type of bottle used in Buddhist rituals