

**The Journeyman Apothecary Hall was located on the south face of Fragrant Cloud Peak. It was surrounded by lush trees and vegetation, and could only be accessed by a narrow limestone path which snaked off of one of the main thoroughfares that ran up and down the mountain. Unless there was a promotion test underway, few people would walk along that path. However, when the time came for the test, it would be packed.**

In addition to the disciples who had come to take the test, there were also friends who had come to support the test-takers, or even people who weren't confident enough to take the test without first observing it being held a few times. From a distance, the Journeyman Apothecary Hall actually looked like a person sitting cross-legged in meditation. In front of that person was a pill furnace, beneath which was a passageway that led into a main square. Set up in that main square were twenty pill furnaces, all of which looked completely identical. Laid out next to each of the pill furnaces was a bag containing various types of plants and vegetation that could be used in medicine concocting. It was dawn, and Bai Xiaochun, worried about getting lost, had come very early. However, when he arrived, he found that there were people who had arrived even earlier than him. There were dozens of people standing around in groups of two or three, chatting quietly, and even some people who stood apart from the others alone, waiting cross-legged in meditation. Bai Xiaochun wasn't the type of person to sit around like an idiot meditating. After glancing around, he caught sight of Xu Baocai and walked over. When Xu Baocai saw him approaching, he clasped hands in greeting, and the two of them began to chat. It quickly became apparent that virtually nothing went on in the sect without Xu Baocai finding out about it. "Elder Brother Bai," he said, "did you hear that about half a year ago, Chen Fei and his friends were mysteriously beaten into bloody pulps? They've been bed-ridden ever since, and for some reason, won't talk at all about what happened." Even as he spoke, he looked at Bai Xiaochun carefully to see his reaction. Bai Xiaochun yawned dramatically, and was just about to start boasting about what had happened when all of a sudden, a buzz of conversation rose up in the crowd. At the same time, Bai Xiaochun felt as if someone had suddenly looked in his direction. When he turned his head, he saw a young woman walking toward him. She wore the long garment of an Outer Sect disciple, but it did nothing to conceal her curvaceous figure. She had a waist as slender as a willow tree, which only served to accentuate the rest of her curves, and make her seem incredibly beautiful. She had long legs, and a perky rear end, and as she approached, people couldn't stop from staring. With her pretty face, and clear white skin that seemed so delicate it might be broken by a faint breeze, she oozed an attractiveness that could easily prove fatal to almost any man. Bai Xiaochun was a bit disgusted to hear people gulping dramatically, even Xu Baocai. Xu Baocai licked his lips, and his eyes shone with infatuation "That's... Elder Sister Du, Du Lingfei!" he whispered excitedly. "She's one of the five hottest women on the south bank! She's the immortal beauty of my heart.... Oh my goodness, she just looked at me!!" "She's looking at me!" Bai Xiaochun said derisively. He simply watched as Du Lingfei got closer. Suddenly, her phoenix-like eyes flickered with a murderous aura as she glared straight at Bai Xiaochun. She had long since come to admit that Bai Xiaochun's skill with plants and vegetation exceeded hers. However, she was still filled with complete and utter revulsion for him. With a slight snort, she walked off to the side. Xu Baocai stared at her in a daze, completely oblivious to Bai

Xiaochun's derision. In fact, he seemed more infatuated than ever. "So Du Lingfei is going to take the test too...." Bai Xiaochun thought. After looking over the twenty pill furnaces, he calmed himself down and focused. "Ah, whatever, it doesn't matter. I'm not here to compete with her. This is an exam administered by the sect, not a contest. Everybody has a chance to get promoted." Soon, Chen Zi'ang appeared, and when he noticed Bai Xiaochun, he hesitated for a moment, then grinned and called out a greeting. Bai Xiaochun smiled and clasped hands in response, after which Chen Zi'ang sat down off to the side to wait. Eventually, even Zhao Yiduo showed up, whom Bai Xiaochun had first encountered outside the Missions Offices. Then, more and more people began to appear, and a good-sized crowd built up. Before too much time passed, the main door of the Journeyman Apothecary Hall creaked open, and an old man walked out. He had a full head of white hair, and piercing eyes, and as soon as he appeared, everyone quieted down. The old man's expression was calm as he strode forward with hands clasped behind his back. He came to a stop at the front of the square, looked around at all the Outer Sect disciples, then nodded his head and began to speak. "I am surnamed Xu, and I shall preside over this test for promotion from apprentice apothecary to journeyman apothecary. "The test will consist of one portion regarding plants and vegetation, and another regarding medicine concocting. To pass the portion regarding plants and vegetation, simply walk through the passageway." Elder Xu didn't seem to want to offer any further explanations. After speaking only three sentences, he simply closed his eyes and ignored everyone. Even as Bai Xiaochun blinked in response, a long-faced young man walked out from the crowd. After clasping hands and bowing to Elder Xu, he strode toward the passageway leading under the giant pill furnace. As entered the doorway of the passageway, a beam of light appeared, which surrounded him, then vanished. A moment later, the pill furnace trembled, then let out a five muffled reverberations. Xu Baocai leaned over and whispered, "Five reverberations means that his skill with plants and vegetation encompasses the fifth volume...." He definitely deserved his reputation of knowing about everything in the sect. Bai Xiaochun blinked again. Before coming, he'd had no idea of how exactly the test would be carried out. Having heard Xu Baocai's explanation, he examined the huge stone pill furnace, and suddenly had the feeling that it must be connected to the stone steles outside the 10,000 Medicines pavilion. "What do I do now...?" he thought hesitantly. "Zhou Xinqi's fans are still combing the mountain for me." Soon, more people approached, most of whom received five reverberations. However, one of them only received four reverberations, upon which Elder Xu flicked his sleeve, sending that disciple spinning away. "Elder Xu!" the disciple exclaimed, face flickering. "I thought volume four of plants and vegetation was the minimum requirement to be able to take the test!" "The rules have changed. Now it's the fifth volume." "But...." The young man stared in shock, then bitterly clasped his hands and bowed. Not daring to say anything further, he left. This turn of events caused the sound of whispered conversations to swell. Xu Baocai's eyes flickered with surprise, and he suddenly produced a tiny notebook, within which he began to take notes. Bai Xiaochun looked over and saw a page filled with lines of handwriting, each character as small as the head of a fly. Apparently it was a record of all matters pertaining to the sect, large and small alike. Bai Xiaochun couldn't help but admire how seriously Xu Baocai took the whole matter. It was at this point that Zhao Yiduo stood up and entered the passageway. The reverberations echoed out six times, after which Elder Xu opened his eyes and nodded slightly. Zhao Yiduo clasped hands and then stepped out of the passageway. Chen Zi'ang's eyes flickered. He and Zhao Yiduo had never gotten along, so he snorted coldly and walked into the passageway, after which six reverberations could be heard. After giving Zhao Yiduo a meaningful stare, and sat back down cross-legged off to the side. The fact that both Zhao Yiduo and Chen Zi'ang had received six reverberations caused a buzz of envious conversation to rise up. At the same time, Du Lingfei's eyes flickered, and she walked through the passageway. As she did, six reverberations could be heard, which caused even more envious gleams to appear in the eyes of the onlookers. Murmured conversations instantly broke out. "Chen Zi'ang, Zhao Yiduo, and Du Lingfei are all persons of outstanding talent within the Outer Sect. Not only have they mastered five volumes of plants and vegetation, but they also have command of the first volume of spirit creatures. I would say that they have a seventy to eighty percent chance of passing the test and being promoted to journeyman apothecary." "Historically speaking, anyone who takes the journeyman apothecary test having already mastered six stone steles will pass, as long as that disciple's performance in medicine concocting isn't lacking." Even as everyone discussed the matter, Bai Xiaochun gritted his teeth.

Unfortunately, there was nothing he could do about Zhou Xinqi's fans. Just as he was about to take a step forward, a figure suddenly appeared off in the distance, speeding along the mountain path. It was a middle-aged man, his hair completely disheveled, but his eyes sparkling with life. Even before he arrived, his voice echoed out to be heard by all. "I, Han Jianye, having spent seven years in secluded meditation, and have finally made a huge breakthrough in my skill with plants and vegetation. Finally, I have emerged once again into the world, not just be promoted to journeyman apothecary, but to become the top journeyman apothecary in the entire test!" Looking very proud and lofty, he flickered through the air toward the giant pill furnace's passageway. Elder Xu didn't pay the man any heed, not even deigning to open his eyes. However, everyone else in the crowd seemed astonished to have heard the name Han Jianye. "Han Jianye? Who's that? I've never heard of him before." "Considering how old he is, he must be an Outer Sect disciple from seven or eight years ago.... He wants to be the top journeyman apothecary, which isn't a very easy thing to do." Even as everyone expressed their shock, Han Jianye stepped into the passageway, looking extremely proud and confident. Almost immediately, powerful reverberations began to echo out into the air. One reverberation, two reverberations... five, six, seven... before anyone in the crowd could even react, eight reverberations echoed out from within the pill furnace. Elder Xu's eyes snapped open, and he looked over at the middle-aged man, a broad smile of praise on his face. "Five volumes of plants and vegetation, and three volumes of spirit creatures," he said. "Excellent!" Looking very excited, Han Jianye clasped hands and bowed to Elder Xu. Then he turned, and when he looked at Du Lingfei and the others, the pride in his eyes was very clear. Swishing his sleeves, he sat down confidently in front of the center-most of the pill furnaces. Finally, gasps could be heard from the crowd, as well as the clamor of conversation. "Eight reverberations! Not only did he master everything about plants and vegetation, he even got through three volumes of spirit creatures!" "It seems he might be able to do exactly as he said and become the top journeyman apothecary!" When Bai Xiaochun witnessed what happened, he was left feeling quite underwhelmed. Therefore, when everyone in the crowd started getting excited, he almost couldn't believe it. "He only mastered three volumes of spirit creatures, right?" he asked of Xu Baocai. "Why is everyone making such a big fuss?" If he remembered correctly, when it came to the third stone stele of spirit creatures, over a thousand people were listed as having passed it. Even the tenth stone stele had been passed by hundreds of people. Xu Baocai rolled his eyes, feeling more contemptuous than ever of Bai Xiaochun. Of course, he didn't dare give voice to that contempt, and instead cleared his throat and said, "Elder Brother Bai, you just don't understand. To master all five volumes of plants and vegetation is hard enough as it is. The volumes of spirit creatures are even harder! Even mastering one of them is enough to make you the subject of much envy. Obviously, to master three is even more shocking. Do you think everyone can be consummate Chosen like Zhou Xinqi or the little turtle? Look, just forget about those two. On all of Fragrant Cloud Peak, there are probably less than fifty people who have passed the stone steles of all five volumes of plants and vegetation plus all five volumes of spirit creatures! Each and every one of those people are dragons and phoenixes among mortals. Think about it! There are a lot of names on those stone steles, but those name lists are thousands of years old. Plus, many of those people have already moved on to the Inner Sect, leaving only their names behind here in the Outer Sect! "Furthermore, you only need to master five volumes to take this test. This guy has eight! Just as he said, he's definitely going to become the top journeyman apothecary, which will earn him the 5,000 merit point prize." Although Xu Baocai's words were actually a bit contemptuous if you paid close attention, Bai Xiaochun didn't really notice. Eyes gleaming with elation, he looked at Xu Baocai and said, "Did you just say that Zhou Xinqi and the little turtle are consummate Chosen? Are they really that awesome?" "Of course! Especially the little turtle. He's completely shocking. He's the first person in a thousand years to get first place in all ten stone steles. Elder Brother Bai, I have to say, you really shouldn't aim too high." Even as the contempt in Xu Baocai's heart rose to new heights, Bai Xiaochun laughed heartily. The more he was around Xu Baocai, the more he liked him. Clapping him on the shoulder, he suddenly strode forward. Xu Baocai gaped in shock as Bai Xiaochun walked toward the passageway. Of course, Bai Xiaochun was somewhat well-known for his skill with plants and vegetation, considering that he had defeated Du Lingfei. It was a given that he would eventually take this test. However, what happened next caused Xu Baocai's eyes to bulge. Bai Xiaochun strode proudly into the passageway, after which a flash of light could be seen, and the

muffled reverberations began. One, two, three... six, seven, eight! Everyone became deathly quiet. However, the reverberations didn't stop. A ninth reverberation echoed out and then... a tenth! RUMBLE! When the tenth reverberation echoed out, Elder Xu's eyes shot open, and they glowed with unprecedented brightness. He looked over at Bai Xiaochun, completely shocked. It must be stated that it would be rare enough for one of the thousands of Outer Sect disciples on Fragrant Cloud Peak to master all ten of the volumes, including the five for plants and vegetation, and the five for spirit creatures. Virtually all of them would have already taken this test. For someone to be so patient as to wait until they had mastered all ten was something that Elder Xu had never seen, not until this very day. Even Zhou Xinqi had taken the test after having mastered only nine. Du Lingfei's eyes went wide as she stared at Bai Xiaochun standing there in the passageway. Although she had already known that he was far more advanced than her in his skill with plants and vegetation, she had never imagined that he would have reached such an astonishing level. Not only had he completely mastered plants and vegetation, he also had shocking skill with spirit creatures. Her mind was spinning, and she could do nothing but gape blankly. She couldn't help but recall how she had demanded to compete with him in skill with plants and vegetation, and how he had cautiously and even nervously asked about her ranking. Then she thought about how anxious he had looked when he had agreed to compete. As of this moment she realized that Bai Xiaochun's nervousness back then had been a front, concealing the wide smile that had blossomed in his heart. "Bai. Xiao. CHUN!!" she thought, gnashing her teeth. Chen Zi'ang and Zhao Yiduo also gasped and stared at Bai Xiaochun in astonishment. As for Han Jianye, who had spent so many years in secluded meditation, he began to tremble. He was glaring at Bai Xiaochun, his mind spinning, waves of shock crashing into him as he realized that Bai Xiaochun was definitely his lifelong archenemy. "The most important part of the journeyman apothecary test is medicine concocting!" he thought. "He might be strong, but I refuse to believe that he can outdo me in concocting medicine. I spent seven years in secluded meditation just to take the top spot in this test!!" At the same time, the surrounding Outer Sect disciples were gasping and even crying out in shock. "That was... ten reverberations! That means he mastered all five of the volumes of spirit creatures too! He passed all of the stone steles outside the 10,000 Medicines Pavilion! There aren't even fifty disciples in the entire Outer Sect who can do that!" "This guy has incredible patience! He waited to pass all ten of the stone steles before taking the promotion test!"