

Chapter 297: Illusions

Illusions were something humanity had experienced since prehistoric times. Whether it be by drugs, sleight of hand, or through stagecraft, it had been with humanity every step of the way. It came as no shock to Li Lang that Qi arts and formations could produce similar effects.

However, they were quite rare. During his intensive research into cultivation techniques, he hadn't come across any of them. It was partly due to his focus on traditional cultivation techniques rather than Qi arts, but he surmised it was also because few wanted to share such abilities. It was the same with magicians. If they revealed their trick, then it would no longer mesmerize the crowds. It was almost definite that cultivators who used illusion techniques kept them close to their chest.

Unfortunately, that meant counters to illusions also weren't widespread for the same reason. Only a fool would expose how you defended yourself for others to study.

Hmm, while I'm unclear what delivery methods Qi arts and formations are capable of, the end goal should be the same—to fool the brain.

So far, Li Lang observed that illusions using formations were more common. That was likely because it was a huge drain of Qi to maintain them. Illusion Qi arts likely only worked for short moments of time, as they didn't have the same leeway as a formation. This likely meant that these Qi arts required a constant connection to fool the brain. Once it shuts off, the effects would disappear.

This'll be just like the programming session I did for artificing. I'll need to adapt the Absolute Dome Art to recognize when I am under the spell of an illusion and react appropriately. Otherwise, it would just drain my Qi.

It was one thing to measure his brainwaves and activity with specialized equipment, but in order for the technique to pick up on mental manipulation, Li Lang would have to get creative. How Qi reacted to a person's mental state wasn't exactly well-studied. He would have to do plenty of tests to track down what worked.

Too bad Li Lang couldn't just shut everything off and only focus on his research right now. He was trapped in the crypt of some old expert, and it was set up to force him to move on if he lingered for too long.

An hour into his research, Ruby alerted him to the rumblings of his surroundings in the physical space. He was forced to pause his research and advance through the trials. It was only when he solved them that he took some time to continue his study.

Thankfully, he wasn't completely grasping at straws. Knowing what he desired of the input and output simplified things, and he soon got a basic method that should theoretically block out illusions while active. It couldn't detect illusions or trigger automatically, but it was enough to test his theory about the entire place being a hallucination.

The Absolute Dome Art was deployed around him before he activated his new additions.

Looking around, he found himself in the same cold cavern, with nothing changing.

This can't be right.

Failure was commonplace during experiments, so Li Lang immediately dove back into his lab to figure out what had gone wrong. He refused to believe this underground crypt was actually this vast and equipped with so many trials.

With no illusion technique of his own to test, he spent time going back and forth between the real world and Ruby's artifact space. After a dozen tries, something finally changed.

Activating the Absolute Dome Art for the umpteenth time, he suddenly heard the sound of water crashing down. Turning around, he found the same waterfall that marked the entrance he came through. Around him were several people wearing the Radiant Wing Sect's robes, all standing eerily still. Their eyes were open and occasionally blinked, but otherwise stared straight ahead with a blank look.

"So it was an illusion, after all. One that caught us all as soon as we stepped foot past the waterfall."

Li Lang let out a sigh of relief after figuring out the truth. It would mean everything that had happened so far wasn't real. Still, he had the urge to go confirm with his own eyes. He rushed forward to the first large cavern by the entrance where he had witnessed the massacre.

He was relieved to see no limbs lying around there or any corpses. Just as he turned around, he noticed a patch of red in the corner of the room. It was dried blood. There was a small trail of it leading further in, but he quickly ran for the exit. His heart was pumping, and he had had enough of this.

It was time to report his findings and await reinforcements. He could even bring out the frozen disciples as well.

Making haste, he quickly reached the waterfall and leapt out without hesitation.

"This crypt uses some type of illu—What?"

Li Lang couldn't finish his sentence as he realized he hadn't exited the crypt as he had hoped. He found himself in a semi-spherical cave, where water was running along the edge. His path slowly ramped up to the circular platform in the middle. For some reason, a warm orange light rained down on the room.

Cautiously moving forward, he made his way to the center of the room. His senses found nothing amiss there except the fact that it was a dead end. There was nowhere for him to go unless he planned to follow the flow of water down whatever rabbit hole it led to.

However, there were a few words engraved on the stone walls all around the room. It didn't take long for Li Lang to realize it was the same technique he'd been practicing, the Absolute Dome Art. It was quite ironic that the text was engraved onto the dome-shaped cavern.

There, he found the same fire chapter he had learned in the illusion, along with dozens of others.

So this is the full technique, huh?

Wasting no time, he recorded everything down into his lab before examining it for clues about the exit. A quick skim turned up empty, causing him to frown.

If this place were to pass on a legacy, there must be an exit. Do I have to go back the other way? Maybe this place is symmetrical, and I'm on the other side. Or I don't even know what the entrance looks like, seeing that I fell under the illusion as soon as I entered.

There are just too many possibilities. From the blood trail, there could still be allies of the Abductress or other demonic cultivators hiding out in here. When in the world is help coming?

As his furrowed brows deepened, he gingerly went back to the area where the frozen cultivators were. The moment he returned to the cavern, Li Lang slapped himself on the face.

Stop tunnel visioning, Li Lang. Help is right before your eyes.

Sighing at himself, he walked up to the group of orthodox disciples and began channeling the illusion-breaking version of the Absolute Dome Art. The wonder of the technique, besides its flexibility, was its ease of use. With the core of the technique being a simple non-attributed barrier, it wasn't a challenge to cast it onto others as well.

Several blank stares soon ceased as their owners regained their senses. They all glanced around in confusion, but their gaze soon settled on the unknown face, Li Lang.

"Before you ask," he defended, "I'm Li Lang. Your elders outside sent me here to take a look, but I didn't expect you all to have fallen into an illusion. How did some of you even get out without reporting this?"

He knew the disciples before him couldn't answer his question. From their expressions, they weren't even aware they had been caught in an illusion.

"Illusion? That's—You mean everything I faced so far was fake? But I was so close to passing the final trial!" a man with a soft voice vented his indignation. "And you. Why in the world would our elder let a nobody enter after us? The investigation of this crypt is under our Radiant Wing Sect's purview. There's no need for outsiders here."

"You can bring it up to your elders, then. Not me. In the meantime, we better find a way out first. I'm sorry to tell you, but I have no idea where the exit is."

"What? But the exit is right there, you buffoon!" The haughty man scoffed at Li Lang as he pushed through the waterfall.

"All of you!" Li Lang yelled. "Follow me, quickly."

The group leapt through the waterfall after the young man and found him staring blankly again. He had gotten too far from Li Lang, and the technique had worn off.

"Jing Song?" one of the other disciples stared at their friend in horror.

"He'll be fine," Li Lang replied as he placed a hand on his shoulder. A split second later, he woke up again.

He shook off his disorientation before glaring at Li Lang.

"How could you have found us without knowing the way you came?"

"I fell victim to the illusion too, until I broke out of it. There are some bloodstains that way, so I figured I'd wake you guys up before whatever caused it returned."

The young man reined in his haughty expression as he fell into deep thought. He then gestured for his peers to huddle around him and whispered amongst themselves.

Well, that works for me. Don't mind if I piggyback off your group's hard work. I leave the rest to you guys.