

Chapter 91: Sword and Karma

“Huh? How did you know?”

Xu Xiaoshou was rather surprised, but when he recalled how quickly Su Qianqian had been able to come to him, he realized that she definitely knew everything.

“That guy came for me last night.” What she said surprised him.

He was flabbergasted. “You already knew he came for you and yet you’re still all smiles?” he thought.

However, he was stunned at the same time. He figured that the Tiansang Spirit Palace was actually mobilizing the powers of the entire place just to keep this girl before him safe.

Su Qianqian’s expression seemed to say “relax.” She raised her hand and patted his shoulder for a bit to comfort him.

“There are 21 famed swords on the continent. With the exception of those lost ones, all are pretty much protected by certain sword wielders.”

“The previous wielder of Epitaph of City Snow was my grandfather.”

“When I was young, three waves of assassins would come to my place every night on average, all of them there for the sword. But then again, as expected, all of them were dead.”

“I’ve gotten used to situations like this.” She looked totally unconcerned.

Xu Xiaoshou was shocked. This was the first time he’d heard the little girl talk about such things.

Su Qianqian put her hands behind her back, acting like an old person. It was obvious that she was doing an impression of her grandfather.

“My grandfather fell ill when I was 10. Everyone at home started touching the sword, as famed swords pick their next wielder.

“Everyone had high hopes for my father, as he’d been preparing for that day for decades.

“Yet, a year later, it was I who earned its recognition, and I became its wielder when I was 11.”

Xu Xiaoshou caught the underlying bitterness in the otherwise cheerful tone in which she elaborated her story. He then asked, “The number of intruders skyrocketed, then?”

“Yeah.” Su Qianqian nodded, and her eyes reddened. “My father, he died fighting...”

“If it’d been him carrying the sword, he wouldn’t have died. He had prepared for so long...”

The sword then hummed, and the surrounding temperature dropped sharply. Xu Xiaoshou then patted her on the head to comfort her.

“Everyone has their own encounters, be they good or bad.

“The sword has chosen you, so you’re destined to bear more on your shoulders. Don’t get saddened over it.”

He was overcome with emotion.

Such is the workings of fate. Whether you’re prepared or not, when it comes, it comes.

There’s no point dwelling in the past.

Whether you can endure and survive it and make it into something that will benefit you is what should occupy your thoughts.

The same thing had happened to him and to Su Qianqian.

He wondered if the others would catch, dissect, or study him if they ever discovered this thing in his mind or somehow realized that something was off with him.

Xu Xiaoshou then shuddered and thought about Elder Sang and that masked man.

The pattern was already there!

However, the thing in his head was still concealed, in a manner of speaking, and even if someone did detect that something was wrong with him, he could still brush the anomalies over with words like “genius,” “hard work,” or whatnot.

Yet things were different with Su Qianqian.

The wielders of famed swords...

That was an identity that would forever remain known to the public. What she had to face and take on was the greed of the entire world of spiritual cultivation.

Perhaps, instead of being called “fate,” this should be called “karma” instead.

Some people were indeed fated from birth to carry certain things on their shoulders.

Xu Xiaoshou then hugged the girl to comfort her, but this meant something else in the eyes of the spectators.

“Sh**! Xu Xiaoshou... you animal!”

“Su Qianqian is still a child! How could you do this to her!?”

“No, Xu Xiaoshou, stop! You’re not a member of the Inner Yard yet! How could you do such a thing to a female disciple of the Inner Yard?”

“Arrggghh! I wanna be hugged like that too...”

Xu Xiaoshou then awkwardly let go of her, and she also blushed.

“Well, let’s get to the skies. Those mortals...”

He waved and put the Reverse Sword Subduing to work and took to the skies.

Everyone watched as the two of them flew higher and higher. They were all left feeling puzzled.

“You’re dissing us because we can’t fly, huh?” they thought.

“D*mn you, Xu Xiaoshou!”

Cursed, Passive Points +112.

Resented, Passive Points +69.

“...”

Both of them chatted as they flew, and it didn’t take long for them to almost reach the Inner Yard.

Su Qianqian then left. She had fulfilled the goal of her trip—telling her Brother Xiaoshou to beware of the ones from the Inner Yard—after all.

The Passive Points accumulated in his mind had already exceeded the 5000 mark by the time he sent her away.

He gleefully landed on the ground.

He realized that this was definitely quite a way of earning points. Although he wouldn’t have much of any fight to fight in the future, he could still get to the streets to earn points.

His being able to fly alone had already earned the envy of a good number of people from the Outer Yard.

Because none of them knew how to fly.

He thought of something else and stood looking at the gate of the Inner Yard for a long time.

Nothing was extraordinary about that gate. It had no barriers, and no one was guarding it, as there was simply no need to.

The law had it that disciples of the Outer Yard weren’t allowed inside, and any who was discovered doing so would suffer harsh penalties.

Yet, Xu Xiaoshou stepped inside all the same.

That one step made him felt like he’d crossed into a different world. The concentration of spiritual energy was very high. But, having upgraded his Breathing Technique to Innate level, it didn’t phase him.

Instead, he felt ticklish all over.

It felt comfortable yet uncomfortable at the same time.

That was the very reason why he was extremely reluctant to upgrade the Breathing Technique, as a change in his living space meant having to get used to everything all over again.

However, he deemed that it was important to accept all of it.

He clenched his fists and did his best to hang on.

Ahh~

He still was unable to bear with it.

He immediately felt a lot better after he moaned and released his tension.

He relaxed, and he recalled the scene when he'd bowed to Elder Sang as his master, the sun rising in the east in the background.

It felt dreamy and unreal.

Elder Sang lived up to his reputation as an extremely peculiar person. Right after the ritual, the elder had set up rules.

First, Xu Xiaoshou was forbidden to call him "master."

Second, he wasn't allowed to tell anyone else about the relationship between the two of them.

Third, he had to look for Elder Sang once at the Spiritual Library Division within three days.

Xu Xiaoshou was completely fine with the first two rules, but it was the third one that was giving him a headache.

He started to get restless as soon as he thought of having to see that old fart on his own accord, even though Elder Sang had become his master.

Yet, said old fart had made that a rule nonetheless, which spoke volumes of its importance.

However, if Xu Xiaoshou were to just do according to his own wishes, hiding in his place to build his house in secret, said old fart would come looking for him and that would be the end of him.

"Whatever. The sooner I get it done, the sooner I can put it behind me. I'll make the order at the Spiritual Affairs Division after I see Elder Sang."

He quickened his steps as he thought about this, and it took him mere moments to reach that unassuming, rustic three-storied building.

The Spiritual Library Division.

The barrier had already been opened by the time he got close, and the door was wide open.

Xu Xiaoshou was feeling rather impressed. "You knew I was here without having to see for yourself, huh?" he thought.

He steeled himself and walked into the place.

There were the familiar shelves as soon as he walked onto the first floor.

He touched them as he walked past.

"Get to the third floor," an exasperated voice was heard in his mind.

Third floor?

Xu Xiaoshou took a book out and shook it for a bit. As expected, there was nothing.

He recalled how, the last time he was there, Xiao Qixiu had emphasized that they were not allowed to go to the third floor, which made the third floor very mysterious to him.

He'd initially thought that the place held Master Level spiritual techniques, but from the looks of things, he wondered if that was where Elder Sang lived.

"Well, a floor reserved specifically for the caretaker doesn't seem like a big deal," he thought.

Tap, tap, tap.

He walked briskly up to the second floor and was immediately attracted by the halos.

During his last visit, he was so obedient that he'd stayed on the first floor and hadn't so much as even batted an eye at the second floor.

As such, he totally didn't expect the place to look like this.

No more shelves and only halos instead then...

"What are these by the way?" he thought.

He walked up to them out of curiosity.

"Third floor!" the voice in his head firmly rang out again.

Xu Xiaoshou was baffled.

"What's the rush, man?" he thought. "Like it's time for reincarnation on the third floor or what?"

"The rules said to look for you in three days.

"Couldn't you let me read the books for two days before that instead?"

"I've been a human in two lives, and this is the only time I've been so studious."

It went without saying that he didn't dare to say any of this out loud.

He quickly walked to the third floor afterward.

"Coming up now!"

Chapter 92: This is an Alchemy Cauldron!

"Old man?"

He poked his head around the door of the third floor. He wanted to call said "old man" something else, but didn't dare to do so.

"Come in."

He then walked inside.

"It's really cool in here," was the first thing that came to mind when he walked inside the third floor. It felt completely different from the scorching hot day outside after the rain. The room was so cool that he felt like he was in an air-conditioned room.

He looked up.

That was a huge red pearl embedded on the top of the third floor. It could also be seen from the outside.

It was only then that he understood that the pearl was meant for absorbing heat. The very reason why the third floor was so cool was due to that pearl's presence.

The coolness in the air had a faint fragrance to it.

He refocused his sight and saw that there was a super-sized bathtub in the very center of the third floor. It had a very polished exterior and was so big that it could easily accommodate ten people inside of it.

It was also so tall that he figured that he wasn't even half as tall as the tub. A bad feeling washed all over him as he looked at the tub.

He wanted very much to just turn around and run, yet he didn't dare to do so.

It was due to his Sense that he saw that Elder Sang was actually sitting cross-legged and hovering midair on the other side of the tub.

He scratched his head. What was the old man doing?

It was then that he saw the old man pick up a bunch of fauna with high spiritual content and dump them all into the tub.

Yeah, over a dozen berries or whatnot as well, with the branches still attached and all.

Crackle, crackle.

He heard this very familiar sound.

Infernal Heavenly Flames? He seemed to realize something.

It was only after he did his best to Sense it that he was just barely able to make out the silhouette of a massive bonfire right beneath the bathtub.

"Just what kind of Infernal Heavenly Flames is this?" he thought. "Why couldn't I immediately detect its presence? Gosh, this is horrifying.

"But, well, the fire is just cooking the bathtub without any water in it, so it couldn't be used for bathing, right?"

"The old man is still dumping ingredients into it. Just what is he trying to do here?"

"Elder Sang?" He called.

"Shut up and just watch." Elder Sang's eyes remained closed, and he was very focused.

Xu Xiaoshou couldn't help but carefully observe what he was doing. He wondered if this was a test of some kind and if he would be quizzed at the end of it.

The possibility was high!

Bosses love doing weird stuff just to scare people, after all.

He was very experienced with such ways of doing things, as he did the exact same thing to scare Su Qianqian.

“But, um...” he thought.

“Why does something feel wrong about all this?”

He was able to Sense that all of the fauna was immediately cooked and burned to nothing by the super high temperatures of the Infernal Heavenly Flames as soon as the old man dumped them inside, yet several drops of extracts of some kind remained behind nonetheless.

Just how precise did one’s control have to be to be able to do such a thing?

Someone could actually extract such condensed energies when using flames as unforgiving as the Infernal Heavenly Flames?

Xu Xiaoshou figured that if he were in Elder Sang’s place, he probably would’ve burned the entire library building down, let alone extract the essence of those things.

As more and more fauna were dumped into the tub, the amount of extracts accumulating in the tub increased, yet they remained separated.

The space inside was so huge that they would never get clumped together.

Hold on!

The extracts were actually beginning to fuse. Such a huge blob of liquid...

Xu Xiaoshou’s eyes flew open. He found the situation to be both wrong yet somewhat familiar.

Boooooom!

A rumble was heard as the bathtub trembled. The blob of liquid, which was somewhat bigger than a head, instantly solidified, turning into a greyish black ball.

Crack!

The black ball cracked, and a thick herbal fragrance filled the room. He instantly shuddered and almost failed to shut it out and suck all of it in.

He covered his nose and mouth, as well as shut all of his pores, right away.

Brroooooom.

Pills started to pour all over the bathtub and roll over to an opening at the bottom, getting inside a huge bottle that had been attached beforehand.

From the sound of it, there were more than ten of them.

Xu Xiaoshou was shocked to the core.

Alchemy at work here?

He looked at the super-sized tub and then at the three legs below the tub, and his jaw almost dropped to the floor as realization dawned on him.

A-an alchemy cauldron?

Elder Sang opened his eyes and looked at the young man before him, who was inexplicably covering his nose. Then he took out a pill and smelled it.

“It doesn’t stink. What are you covering your nose for?”

“Oh, well, that’s nothing.” Xu Xiaoshou put his hands down and adjusted his posture.

“Luckily I didn’t suck it all in,” he thought. “Just an impulse and all those 30 or so pills would have...”

He shuddered at the thought.

Elder Sang packed up the pills and asked, “So, what did you learn?”

Xu Xiaoshou took a deep breath. His tone was full of nothing but disbelief as he asked, “You’re doing alchemy here?”

Elder Sang stopped what he was doing, then gave the young man a disbelieving look. “You stood there watching for so long and that’s all you were able to tell?” he asked in shock.

“I was asking you about the method of alchemy, man!” he thought. “What were you looking at all this time, old man?”

“That’s not all, of course!” he quickly added.

That one line from Xu Xiaoshou made the old man wearing a conical hat somewhat relieved.

He then looked at Xu Xiaoshou with anticipation.

The way he saw it, that young man before his eyes was talented, resilient, so excellent in all aspects that he could even be deemed exceptional.

While his talents weren’t exceedingly rare, they were nonetheless still very, very rare.

Someone who was capable of developing Innate Sword Will couldn’t fail to see what he was doing here.

However, Xu Xiaoshou just went on to point at that cauldron before his eyes and declared loudly, “This is actually an alchemy cauldron!”

Thump!

Clangggg.

Elder Sang was caught off-guard and dropped to the ground, knocking over several smaller bottles on the ground and causing the pills to spill all over.

“Are you blind? What else could it be but an alchemy cauldron!?” Elder Sang yelled.

Xu Xiaoshou immediately shirked back. “But how would anyone be able to tell that just by looking at it?” he thought. “Do such ginormous and weird alchemy cauldrons even exist in the first place?”

“It’s so tall and so big...

“Forget, I just take it that you have special preferences and you like these types.

“But just take a look at the outside of the cauldron. So white, so smooth...

“Where did you buy such a cauldron in the first place? What made you buy such a thing?

“There isn’t even a single carving on this thing! This is but a super bathtub with three legs on it, okay? Gosh, this is hilarious!

Despite his ill thoughts about the cauldron, he didn’t dare to say anything out loud, nonetheless. He simply replied weakly, “I initially thought that this was a bathtub...”

“A bathtub?”

Elder Sang was already fuming by this point.

“You good-for-nothing of a student!” he thought. “Are you trying to p*ss me off to death on the very first day of your lessons?”

He suppressed his anger and took a look at the cauldron. The more he looked at it, the more he found the kid’s description to be apt.

Ptuih!

“This is the special cauldron required for us of the Infernal lineage to perform alchemy. We cast away all the unnecessary flamboyance and crafted it using the most heat-resistant rocks.”

“You should’ve realized the power of the Infernal Heavenly Flames by now. Not even the Spirit Crystals were able to last for a second under its might. If this cauldron had been made out of anything else, it would have melted before the pills were completed.

“By the way, the cauldron may be ugly, yet it would cost over 10 times the price of a cauldron of similar sizes.” Elder Sang felt rather exhausted as he explained.

Xu Xiaoshou’s eyes lit up. “That awesome, huh?”

“Of course!” Pride was heard in Elder Sang’s tone again.

Xu Xiaoshou then touched the wall of the cauldron, feeling impressed that despite the session having ended mere moments ago, its temperatures had completely returned to normal.

He then knocked on the cauldron. The clangs were thick and sturdy—a sign that the cauldron was indeed sturdy.

He was still wearing an awed expression when he turned around and asked, “I guess dropping such a sturdy cauldron on someone would hurt like h*ll, right?”

Elder Sang was baffled.

He stared at the young man in puzzlement briefly, before the vein in his forehead started to bulge out.

“Xu Xiaoshou!”

“Shut the f**k up!”

“...”

Xu Xiaoshou was shocked, and he wondered why the old man was so riled up.

Andropause?

Requested, Passive Points +1.

Chapter 93: Meeting Gift

Xu Xiaoshou obediently shut his mouth.

Why were people these days so prone to anger?

Elder Sang glowered at him before picking up the overturned bottle, the pills spilling all over the floor, before packing them inside the bottle. He then pushed the bottle to Xu Xiaoshou.

“Consider this a meeting gift.”

Xu Xiaoshou’s eyes widened, and he asked with a puzzled look, “For me?”

“You see anyone else in the room?” Elder Sang rolled his eyes. “36 Origin Court Pills, fitting the number of heavenly spirits. Quite an auspicious number.”

“Origin Court Pills?”

“You don’t know them?” Elder Sang noted the puzzled look on the kid’s face and then asked, “You at least know the Spiritual Cultivation Pill, right?”

“Every single major level has a corresponding medicine for speeding up training. The pills are basically the most precious thing in said levels. Spiritual Cultivation Pills are meant for those still in the ten Spiritual Cultivation levels.”

“And one more thing. Two grades make up one major level. Spiritual Cultivation Pills are considered at Acquired Level, which places them at ninth grade.”

Xu Xiaoshou then pointed at the bottles on the ground. “So these are...”

“Innate level ones. Seventh-grade.”

Xu Xiaoshou’s jaw almost dropped to the floor.

Elder Sang chuckled and said, “Oh, don’t mind me, I’m just...”

But before he was able to finish, the young man before him bowed, and his necklace appeared. The bottles on the ground were gone in an instant. “Thank you very much!”

Elder Sang was baffled. “Well...” he thought.

“This kid really is...”

“And here I was naïve enough to think that he’d actually be reluctant.”

He was definitely naïve to think that.

There was just no way Xu Xiaoshou would’ve been reluctant to accept it. He’d simply been shocked earlier. That was all.

He’d been shocked to find that seventh-grade pills were actually crafted en masse. Didn’t it cost money to make these things?

He felt like he was in a dream.

He figured that all the Spiritual Cultivation Pills stockpiled in his ring were worth less than a single Origin Pill.

Seventh-grade pills, man...

“I only got one single Innate Pill after becoming the champion of the Wind and Cloud Contest, and that thing was just an eighth-grade pill,” he thought to himself.

Elder Sang didn’t seem to mind. So long as he had enough ingredients to spare, it would only take him mere hours to cook up more.

“Those should last you for quite some time,” he said. “Remember, though. Try not to use them before reaching Innate Level. They might overwhelm you.”

“But, hmm, you have Innate Level Physique. Whatever, you figure it out yourself.”

He waved. “Come and get more when you’ve run out.”

Xu Xiaoshou was stunned.

“Come and get more when I’ve run out?” he thought.

“Such extravagance!”

“Me likey!”

Elder Sang saw the greedy look on Xu Xiaoshou’s face and couldn’t help but add, “No need to be surprised. If there’s one thing Alchemists are never lacking in, it’s medicine. It’ll be the same for you one day, so get used to it.”

Xu Xiaoshou nodded, his face deadpan.

Truth be told, he’d had little interest in alchemy before, but Elder Sang prompting him to pick it up had motivated him.

“This is one h*ll of a way to get rich!” he thought.

“Passive Points are important, but no way would I skimp out on gaining material wealth!”

“Furthermore, those two things seem to go hand in hand anyway.”

He imagined just how many looks of awe and admiration he would receive if he was able to whip out tens of bottles of pills just like that one day in the future.

Tsk, tsk!

He felt like he was about to salivate.

However, it didn't take him long to realize one key problem—"I don't actually have much talent. Will I be able to master alchemy?"

Elder Sang then answered dismissively, "You don't actually need to learn much. Your talents are enough for you to master it soon enough."

Someone capable of developing Innate Sword Will being of inferior talents?

Elder Sang chuckled and thought just how pretentious this disciple of his was.

Xu Xiaoshou, "....."

He had no idea why the old man had so much confidence in him, but Elder Sang was a veteran, which meant he definitely saw something in him that he'd never noticed himself.

Yeah.

That was definitely it!

Xu Xiaoshou clenched his fists and said, "I can't wait. Let's get to it!"

Elder Sang was pleased to see that his disciple was so motivated. He nodded and added, "Before we begin, there's still one more thing."

"Alchemy of the Infernal lineage is different from that of other alchemists, which is something I'm sure you're already aware of."

"Due to the overbearing power of the Infernal Heavenly Flames, we're just as violent and uncaring them with the processes of our alchemy, so much so that you could say that we have no techniques at all. The only thing to be mindful of is precise control of the flames."

Xu Xiaoshou gestured that he understood.

Earlier, he'd watched as Elder Sang dumped the herbs in such large batches that he didn't even bother dumping the berries in one by one when performing alchemy.

Anyone who wasn't in the know would've wondered if the elder was trying to make soup.

Any of the other alchemists would've immediately shouted in frustration.

But the elder controlled the flames with impeccable precision, which enabled him to instantly separate the ingredients yet cook them all at the same time.

This alone allowed him to drastically reduce the time needed for extracting the essences, which also affected the number of pills he could craft in one go.

The number was incredibly high.

Elder Sang put his hands behind his back and walked to the side of the window before adding sincerely and seriously, “Alchemy is but a side job. It can bring you immense wealth, but remember never to be engrossed in it.”

“Spiritual Cultivation training is the main path you need to walk in the future. That much should never, ever change.”

He turned around and stared at Xu Xiaoshou with his dark-circled eyes. “If your powers are unable to keep up, the better your alchemy gets, and the worse your life will become. Never forget that!”

Xu Xiaoshou couldn’t help but recall their first lesson when the two of them officially became master and disciple. “The cage again?”

“Indeed.”

Elder Sang nodded and added, “If such a thing were to happen, unless you were able to stay hidden, you’d be reduced to a mere tool doing alchemy for some huge cultivation forces out there—meaning, you’d completely lose your freedom.”

“Understood!”

Xu Xiaoshou shuddered somewhat. What kinds of things had the old man gone through for him to have such in-depth knowledge of the world’s brutal reality?

“So you’re staying hidden now?” he then asked.

Elder Sang choked and glared at him in exasperation, yet he didn’t retort. “I roam everywhere so as to keep myself from getting caught.”

Xu Xiaoshou had only asked it out of a whim, not expecting that there really were some forces out there that truly had their sights set on this old man wearing a conical hat. He became rather flustered.

“So I’m in danger now because you became my master?”

Elder Sang was baffled.

Belittled, Passive Points +1.

“At the level you’re at now, you’re not even fit for becoming a pawn! You’re being afraid for nothing!” Elder Sang realized that he needed nerves of steel to talk to this kid.

Ridiculed, Passive Points +1.

Xu Xiaoshou patted his chest and sighed in relief instead. “That’s good to hear...”

Elder Sang touched the huge bathtub and said, “Use this thing for now.”

“Remember. Alchemy of the Infernal lineage is overwhelmingly powerful. Alchemists of other lineages might not be able to put up a fight, but not us.”

“Alchemy is only a secondary goal. The main goal is to have you hone your control of the Infernal Heavenly Flames to perfection through the process of practicing alchemy so that if you ever run into any powerful enemies, you’ll just see them as pills to be cooked.”

Xu Xiaoshou's jaw almost dropped to the floor, and after quite some time, the only thing he was able to get out was, "This is awesome."

Elder Sang threw a ring at him. "When you go about extracting the essences later, put all of your focus into controlling the flames. No need to think about anything else."

"Your next goal is to use up all the ingredients in this ring to extract just a single drop of essence."

"There is a jade scroll, on which is all the common knowledge of alchemy. Remember to check that out first."

"All right. I'll be off, then. Take your time."

Xu Xiaoshou was about to say something else, but Elder Sang disappeared from where he was standing. He looked at the massive tub, feeling speechless.

"So I'm all on my own now?" he thought.

"You let me watch you do it once and then thought I was good to do it all on my own?"

"You really think that I'm some kind of genius?"

He took a look at the ring and immediately slumped to the floor.

The number of herbs piling up like mountains inside it was extremely overwhelming, and he wondered if that many herbs could've filled the entire first floor of the library.

He realized why the elder would leave him to work at it.

If he were to finish using up what was inside the ring, he'd probably master all he needed to master.

Xu Xiaoshou was lacking in many things, but tenacity wasn't one of them. He gritted his teeth and looked at the massive tub.

"Let's get to it!"

Chapter 94: Explosions, Beginning from Alchemy

A purple jade scroll sat quietly atop the pile of grass in the ring.

"Looks rather simple..."

While there was a lot of common alchemical knowledge elaborated in the jade scroll, more of the contents were about techniques for controlling the flames.

Xu Xiaoshou opened his hand and compressed the spiritual source on his palm, causing crackling sounds to erupt.

If he didn't have Sense, that bit of invisible flames would've been incredibly difficult for him to control.

"Compress the flames as much as possible to about ten times its original size, condensing all of the energy at the center. If it explodes, it'll bring about terrifying damage..."

“Umm, the latter part probably isn’t the main point. The main point should be using the energy of the weakened flames on the outer layer to perform alchemy...”

He recalled the contents of the jade scroll and felt rather intimidated.

The Infernal Heavenly Flames were simply too overbearing to be used for alchemy in the first place. He had no idea what the founder was thinking when he’d thought to use something so terrifying for alchemical purposes.

Failing to control it would cause it to explode...

He glanced at the massive red pearl above his head. The jade scroll said that the pearl was capable of absorbing heat energy, which he speculated should be able to withstand explosions as well.

“Let’s try it out, then.”

Under the thrall of his will, the flames in his palm no longer spread their energy outwards. Instead, the energy turned inwards, gradually forming a ball about the size of a human head.

But, nonetheless, the scorching heat energy leaked outside, and the ball seemed to grow even more reckless.

He clenched his teeth and continued to exert his power over it.

Puk!

A slight crackle was heard as the ball-shaped bundle of flames the size of a human head was condensed even further and reduced to the size of a fist.

Terrifying high temperatures spread, causing the space around it to warp. He was thoroughly baffled.

“What’s going on?”

“Shouldn’t the energy be turned to the innermost core? Why is the temperature so high?”

He looked at the ball-shaped thing in his hand with a confused look, then focused and willed it to move. The ball then spun at high speeds.

R-Rasengan?

“Damn it, no! This is not the direction I should be taking it!” Xu Xiaoshou’s expression turned glum.

According to the jade scroll, if he could collapse that thing into to the size of a fingernail, all the heat energy would turn inward and become an “extreme flame,” with whatever was left forming a layer called the “residual flame.”

The residual flame, which was of considerably lower temperature, was what was required, as it could be used for alchemy.

But that wasn’t all.

Not only did one need to keep the residual flame at a suitable temperature throughout the entire process of alchemy, but one also needed to be wary of that extreme flame condensed to the size of a fingernail.

A mishap would result in failing the process and killing the user.

He looked at that ball in his hand, feeling like he'd gotten himself into trouble. He was already barely able to keep the ball together, even after condensing it to such a size.

His forehead started to break out in beads of sweat, but he clenched his teeth and soldiered through. That ball-shaped flame in his hand flickered twice and instantly collapsed into the size of a fingernail.

He was able to tell from his Sense that slivers of formless mist were leaking from it, forming an external layer.

Residual flames!

I did it!

He was overjoyed, but his smile froze the next second.

That condensed flame in his hand shuddered unstably twice before stopping altogether.

"Well, that was close..."

"Wait, no!"

"The energy inside is still fluctuating!"

"I can't keep it down anymore!"

His pupils contracted, and his hairs stood on end, and he felt a sense of impending death.

He looked up at the red pearl above and wondered if he would end up blowing the library up if he were to fail to keep this thing under control.

"Can't wait to see if that happens!"

He went to the window and threw the thing into the sky outside.

Boom!

An explosive rumble was heard in midair. Raging, majestic and scorching energy rippled out, thoroughly bombing the air above the library.

The currents shot up, and in the fluctuations, he was able to see a vague, near undetectable super mushroom cloud forming.

"What the f**!"

Xu Xiaoshou was baffled. "You call this alchemy?"

"This is a super attack like no other!"

“Have I just created yet another terrifying spiritual technique after the four moves of Fleeting White Clouds?”

“Worse still, this is large area-of-effect damage that would attack anyone indiscriminately.”

He immediately got excited. While it was extremely difficult to keep such a compressed fire seed stable, making it unstable was, on the other hand, as easy as could be.

He then checked his energy reserve, finding that the compressed bit of flames of the size of a fingernail had actually drained about 30 percent of his reserves.

However, his High Spirits enabled him to regenerate the depleted spiritual source to about 80 percent, and he deemed that his reserve would be full again in a matter of minutes.

“How about going wild for a bit, eh?”

He opened both of his hands, drained about half of his spiritual source, and conjured two balls of formless flames on his hands.

Crackle, crackle!

Compress, compress even more...

Without breaking a sweat, he condensed the flames into a ball the size of a fingernail.

However, the energy within was even more raging than the one before, as he no longer bothered to keep them controlled.

Swoop!

Swoop!

He flung his hands, and the two formless bits of flames shot to the skies and rammed into each other.

Boooooom!

The explosive effect was more than just the culmination of the two bits. He was already able to see the protective barrier around the library materializing, seemingly being out to nullify the raging, scorching energies.

That was just the aftershock!

If he were to throw several of these at the library...

“Ehem, no, no, no, can’t afford to think like that,” he thought.

But just imagine...

If he were surrounded by a massive army, yet just casually rose riding his sword and then kept compressing this thing using High Spirits, then threw one out one after another...

Would that make him a living bomber, then?

Just how much admiration and resentment would he learn from that alone?

“Ohohoho...”

His eyes narrowed to slits. He'd initially come here to learn to make pills, yet now he seemed to have ended up creating an extremely terrifying attack instead.

“Right, I have to name it.”

“All four moves of the Fleeting White Clouds have names, so I couldn't just call this thing ‘compressed fire seed,’ right?”

“It's small, it's condensed from a ball, it's of fire element...”

“Well then, I'll just call it the ‘Lesser Fireball,’ then! Perfect!”

He then pulled himself away from the window, dusted his hands off with satisfaction, and then looked at that massive tub standing on three legs.

“Sigh, gone off-course again. Alchemy, get back to alchemy...”

...

Zhao Xidong had a blade of grass in his mouth as he cradled the back of his head with both hands and leisurely took a stroll.

After sending He Yuxing to the Tribunal, he had nothing else to do.

As for Su Qianqian carving a place inside the Inner Yard...

Well, he guessed that scuffles like that didn't matter in the Inner Yard so long as no one died. He'd turn a blind eye to it, and the whole thing would blow over.

A rumble was heard in the sky at that moment.

Boom!

A wave of terrifying heat energy exploded in the sky not far away. His pupils contracted.

That was...

The library!

He recalled the case of the masked invader from the previous night and got a bad feeling about things.

Booom!

An explosion greater than the one before was heard from afar, yet his will allowed him to see that even the barrier protecting the library had materialized.

Someone was attacking the library in broad daylight!

Just how reckless would one need to be to do such a thing!?

He felt very uneasy at that moment. He then took to the skies and shouted,

“Intruder!!”

Chapter 95: Surrounded

Swearing to himself that he would never again deviate from the work at hand, Xu Xiaoshou went back to sit in front of that massive tub and dedicated himself to making alchemy work.

“Since I couldn’t control that compressed fire seed the size of a fingernail, I guess I’ll have to resort to the next best thing: using rasen... ehem, a fireball for doing alchemy.”

He grasped, and a ball-shaped flame appeared on his hand, which he then threw into the tub.

It took mere seconds for that milky white tub to turn red hot and the temperature to rise exponentially

He then recalled how Elder Sang had dumped the herbs into the tub earlier like they cost nothing. As such, he went on to grab a bunch of herbs from the ring and dumped them into the tub.

Fzzzz!

All of the herbs were reduced to dust while they were still midair. There was no extract to be had. Not even ash was left!

Xu Xiaoshou was speechless.

“Sure enough, the temperature is too high.

“These are flames capable of outright evaporating spirit crystals, after all.

“Furthermore, I lack the prowess of the elder, who was capable of separating the herbs.

“Guess I’ll have to do it one by one, then.”

He willed for the flames to be at a level that he could control before compressing.

A bundle was thrown inside.

Fzzz.

“Still won’t do, eh?”

He didn’t continue doing this. He wasn’t impulsive. While the supply of herbs was massive, simply dumping them without a care would be too wasteful, so he needed to come to some other conclusion.

Well...

There was no conclusion to be had. The temperature of the flames was still too high, after all.

“How should I go about lowering its temperature?”

He stroked his chin and furrowed his brow before suddenly coming to a realization.

“If the temperature is still too high, how about I just suck it up with Breathing Technique, then?”

“I’m so smart!”

He high-fived himself. Such a way of doing things was workable, as exhalation from Breathing Technique could be used for more than just training.

He opened his pores, and the heat was sucked into his body. That ball-shaped flame beneath the tub no longer looked as menacing.

He sensed heat rising and started to sweat all over, but it was still well within his limits.

Unlike when he'd refined the Infernal Fire Seed, this little spike in temperature didn't even manage to cause his Information Bar to pop up with a message saying that he was being attacked.

He then threw another bundle into the tub.

The next one landed perfectly inside. It hovered in the tub per the effects of the spiritual source, yet it took less than a second for the bundle to be reduced to nothing.

Hmm...

He stopped what he was doing, finding his method to be unsustainable.

He realized that he'd never be able to keep the heat energy he was sucking into his body at a constant rate. The temperature of the flames would always fluctuate. Such temperatures could never be used for alchemy.

However, given that he couldn't do anything else, he had to just keep trying.

"Practice makes perfect.

"Alchemy is indeed about precision, and that old fart's right. I could indeed become able to control my powers with precision throughout the process."

He took out a bundle, but a message popped up in his Information bar before he was able to throw it in the tub.

Surrounded, Passive Points +1.

"Huh?"

"Surrounded?"

He was momentarily startled, and checked his surroundings, but found no one to be around.

"Wait, outside then?"

"Someone's surrounded the library?"

He recalled that masked figure from last night, and his skin crawled. It left him wondering if someone was trying to attack the library in broad daylight.

How did they manage to get inside the Tiansang Spirit Palace?

He then put the herbs away and took two ball-shaped flames in his hand, getting ready to throw the 'Lesser Fireball.' He sneaked to the window and peeked outside.

Sh**!

So many of them!

Xu Xiaoshou was shocked.

A massive number of personnel clad in black stretched as far as the eye could see, completely surrounding the library in three inner layers and three outer layers.

“Hold on...

“Black attire?

“Aren’t these people the enforcers from the Spiritual Law Division?”

He was rather exasperated. He pushed the window open and saw someone step out of the group.

That person looked rather familiar.

That referee from that group match back then?

He opened his eyes wide and rubbed them, then looked outside again, immediately meeting the man’s gaze.

“It’s you?”

“It’s you?”

Both of them uttered at the same time.

Zhao Xidong was completely baffled, and he realized that all the plans he’d made were now null and void.

Xu Xiaoshou?

How could it be him?

Wait, no, how did this guy manage to get inside the library?

“No, no, no,” he thought. “Isn’t he still a disciple of the Outer Yard? I should say, how dare he sneak inside the Inner Yard.

“And wait... the explosions. He had something to do with those too?

“Impossible!

“That’s Xu Xiaoshou for you, man!”

Doubted, Passive Points +1.

Doubted, Passive Points +1.

Doubted, Passive Points +1.

“...”

Xu Xiaoshou was pleased. He looked at the referee without saying anything, yet he kept asking him to say more deep down.

“Come on, put that imagination of yours to work.

“I don’t know what’s going on inside your head, but I’m not gonna stop you from thinking.

“Thinking is what enables humans to progress.”

Zhao Xidong saw that the young man was all silent. He then recalled that said young man had also killed Feng Kong and Shao Yi, as well as the unexpected results of the matches.

Was he really the cause of the explosions?

He wasn’t the only one who was confused. Every enforcer present was just as confused as he was.

A good number of them knew Xu Xiaoshou, not just because of his peculiar performances back in the Wind and Cloud Contest but, more importantly, from that fight last night. That young man was the only one there at Acquired Level training, yet he was the focus of the whole ordeal.

Doubted, Passive Points +169

Doubted, Passive Points +112

Doubted, Passive Points +84

“...”

Awesome!

Xu Xiaoshou stood at the window, clenching his fists a little. Just that one meeting of their eyes had enabled his accumulated points to reach almost 6000.

Zhao Xidong was tired of waiting and asked, “You were the one responsible for that explosion back there?”

“Yeah.” Xu Xiaoshou nodded. He supported his chin with both hands as he rested his elbows on the window sill. “Relax. The library is fine. You can all leave.”

“Huh?”

Everyone was dumbfounded. It was fine when he wasn’t saying anything! What he said flustered them.

Doubted, Passive Points +266.

Xu Xiaoshou was pleased. He found that for some reason, every time he told the truth, no one believed him, which meant there was no need for him to lie.

“Why are you in the library, and on the third floor at that?”

Zhao Xidong was flustered. “That’s off-limits to you! Get down here at once! It’s already a grave enough offense for a disciple of the Outer Yard to enter the Inner Yard without permission, and you... you dare to trespass in the library?”

“Elder Sang summoned me,” Xu Xiaoshou answered.

Doubted, Passive Points +266.

Everyone immediately doubted this, yet when they recalled that Elder Sang had indeed saved him the previous night, they all of a sudden thought it was indeed possible.

Whatever. The Passive Points were in.

“Why did Elder Sang summon you?” Zhao Xidong was curious.

“Alchemy.”

Doubted, Passive Points +267.

Xu Xiaoshou was amused. He saw yet another enforcer come onto the scene, joining the army of point-givers.

Zhao Xidong then chuckled out of frustration. “Alchemy, you say?” he thought.

“Sh**, you think I’m gonna buy that! I can’t believe you actually said Elder Sang summoned you!

“Furthermore, is alchemy really something a guy at level nine like you should be doing?

“You don’t even have an Innate Elemental Trait! What are you gonna do alchemy with, huh?

Woodfire?

“What a joke!”

Chapter 96: Xu Xiaoshou’s Been Kidnapped!

Zhao Xidong couldn’t be bothered wasting time talking to Xu Xiaoshou and running around in circles. The good news was he didn’t understand what the other man was talking about.

But this wasn’t Xu Xiaoshou’s problem. It was Zhao Xidong’s.

He decided to cut to the chase. “Spill it. What caused the explosion?”

Xu Xiaoshou lightly tapped his finger on the windowsill, his face emotionless.

“An experiment.”

Zhao Xidong’s lips twitched. His face darkened, then paled, then darkened again.

An experiment? So Xu Xiaoshou was the one who’d caused the explosion, then.

“What kind of experiment?” Zhao Xidong asked.

“An experiment on Lesser Fireball.”

Xu Xiaoshou eyed the two fireballs on his palm before quietly extinguishing them. He wasn’t going to need them, after all.

Everyone else was stupefied.

...a Lesser Fireball?

Did Xu Xiaoshou really just tell them that a Lesser Fireball had caused that terrible explosion?

Did he think they were idiots?

Suspected, Passive Points +275.

Zhao Xidong took a deep breath and suppressed the agitation that was bubbling inside him. "Get down here," he huffed. "We need to talk."

They were talking right now, weren't they?

Xu Xiaoshou ignored Zhao Xidong's orders. He could faintly sense the murderous rage coming from them.

He had killed three men, after all.

"Does that mean...you can't get in?" At that moment, it hit Xu Xiaoshou that this was the Spiritual Library Division. They might be law enforcers, but they probably didn't have the authority to force their way into the Spiritual Library Division.

In fact, they couldn't have forced their way in if they'd wanted to.

The Spiritual Library Division was the foundation upon which the Tiansang Spirit Palace rested. Its security measures could probably keep powerful men like the masked figure out. It wasn't a place that the average law enforcer could barge into.

Elder Sang had let him in, which was how he'd been able to enter the Spiritual Library Division in the first place.

"It was just a small experiment..." Xu Xiaoshou eyed the look of hostility in the men's eyes and attempted to appease them. "Don't panic. It's not a big deal."

The look on Zhao Xidong's face was absolutely stormy.

If this were anyone else, he wouldn't have been worried. But this was Xu Xiaoshou they were talking about!

It was Xu Xiaoshou!

An absolute troublemaker!

How could he not be worried?

"Why don't you get down here first..."

These men didn't seem convinced by Xu Xiaoshou's words, and they weren't giving him any Passive Points at all. Xu Xiaoshou lost all desire to continue the conversation.

They were preventing him from cultivating his pills and were wasting his precious time.

He went back into the room and rummaged around. This was Elder Sang's private quarters, and it was filled with plenty of stuff that wasn't exactly valuable or important.

"I found it!"

It didn't take Xu Xiaoshou long to locate a dark red token. This should grant him the necessary authority.

He walked back to the window and raised the token. "By the orders of Elder Sang, you are hereby dismissed!"

Zhao Xidong stared at the young man. The image of Su Qianqian brandishing the same token popped up in his head. They were cut from the same cloth!

"You..." he paused suddenly.

Hold on a second.

That fellow had been behaving oddly since the beginning, going on about an experiment and playing with the Lesser Fireball...

He wouldn't be joking with them without a reason.

That explosion hadn't been an illusion. It had happened. Pill cultivation couldn't have led to such a huge explosion.

Something wasn't right.

Besides, Xu Xiaoshou was only at Level Nine. He shouldn't be able to cultivate pills at all!

Zhao Xidong's pupils contracted. Xu Xiaoshou had been trying to tell them something right from the start...

That must be it.

He hadn't caused the explosion. Someone else had.

Xu Xiaoshou...

...was being held captive!

His kidnapper was the one who had unleashed that terrible attack!

The thought of it was terrifying!

Zhao Xidong extended his spiritual senses but failed to identify anything suspicious in the vicinity. His eyes fell on the Spiritual Library Division again.

The answer was staring them right in the face.

The kidnapper was also in the Spiritual Library Division.

In fact, he might be hiding behind Xu Xiaoshou right now, threatening and terrorizing the latter into convincing Zhao Xidong and the others to leave.

"That's it..."

“That’s why Xu Xiaoshou’s desperately trying to send us away...”

Zhao Xidong was convinced that he was right, and everything else that had been bothering him now made perfect sense.

“Suspected, Passive Points +1.”

“Suspected, Passive Points +1.”

“Suspected, Passive Points +1.”

“... ..”

Xu Xiaoshou stared dumbly at Zhao Xidong and wondered what crazy thoughts were going through that man’s head right now.

He was rewarded with a series of strange gestures.

He stared as Zhao Xidong stuck one finger out, wiggled it, then raised his other hand and placed it behind the first...

The man blinked and gave him a questioning look.

What did he want? Xu Xiaoshou was baffled.

He didn’t understand any of Zhao Xidong’s gestures. As for that blink...

...he had no idea what that meant either.

That didn’t stop him from blinking back. “Leave right now!”

He didn’t expect a look of dawning realization to appear on Zhao Xidong’s face...

What was going on?

Zhao Xidong seemed to be staring at his back.

“Let’s go!”

Before Xu Xiaoshou could comprehend what was going on, the former judge flicked his wrist. Everyone around him stilled suddenly, then vanished the next moment...

What the h*ll was going on?

Xu Xiaoshou was utterly bewildered.

...

He wasn’t the only one who was confused. The majority of the law enforcers who had left also had no idea why Zhao Xidong had issued the order for a retreat.

“I thought there was an attack. Why are we leaving?” someone asked.

Zhao Xidong seemed to be in a hurry. “Hurry up. I need you to find Boss Xiao while I locate Elder Sang. We need the both of them. We have to move quickly if we want to save him!”

“Save who?”

Zhao Xidong came to a stop, then tilted his head and stared at the man who had voiced the question.

“Haven’t you realized?”

“Someone’s kidnapped Xu Xiaoshou. He’s being held captive!”

...

Slam!

Xu Xiaoshou shut the windows.

He walked back to the bathtub, sat down, and ground his teeth in frustration.

He should have expected this. As soon as one had the slightest intention to work hard on something, trouble would come knocking at one’s door and attempt to ruin everything.

“I can’t be distracted. I have to focus on cultivating my pills!”

He got his herbs out and repeated what he’d done previously, attempting repeatedly to fuse his Breathing Technique with the burning ball of flames.

Poof!

Poof!

Poof...

His consecutive failed attempts doused the excitement that had been burning inside him. Xu Xiaoshou wondered if Elder Sang had made a mistake. Perhaps he didn’t have the gift for it.

He should have known...

He was still the guy who had taken three years to learn the first move of the White Cloud Sword Technique...

“That’s not exactly true. This probably has something to do with my cultivation level.”

Xu Xiaoshou wasn’t giving up just yet. He wasn’t the sort who gave up that easily.

He had acquired Innate Level abilities while his cultivation level was still stuck at the Acquired Stage. While he possessed great power, his control of it was incomplete and flawed.

His cultivation level wasn’t up to par. As a result, he couldn’t wield the power he possessed as effortlessly or freely as he should’ve been able to.

Xu Xiaoshou fell onto his back and lay down on the floor sullenly. He let his thoughts wander. A red screen appeared in his head.

Passive Points: 6442.

He had accumulated more than six thousand points...

Wouldn't it be great if he somehow managed to draw a skill that granted him expertise on fire?

Xu Xiaoshou was seriously tempted, but then he remembered his increasingly dismal success rate and decided to abandon the idea.

He only had six thousand Passive Points. Honestly, the system would devour everything in a single go and still ask for more.

He yanked his thoughts back to the present.

The rays of the setting sun spilled through the window. As he gazed at the sunset, Xu Xiaoshou could feel his spirits lifting slightly.

"It's been a while since I got to unwind and spend time alone with myself..."

During moments of tranquil solitude, one was often seized by the sudden impulse to do something.

Xu Xiaoshou wasn't thinking when he traded his Passive Points for a Passive Key and slotted the latter in the wheel.

With the number of Passive Points that he had right now, he couldn't level up any skills. It seemed like such a waste to not use them. After all, he might get lucky.

He sat up suddenly.

He couldn't see anything.

What was going on?

Chapter 97: A Fire in the Spiritual Library Division!

Legend had it there was an enormous sacred tree that was rooted in the heavens and grew downward, earthward—the Ashvattha.

The laws of the natural world formed the soil from which it drew its nutrients, and the souls of all living creatures were the nourishment it needed to bear fruit.

The Ashvattha flowered only once every ninety thousand years, and it bore fruit only once every ninety thousand years.

The flesh of the fruit would split wide open, releasing a seed that had the potential to become the next Sun.

When Xu Xiaoshou opened his eyes, he found himself in a world of scorching red lava. It was a massive world with no end in sight, and it was unbearably hot.

The sight of lava bubbling furiously at his feet sent shock coursing through his veins.

Before him was a huge, ancient tree hanging upside down with skyward roots and groundward branches.

"Is that the Ashvattha?"

Xu Xiaoshou reeled back in shock, unable to believe his eyes. He was staring at something that belonged in myths and legends.

Within a blink of an eye, the sacred tree before him flowered and bore fruit. The fruit shriveled, and its flesh wrinkled, peeling away to reveal a seed.

Then, with a soft explosion, a white sun suddenly appeared, was enveloped by a near-invisible shimmer, then plunged to the earth and right inside Xu Xiaoshou.

“Ah!”

Waves of scorching energy flooded his energy reserve, their sheer heat vaporizing the blood in his body. He screamed in agony.

Why?

How could a mere illusion cause him such pain?

It shouldn't. It hadn't the last time!

He didn't have time to think at all before he was seized by a sudden revelation. Xu Xiaoshou's eyes fell shut. When he opened them and gazed upon the world again, he was greeted with the sight of countless red specks of lights hovering in midair.

“The fire element?”

His fingers curled into tight fists. Could it be true?

Had his wish been answered?

Had he acquired Flame Expertise?

Suddenly, he heard the sound of chanting. It was as if the gods themselves were murmuring Sanskrit scriptures into his ear, except these whispers rumbled like deafening thunder, filling his head.

Xu Xiaoshou tried to parse the chanting into words, only to realize that his mind had gone completely blank. After a moment's struggle, he gave up.

Out rushed all thoughts and desires, and suddenly, the voice in his head sounded as clear as day.

“...the world maketh the cauldron whilst fortune maketh the craft; from yin and yang, firewood for burning, from all things living, iron for smithing...”

Boom!

Those words struck Xu Xiaoshou like a bolt of lightning. He could hear nothing else after that.

Was the voice suggesting that he treat the world as his cauldron and that everything between this heaven and earth could be cultivated?

What a terrifying thought!

A burst of light suddenly erupted from the lava, and a magical-looking herb floated before Xu Xiaoshou's eyes.

This was the first time he'd laid eyes on such a herb, yet he instantly knew everything about it.

"Nona-Revival Mustard. An ancient mythical herb. Can be used to revive the dead and regenerate flesh. Extremely spicy. Masks fishy odors well. Can be taken with meat."

Xu Xiaoshou was dumbstruck.

What the h*ll was going on?

A huge black bird flew across the skies, darkening the heavens with its massive shadow. Xu Xiaoshou had never seen such a bird before, yet he instantly knew everything about it.

"Divine Black Strix. An ancient mythical monster. Infused with divinity. Delicious. Extremely springy."

Xu Xiaoshou was speechless.

What the h*ll?

The introductory profile to both magical herb and creature had started off fine before going down this strange, descriptive path...

The illusory world had appeared so grand and breathtaking. Yet, the sudden appearance of the magical mustard and winged beast had somehow killed the mood.

It was then that the Divine Black Strix swooped down on the Nona-Revival Mustard, and Xu Xiaoshou inexplicably reached out his hand...

He had no idea why he stuck out his hand. He simply thought that he should...

Boom!

Invisible Infernal Heavenly Flames shot down from the heavens as the Divine Black Strix clamped its beak shut around the Nona-Revival Mustard. The flames engulfed the divine beast and instantly turned it into dust. A strange fragrance filled the air, and before he knew it, the illusory world started falling apart.

"What just happened?" Xu Xiaoshou was utterly bewildered.

The last time he entered the illusory realm, a revelation had seized him, granting him some understanding of swordsmanship. This epiphany had clued him into the kind of Passive Skill he'd gotten then. But this time...

Initially, he'd suspected that his new Passive Skill had something to do with fire, but now he wasn't so sure.

The words "extremely spicy" and "delicious" popped into his head...

They were like demons hounding him. He just couldn't be rid of them.

He immediately looked at the Information Bar.

"Expertise Passive Skill acquired: Cooking Expert!"

What?

A look of utter confusion appeared on Xu Xiaoshou's face.

Cooking?

His eyes widened in disbelief, and his jaw dropped, nearly dislocating his jaw.

He'd been spirited away to a magnificent world of molten lava and treated to the sight of the mythical Ashvattha and the birth of a sun. He'd thought that he had hit the jackpot, that he would be rewarded with the Flame Expertise...

But instead...

...he had acquired culinary skills.

What a fine system this was indeed! It was just absolutely fantastic!

Xu Xiaoshou fell to his knees with a loud thud, then collapsed into a heap on the floor in a daze, his eyes glazed over.

He had waited so long to acquire another Passive Skill only to get this in the end. A lousy skill that wasn't going to do him any good.

"Hah! Cooking Expert..."

Hold on a minute.

Something wasn't right.

Why did the floor feel warm?

Xu Xiaoshou pulled his thoughts back to the present and sat up. The bathtub had been turned over.

He surveyed the room and found it in an utter mess. Its two windows were shattered, as if they'd been blown out by a storm.

What was going on?

His pupils contracted. He remembered lifting his hand up to summon the sun in his illusion...

Had he caused a similar explosion in reality too?

Crack! Crack!

Xu Xiaoshou unleashed Sense upon hearing a familiar sound, and that was when he saw the invisible flames surrounding him.

"What the h*ll!?" he thought. "Did I set the Spiritual Law Division on fire?"

Xu Xiaoshou hastily deployed his Breathing Technique and sucked the room clean of fire. He patted his chest and heaved a sigh of relief.

"Luckily it's not that big a..."

Crack! Crack!

Something sputtered faintly in the distance. Xu Xiaoshou felt his scalp prickle. His hair stood on end.

He clambered to his feet, then looked down and stared at the floorboards.

Were the first and second floors on fire too?

“Oh my god!”

Xu Xiaoshou charged downstairs without a second thought.

He couldn't let the place burn.

Not when it was filled with manuals of spiritual techniques!

He wasn't ready to die!

Somebody, save him!

...

Meanwhile, outside the Spiritual Library Division.

A man dressed in black was hiding in the bushes.

Zhao Xidong had assigned him the duty of sentry. He was to keep his eyes on the Spiritual Library Division at all times and inform everyone if he caught sight of Xu Xiaoshou's kidnapper.

Yawn...

The law enforcer yawned. Honestly, he didn't see how the kidnapper could've sneaked his way into the Spiritual Library Division, but one could never be too careful.

His assignment might seem absurd and pointless, but nevertheless, he continued to keep a lookout for anything amiss around the Spiritual Library Division.

He felt a sudden rising heat in the air.

“What's going on?”

He looked up and stared at the darkening sky. The sun had set. The temperature should be dipping. What was going on?

He didn't have the luxury for leisurely contemplation. The Spiritual Library Division suddenly quaked violently, and the protective barrier around the building lost its cloak of invisibility as it shimmered and rippled angrily.

Boom!

An explosion louder than the one they had just experienced erupted. The sentry's face turned pale.

He watched as two windows on the third level of the Spiritual Library Division shattered. Shards of splintered wood sprayed into the air while a terrifying, scorching heat surged outward and began to flood the area.

The law enforcer was dumbstruck. Had a kidnapper really been hiding in the Spiritual Library Division all along?

Was he trying to blow up the Spiritual Library Division?

Was he trying to destroy the foundation of the Tiansang Spirit Palace?

Crack! Crack!

The sound of crackling sputtered all around the law enforcer while grass transformed into scorched earth in a blink of an eye. He was seized by a sharp streak of pain. His spiritual senses instantly unfurled, and he was abruptly greeted by the sight of invisible fire burning all around him.

“There’s been an attack!” he yelled frantically at the top of his voice.

It hit him then. This was why Zhao Xidong had been immediately made the leader of their team upon his graduation from the Inner Yard while he was still stuck with sentry duty despite years of service at the Spiritual Law Division.

Zhao Xidong now saw what he’d missed.

Look!

Zhao Xidong had managed to piece everything together from the little that Xu Xiaoshou had said. He, on the other hand, had had to see the Spiritual Law Division blow up with his very own eyes before finally believing what Zhao Xidong had said.

Fortunately, Zhao Xidong had already gone to seek reinforcements.

It was then that the law enforcer saw, to his horror, the protective barrier around the Spiritual Law Division burning as well.

He cried out a second time, his voice filled with panic and fear.

“The Spiritual Library Division’s on fire!”

“We have to put the fire out!”

Chapter 98: Don’t Worry. This Isn’t a Big Deal

In a small room, around a round wooden table, sat four men.

The tip of Xiao Qixiu’s sword rested on the floor. Xiao Qixiu frowned at Elder Sang as his fingers stroked his sword’s hilt. “Are you really going to take Xu Xiaoshou as your disciple?”

“That’s right,” said Elder Sang after taking a sip of wine. “The fates willed it so. It was decided when he ate the first Infernal Fire Seed and lived. You knew then, didn’t you?”

Elder Sang was talking about the Windcloud Competition’s preliminaries, when Xu Xiaoshou had barged into the arena and begged Xiao Qixiu to save him.

Xiao Qixiu fell silent.

He'd been tempted to take Xu Xiaoshou as his disciple when the latter had revealed his Innate Stage Sword Will.

But, when he recalled the young man's eccentric and bizarre antics, as well as the way he spoke, which was absolutely infuriating...

He'd concluded that there was every chance that Xu Xiaoshou might turn out to be an absolute disaster and danger to the rest of humankind. He couldn't give in to impulse and risk that.

He hadn't expected Elder Sang to take the young man as his disciple!

"Xu Xiaoshou..." he trailed off, deliberating for a long moment before settling on a particular description. "...is quite the character."

"Are you worried?" Elder Sang scratched his head. When he remembered his huge bathtub, his lips twitched.

"It's good to have character. Anyway, he's not going to cause any trouble on my watch."

"He's not going to be a problem."

Qiao Qianzhi burst into laughter, and he smacked Xiao Qixiu on the shoulder. "Didn't I tell you to make your move before it was too late? Look, someone got ahead of you!"

Xiao Qixiu snorted. "I have no intention of taking him as my disciple. I've got my hands full with Su Qianqian."

"Honestly, Xu Xiaoshou's not that bad. Why don't you like him?"

Qiao Qianzhi tried to recall what he knew of the young man. The memories that came to mind were of a young man, always alone, training with his sword by Goose Lake.

Two or three years ago, every time he'd gone to Goose Lake to pick up his fat geese to prepare a good meal, he would see the young lad training diligently.

That was how they'd gotten to know each other. He had treated the young man to cooked goose!

Qiao Qianzhi gave everyone in the Spiritual Affairs Division a taste of his caustic wit—everyone but Xu Xiaoshou. That was because he knew how hard the young man worked.

His diligence and hard work had paid off.

After three years of training that had led to little progress in his swordsmanship, Xu Xiaoshou had acquired an Innate Stage Sword Will and clinched the championship in the Windcloud Competition. There was no question that his achievements had everything to do with the hard work that he'd poured into his training!

But, if he were being honest,

Qiao Qianzhi had watched two of Xu Xiaoshou's matches. His fighting style had become flashier...

He was unpredictable and excitable. But one could attribute those qualities of his to his adorable, lively personality!

At this thought, Qiao Qianzhi burst into laughter again. What he wouldn't give to be young again!

"Hahahahahaha!"

"Come on, let's drink!" Qiao Qianzhi raised his cup, but Elder Sang was the only one to return his toast. He eyed Ye Xiaotian. Why did the latter look so worried?

"Why aren't you drinking?"

He understood why Xiao Qixiu didn't drink. The man was a swordsman. But why was Ye Xiaotian pretending that he couldn't drink?

Ye Xiaotian glanced at him unhappily. A man of few words, he didn't say anything as he patted his arm.

Elder Sang laughed. "He just got that reattached. He has to stay away from alcohol."

"Hahaha!" Qiao Qianzhi gave Ye Xiaotian's arm a hard pinch. "That's karma for you!"

Ye Xiaotian jumped in pain and yanked his arm back. He watched the two men drink. He could still hear the deafening thunder of the two explosions that had gone off in his head. "Are you really sure that everything is alright?"

Elder Sang grabbed a slice of roasted goose, shoved it into his mouth, and began to chew loudly. "Don't worry about that. It's just Xu Xiaoshou cultivating the Infernal Fire Seed. He should be in the middle of refining it."

"Don't panic. I've done this before. I know how this goes!"

"Come on, cheers!"

Qiao Qianzhi was the only one who raised his cup...

Ye Xiaotian stared at the liquid in his own cup, swallowed hard, and resisted the temptation to drink it.

Xiao Qixiu was unmoved. Watching them drink was akin to an exercise in strengthening his own willpower.

As the rims of two cups collided lightly with each other...

Boom!

In the small room, whose walls even telepathic communication could not pass, the sound of an explosion rumbled deafeningly like thunder. One could only imagine how loud the explosion would've been without the protection of these walls!

Ye Xiaotian turned and stared dumbly at Elder Sang. "Is that Xu Xiaoshou cultivating the Infernal Fire Seed too?"

Elder Sang's heart skipped a beat. He had a bad feeling about this.

Then, he remembered the array protecting the Spiritual Law Division and concluded that everything should be fine. He stubbornly replied to the other man. "Don't worry. It's nothing serious...I think."

Xiao Qixiu couldn't sit still any longer. He was the Chief Elder of the Spiritual Law Division. That had sounded like a huge explosion. His men were probably looking for him right now.

"I'm going to take a look!"

Knock, knock, knock!

Someone was urgently pounding on the door.

The four men exchanged looks with one another and caught the look of alarm in one another's eyes. No one would come knocking on the door of this room unless some calamity had struck.

Xiao Qixiu rushed towards the door and pulled it open.

Standing at the doorway was Zhao Xidong, panting heavily. His eyes fell on the four men in the room. "You're all here. That's great!"

"Look at you, all flustered and in a panic!" Xiao Qixiu frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Of course I'm in a panic..." Zhao Xidong blurted out frantically. "We're under attack!"

The other three men in the room instantly rose to their feet. An attack? When the sun had just set and night had barely arrived?

Ye Xiaotian and Qiao Qianzhi pulled a token out suddenly. It vibrated incessantly in their hand as messages came flooding in.

They extended their spiritual senses and understood immediately what was going on.

Zhao Xidong pulled out his token, then. Ye Xiaotian, Qiao Qianzhi, and Xiao Qixiu glanced at the token before reeling back in shock and blurring out in unison, "The Spiritual Law Division's on fire?"

Everyone stared at Elder Sang. His face had gone white. Just moments ago, he had reassured them that everything was fine and told them not to panic, and now...

Had Xu Xiaoshou really gone and landed himself in trouble?

Elder Sang's heart skipped a beat. He couldn't deny that that was a very real possibility.

Ye Xiaotian's expression darkened. "What about your tokens? Why aren't you receiving any messages after something so serious has happened?"

Elder Sang froze. "I usually leave mine in the Spiritual Law Division..."

Xiao Qixiu stared dumbly at Ye Xiaotian. "I lent mine to someone..."

Qiao Qianzhi nearly stomped his foot in fury. "Why are we still talking? We need to get to the Spiritual Law Division immediately and find out what's going on!"

Whoosh!

The four men vanished instantly.

Elder Qiao went back to the table, squatted on the stool, and grabbed a piece of roasted goose with his chopsticks. He took a bite. It was tasteless. He threw his chopsticks down and dashed out of the room.

Slam!

A moment later, he ran back and pulled the door shut.

... ..

“Huff!”

“Huff!”

Somewhere in the first level of the Spiritual Law Division, Xu Xiaoshou was unleashing his Breathing Technique without restraint. With his every inhalation, he sucked in the Infernal Heavenly Flames that were burning all around him, extinguishing flames everywhere he passed.

He had killed the fire on the second floor. But the fire on the first floor was causing him real grief.

He had stopped thinking about the pain. All he prayed for was for the fire to stop and for the place to not burn down. He couldn't afford to think about anything else.

He continued breathing in the flames as he silently and desperately uttered his apologies for the grave crime that he had committed.

He didn't do it on purpose!

How could he have known that the attack he unleashed in the illusory world would be mirrored in reality too? Something wasn't right. Everything should have been an illusion.

Fortunately, the techniques housed in the Spiritual Law Division were all protected by a defensive barrier. His feeble attack had clearly failed to breach their defenses.

As for the shelves...

They looked a terrible sight!

“Surrounded, Passive Point +1.”

Heavens! They weren't wasting any time at all, were they?

Xu Xiaoshou was seized by panic. He was still in the middle of putting out the fire on the first level...

Whoosh!

His face twitched violently as he sucked in another deep breath. Then, suddenly, he heard something behind him.

He turned around to the sight of four pairs of eyes staring right at him.

It was Elder Sang, Ye Xiaotian, Xiao Qixiu, and the judge from the first round of the Windcloud Competition...

Xu Xiaoshou's legs turned to jelly.

Whoosh!

A shadow fell over him. Qiao Qianzhi had silently landed in front of him.

Loudly and with some difficulty, Xu Xiaoshou gulped.

Somebody, say something!

Why wouldn't anybody say something? The silence was driving him mad with panic...

"Haha..." Xu Xiaoshou mustered a faint smile on his face and said earnestly, "This isn't what you think it is. Don't worry, it's really nothing serious..."

Chapter 99: The Most Dangerous Enemy is the One You Can't See

Elder Sang's hands were hidden in his sleeve. He curled his fingers and effortlessly sealed the invisible raging fire away.

Elder Qiao was the first to speak. "Where's the enemy, Xu Xiaoshou?"

What enemy?

Xu Xiaoshou was puzzled. Had the Spirit Palace been infiltrated by yet another enemy? What was going on?

Hovering in midair, Ye Xiaotian looked as tall as the rest. He glared at Elder Qiao. They should have let Xu Xiaoshou speak first.

If what he said aligned with what they knew, that would mean that there was nothing wrong with him. But they would have a problem on their hands if it didn't.

Speaking first was akin to giving Xu Xiaoshou a chance to weasel out of the precarious spot that he was in right now.

Elder Qiao glared back fearlessly.

It was clear what Elder Qiao thought about that. Who subjected to the appraising looks of four men would be able to withstand that kind of pressure?

Xu Xiaoshou was just a kid!

Now that Elder Qiao had spoken, Zhao Xidong naturally no longer restrained himself. "We communicated via a series of hand signals just now. Didn't you tell me you were being held hostage by a kidnapper?"

Hand signals?

Xu Xiaoshou was stupefied. What hand signal?

When had he ever communicated with Zhao Xidong via a series of hand signals?

Xu Xiaoshou wasn't an idiot. He'd managed to learn a great deal of important information from the little the two men had just said. He had half a mind to use the clues that he'd been given and play along. Surely that would enable him to escape the blame for what he'd just done...

...wouldn't it?

As his eyes flickered between Elder Qiao and Zhao Xidong, his Sense caught every minute detail of everyone's reactions.

Despite his stern look, Xiao Qixiu was still a familiar face. He could be persuaded as long as Elder Qiao was around.

Elder Sang was his master. He might not have said anything yet, but it was clear that they were on the same side.

Ye Xiaotian, the snowy-haired child, was the only person whom he'd only met but once. The only impression he had of the child was of his reticence.

But Xu Xiaoshou had known right from the start that this was a shrewd man. A man who had the capabilities to assume the role of dean of the Inner Yard wasn't someone to be trifled with.

Besides, he didn't know him very well. He couldn't afford to act rashly.

Xu Xiaoshou was a man guided by reason. He was very astute and rarely reckless.

He might have caused a minor explosion in the Spiritual Law Division, but the damages had been minimal. They had only lost a few hundred bookshelves and many, many tables and chairs...

Well, tables and chairs that had looked like they would cost an arm and a leg.

If he admitted to his wrongdoing, he would only suffer a monetary loss. But if he tried to hide the fact that he'd caused the explosion, he would lose a moral battle.

"There were no enemies, no intruders, no kidnappers," Xu Xiaoshou said calmly.

"Suspected, Passive Points +5."

Xu Xiaoshou froze momentarily.

What was going on? He was telling the absolute truth!

He wasn't lying!

"Are you playing me for a fool?" Zhao Xidong couldn't take it anymore and said what was on everyone's mind. "If there's no one else in the building, are you saying that you were the one who caused the explosion?"

"That's right." Xu Xiaoshou nodded.

"Suspected, Passive Points +4."

Hmm?

Four?

Xu Xiaoshou caught the slight curl of Elder Sang's lips. The old man seemed to have caught onto something. He yanked his straw hat down and kept his silence.

That was right.

The old man was the one who'd taught him how to refine the Infernal Fire Seed. He was probably the only one who believed what Xu Xiaoshou was saying...

"What nonsense!"

Elder Qiao gave Xu Xiaoshou a hard smack on the shoulder. "Kid, you don't have to be afraid. The most powerful warriors in the Tiansang Spirit Palace are standing right before you. If there's someone trying to threaten you, just tell us. You don't have to worry at all."

Well...

Something about this conversation struck Xu Xiaoshou as vaguely familiar, and he got the feeling that he'd heard it before. He subconsciously looked at Xiao Qixiu.

Xiao Qixiu gave him an encouraging look. "No crime will go unpunished. Sooner or later, justice will be served. Tell us!"

"Encouraged, Passive Point +1."

Xu Xiaoshou was dumbstruck. Why was he waxing lyrical about justice? He realized why the conversation sounded so familiar.

The same conversation had taken place the first time he'd drawn Sword Technique Expertise. These two men had tried tirelessly to make him spill the whereabouts of a person who didn't exist.

He was on the verge of tears. In another place and another time, he might have pointed them in a random direction to get them off his back. But Ye Xiaotian was right there. He dared not act rashly. "I swear, there wasn't anyone..."

Elder Sang abruptly cut him off.

"Judging from the force of the explosion, the impact must have hit all three levels of the Spiritual Law Division. But the damages appear to be minimal. I've looked through our inventory of spiritual techniques. None were lost or damaged. We're only missing a few miscellaneous items.

"Here's my preliminary assessment: we have an intruder who is at the Master Stage and wields the fire element. But we can't eliminate the possibility of the intruder suppressing his cultivation level in an attempt to mislead us, so let's assume that he is at the Sovereign Stage!"

Ye Xiaotian frowned. Nothing about this matter seemed certain, yet here Elder Sang was drawing a conclusion. Something wasn't quite right.

He didn't raise his suspicions though. The man had just reattached his arm for him, after all.

Meanwhile, listening to what Elder Sang said, Xu Xiaoshou grew increasingly baffled.

An intruder?

At the Sovereign Stage?

Then, something clicked suddenly, and, in an instant, he realized that this was Elder Sang trying to let him off the hook.

He knew he'd guessed it correctly when the old man asked sternly the next moment, "Where did the intruder go?"

Xu Xiaoshou lifted a trembling finger and pointed in a random direction...

Why?

Why was he constantly being forced to lie?

Elder Sang issued his orders with a second's hesitation. "Zhao Xidong, gather your men and search the grounds. Qiao Qianzhi, Xiao Qixiu, follow the intruder's trail and track him down. Ye Xiaotian..."

He gave the snowy-haired child a look. Ye Xiaotian stared back at him, a doubtful look on his face.

"You're going as well! Team up with Xiao Qixiu!" Elder Sang said firmly. One couldn't tell at all from the look on his face that he was lying. "This could be the work of the Holy Vassal. We can't let our guards down!"

All traces of doubt fled from Ye Xiaotian's mind when he heard the mention of the Holy Vassal. His expression turned solemn.

"We don't know if they're trying to draw us away from the Spirit Palace. I'll hold the fort while you track the intruder down. Let's move!" Elder Sang said decisively in a tone that brooked no argument.

"Yes, sir!" the men around him answered in unison before dashing away.

Xu Xiaoshou stared dumbly at the old man before him, his heart swelling with awe.

That was amazing!

With a few words, the old man had handled and dealt with everything. His argument had been sound, leaving no room for any refutation.

He was incredible!

The look that he gave Elder Sang was filled with open flattery and adoration.

The old man took a deep breath. His expression darkened as he stared unblinkingly at Xu Xiaoshou. "I was only away for a short while. Didn't I tell you to focus on cultivating the Infernal Fire Seed? Look at what you did instead!"

Xu Xiaoshou knew it. The old man knew everything...

Xu Xiaoshou scratched his head sheepishly. He didn't know what to say.

He was as frustrated as Elder Sang was!

All he'd wanted to do was cultivate the Infernal Fire Seed too. He hadn't expected the series of mishaps to befall him!

Elder Sang glared at him. Fortunately, little damage had been done and no spiritual techniques had been lost in the fire. Otherwise, this could have been a devastating blunder.

“I’ve distracted everyone and sent them away, but you still owe me an explanation. Explain yourself right now, or else...”

Xu Xiaoshou could feel his hair stand on end. He felt like he was being hunted by a ferocious beast, and terror rippled through his body.

He plastered a weak smile on his face. Flattery wasn’t going to help him now.

“I do have an explanation, but I’m not sure if I should say it...”

Elder Sang grabbed him and dragged him up to the third floor.

The array was activated. A barrier slammed down between the space they were residing in and the rest of the world. The old man lifted his straw hat then and finally saw the state that his room was in. He was so shocked he nearly puked blood.

The huge bathtub had been flung aside and now lay overturned on the floor. There was a huge dent in the wall that marked the bathtub’s collision with the latter.

The rows of bottles and jars that had lined the room neatly were now scattered all over the place, as if a storm had broken into the room and sent them flying.

Some of the bottles had been shattered, their pills sprawled across the floor like the pale, naked forms of young girls, hapless and exposed.

The panes to his windows were gone. A cool wind breezed into the room. How refreshing indeed!

Elder Sang wondered if he had taken a disciple at all.

He suspected he had brought home a beast that had then gone on to tear his home down!

He was livid. He scrunched his sparse eyebrows and glared murderously at Xu Xiaoshou. Anybody else would have been dead by now.

Xu Xiaoshou trembled, then said in a faint, subdued voice. “I was trying to put out the fire just now. I didn’t have time to clean up the mess in the room...”

“To h*ll with that! I want an explanation right now!” thundered Elder Sang.

Chapter 100: Seeds on All Five Fingers

An explanation...

Xu Xiaoshou had no explanation for him. He’d been cultivating pills!

But he couldn’t tell the old man that. He was clearly livid, and who knew if he could still be reasoned with. What he needed to do right now was to get him to calm down.

“Don’t get worked up...”

Xu Xiaoshou gave the old man a light push. Elder Sang's eyelids started to twitch violently, and the sight of it nearly made Xu Xiaoshou's heart stop. "I succeeded!" he hastily added.

Elder Sang froze suddenly. "At what?"

At tricking the old man, obviously...

Xu Xiaoshou exhaled a soft sigh of relief. If he'd drawn the Passive Skill of Flame Expertise, he would have confidently declared that he had succeeded in refining the Infernal Fire Seed.

But he had acquired the damn Cooking Expert...

Alright, he wasn't going to harp on that anymore. It would only make him cry.

"Take a look!"

Xu Xiaoshou wasn't sure if this was going to work at all. He laid his palm out flat, and in the middle of his palm, Infernal Heavenly Flames flickered into life.

Crackle! Pop!

He was seized by a strange feeling. It was as if...

...he could feel the excitement that the flames on his palm were feeling.

"There's something different about this!" Something hit him then. He recalled the scorching heat that he'd awoken to in the illusory realm.

Cooking Expert...

One needed fire to cook, didn't they?

Fire?

He supposed his newly acquired skill did have something to do with fire after all.

Xu Xiaoshou's lips twitched. He couldn't help but find the entire thing ridiculous...

"That's it?" Elder Sang frowned as he stared at Xu Xiaoshou's palm.

Xu Xiaoshou gave him a look that said "be patient." Then, he pooled his full attention on the fire in his palm. The flames shrank.

Pop! Crackle!

A fireball spun rapidly in the middle of his palm, releasing waves of heat that distorted the air above the flames.

Elder Sang was silent. The extent of compression that Xu Xiaoshou had managed to achieve during his brief absence was impressive.

But his progress didn't explain the last explosion at all.

He gave Xu Xiaoshou a look that indicated the latter could move on now.

Beads of sweat appeared on Xu Xiaoshou's forehead. He could sense another strange bond unfolding between him and the fireball on his palm. But this...

...wasn't enough!

He still had more than five thousand Passive Points.

"Should I use them all?" he thought.

Xu Xiaoshou hesitated. If Cooking Expert were an Expertise Passive Skill meant for combat, the thought of leveling up the skill with every Passive Point he currently had never would've crossed his mind. Instead, he would've deliberately timed his leveling up, like he had for Sword Technique Expertise.

He was completely talentless. If he tried to learn too many spiritual techniques, he would never progress beyond the first move of the White Cloud Sword Technique.

But if he were to level up his skills during battle, the sudden surge of knowledge might lead him to an epiphany and grant him a new technique.

That was how he'd acquired the Modified Sword Style and the Blade-draw Technique.

This strategy was based on his experience with Expertise Passive Skills, and he'd developed it to acquire more spiritual techniques. He knew that he was exploiting a loophole in the system, but honestly, it worked very well.

He lacked talent, so he had to make up for that with a few additional skills.

Well, Cooking Expert...

...didn't seem like a name someone would give a skill that was meant for combat.

He had no idea if his strategy would work...

He saw the sullen look on Elder Sang's face and had a terrible suspicion that his future would be grim if he didn't survive his current predicament.

"So be it!"

After some thought, he decided to trade all his Passive Points for Skill Points and use all of the latter on Cooking Expert.

"Cooking Expert (Acquired Lv. 6)."

A deluge of knowledge instantly flooded his mind. This was the first time Xu Xiaoshou had attempted to level up an Expertise Passive Skill five consecutive times. He could feel his mind bending under the weight of all that knowledge.

His head was killing him!

The fireball in the center of his palm wavered, and Elder Sang's face involuntarily twitched at the sight.

"You mean you can't even master control over such a small fireball?"

Xu Xiaoshou didn't answer him. His brain was flooded with a sudden torrent of information on an array of ingredients, recipes, and various cooking techniques.

"That's it!" His eyes lit up.

Simmering, baking, sautéing...

All kinds of weird trivia popped into his head. But he didn't care!

What did care about was the clear and growing bond between him and the flames burning on his palm. This didn't feel like a skill that he had recently acquired. It felt as if he'd had it for years.

It was as if he had complete mastery over it!

Xu Xiaoshou grinned as he stuck his palm out. Before Elder Sang could voice his confusion, he heard a soft pop, then watched as the fireball on Xu Xiaoshou's palm expanded and grew to a size that a man could comfortably wrap his arms around.

Waves of heat erupted from the fireball, ripping the old man's straw hat from his head while sending Xu Xiaoshou's clothes flapping furiously.

Elder Sang was blown away. He couldn't believe the mastery that Xu Xiaoshou had gained over the Infernal Heavenly Flames within his brief absence.

But...

"I told you to shrink it, not expand it!

"What's all that about..." he huffed in annoyance. "How are you going to cultivate anything with that? That'll melt the hardest cauldron!"

Xu Xiaoshou shook his head. "Can't you tell? This is..."

"...ehem, it's Sautéing!"

He grinned cheekily. With a twist of his fingers, the enormous fireball disappeared and was replaced by a small, quiet flame in the center of his palm.

Gone was the furious, wild fire. Like a tamed beast, the flame licked quietly at the center of Xu Xiaoshou's palm, burning steadily.

He'd had no need to employ his Breathing Technique this time. Instead, he'd relied on his mastery over heat and fire to accomplish the daunting feat that he'd tried and failed to achieve so many times before.

So...

Simmering!

The thought left him caught between laughter and tears.

He'd expected Cooking Expert to be a useless skill. In fact, he'd had half a mind to cast aside the irrelevant trivia crowding his brain and only retain the knowledge that gave him mastery over fire. With

the latter, it would be the same as achieving his dream of wielding the Flame Expertise. He would be able to do nearly everything that he could possibly do with the Flame Expertise.

Yet, the more he thought about it...

...the more he realized that Cooking Expert was so much better than Flame Expertise. With the former, he could whip up a meal for himself when he had nothing better to do...

Xu Xiaoshou could feel a toothache coming on. D*mn. This was getting ridiculous.

Elder Sang was blown away. He couldn't believe it. Xu Xiaoshou had actually managed to refine the Infernal Fire Seed in the brief period he'd been away.

But he'd counted the explosions. There had only been three of them!

He had taken an entire day to refine that d*mn thing, and, during the process, had blown himself up numerous times. In fact, his skin had turned brown and cracked by the end of it all while his insides had turned out soft and tender.

Xu Xiaoshou, on the other hand...

...had emerged unscathed, but the Spiritual Law Division had ended up been destroyed.

"This..."

Elder Sang got a grip on his emotions and said slowly, "So, that last explosion. Were you the one who caused it?"

It didn't matter that this young rascal had managed to master the technique of refining an Infernal Fire Seed within such a short period of time. Elder Sang wasn't convinced that a Level 9 Spirit Cultivator could unleash a power so destructive and immense that even the Spiritual Law Division couldn't contain it.

Xu Xiaoshou started to panic.

He wasn't the one who'd blown up the Spiritual Law Division, but there was no way he was going to tell Elder Sang everything that had happened in his illusion.

His will over the flame wavered, and the Infernal Fire Seed on his palm flickered unsteadily.

"I was testing out my new technique, Lesser Fireball!"

"Lesser Fireball?" Doubt flickered in Elder Sang's eyes.

The fireball resting in Xu Xiaoshou's palm brimmed with power. Elder Sang could be persuaded to believe that it was powerful enough to breach the Spiritual Law Division's protective barriers, but how had it managed to blow out his windows?

"Suspected, Passive Points +1."

He knew it...

Xu Xiaoshou didn't spare the old man a single glance as he muttered to himself, "That's just for starters."

"Is that so?" Elder Sang picked his straw hat off the ground. "Are you saying that you managed to come up with a more powerful move within such a short period of time?"

"That's right!" Xu Xiaoshou smiled smugly. "It's the Seeds on All Five Fingers!"