

Magic Era 231

Chapter 231: Thunderbird Flock

“How was it? Did you two get a good harvest?” Suyass seemed quite pleased with himself, likely because he had gotten some good stuff.

“Haha, so-so.” Lin Yun chuckled but didn’t elaborate. He only glanced at the distant Fran. Ever since he signed the contract with the Crystal Scales, Fran had become quite different. The mana fluctuations of the 5th Rank High Mage had been ordinary before, but now, Lin Yun could feel a surge of mana fluctuations, just like an unending tide...

Lin Yun knew that this was the power granted to him by the Crystal Scales.

Although Fran was only a 5th Rank High Mage, with the Crystal Scales equipped, he could display the power of an Archmage anytime. His power was at least five times greater than before.

The leap in strength gave Fran boundless confidence.

He was completely different from before, no longer acting meek in front of Lin Yun, and instead, he was now proudly smiling.

“Well, Mafa Merlin, Solomon, you two are ten minutes late. You can leave the nonsense for later, let’s first go to the 4th floor. That’s the most important part of the stone tower.” Fran bluntly criticized the two energetically.

Lin Yun and Solomon didn’t say anything in reply, but Suyass frowned as he looked at Fran, his gaze carrying apparent dissatisfaction.

But Fran was too conceited now, so how could he care about Suyass’ dissatisfaction?

The group of four found a path leading to the 4th floor at the edge of the Magic Iron Forge. They could see how distorted the space in the stone tower was, as the path to the 4th floor took no less than an hour to traverse.

Both sides of the path were filled with metal cages. It was unknown what these metal cages had once held, but they were now empty. On the way, they saw a few hundred cages, some of which were especially huge, and there were even some shocking residual mana fluctuations left.

“This should be where Vaughn kept magic beasts locked up...” Solomon wasn’t unfamiliar with these kinds of metal cages as the master of the Sage Tower. In fact, whether it was the Sage Tower or the Cloud Tower, they both had areas specialized for imprisoning magic beasts.

“Yes, this should be a place used for experiments...” Lin Yun nodded. It wasn’t strange for an alchemist like Vaughn to do some experimentation on magic beasts. After all, it was even rumored that the Dark Sage himself had once captured a Demon Lord to complete an experiment.

“What... What about the magic beasts?” Solomon suddenly froze and gulped. Everyone knew that the magic beasts used for experiments were usually well-watched. But the hundreds of metal cages were all empty...

For this to happen meant that a large number of magic beasts had escaped.

Thus, the question was... Where had they fled to?

There had been no signs of magic beasts in the first three floors...

Moreover, with the eight flying puppets patrolling around the tower, even flying magic beasts might not necessarily be able to escape. There was only one possibility left...

And as he thought of it, Solomon looked up.

Indeed. The 4th floor was the only place the magic beasts could have gone to.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Vaughn was only an Archmage, even if he caught a few magic beasts for experimentation, they wouldn’t be too powerful.” Solomon could only comfort himself like this.

“That isn’t certain...” But Lin Yun bluntly poured cold water over him. Although Vaughn only had the strength of an Archmage, one shouldn’t forget that he had inherited the legacy of the Dark Sage. The three Heaven Rank puppets were almost unequalled in that era. Numerous Heaven Rank powerhouses had no choice but to bow their heads in front of Vaughn. Not many magic beasts would be able to escape if he wanted to catch one.

As the two discussed, Fran bluntly reprimanded, “What’s the point of saying that? There is no trace of any magic beasts. You are spineless, if you are afraid you can stay here while Suyass and I go to the 4th floor.”

“Haha...” Lin Yun only chuckled again. Fran wanted to put on a show. Let alone magic beasts escaping, even if a Demon Lord escaped, he would have used that opportunity to put him down.

After walking for an hour, the path that felt endless to the group of four finally reached its end.

‘Worthy of Vaughn...’ Lin Yun inwardly sighed when he finally stepped onto the 4th floor of the stone tower. The final Artisan of the 3rd Dynasty had truly reached an outrageous level in the field of alchemy and spent a great amount of effort on this stone tower.

This was proven by the scenery in front of them.

Blue sky, white clouds, forests, rivers, mountains...

Everything felt like the real world!

Standing there, who would have thought that this was merely a place inside the stone tower?

All this was even enough to stun Lin Yun, to the point that he felt somewhat doubtful. Was Vaughn really only an Artisan? After all, world creation belonged to the domain of Saint Alchemists.

“There is movement ahead...” As Lin Yun sighed in admiration, Suyass cast a Mage Eye and quickly sent it to the forest. A short moment after, the Archmage looked amazed. “It’s Lys and all the others!”

“Ah?” Suyass’ words startled Lin Yun.

He originally thought that the Fortune Box had sent Lys and the others to different locations in the laboratory, but he hadn’t expected them to all be teleported to the 4th floor.

Surprised, Lin Yun cast a Mage Eye of his own.

Sure enough, the other members of the joint exploration team were about a kilometer ahead, in the forest. Lin Yun looked around and saw Lys, Badrack, Xiuban, William, and the others.

It’s just that the sixteen of them weren’t in a very optimistic position.

To be more precise, they were caught in a dangerous battle.

They were fighting over a hundred Thunderbirds.

Moreover, the birds were each at least level 20 and seemed to be going wild as they assailed the group. The wings of the leading Thunderbird were ten meters long when stretched out, and it looked like a golden cloud when diving down. For magic beasts like Thunderbirds, the higher level they were, the bigger they would be. Lin Yun estimated that this Thunderbird was already level 25...

Along with its hundred subordinates, that battle could only be described as frightening. Lightning could be seen spreading for a few hundred meters. The team had gathered together as closely as possible, relying on Sasu’s shield and the Runic Shield jointly cast by the few High Mages to keep the group of Thunderbirds at bay.

But counterattacking was impossible.

Lin Yun estimated that the way it was going, they would only last five more minutes. At that point, the High Mages would suffer from mana exhaustion and the Runic Shield would dissipate. Sasu’s shield wouldn’t be enough to hold back those frightening Thunderbirds.

“Let’s help them as fast as possible.” Suyass cast Flight as he said that. He turned into a sharp arrow, piercing towards the forest.

Lin Yun and Solomon used Elemental Incarnation and arrived in the forest after a few Flame Flashes.

The fight was already at its most critical juncture when the group of four entered the forest. Two of the High Mages had already suffered from mana exhaustion, causing a good part of the Runic Shield to start cracking. A few Thunderbirds rushed down and the intense current in their claws made a mess of the formation.

Suyass fortunately arrived on time.

He cast a Freeze spell at the flock of birds, turning three of the Thunderbirds that had rushed in into ice statues. Suyass didn’t waste time and quickly cast an Elemental Shield before rushing to engage the biggest Thunderbird.

He was rather straightforward, planning to have the greatest effect by dealing with the leader of the Thunderbirds.

But the Alpha Thunderbird was level 25, and when it saw Suyass rush over, it didn't even try to avoid him. It unfolded its ten-meters-long wings and a berserk electrical current was discharged.

One was a newly advanced Archmage, and the other was a level 25 Alpha Thunderbird. When they clashed, only a burst of electrical current and scattering magic runes could be seen.

Lin Yun and Solomon rushed over at this time. They didn't say anything to the others before quickly filling the spots of the two High Mages and mending the cracks of the Runic Shield.

But Lin Yun and Solomon were much stronger than the two High Mages they were replacing, so with the addition of Suyass pinning down the Alpha Thunderbird, the battle was well on its way to being turned around. Not only was the Runic Shield mended, but the joint exploration team was now able to counterattack.

"Merlin, how come you are here?" Lys finally had enough leeway to ask.

"We just walked up from the 1st floor of the stone tower."

"What?" But they hadn't expected that such a mundane answer would make Lys cry out in alarm. "This isn't Gaugass?"

Chapter 232: One Day and Three Months

"Gaugass?" Lin Yun froze. 'What is Lys talking about? Why did he mention Gaugass?' At first, Lin Yun thought that Lys made a mistake and jokingly said, "Leader Lys, Gaugass is a few thousand kilometers from the Four Seasons Canyon."

But he didn't expect that these words would make Lys flinch, his gaze empty, as if he had seen true horrors. He stared at Lin Yun in shock for a few seconds, not even looking at the Thunderbirds pouncing over. Lin Yun helped him maintain his side of the shield, but Lys didn't even notice and asked with a shuddering voice, "Mer... Merlin, this really isn't Gaugass...?"

"Leader Lys, this is truly not Gaugass..." Lin Yun realized that Lys was being serious.

'What happened? Lys doesn't look clear-headed... How could he think that this was Gaugass, the land of the battlemages? That place is several thousand kilometers away. No matter how formidable the Fortune Box was, it couldn't teleport over ten people across such an incredible distance. Could they have had such a different experience? Different to the point that they thought they were in Gaugass?'

"How could it not be Gaugass... How... How could this be?" While Lin Yun was mulling it over, Lys was still stunned.

"Leader Lys, this is truly not Gaugass."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, it truly isn't..." Lin Yun sighed and finally was forced to believe that Lys truly considered this place Gaugass. He was doubtful as he asked, "Leader Lys, I think there must have been some issues, can you recall what happened after everyone scattered? Where did you guys go?"

“We... After we got separated, we entered an underground castle and met a large swarm of Lava Spiders. Fortunately, these Lava Spiders weren’t too powerful so we managed to escape...”

“Lava Spiders?” Lin Yun now understood why Lys kept thinking that this was Gaugass. It was because Lava Spiders were part of the fauna of Gaugass. The Gaugass Battlemages had been fighting the Lava Spiders for over a thousand years. Every year, a large number of Gaugass Battlemages would die in the fights against Lava Spiders.

But Gaugass wasn’t the only place with Lava Spiders.

In Noscent, there were hundreds of large and small volcanoes, and each of them could be inhabited by Lava Spiders, so why did they think that this place was Gaugass?

As Lin Yun thought about it, Lys continued, “At first, we didn’t figure out that this was Gaugass, but after walking for several days, we found out that we would regularly lose our way, so Badrack started drawing a map. During the next month, we had to fight dozens of battles, and Badrack’s map...”

“Hold on, a month?” Lin Yun felt that this wasn’t right... Several days? A month?

Lin Yun clearly remembered having been separated from the others less than a day ago, so how could they have been here for a month already?

Lin Yun felt that the problem was rather serious...

“Yes, a month. What is it?” Lys looked at Lin Yun in bemusement. He then continued, “A month later, Badrack had finished enough of his map for us to realize that we were in the middle of Gaugass, and thus, after some discussion, we decided to head southwest. We wanted to return to Okland first... and that was two months ago...”

“No way...” This wasn’t just a bit serious. According to Lys, they had been on the road for three months, and furthermore, they had been in Gaugass for three months. What did that mean?

“Merlin... What... What’s wrong?”

“Nothing...” Lin Yun shook his head, “I just feel that there must be something strange going on, Leader Lys...”

“What is it?”

“First of all, this is definitely not Gaugass. Sir Suyass and High Mage Solomon can testify to that, they can also confirm that we are on the 4th floor of a stone tower. Moreover, we didn’t separate three months ago...”

“Not three months ago?” Lys was confused. “Then... How long?”

“A day...”

“Impossible!” Lys almost jumped up on the spot. ‘How could this be, I clearly remember every detail of the past three months, how could it have been a day?’

“Well, Leader Lys, we can deal with the details later, let’s first deal with these Thunderbirds...”

After the discussion, the two directed their focus back onto the battlefield. At this time, they had already managed to regain the advantage. Suyass was controlling the Alpha Thunderbird in the sky while Lin Yun, Solomon, and Fran, who were still full of power, joined the fight and reversed the situation.

The joint exploration team quickly counterattacked and casualties quickly piled up within the flock of Thunderbirds.

The outcome was already decided.

After Solomon shot two Thunderbirds, Lin Yun's attention moved away from the main battlefield as he began to pay attention to the other battle in the sky.

The fight between Suyass and the Alpha Thunderbird had already reached its climax, and no clear victor was emerging. Although Suyass had overbearing power, the sky was still the main field of the Alpha Thunderbird. By relying on its nature and its flying ability, the Thunderbird remained equally matched with Suyass. When Lin Yun saw the situation, he knew that if no one intervened, Suyass' fight could drag on for at least 30 minutes.

30 minutes was too long...

Lin Yun thought for a moment before pouring mana into the Lava Dominator to activate its Flight ability. He cast an Ice Fire Shield before ascending, only leaving behind a blue and red afterimage.

"Merlin, cover me..." When Suyass saw Lin Yun joining him, he knew that the outcome of the battle had already been decided. As an Archmage, handling a magic beast below level 30 should definitely be a piece of cake. The only problem was much more familiar with flying. It was too fast and too nimble. He would suffer if he was caught off guard.

But Merlin had already come to his aid. With the strength of that young Great Mage, covering for him would be no issue. As long as he could buy ten seconds of time, Suyass would be able to completely suppress that Alpha Thunderbird. He would have no problem killing it in one shot then.

But he hadn't expected Merlin to not hear him. The latter flew like a meteor towards the belly of the Alpha Thunderbird.

"Merlin! Watch out!" Suyass was startled when he saw that. This was far too rash. Although the belly was the weak point of Thunderbirds, it was also the most dangerous part. This was a sentient magic beast whose instincts far surpassed ordinary humans. It would naturally know to protect its vitals, and Merlin's flying speed with his magic tool was truly inferior to a Flight Spell. Flying so close to its belly was like delivering himself to the Alpha Thunderbird's claws.

Sure enough, just as Suyass warned him, the Alpha Thunderbird's long wings spread ferociously in the sky as two sharp claws used the momentum to fiercely slash down.

'Shit...'

Suyass felt terrible. The Alpha Thunderbird's reaction was so fast that even Suyass was surprised by it. The pair of sharp claws were rushed at the young Great Mage's flight path. When the lightning fell, the young mage would be unable to dodge.

Sure enough, just as Suyass thought about it, the pair of claws almost sealed the youth's fate. Wind howled as Lin Yun barely managed to dodge the attack. Then, the Thunderbird shook before a thousand feathers were shaken off.

In a flash, these flickering feathers turned into boundless lightning bolts, covering the sky in an instant, like a huge net ready to swallow Lin Yun within.

"Shit!" Suyass cursed.

That young Great Mage's strength was definitely amazing, and he had already shocked him multiples times. Unfortunately, he was only a young Great Mage... His greatest fault was that he was too rash and impulsive. That was a level 25 magic beast, how could he rush towards it like that?

They obviously already had the upper hand.

As long as Lin Yun helped restrain it for a bit, Suyass would have been able to easily finish it off. There would have been no problem, so why had he acted so rashly?

Unfortunately, it was already too late. The earth-shattering lightning had already surrounded him, and even if Suyass could reach Heaven Rank, he still wouldn't be able to save him.

All Suyass could do was to prepare some spells, hoping the young Great Mage would somehow survive.

If he could survive the wave of lightning, Suyass would use his first spells to give him some time.

But even if he survived, he would most likely be critically injured.

It was certain to be the case, as the attacks from the Alpha Thunderbird were too ferocious. Even he, as an Archmage, was not certain he could endure that attack directly, let alone a young Great Mage that was not even twenty.

Suyass was in deep thoughts as he was finishing up his casting. Just as the storm of lightning burst out, Suyass heard a wail, before seeing a huge silhouette fall down from the sky.

Chapter 233: Treasury

Suyass was startled by this wail and the lapse in his concentration almost caused his casting to fail. After barely managing to finish his incantation, just before he released his spell, a loud rumble echoed out as the Alpha Thunderbird crashed into the ground.

For a few moments, not a sound could be heard in that entire world.

The battle was thus ended. Under the counterattack of the joint exploration team, the flock of Thunderbirds that had lost their alpha became headless chickens. The fighters constantly harried the birds with hit and run attacks while a few High Mages and Spirit Archers shot four Thunderbirds with a wave of fire. Immediately after, the joint exploration team kept consolidating their advantage and this battle also drew to a close. After a few minutes, of the hundred Thunderbirds, only one or two luckily escaped.

“Sir Suyass...” Lin Yun flew over and stopped right beside Suyass and told him, “I talked to Leader Lys, it seems that the situation is a lot more complicated than we thought...”

“Eh? Eh?...” Suyass let out a few grunts of confusion before he dared to look Lin Yun in the eyes.

Because Suyass suddenly felt like the young Great Mage in front of him had become quite unfamiliar to him.

He finally understood why Karon had talked to him for such a long time that night and tried to dissuade him from looking for trouble.

At that time, Suyass had thought that Karon was worried he would injure Merlin and draw the ire of the Star Sage, and the resulting punishment from his teacher Nolan.

But now, Suyass understood clearly. Karon was worried about him. He wasn't worried about the aftermath of injuring Merlin, he was worried about him not even being able to harm Merlin...

An esteemed Archmage being unable to injure a 9th Rank Great Mage... Suyass would have never believed Karon if he had directly stated it, but now, Suyass was also convinced.

Because just now, he had seen that 9th Rank Great Mage shooting down the level 25 Alpha Thunderbird. The power he had burst with was simply shocking!

From this alone, Suyass could see that this young Great Mage's true strength far surpassed the bounds of his rank. He hadn't thought that it was to such an extent. In the joint exploration team, only Suyass clearly understood what just happened.

Thunderbirds were spirits of thunder and lightning, and each of their feathers was filled with that power. Especially after reaching level 25, the boundless electrical power within their bloodline would awaken and each feather would be able to turn into lightning. When several hundred such feathers were converted at once, even an Archmage like Suyass would have no choice but to avoid the attack.

But that young Great Mage actually welcomed the lightning as it struck out at him. At that time, Suyass had truly thought that this young Great Mage was finished. But he hadn't expected that in that split second, the young mage would be able to find a small gap within the boundless lightning before rushing through it. When he saw that, Suyass was stunned silly. How terrifying was his control? After all, that young Great Mage wasn't using Flight, he was using an imprecise Magic Tool for that function.

How could Suyass not know the difference between flight granted by a Magic Tool and the Flight spell?

One was a spell crafted from one's own mana and thus completely under the user's control, while the other was the power of a Magic Tool. They were on two different levels. It could be said that a mage that could decently control a Flight Magic Tool could reach the same degree of nimbleness as a flying magic beast when using the Flight spell.

Moreover, Lin Yun's control was far from being merely “decent”...

Suyass had clearly seen him threading the needle and evading all the danger... Even if Suyass himself had been in such a position, he wouldn't have been able to grasp the opportunity to exploit that gap, yet Merlin did while using a Magic Tool.

What kind of concept was that?

This was a level of control Suyass had never imagined.

And then he saw the ball of flames...

If the precise control shown by the young mage had made Suyass feel shocked, then the flames he summoned made him feel dread.

The power of the flames was definitely comparable to that of an Archmage. It gently flowed into the body of the Alpha Thunderbird before exploding, entering from the belly and escaping from its back. In that split second only one thought appeared in Suyass' mind: 'True Spirit Magic Tool, that was definitely a True Spirit Magic Tool.'

Its power was too frightening...

After the fight ended, Suyass asked himself, 'If I were in that bird's position instead, could I survive that blow?'

The conclusion made Suyass dejected. 'I couldn't... I truly couldn't...'

He then thought about what had happened earlier in the camp. If not for Karon's sudden arrival...

Just thinking about it made Suyass feel cold and clammy.

Suyass felt quite dejected. He had thought that he was the strongest member of the entire expedition, so he had always acted as the leader. Even after the four of them got separated from the rest of the group, he kept directing the others around because he truly felt that it was the duty that came with power.

But thinking back on it, Suyass felt his face starting to burn up.

That huge gap made Suyass feel like he had been dancing like a clown. He believed himself to be unbeatable, but in the end, it had all been a joke.

"Sir Suyass!" At this time, the power of the Lava Dominator had been exhausted and Lin Yun had already landed and converged with Lys' group. After exchanging a few simple sentences, he noticed that Suyass was still in the same place, daydreaming, so he tried calling his name.

"Ah..." Lin Yun's shout woke Suyass. He subconsciously shook his head to put this chaotic train of thought to the back of his mind before slowly descending.

When Suyass landed, Lin Yun was already discussing with the others. Everyone had some understanding of the current situation and they were now sharing their ideas and opinions.

"What's going on, Great Mage Merlin..."

"It's like this Sir Suyass..." Lin Yun then repeated information that he had gleaned from Lys earlier.

At first, Suyass still seemed preoccupied with something else, but the more he heard, the more serious his expression became, especially when he heard that Lys' group had already been in this place for three months.

“This is a Time Cage!”

“Indeed...” Lin Yun nodded. He already knew of the Time Cage Suyass had mentioned. It was said that those who reached the peak of the Saint Alchemist realm could use arrays to alter space and time. These kinds of arrays were known as Time Cages.

But Time Cages were already legends. Even 30,000 years in the future, they were barely mentioned in a few books he had seen, so despite his great wealth of knowledge, Lin Yun didn’t know the specifics of what a Time Cage truly was.

But everything Lys said was in accordance with the principles of a Time Cage. It was like everyone was locked in a crack in time. This was a gap in the river of time, where the passage of time was completely different from the outside. One year inside might be a day outside, but it was also possible for it to be the other way around.

It might be static, or it might change unpredictably...

In short, anything could happen in a Time Cage.

But why was there a Time Cage at all?

This was the question that Lin Yun truly cared about. After all, a Time Cage wasn’t something a Saint Alchemist could casually set up. This was already touching upon the most basic Laws of this world. Without a suitable reason, who would spend a lot of time and resources to set up a Time Cage?

Moreover, Lin Yun knew...

Although the Time Cage had “cage” in its name, it wasn’t a true cage. 30,000 years later, Time Cages were also known as Time Barriers. The different time flow made it so that any force used against Time Barriers would dissipate within the river of time. This property made it impossible for external forces to break through from the outside.

Lin Yun clearly remembered that the Shelter Tower’s defensive system used a Time Cage as its core.

But the Shelter Tower was covering an entire city, it was Noscent’s final hope.

Then... What was this Time Cage protecting?

‘Could there be something important buried in this fake Gaugass world?’

“Great Mage Merlin... Great Mage Merlin...” Suyass had been waiting next to him for a response for a long time without saying anything.

“Sorry, I just remembered something.”

“Great Mage Merlin, what do you think we should do?”

The others didn’t react particularly to Suyass’ words, but Solomon and Lys, who both paid attention to details, turned to look closer at Suyass.

Although they weren't as strong as Suyass, they had been in Thousand Sails City for a few dozen years, and they weren't easy to deal with. Hearing Suyass' words, they felt that something was off. Thinking about it carefully, they found that Suyass' attitude was different.

After all, Suyass was an Archmage. Even though he was a lot friendlier after Karon's appearance, he still exuded the pride and aloofness of an Archmage even though he tried to conceal it. It clearly showed when Suyass made a decision; he wouldn't consult with anyone and would act as if following his lead was a matter of course.

Why? Because he was an Archmage.

The world of magic was strict about ranks.

Suyass normally wouldn't have used such a tone and politely asked Mafa Merlin for his advice.

How could this be?

Why did an Archmage like Suyass suddenly act so polite with Merlin?

The two looked at him for a bit before exchanging glances with each other.

"We should walk south..." After saying these words, Lin Yun looked towards the north with a trace of reluctance.

Mountains could be seen spreading through the north for hundreds of kilometers. Lin Yun used his Magic Array to do a simple analysis and found out that 90% of the power of the Time Cage was concentrated among those mountains.

Lin Yun was almost certain that the secret that the Time Cage was protecting was somewhere in that northern mountain range.

Lin Yun remembered that the mountain range in northern Gaugass would shock all of Noscent 10,000 years later.

Unfortunately, Lin Yun knew that when that happened, Archmages were completely annihilated. Even a few of the weaker Heaven Mages fell. With his current strength, he wouldn't have the opportunity to explore that secret.

He could only leave for now.

And the further the better.

"South?" Suyass froze. Lin Yun had needed his Magic Arrays to analyze the place where the power of the Time Cage converged, but that didn't mean that Suyass wouldn't be able to notice anything.

Thus, Suyass was stumped when he heard Lin Yun's words.

"Yeah, let's go south..." Lin Yun didn't explain and only nodded.

Suyass opened his mouth and closed it a few times looking like a fish. But after seeing Lin Yun's expression, the Archmage felt less and less sure. Before now, Suyass might have just insisted on heading north.

But he didn't dare to now.

"Okay..." After a moment of silence, Suyass nodded reluctantly.

After they agreed on the decision, the joint exploration team restarted their journey. They went through the dense forest and followed the Harrison River south. The journey wasn't peaceful, as they would meet some magic beasts from time to time, but now that the group had reunited, they were much more powerful. Some of the weaker magic beasts were crushed instantly, while the more powerful ones only lasted a few attacks.

The trip was more taxing on the mind than on the body.

The Harrison River ended in Nolun, which meant that the Harrison River would eventually lead them out of Gaugass.

But when the party of twenty reached the end of the river, they only saw a gentle light flickering. The surging water was pouring down into the gentle light, not leaking a single drop.

Suyass did a simple magical check before stating, "This is a Teleportation Gate."

But even Suyass didn't know if they should enter this Teleportation Gate.

Even an idiot would know that it was best to avoid entering an unknown Teleportation Gate, because they wouldn't know where it led.

Naturally, the circumstances of the group were a bit special.

At least for the moment, it felt like the Teleportation Gate was the only exit they had. If they walked in, they might be sent to a terrifying place, but if they didn't enter, they would definitely remain in this damned place. It wasn't easy to choose between the two.

"I'll go first." After thinking about it for a while, Lin Yun went in without discussing with the others.

Because Lin Yun knew that even some other accursed place would be better than remaining in a Time Cage. Even if the flow of time seemed normal to them, who would dare guarantee that the flow of time would always remain normal? What if it suddenly sped up a thousand times? They couldn't stay there.

Lin Yun was already prepared for the worst when he entered the Teleportation Gate, so that he wouldn't be surprised even if he stepped into the Abyss.

But, when the surroundings stopped twisting and settled down, Lin Yun found out that he had entered a treasury.

"No way..." Lin Yun was dumbstruck as he looked around. This was simply an alchemy paradise. All kinds of magic materials were piled up like mountains, and even with Lin Yun's knowledge and experience, he was almost blinded on the spot.

'This... Could this be Vaughn's collection?' Suyass suddenly came out of the Teleportation Gate, and when he noticed the magic materials, he had the same shocked expression as Lin Yun.

Of these two, one was from the holy land of alchemy, the Mercury Tower, and had seen countless magic materials throughout his life, while the other one was from 30,000 years in the future, and although he

hadn't seen such magic materials with his own eyes, he had read countless illustrated handbooks and references, and the breadth of his knowledge was extremely vast.

It was natural for these two to be so shocked when facing such a collection.

The treasury was ten meters high and at least a kilometer across. It was paved with moonstone and ivory rocks, and over a hundred chests were piled up on both sides. Each of those was filled with more magic materials.

If these magic materials were exchanged for golds, then there would be enough to buy Thousand Sails City ten times over...

Chapter 234: The Power of the Crystal Scales

More and more people came out of the portal. After Lin Yun and Suyass arrived, William, Xiuban, and Solomon appeared. They were then followed by Lys, Badrack, Sauss, and the others... It took about ten minutes before all twenty members of the joint exploration team reached the treasury.

Their expressions were all exactly the same. They were all stunned by the many chests of loot and the piles of magic materials. They all looked around like starving beasts looking at prey...

The atmosphere was too frightening.

"Merlin... Could... could you buy the entire Thousand Sails City with this?" Solomon stuttered.

"At least ten of it..."

Solomon held his breath.

"Worthy of Vaughn, worthy of Vaughn..." Lys rubbed his hands together, feeling excited and also relieved.

He had been feeling a lot of pressure for this whole trip.

The nine forces of Thousand Sails City had come out at full strength, an unprecedented event. As the organizer, Lys was under pressure that others couldn't imagine. Fortunately, this huge treasury was more than enough to vindicate his original recommendation.

But even though Lys was excited, he couldn't ignore his previous agreement with Lin Yun. He was rubbing his hands energetically, but he first said, "Merlin, according to our previous agreement, you have loot priority when it comes to magic materials, it's time..."

Although Lin Yun hadn't cracked many arrays, he had saved the group many times. When they entered the Maze Array, if Lin Yun hadn't mentioned that they were going in circles in the body of the Void Python, no one would have noticed that they were pacing back and forth on the verge of death.

It could be said that Lin Yun deserved a double share of the loot or more, not just the right to choose first.

A few leaders parroted Lys' words.

“Right, right, Merlin, you go first, you go first...”

But, while everyone else was speaking in unison, one inharmonious voice interrupted.

“Hold on!” Fran was obviously the one that wasn’t satisfied.

In the current joint exploration team, even the Archmage Suyass wouldn’t object to Lin Yun having loot priority. Only Fran would object at this time.

“High Mage Fran, what are you trying to do?” Lys’ tone was extremely cold. After all, he had a pretty good relationship with Fran before the exploration, or else he wouldn’t have introduced Lin Yun to Fran during the first meeting.

But that introduction had gone all wrong.

And now, the relationship between the two had changed dramatically. Lys felt that Fran was becoming more and more unfamiliar to him, and sometimes he even doubted whether he had truly known Fran before.

“I’m not trying to do anything, but Lys, everyone knows the value of that batch of magic materials. You can’t decide the owner of such wealth with just a few sentences, can you?”

“What do you mean a few sentences? Everyone, including yourself, Fran, already agreed that Merlin was in charge of cracking arrays. In exchange, he would gain the first pick of magic materials. If you had any opinion about it, you should have said it then. You didn’t speak up then, yet you don’t agree now, I naturally have to ask you what you are trying to do, Fran!” Since things had reached this stage, Lys was very blunt.

“Haha, I agreed?” Unfortunately, Fran was decided on setting himself against them. With such a huge batch of magic materials, the difference between the one who would pick first and the one who would pick last could easily amount to ten million golds. Faced with such a huge potential disparity, how could the shameless Fran put his reputation before the valuable magic materials?

“Lys, try to remember, did I ever say that I agreed? From the beginning, it was your group from Thousand Sails City talking among yourselves. Did you ever care about Suyass’ opinion or mine?”

“You...” Lys was so angry that he was almost at the point of spitting blood. Fran indeed never had said that he agreed. The problem was that Merlin’s loot priority had already been decided before they arrived. Even after knowing this, Fran still joined the exploration team. This was already a default condition of joining. Saying that he had never agreed was utterly shameless.

The problem was that Lys truly couldn’t say anything to the shameless Fran...

“What? Did you people from Thousand Sails City think our Mercury Tower is easy to bully?” Fran complacently asked when he saw Lys’ expression.

“Fran, you shouldn’t say that much.” At this time, even Suyass couldn’t keep watching from the side. But in Suyass’ position, he had no reason to lessen his chance to get a larger share, so he only gave Fran a reminder before falling silent again.

“It’s like this, Mafa Merlin, don’t say that I didn’t give you a chance.” Fran proudly looked at Lin Yun before calmly continuing, “You originally asked for loot priority if you cracked the arrays, so I’ll give you a chance...”

“Hmm?”

“Take a closer look. There is an uncracked array in this treasury. I’ll give you a fair chance, if you can break that array before I do, I’ll acknowledge your right to the loot priority. But if you break that array after me, then that loot priority comes to me...”

Fran finally exposed his real goal.

“Fran, you are counting your chickens before they hatch...” Lys sneered. “Merlin, you don’t need to bother dealing with him. Your loot priority is something we all acknowledge. Fran doesn’t represent everyone...”

“It’s okay, Leader Lys.” Lin Yun smiled at Lys before walking out from the group. “High Mage Fran, after you.”

“Haha, you should find out what kind of array it is first...” Fran laughed proudly. If it had been before, Fran might have still rushed to try to get a head start, but he didn’t see a need for it now. After obtaining the loyalty from the Crystal Scales, no one understood the treasury more than he did.

He had a clear understanding of that array. Now, with the help of the Crystal Scales, he had the alchemy knowledge of an Artisan. In time, he would use that knowledge to make Lin Yun embrace his defeat.

Mafa Merlin might still be looking for the array by the time Fran himself was able to finish cracking it.

“Alright then...” Lin Yun shook his head. “But, High Mage Fran, I hope that you don’t regret it...”

“Me, regret it? Truly funny...”

“I hope so...” With that, Lin Yun ignored Fran and directly fished out a bottle of Melting Snow Ink before walking through the narrow passage in the middle of the treasury.

“Mafa Merlin, you should hurry up and look for the array...” Fran was smiling as he saw Lin Yun walking. He provoked him while rousing the power of the Crystal Scales...

“Ah?” At this time, Suyass felt something strange. As an Archmage, he was the most sensitive to changes in mana fluctuations. Just as Fran roused the power of the Crystal Scales, Suyass noticed that the mana fluctuations in the surroundings were becoming abnormal.

And as Fran’s mana fluctuations grew fiercer, even Lys felt something wrong...

The mana fluctuations emitted by Fran were no longer those of a 5th Rank High Mage. At first, it seemed like only 6th Rank or 7th Rank, but soon, these fluctuations reached 8th Rank and showed signs of reaching 9th Rank.

‘What’s going on?’ Lys was baffled. This was no joke. The mana fluctuations reached a level comparable to Solomon’s. Compared to the previous Fran, it felt like two different people.

And it didn’t stop there.

They were still growing stronger, and soon, they were just a step away from the Archmage realm.

'How could this be!' Lys didn't dare to believe what was happening. Fran had just been a 5th Rank High Mage, yet now, he had power on par with Solomon.

Moreover...

The rising power of the mana fluctuations showed no signs of stopping.

Lys suddenly had an ominous premonition.

'Don't tell me... Archmage?'

Just as Lys thought about it, the mana fluctuations within Fran's body broke through the limit and he instantly reached the Archmage realm! 'Heavens...' His face turned deathly white. 'Archmage, he... Archmage...! No wonder Fran showed such confidence! Turns out he already grasped the power of an Archmage...

'Over, it's all over.'

Although Merlin's strength was deep and unfathomable, he was only a 9th Rank Great Mage. How could he compete with an Archmage?

Chapter 235: Mirror Image

It truly was the power of an Archmage.

Lys stood there in a daze, panicking.

Lys was a Master Alchemist, so how could he not know the importance of having high levels of magic power when cracking arrays? It could be said that when two alchemists of similar rank faced the same array, the intensity of one's mana would decide the final outcome of the contest.

Especially in this situation where one was a 9th Rank Great Mage and the other was an Archmage.

They simply didn't have the same starting line.

The advantages of an Archmage were too great. Insight, knowledge, experience... They far surpassed a 9th Rank Great Mage... Not to mention, an Archmage's understanding of laws wasn't something a Great Mage could imagine. Any of these advantages would be enough to change the outcome.

Moreover, this was assuming that they were competing with an ordinary array.

If it was a maze-type or illusion-type array, the gap between them would be unimaginably wide. A gap of two ranks was like a death sentence to a Great Mage. The Archmage could effortlessly deal with them.

At first, Lys hadn't quite understood why Fran had offered to compete with Merlin. After all, even Suyass, whose alchemy skill far surpassed Fran's, had no choice but to humbly concede. Why did Fran become so bold?

But Lys now understood.

It turned out that Fran had already reached the Archmage realm...

“Fran, you hid yourself quite well...” Lys squeezed those words out.

There was no suspense in this alchemy competition. Fran would have to be an idiot if he couldn't win.

The fact that he had proposed such an unfair competition made Lys feel utterly disgusted with Fran.

No, it wasn't just Lys.

At this time, everyone in the exploration team was looking at Fran.

There normally would have been nothing wrong with hiding his true power. After all, no one wanted to show all their cards.

But Fran was too excessive this time.

The joint exploration team had gone through a lot. From the flock of Thunderbirds till now, they had pushed through so many challenging fights, yet Fran had kept hiding among them without revealing his true strength despite Merlin and Suyass charging ahead to do their best.

And now, Fran finally revealed his strength, but for no other reason than to fight over the spoils with Merlin.

“Regardless of who cracks the array first, we, the Silver Moon Mercenaries, will only recognize the previous agreement.” Sasu was the first to speak out.

It was also a bit strange.

At first, when the Gilded Rose was only a third-rate alchemy shop, the leader of that top mercenary group decided to ally with the Gilded Rose over a Ghost Potion. At the time, many people had said that a pie fell out of the sky for the Gilded Rose.

But the events that followed showed that the truly lucky ones were the Silver Moon Mercenary Group.

It was the same now. Facing Fran, who had just revealed his strength as an Archmage, Sasu didn't even have to think about it as he stood with Lin Yun. Others tended to be unable to comprehend why every time Lin Yun was in trouble, he would stand with him.

“Our Flash Arrow Mercenary Group is the same.”

“Same for our Viper Nest.”

“You can add our Black Horn Auction House too.”

“You can count on the Sage Tower.”

...

In an instant, of the eight major forces of Thousand Sails City gathered, seven of them already declared their intention to stand with Lin Yun. The only remaining one was the Elder High Mage of the Monchi Family. After a bit of hesitation, he finally clenched his teeth and weakly raised his hand to indicate that he stood together with the other seven forces.

To be honest, that Elder of the Monchi Family was very willing to see Merlin suffer, but the problem was that he couldn't afford to do so right now. Solan had named a few magic materials, and if Merlin had loot priority, the Merlin Family could still thicken their faces and negotiate with him. However, if they fell into the hands of the Mercury Tower, then the reputation of the Monchi Family would be useless. Even if Solan used the Black Tower's reputation, the Mercury Tower was unlikely to show them any respect.

Not to mention that the seven forces of Thousand Sails City were already backing the Gilded Rose. If the Monchi Family didn't stand with them, then what place would they have in the future?

"Haha..." At this time, Fran had already finished fusing with the Crystal Scales. The feeling of boundless power immersed him in a kind of intoxicating pleasure. He swept his gaze over everyone standing in front of him before exposing a sinister smile. "You want to provoke an Archmage?"

"Fran, what are you trying to do!?" Lys frowned.

"I'm not trying anything..." Fran smirked as he shook his head. "But Lys, you should be clear about this... Can you guys handle the fury of an Archmage?"

"Are you threatening us?"

"Indeed, I'm threatening you. But Lys, you should understand that Mafa Merlin has already agreed to this competition. You didn't oppose it before, but now that the outcome has been decided, you want to change it. Do you think the Mercury Tower is that easy to bully? Lys, don't take the Mercury Tower's leniency as weakness. You guys are gathering to cheat me out of my victory? Hmpf, Let's see if you are able. There are two Archmages from the Mercury Tower here, can the rest of you provoke the Mercury Tower?"

"Sir Suyass..." As Lys was feeling stumped, his eyes fell onto Suyass. At such a critical juncture, Suyass was definitely the key. The nine forces of Thousand Sails City didn't fear Fran as long as they worked together. But it would be very different if Suyass joined.

However...

When Lys looked over, Suyass averted his gaze.

"..." Lys' heart sank. Suyass didn't need to say anything, as his attitude was clear.

"Sir Suyass..." Lys anxiously called his name again, hoping that this Archmage who had been cooperating with them on the way would say a few words to defuse the situation.

But Lys was once again disappointed.

After staying silent for a long time, Suyass lowered his head and muttered, "The war in the Golden Forest Plane is raging."

The war of the Golden Forest Plane being in a critical state meant that the consumption of the puppet legion was very large. It also meant that the Mercury Tower greatly needed these magic materials.

After saying this, Suyass raised his head and looked at Lys apologetically...

These words that went against his true feelings were the hardest he'd had to say in his life.

Suyass loathed Fran's abhorrent practices.

But even if he hated it, he had priorities. These magic materials were too important to the Mercury Tower. They would greatly expand and empower the puppet legion. Suyass was confident that the Golden Forest Plane could be settled half a year sooner if they could have their pick here.

And settling the plane half a year earlier meant that the Mercury Tower would have fewer casualties and suffer less damage.

In Suyass' position, everything was for the good of the Mercury Tower, even if the benefits of the Mercury Tower came from the despicable actions of Fran.

But Suyass wouldn't explain all that.

After obtaining Suyass' support, Fran's arrogance reached a whole new level.

"Good, the outcome has already been decided. If you don't want to draw the ire of two Archmages, you should hurry and get out of the way. Don't disturb me when I'm choosing materials."

"Well, High Mage Fran, aren't you announcing the outcome too soon?" Lin Yun, who had been busying himself, took the time to turn and say something.

"Haha, Mafa Merlin, there is no use in pretending..." Fran didn't seem to care, as this competition held no suspense to him. "You blindly searched there for such a long time, but have you found the position of the array? You can't even locate the array, the most basic step, yet you still dare to boast shamelessly about cracking arrays? I would have been angered to death if I were your teacher..."

"..." Lin Yun scratched his cheeks before looking at Fran in surprise. "No way, High Mage Fran, you thought I was still looking for the array?"

"Stop trying to deceive people," Fran sneered. "There is no harm in telling you, the array is under my feet. I already completed a rough analysis and it will be broken in ten minutes. If you are interested, you can come over and watch..."

"Ten minutes is too long. In fact, if you are interested, you can come here to check the results of the cracking..."

"Nice try, but I'm standing on the array..." Fran's expression was full of ridicule. The Crystal Scales had told him that the array was just below him, so no matter how brilliant Mafa Merlin was, he couldn't have cracked it without even seeing it.

"I obviously know that the array is under your feet, but High Mage Fran, have you never heard of the Mirror Image skill?"

Chapter 236: Hell Gate

“Hahahaha, Mirror Image? Mafa Merlin, you are truly funny...” Fran had been sneering before, but he burst into loud laughter when he heard those words, pointing at Lin Yun and holding his belly with the other hand.

What was the Mirror Image skill?

In many cases, alchemists would need to duplicate arrays for experiment or research purposes. When that happened, they would use the Mirror Image skill because it didn’t require the array to have been analyzed and didn’t require much of the alchemist. It was like copying the whole array onto a blank slate.

This was a skill that every alchemist needed.

Fran himself was a peak Master Alchemist, and with the boost from the Crystal Scales, he had entered the realm of Artisans, so how could he not have heard of the Mirror Image skill?

The thing was...

‘He hasn’t even touched the array, so how could he use Mirror Image? It looks like he overworked his brain, or he wouldn’t have said something so ridiculous...’

“Okay, Mafa Merlin, you can leave this kind of joke for later, you don’t have much time left...” After saying that, Fran took one step forward and fished out a bottle of Melting Snow Ink and a quill.

Indeed, Fran felt that it was time to end this charade.

But...

Just as Fran opened the bottle of Melting Snow Ink, he felt some strange mana coming from the array below him.

“What’s going on?” Fran froze. For a moment, he thought that he had inadvertently activated the array, and was about to rouse the Crystal Scales to analyze the array...

But he hadn’t expected that before he could even draw out the power, the array would burst out with earth-shattering mana fluctuations...

“How... How could this be?” Fran subconsciously took two steps back, his face pale in incomprehension. ‘What’s happening? I was standing on the array, how could it have been triggered? ...This is simply impossible.

‘The Crystal Scales’ incarnation obviously said that this array had to be triggered by mana. I didn’t use the slightest wisp of mana, so how could it have been triggered?’

Fran stood there in a daze, looking at the faintly visible dark red lines, an unfathomable expression on his face.

“Didn’t I tell you? Mirror Image...” Lin Yun shook his head and used his quill to spread the Melting Snow Ink. In a blink, an isolation array formed from seventeen white lines had been completed, and it suppressed the mana fluctuations.

Lin Yun didn't stop after drawing the isolation array. All kinds of arrays started materializing. In a short time, Lin Yun had already drawn out a dozen arrays.

These arrays were lesser arrays, but Lin Yun drew them quickly one after the other, and they formed an extremely complicated array. The power of each array wasn't very considerable, but they were all very efficient, and when they were combined together, they formed a complex network, firmly suppressing the mana fluctuations that had been on the verge of bursting out.

At this time, Fran finally understood...

Mafa Merlin had been drawing arrays all along. There were only a few dozen meters between them, but as each array was written, a strange change appeared in the array under his feet.

It felt sort of like a puppeteer controlling a puppet with a thread.

'Mirror Image! It really is Mirror Image! Only the Mirror Image skill could be used to crack an array from dozens of meters away... But how could this have happened? Merlin never touched the array, how could he have set up a Mirror Image? What did he mirror?'

'Could it be... Mafa Merlin found that array when he first entered and dealt with it then, digging a hole for me to jump in? ...No way.'

'He only got in a minute before me, and furthermore, Mafa Merlin is only a Master Alchemist. Even if he had entered the Artisan realm, he wouldn't have been able to find and crack the array in such a short time. If Mafa Merlin had such power, then he would have just exerted it and taken all the materials for himself.'

As he thought of this, Fran calmed down.

'That's right, I haven't lost yet!'

"So what if you used a Mirror Image, in an array-cracking duel, the first one to start isn't necessarily the winner!" Fran was completely confident after saying that.

Because he suddenly recalled...

The Crystal Scales' incarnation had said that this array wasn't an ordinary array.

The last step was crucial!

This helped Fran regain his smug smile. He dipped his quill in the Melting Snow Ink and started also trying to crack the array.

Although his opponent had started first, the confident smile remained on Fran's face. The quill in his hand was moving in a stable and efficient manner, neither slow nor fast. Mirror Image or not, that didn't even matter. This competition was a matter of strength.

He was an Archmage and an Artisan with the help of the Crystal Scales, placing him high above everyone else present.

Even if Mafa Merlin used the Mirror Image skill, could it make the difference when it came to who would crack the array first?

Would he, an Artisan, lose to a Master Alchemist?

Because the last step of the array was a contest of power... As an Archmage, his advantage was too great.

The two of them focused all their efforts into breaking the array and already showed their hands. Everyone could see two identical arrays, one under each of them, both filled with the exact same red-patterned lines.

It now looked as if Lin Yun had made more progress...

But Fran's pace was also shocking. He started minutes after Lin Yun, but in a short twenty minutes, they were almost at the same stage. Since the main body of the array was visible to everyone, they all knew that what happened next would decide the outcome of the competition.

The two were competing to see who would crack the core of the array because whoever completed that step first would have an unquestionable advantage. Unless they made a mistake afterward, the final outcome would be set in stone at that point.

Lin Yun attacked the core of the array first...

Just like before, he used a large number of lesser arrays to cover the entire array like a net. His quill was moving at a shocking speed, leaving traces of Melting Snow Ink behind.

Fran's cracking method was different. It wasn't fast or slow, but very efficient. He would carefully reflect on each patterned line, and after accurately calculating each node, he would use his quill to sway the foundations of the entire array.

Time slowly passed as their progress remained rather similar.

All the onlookers were watching with worry.

Especially William, Lys, Solomon, and Sosu. They were the closest to Lin Yun and they all subconsciously held their breaths, their hands clenched into fists.

Lin Yun and Fran put down their quills almost at the same time.

Two red lights suddenly soared, quickly followed by two red doors opening within the treasury. Nothing came out of the gates, but the mana fluctuations emitted made everyone shake.

"Hell... Hell Gates?" Lys reacted first, turning pale as he looked at the two red gates. "Those arrays... are Hell Arrays?"

"Indeed, Lys, you do have some knowledge. Now watch, only by breaking the Hellish Core of the Hell Array can one truly crack the array. Now you know why I told you that the outcome was already decided, Mafa Merlin. You are a very good alchemist, but unfortunately, you aren't as powerful as you are brilliant in the field of alchemy. Charging into a Hell Gate as a 9th Rank Great Mage is no different from killing yourself. There is still time to admit defeat. Although you'll lose the loot priority, you'll keep your life."

"Merlin..." Even Lys didn't dare to refute Fran's words. He could only look at Lin Yun with worry.

A Hell Gate was no joke. No one knew how many powerful hellish creatures would reside within. Even an Archmage wouldn't dare to say that he could escape unscathed. Although Merlin was very powerful, breaking into a Hell Gate was no different from courting death.

"High Mage Fran, you should worry about yourself. Don't celebrate too early..." Lin Yun walked into the Hell Gate after saying those words.

"Haha, we shall see who is celebrating early!" Fran coldly snorted before disappearing.

The Hell Gate was indeed dangerous even for Archmages, but he wasn't an ordinary Archmage.

What was a trifling Hell Gate when he possessed the Crystal Scales?

Chapter 237: Cheater

The treasury suddenly reeked with a strong smell of blood after the two entered the Hell Gates. Roars and snarls echoed alongside the surging mana fluctuations, and from the flickering light of the Hell Gates, everyone saw the sinister Hellish creatures within. Devils made of flames and blood, young monsters spurting thick smoke from their mouths, ugly and sinister Yakshas.

All they could see was a sea of Evil Spirits and Ghouls. No one knew which corner of Hell those Hell Gates were linked to, but just by seeing these creatures, everyone knew that this wouldn't be a simple battle. Even the lowest Evil Spirit was at least level 20. But now, there were dozens of them, not to mention the scattered juvenile monsters and Yakshas, as well as Cerberus and Hell Horses appearing. Even an Archmage might not be able to survive in those conditions.

But no one could tell the exact situation within the two Hell Gates, so they could only worry outside, waiting for the outcome.

Time passed, seeming extremely slow to the others. None of the twenty members of the joint exploration team said anything. Nothing could be heard besides their breaths and heartbeats.

They were all waiting anxiously.

They didn't know how long they had been waiting, it could have been one hour, or maybe two.

But this stifling wait made them lose their minds. Lys was the first to find out that one of the Hell Gates suddenly flickered.

Then, he froze.

He felt a sinking feeling in his heart.

Fran walked out of the Hell Gate...

'It's over, it's Fran. After Fran became an Archmage, Lin Yun could no longer compete with him. Even with his unfathomable power, when faced with a genuine Archmage, he truly couldn't win.'

Although he had already prepared himself to some extent, seeing Fran walking out of the Hell Gate by himself was very disappointing.

'Fran indeed won...'

Fran was the final victor of the struggle over loot priority. It was the first time he felt so powerful after becoming a Master Alchemist.

After forcibly shaking his head, Lys slowly walked forward.

But just as Lys was about to speak, the other Hell Gate flickered.

It was followed by Lin Yun walking out of the Hell Gate while cutting a sorry figure.

"High Mage Fran, you let me win."

"Ah?" When Lys heard that, his mind shook. 'What was this? Didn't Fran come out of the Hell Gate?

'Hold on... There must be something wrong...' Lys composed himself before raising his eyes to look at Fran. At that time, Lys suddenly realized that Fran didn't look too good. Fran had left the Hell Gate first, and even if he didn't say anything to ridicule everyone, he would still have had the arrogant smile of a victor.

But Fran's face was ashen.

Especially after Merlin left the Hell Gate and thanked Fran for "letting him win", Fran acted just like a cat whose tail was being stepped on as he stood straight and shouted, "Mafa Merlin, you cheater!"

"High Mage Fran, you can't speak nonsense. You are accusing me of cheating in front of so many people?" Lin Yun coldly snorted.

"If you say you didn't cheat, then why was there no Hell Core in my Hell Gate?" The pale Fran stood there, pointing at Lin Yun with one finger while shaking.

Lys finally understood a bit of what had happened from this exchange.

It turned out that Fran, who left the Hell Gate first, hadn't actually destroyed it. It seemed that Fran never found the Hell Core after entering the Hell Gate. In other words, Fran went on a wild goose chase.

But...

How could a Hell Gate have no core?

As a Master Alchemist, although Lys hadn't grasped Hell Gates, he still had some understanding of Artisan rank arrays.

The so-called Hell Gate actually borrowed the force of an array to cut out an area of Hell, and the creatures within that area would become the guards of the array's source. And this was all accomplished through the Hell Core. To some degree, the Hell Core was both a mana source and the actual core of the array.

Even an Apprentice Alchemist who just started treading on that path knew something as basic as the fact that a Hell Array would stop functioning without its Hell Core.

How could Fran fail to find it?

Lys wasn't the only one with that question, because Fran also wanted to understand.

Thus, Fran promptly decided, "No way, this didn't count!"

"..."

When these words came out, let alone Lin Yun and Lys, the entire joint exploration team was shocked. At that time, everyone looked at Fran with contempt, and William even let out a derisive snort.

It was to the point that even Suyass' face creased into a frown.

'This is truly tarnishing our reputation...'

An esteemed disciple of the Mercury Tower refused to acknowledge that he had lost a wager in front of everyone. If this came out, the Mercury Tower's reputation would be completely trashed by Fran's actions.

"If I say that it doesn't count, then it doesn't count!" Fran didn't care about the others' gazes. He only opening his two reddened eyes like a mad gambler. He waved both hands about while loudly yelling, "Mafa Merlin, you must have used a trick. Otherwise, how could there be no Hell Core within the Hell Gate?"

"High Mage Fran is being a bit excessive..." Lin Yun scratched his nose as he looked at Fran for a bit before looking at Suyass. He couldn't understand... They were both Nolan's disciples and both came from the Mercury Tower, so how could there be such a huge gap between them?

Although Suyass was excessively arrogant and was willing to be unscrupulous for the benefit of the Mercury Tower, there was one quality about him worth praising, which was that he knew how to accept a loss.

Fran was the perfect opposite.

"You know the truth, Mafa Merlin. I already decided on my magic materials! Since you don't want to abide by the rules and you resorted to cheating in the Hell Gate, then it wouldn't be strange for me not to abide by the rules either!" Fran could no longer retreat. The battle he had thought he would easily win had actually been lost.

But he refused to give up on those magic materials.

So Fran had only one choice left.

Just as he finished his words, Fran started incanting and displayed the true power of an Archmage. All the mana in the surroundings was ferociously drawn in, making everyone feel stifled. Fran then raised his magic staff, and a pair of icy and hot halos were spinning towards Lin Yun.

"Fran! You dare!" Lys was the first to react, his magic staff already on the move as a Runic Shield formed.

But...

How could his Runic Shield contend with the power of an Archmage? Even though Lys had been famous for decades and could stand shoulder to shoulder with Solomon in Thousand Sails City, he was still weak in front of an Archmage.

The icy and hot halos knocked against the Runic Shield just as it appeared. Only an explosion was heard as Lys was directly sent flying, knocking against a dozen of chests filled with magic materials and spilling quite a few of them. Lys was buried under them.

“Lys! You dare to make a move against me!?” Fran sneered after the failure of the twin element halo. With a flourish of his magic staff, an irresistible power appeared within the pile of magic materials before tightly winding around Lys.

Then, Lys slowly floated out of the pile, slowly rising into the air. He wanted to struggle, to fight for air, but now that he couldn't break away from that unseen frightening magic power, he felt as if a large, unseen hand was tightly grasping his neck.

“I still wanted to consider our previous friendship...” Fran was like a whole new person now. After restraining his old friend, cruelty and excitement formed in his eyes.

“But I didn't expect that you would act against me on Mafa Merlin's behalf. Very good, very good. Since that's the case, I don't have to remain lenient. You are dead to me now...” Fran's grasp on his magic staff slowly tightened, and the mana constricting Lys also increased.

Fran knew that there was only one ending at this point.

He was already standing on the opposite side of the rest of the joint exploration team. Now, all he could do was to use his power to make the country bumpkins of Thousand Sails City learn that they must never provoke an Archmage. Even the leader of Thousand Sails City's Alchemist Guild would pay the price with his life.

“Ah?” But, after a few seconds, Fran felt something wrong.

He had already increased the mana output to the limit, so how could Lys still be alive?

No, he wasn't just alive... Lys' situation seemed to be getting better and better. He was no longer struggling and his breathing settling down.

‘What is happening?’

The first reaction Fran had was to think, ‘Could there be an issue with the Crystal Scales? Has my Archmage level power left me? No way, this is impossible.’

Fran immediately denied that conjecture, because he could clearly feel that his power was still within the Archmage boundary. That unprecedented feeling of power was no different from before.

‘But why... Why hasn't Lys died?’

Bang!

While Fran was hesitating indecisively, a ball of flames began to grow within his line of sight. 'Fuck, Flame Burst!' Fran was startled out of his bewilderment. At this time, he looked up and saw that Lys was no longer entangled. Still not understanding what had happened, he cast an Elemental Shield.

That was the signature defensive spell of an Archmage. It was made of the four elements, and whether an attack was physical or magical, close or long range, its defensive ability was top-notch compared to the Runic Shield of an Archmage. The latter was just like a child's toy in comparison.

But Fran hadn't thought that a nearly unbreakable spell like the Elemental Shield would actually be as fragile as a piece of paper in front of that Flame Burst. Fran didn't even comprehend what was happening when the Flame Burst passed through the Elemental Shield.

Then, it heavily smashed into Fran's chest.

It was too different from the icy and hot halos that hit Lys just before.

As the dazzling flames blossomed, Fran felt like a kite with its string broken as he was sent flying back a few dozen meters, still slightly burning.

"I told you, High Mage Fran, you are being a bit excessive.

Chapter 238: Casting Mistake

This sudden change shocked everyone.

From Suyass to Lys, from William to Xiuban, everyone in the joint exploration team stared blankly when they saw Fran get sent flying like a broken kite before crashing heavily with a bang that echoed in everyone's heart.

"This..." No one thought that the one sent hurtling away would be the Archmage, Fran! He had the power of an Archmage, and even Lys, a 9th Rank High Mage, was unable to retaliate!

But now, his Elemental Shield was pierced by a Flame Burst...

And the one to let off that Flame Burst was a 9th Rank Great Mage!

What was happening?

This incongruous sight was too shocking. It was already beyond what could be attributed to carelessness or underestimating the enemy.

The gap between the two was too shockingly huge. It wouldn't be exaggerating to say that even if an Archmage just stood there without retaliating, it would be very difficult for a Great Mage to injure him. Just the mana alone was hundreds to a thousand times better, let alone since Fran had used the Elemental Shield spell. Just how did this happen?

This wasn't logical at all...

Yet no one expected something even more illogical to follow up!

Lin Yun moved just as Fran was knocked off his feet.

He moved like lightning. With the Haste boosted by the Magic Arrays, Lin Yun's speed was pushed to its limits and everyone only heard a soft sound echoing before Fran fell to the ground, with Lin Yun standing in front of him.

"You..." Fran was on his back, but he didn't have time to get up. When he noticed Lin Yun standing before him, he was so shocked that he didn't dare to meet his eyes. That Flame Burst had just pierced through the Elemental Shield like punching through a piece of paper. He didn't get up and just cast a Counterspell.

This was no joke.

An Archmage still had a fleshy body... without the protection of his Elemental Shield, he could still be killed by a 9th Rank Great Mage.

And his opponent just broke through his defenses.

Fran's reaction could be considered extremely quick, casting Counterspell right after his crash landing.

Unfortunately, he was still too slow.

Fran didn't even have time to launch his Counterspell before he felt a pain in his chest. A dazzling white light exploded on his chest, followed by uninterrupted sounds of impacts as one white light after the other kept striking his chest.

Fran knew that these were Arcane Missiles.

It didn't actually do him much harm. It was a 1st Tier spell, after all, and with his current level of strength, he could use the power of the fused runes to cast a spell with only a gesture or transfer a huge amount of mana anytime. Although the Arcane Missiles were endless, most of them were blocked by the mana Fran released and few of them actually hurt him.

But to Fran, the repetitive sound of the Arcane Missiles truly sounded like slaps, making him feel very embarrassed. Not only was an Archmage's Elemental Shield pierced by a Flame Burst, but he was also still being stepped on as a flurry of Arcane Missiles kept falling onto him.

It wouldn't be fun if news of his predicament spread!

But there was nothing he could do...

Fran truly felt that he couldn't make it out. He obviously held the power of an Archmage, but he was being beaten by a 9th Rank Great Mage. This was incredibly awkward, and it was driving him crazy.

To be honest, his opponent wasn't even casting very quickly. As the owner of the Time Hand Magic Conducting Rune, he still wouldn't put Lin Yun's current casting speed in his eyes.

But now, Fran was backed into a corner by this kind of unhurried yet brisk casting speed.

Indeed, Lin Yun wasn't casting spells very quickly right now, but he was being very precise and effective, as if he had already calculated exactly how everything would turn out. Each of his spells would break Fran's rhythm, and he even forced Fran to interrupt his casting four times in a row.

What kind of concept was that?

Even for an Archmage powerhouse, rashly cancelling a spell while still casting it was very dangerous. In fact, this wasn't just a matter of wasting mana; each spell cancelling could lead to magical backlash. It could be said that unless necessary, no mage was willing to cancel the casting of a spell.

But each time he was forced to do it, it was very necessary.

The first time was just as the Elemental Shield disappeared. Fran was fighting to get the initiative and wanted to use a quick Burst spell to get the upper hand back. He planned to fire it right when his opponent's mana sharply gathered for the next spell so that the gathered mana would detonate and hit Merlin with the backlash. Yet, right when he had his Burst spell ready, the other side just happened to make a critical mistake. The Elemental Burst that originally would have gathered a sudden surge of mana before firing was delayed by a few seconds, making the mana swell slowly instead, and throwing a wrench in Fran's plan...

Thus, Fran fell into a very awkward situation.

He either had to interrupt his spell, or he would have to just cast his relatively weak spell directly and try to overcome the Elemental Burst in a contest of strength.

The problem was that Fran actually knew of the formidable might of Elemental Burst.

Although it wasn't like that previous illogically powerful Flame Burst that could pierce through barriers, that power was definitely not something a 9th Rank Great Mage could produce. It was hardly an exaggeration to say that without an Elemental Shield to defend him, even an Archmage would seriously suffer from that Elemental Burst.

Thus, Fran had no choice but to cancel his Burst and recover as much mana from the spell as he could before condensing it into a Runic Shield to resist the Elemental Burst.

There was nothing else he could do because a Runic Shield was far inferior to an Elemental Shield. If he wanted to use it to resist an Elemental Burst, Fran would have to draw as much mana as he could out of the spell he had been ready to cast.

This was too embarrassing.

After managing to find an opportunity to counterattack, Fran was forced to spit blood because of the other side's mistake. At this time, Fran really wanted to ask, 'Who do you think is paying for your mistake?'

However...

After similar situations kept appearing, once, twice, thrice... Fran felt like something was wrong.

'Is Mafa Merlin doing it on purpose? No, No way...'

How could a 9th rank Great Mage possess such an incredible ability? Let alone a 9th Rank Great Mage, even Suyass and Karon, who had become Archmages before him, couldn't cast spells in such a sinister manner. Perhaps only his unfathomable teacher, Nolan, could pull off something like that on purpose.

But wasn't this too coincidental?

One time, two times, three, four, five, six... Could there be such a series of coincidences in this world?

Unfortunately, there was no time for Fran to think about it properly. After having to cancel several spells in a row, Fran was at a huge disadvantage. While constantly being forced into using defensive spells, Fran couldn't find any way to counterattack.

An esteemed Archmage was being thoroughly suppressed by a 9th Rank Great Mage, and he wasn't able to retaliate at all.

That scene made everyone in the exploration team watch in shock.

"Solomon, can you guess who will win in the end...?" Lys had already been freed from Fran's binding, and his injury had been healed. He was standing next to Solomon, watching while inquiring.

"I can't..." Solomon shook his head.

"Also..." When these words came out, Lys felt that his question was rather dumb. Although Solomon was Thousand Sails City's most powerful High Mage, that battle had clearly surpassed what he could analyze. Even if Merlin was a 9th Rank Great Mage, the power he displayed had already reached that of peak High Mage.

And that was only the raw power.

The most frightening part about Merlin was that his fine control over his mana and his spells could only be described as unfathomable. This surpassed the limit of casting altogether. Let alone a 9th Rank Great Mage, it would be terrifying even coming from a 9th Rank High Mage. Not to mention, Fran might not have been able to see it carefully, but Lys clearly saw what happened.

Merlin had a firm grasp on the rhythm of the battle through his shocking insight and control!

The only thing Lys couldn't see for sure was the final outcome of the battle.

Obviously, it currently looked as if Merlin had an overwhelming advantage. But the fact that Fran was an Archmage shouldn't be ignored. He was one of the existences at the peak of the magic world. There were over 10 ranks of difference between them. Under ordinary circumstances, there would be no need to fight to declare the outcome.

But Merlin going all-out greatly pleased Lys.

'Enough, it truly was enough...'

This battle proved that Merlin had the strength to contend against an Archmage. Even if he now suffered a defeat at the hands of Fran or Suyass, they would still have to consider Merlin's reaction when picking magic materials.

Naturally, there was a voice echoing within Lys.

'What if he can win...'

But this could only be said in his heart. Lys knew that there was some luck involved for a fight to reach this stage. Merlin had completely relied on that weird Flame Burst to break the Elemental Shield and take the upper hand.

But even if Merlin didn't say anything about it, Lys knew that this definitely wasn't something he could use again right now. Otherwise, Merlin wouldn't still be fighting with Fran, he would have just cast a few of those Flame Bursts to finish the fight.

Chapter 239: Mana Suppression

Of course, Lys was very pleased with Lin Yun's performance.

After all, Fran was a genuine Archmage.

"Merlin never takes risks..." While Lys was lost in his thoughts, Solomon unhurriedly mentioned this.

"Hmm?" Lys paused as he thought about this. 'Yes, Merlin never took risks...'

He carefully considered what he had seen, and realized that this truly had been the case ever since he had first come into contact with that young Great Mage due to the hearing over the Hope Potion a few months ago.

Everything that young Great Mage said, every matter he brought up, all of it seemed absurd, but later on, everyone would always find out that the decision had been made after careful consideration. He was rarely seen taking risks, and it was even more unlikely for him to do something out of desperation.

'Would it be the same this time?'

The fight was still ongoing, and the two sides remained in the same posture, one attacking, one defending. All that had changed was that Fran had gotten up from the ground.

But the experienced mages in the joint exploration team such as Suyass, Solomon, and Lys all knew that this battle had already entered its most dangerous stretch.

Although the young Great Mage had remained on the offensive this whole time and seemed to have the advantage, he was actually walking on a tightrope. One mistake could make him fall into a bottomless abyss. Fran was an Archmage, so if he found the opportunity to counterattack, with the crushing differential in power, he would easily tear his opponent to shreds.

In reality, Fran was also waiting for it.

To Fran, the course of this battle had been quite unexpected...

That sudden Flame Burst completely ruined Fran's rhythm, and it also ruined any semblance of reputation Fran had left, forcing him into acting like a passive punching bag.

But Fran believed that this situation would only be temporary.

As an Archmage, how could he be suppressed by a 9th Rank Great Mage? Every single one of an Archmage's moves would be imbued with formidable mana. A Great Mage wouldn't be able to resist some casually released mana from an Archmage... It was a crushing power.

He only had to endure for now.

As long as the other side eventually made a mistake, he would be able to reverse the tide of the battle and return everything he had endured with interest.

Fran couldn't help sneering as he thought, 'Mafa Merlin, you are truly naive, do you really think that you can contend with an Archmage without that special Flame Burst? This frantic attempt to suppress my spells is ridiculous.

'You are only a 9th Rank Great Mage, yet you want to defeat an Archmage with that power? You are dreaming! How much mana do you have left? How many spells can you cast? Even if you luckily managed to suppress me momentarily, how long will you be able to keep it up for?'

'So what if you can suppress me for thirty seconds? So what if you have the upper hand for a minute? As soon as you make a single mistake, I'll tear you apart. You don't have any chance to win this battle unless you can suppress me from start to finish so that I can't even cast a spell the whole time.

'But is that even possible? Could a 9th Rank Great Mage ever be able to keep suppressing an Archmage? Let alone you, even Suyass wouldn't be able to with such a difference in power.'

Thus, Fran remained calm amidst the continuous bombardment of spells. He kept protecting himself while patiently waiting for his opportunity, a sneer on his face.

But that sneer gradually faded.

Because for some reason, the attacks weren't letting up.

Three minutes had already passed yet the other side had yet to make a mistake. He was like a machine, accurate and efficient. All his spells seemed to have come from a textbook, making it impossible for anyone to find a loophole.

This felt very uncomfortable.

Fran clearly saw that the other side didn't try to burst him down; he only used basic spells and didn't even use metamagic.

But these common spells kept coming one after the other, giving Fran no room to breathe. He felt as if he had fallen into a swamp, and the more he struggled, the deeper he sank.

Fran started panicking.

'What's going on? I definitely reached the Archmage realm and that guy is clearly only a 9th Rank Great Mage, so why does this battle feel so difficult? ...Will I lose?' A sudden thought flashed through Fran's mind.

This was the first time it even occurred to him that he could lose this battle.

Fran was scared by this thought.

'How can I lose!?!'

He never thought this could happen, he had never considered this a battle.

Who would describe a fight between an Archmage and a Great Mage as a battle?

But now, Fran had suddenly discovered that he might really lose.

Because that battle had already entered a rhythm that Fran couldn't break. The impeccable continuous suppression wasn't letting up, and it didn't give him any chance. This was no longer Fran waiting for the other side making a mistake in his offense, but rather Merlin waiting for Fran to make a mistake in his defense.

'What can I do?' Fran suddenly lost his nerve. He wouldn't be able to handle the consequences of losing that battle.

It wouldn't just be the loss of the loot priority.

This also involved the only thing Fran relied on, the Crystal Scales.

It was hardly an exaggeration to say that if Fran lost this battle, he might lose everything!

'No way, I can't let this continue!'

At this time, Fran no longer had the patience to wait for his opponent to make a mistake, and thus, he started gathering all his mana to burst out in a last-ditch effort.

But...

But Fran forgot that haste makes waste. For a mage, a hectic mind was the worst enemy.

Fran left a hole in his defenses when he gathered his power to attack. The Elemental Shield that he had managed to recast was about to disappear, but he didn't spend any mana making a Runic Shield to fill the gap, just so he could burst faster.

He was trying his luck. He thought that the other side wouldn't notice such a small gap, giving him enough time to attack.

But in the end, Fran was mistaken once again.

Right when the Elemental Shield disappeared, a flame appeared in Lin Yun's palm. It was finger-sized and was burning neither fiercely nor brightly, yet Suyass let out an alarmed cry the instant that flame appeared.

Because he recognized that flame. It was the flame Merlin had used in the forest to kill the Alpha Thunderbird.

Unfortunately, Suyass cry of alarm came too late.

That flame was already flying over before Fran could even launch an attack. It instantly transformed into a brilliant flame, and just like a whip, it fiercely lashed at Fran.

"Merlin!" Suyass reacted quickly. After his alarmed cry, Suyass had already started casting an Ice Wall around Fran, trying to protect him.

Ice Wall was a 6th Tier spell famous for its defensive power.

But the dazzling flame was only hindered by the Ice Wall for a mere moment before sweeping over Fran's body.

“Aaah!” Fran screamed as he was once again sent flying.

No one dared to talk... Or breathe in the treasury.

Time seemed to be frozen.

A loud “bang” could be heard as Fran landed with a heavy crash. After a while, Fran spat a mouthful of blood. He struggled, trying to get up, but he kept falling back on the ground.

It wasn’t a Flame Burst this time.

It was the work of the Upper Rank Flame Spirit, a power close to the Archmage rank. It could kill an Alpha Thunderbird when unleashed, let alone Fran.

Without the protection from the Elemental Shield or Runic Shield, Fran only managed to survive due to the Ice Wall that Suyass had formed.

That Ice Wall had absorbed at least half of the Upper Rank Flame Spirit’s force by cutting its momentum, while Fran took the rest of the damage head-on.

But even so, Fran nearly lost his life.

His robe had already been shredded by the berserk mana fluctuations and pieces were hanging down Fran’s body. Blood and dust made him look rather pitiful. His right shoulder and arm were hanging down powerlessly, almost crippled.

“High Mage Fran...” Lin Yun slowly walked through the dust and smoke towards Fran. He felt around in his pocket and fished out two Hell Cores. “Do you still feel like calling me a cheater?”

Chapter 240: Pleading

“Two... Two Hell Cores?” Fran blankly looked at the two Hell Cores with his pale face, while Suyass was mirroring his expression.

Two Hell Cores!

There could only be one Hell Core behind a Hell gate. This was common knowledge to all alchemists. No matter how formidable an alchemist was, no matter how deep his understanding of alchemy was, this was something that was immutable.

No alchemist could make two Hell Cores coexist within a Hell Gate. This was a basic fact inherent to the structure of a Hell Gate. Hell Gates would directly collapse if this structure was changed, and a large number of creatures would then come pouring into Noscent, creating a disaster.

But Merlin was clearly holding two Hell Cores.

What did that mean?

Could it be that the Hell Core that Fran couldn’t find was in Merlin’s hands?

This thought made Suyass feel a chill.

This was too frightening if it was true.

The two Hell Cores in Merlin's hands meant that Merlin already went through the second Hell Gate without anyone noticing and wordlessly snatched away the second Hell Core.

Suyass was too afraid to think of the difficulty involved.

Although Suyass had never personally met one of the creatures behind the Hell Gates, it was mentioned in all kinds of sources that even an Archmage might not come out unscathed after facing the creatures within. Fran's appearance was the best proof. He had the power of an Archmage, yet he was injured before he could find the Hell Core, yet Merlin crossed the two Hell Gates in such a short time and snatched both Hell Cores.

His strength was unfathomable.

"High Mage Fran, I already told you twice... You are being too excessive..." Lin Yun stood in front of Fran and put the two Hell Cores back in his pocket. A large amount of mana gathered within the Elemental Amber at the tip of his magic staff.

"Merlin!" Suyass was startled by this action. With his keen sense of magic, how could he not feel the mana gathering on his magic staff and targeting Fran!?

'This is bad.'

Fran was half-dead, and he couldn't muster up any decent defensive spells. He would definitely die if that power burst out at him.

"What?" Lin Yun held his magic staff, maintaining the power he'd gathered as he glanced at Suyass with a faint smile. "Suyass, do you plan to stop me?"

"Merlin..." Suyass hurriedly called his name, planning to try to persuade him, but he suddenly realized something wrong with the way Merlin had addressed him...

That young Great Mage had always respectfully referred to him as "Sir" when talking to him before, even when the two of them had bet their arms.

But that "Sir" was omitted now.

Suyass hadn't noticed it at first, but he understood that this signified a change in attitude.

He knew that this young Great Mage was dissatisfied with him.

Indeed, although he hadn't clearly stated his position earlier during the quarrel between Fran and the joint exploration team, his words showed that he had stood on Fran's side.

Moreover, he had cast an Ice Wall to protect Fran.

This wasn't something trivial. He had directly interfered in the one-on-one fight between them and had clearly shown who he was siding with. This could already be seen as a provocation against another mage.

These thoughts made Suyass sweat.

The words he had planned to say were swallowed back. After mumbling for a bit, Suyass stiffly smiled. "It's a misunderstanding, it's a misunderstanding, Merlin, I truly didn't intend to stop you..."

"Eh?" Lin Yun looked at Suyass with an enigmatic smile. "I'm a bit confused, if you don't want to stop me, then what was that Ice Wall for?"

"This..." Suyass' heart tightened. 'Sure enough, it was because of that Ice Wall...' He couldn't help forcing a smile when he thought about that.

Fran's conduct was indeed terrible, especially today. He was completely unscrupulous in order to get loot priority, not caring about his own reputation or the Mercury Tower's. If it had been some stranger, Suyass wouldn't even bother to look at them, let alone cast an Ice Wall to save them.

The problem was that Fran wasn't someone else... Fran came from the Mercury Tower just like him.

How could he just watch him being burnt to death?

He couldn't help making a move...

But Suyass knew that no matter how reasonable this was, it wouldn't matter to that young Great Mage. Why would he care about Fran's fate? He wasn't from the Mercury Tower.

At any other time, Suyass could have used his power as an Archmage to get Fran out of this situation, and even if that batch of magic materials couldn't be taken away, Suyass would have still been able to save Fran.

But the battle just now, as well as the two Hell Cores, made Suyass cross this idea out.

Suyass was already convinced that this young Great Mage's strength was at the Archmage level, and he also had that strange and unfathomable flame. Even if he personally acted, he probably wouldn't do much better than Fran had.

Not to mention that the joint exploration team also had two peak High Mages as well as the experienced veterans, Sasu and Badrack. The strength of both sides had already been inverted. He could only save Fran by convincing the young Great Mage.

As he thought of that, Suyass humbled himself.

"Merlin, can you, for my sake... For the sake of my teacher Nolan, give a chance to Fran?" At first, Suyass only wanted to use his own reputation, but he remembered that he didn't have any in front of that young Great Mage, so he changed his sentence and added his teacher.

"Haha..."

Lin Yun chuckled grimly. Suyass felt pained when he heard that. With that young Great Mage's character, he didn't need to say anything. This chuckle already showed his resolve. Even if Fran didn't die this time, he would suffer tremendously at the very least.

But Suyass had no other choice, he could only make an appeal for Fran. "Merlin..."

"Okay, Sir Suyass, you don't have to say any more." Lin Yun helplessly shook his head and addressed Suyass as "Sir" once more. But the mana gathered within the Elemental Amber showed no sign of

dissipating. "You are helping your fellow disciple, this is something I can understand. But Fran shouldn't have made a move against Leader Lys. Leader Lys has helped me quite a bit, and he is someone I respect."

"I will apologize to Leader Lys on Fran's behalf."

"Leader Lys doesn't need an apology."

"Then... Then I'll make Fran compensate Leader Lys for his loss!"

"Oh?" Lin Yun didn't refuse this time, but he didn't agree either. He only smiled at Suyass, waiting for him to elaborate on the compensation.

"Leader Lys, I know that you always wanted the set of Artisan notes inherited by the Mercury Tower for generations. I can make the call to lend those to you. Moreover, your Alchemist Guild can obtain three slots to send people to study at the Mercury Tower every year. Apart from this, I can also represent the Mercury Tower to gift our earnings from this joint exploration to the Alchemist Guild and the Gilded Rose. Does Leader Lys accept this show of good faith?"

Each and every one of these generous conditions had been something Leader Lys had long been yearning for. In a normal situation, even if he had been beaten until he was on the verge of death, Lys would have unhesitatingly agreed, let alone just being lightly wounded by Fran.

But Lys could clearly see what had happened. These generous conditions had been won for him by the young Great Mage. He didn't have the power to agree with or reject these conditions... Only the young Great Mage had the right to make the call. Thus, despite hearing these generous conditions, Lys resisted his urge to nod and gave an inquiring look at Lin Yun instead. "Merlin, you see..."

"Leader Lys, this is the Mercury Tower's compensation for you, if you feel that those terms are good, then you can agree."

"It's good, it's good..." Hearing this, Lys promptly nodded. "It's a deal then."

"Thank you, Leader Lys." Hearing that Lys was willing to accept the deal, Suyass relaxed. "Merlin, what are your conditions?"

"Don't worry Sir Suyass, I still need some things from Fran..." After Lin Yun said that, he scattered the mana he had accumulated, but at the same time, the flame that had alarmed Suyass so much before once again floated within Lin Yun's hand.

"What things!?" Suyass' heart sank when he saw that flame, and he hurriedly exclaimed in panic, but he was too late.

That flame gently swayed and transformed into two blazing rays that crossed each other.

Then, Fran's blood-curdling scream pierced the air. Everyone watched as Fran's two ring fingers were cut by the rays of flames.

"No... No... You can't take them away, Mafa Merlin, you can't take them away!" Fran almost went crazy after his ring fingers were cut off and pounced towards Lin Yun. But unfortunately, he was seriously injured and couldn't even cast a decent spell.

Moreover, his two ring fingers had been cut off, which meant that Fran lost the power of the Crystal Scales and only had the power of his Time Hand and the normal power of a 5th Rank High Mage.

He wasn't Lin Yun's match as an Archmage, let alone now that he returned to his original level of power. Lin Yun didn't even spare him a glance. He only waved his Spiritual Magic Staff and erected an Ice Wall between them, leaving Fran shouting on the other side of the wall. Lin Yun ignored him and only paid attention to the two rings, as well as the staff that Fran had dropped.

'The power of the Crystal Scales is indeed amazing...'' Lin Yun felt a surge of power when he got his hands on the set of three items. If Lin Yun could grasp this power, he would be able to control the power of an Archmage, just as Fran had.

But unfortunately, that power wasn't that easy to control.

Moreover, as far as Lin Yun was concerned, the true function of the Crystal Scales wasn't to increase one's strength.

In this era, only Lin Yun knew that the true form of the Crystal Scales was that of a key.