

The Quest 411

Chapter 411: South Yue City (1)

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And so, we continued our journey, drawing formations as we went, beating up bandits, and feeding Big White. Along the way, we took in the local customs and practices.

Several months later, Mo Hua and his companions finally arrived at South Yue City.

South Yue City was larger than Tongxian City.

Standing on a mountain peak outside of South Yue City, Mo Hua gazed into the distance and roughly estimated that South Yue City was about twice the size of Tongxian City.

The city walls were taller but looked somewhat shabbier.

The formations on them weren't particularly sophisticated either.

Of course, that was from Mo Hua's perspective.

The city walls were old and weather-beaten, showing signs of cracking and discoloration.

Before entering the city, each person had to pay an entry fee of one Spirit Stone.

Not all Immortal Cities charged an entry fee.

Tongxian City didn't.

And almost half of the cities they passed through on their way didn't either.

Even for those that did charge a fee, it wasn't normally this much.

One Spirit Stone was not a small sum for the average Loose Cultivator.

Not to mention, the Minor Wilderness State Boundary seemed even poorer than other places.

Mr. Zhuang, Old Kui, plus the three young disciples—a total of five people in their group.

Mo Hua paid five Spirit Stones.

The gate guards accepted the Spirit Stones and allowed them to pass.

They didn't dare to trouble Mo Hua.

That's because he had the tall and imposing Big White standing beside him.

A Cultivator who could afford to use such a Spirit Horse and ride in such a carriage was not someone they could afford to offend.

Mo Hua and the others then passed through the city gates and entered South Yue City.

Inside South Yue City, the streets were even wider.

But the stone bricks on the ground were pitted and eroded by the wind, and there was a lot of dust. The Cultivators coming and going mostly wore simple clothing, and their faces showed signs of hardship.

"Master, where shall we go?"

Mo Hua asked while sitting atop Big White.

"Let's find an inn to settle down first."

"Okay."

Mo Hua asked a few Cultivators for directions and then followed the streets, turning left and right until they arrived at a street corner.

There was an inn at the corner. It had a weathered signboard hanging above, inscribed with the four characters "Nanyue Inn."

Nanyue was just one character different from the city's name, South Yue.

This inn was neither luxurious nor crowded, but it looked neat and clean.

Mo Hua and his group decided to stay at the Nanyue Inn.

They checked in, and the attendant served them tea.

Mo Hua then said to the attendant:

"Could you feed Big White for me?"

"Sure thing!"

The attendant called out and then asked, "Young man, what kind of fodder would you like to use?"

"Is there a difference between the fodders?" Mo Hua asked.

"Yes, there's ordinary, superior, and top-quality fodder. The prices and qualities differ, but they're definitely worth the cost," explained the attendant with articulate clarity.

After inquiring about the price and finding that even the top-quality fodder was affordable, Mo Hua generously said,

"Feed him the best one!"

The Minor Wilderness State Boundary was somewhat barren, and they hadn't found much good fodder during the journey. Big White hadn't eaten well and had gotten thinner.

Although he still looked big and strong, Mo Hua knew that Big White had definitely lost weight.

"You got it!"

The attendant cheerfully went to fetch the fodder.

Mo Hua then went over to caress Big White, "Wait for the good food, make sure you eat plenty!"

Big White nodded his head and affectionately licked Mo Hua's face with his tongue.

Mo Hua smiled back.

After making sure Big White had something nice to eat, he also went for a meal.

The inn provided food and drink.

Mr. Zhuang and the others had already taken their seats.

Bai Zisheng looked at Mo Hua with a mix of envy and curiosity, asking,

"Why is Big White so affectionate with you?"

Mo Hua said with conviction, "Because I feed him!"

Bai Zisheng shook his head, "That's not it."

It wasn't like Big White was willing to eat from just anyone. At least, when he tried to feed him, Big White seemed to despise it a bit.

Mo Hua asked, "Is it because the food you feed him is too bad, and that's why Big White despises you?"

Bai Zisheng frowned, "Isn't it all just grass? What's the difference?"

"Of course, there's a difference. Some grass tastes good, and some taste bad," replied Mo Hua.

Bai Zisheng frowned, "I'm not a horse, how would I know which grass tastes good and which tastes bad?"

He then looked at Mo Hua in shock, "You didn't taste it yourself before feeding it to Big White, did you?"

Mo Hua looked at Bai Zisheng with a touch of disdain, "I'm not you, why would I be so silly?"

"I'm your senior brother, and you're calling me silly?"

"Who said a senior brother can't be silly?"

...

The two of them chatted back and forth, whispering and muttering.

Bai Zisheng was still puzzled and couldn't help but ask again:

"How exactly do you know which grass tastes good and which tastes bad?"

Mo Hua thought for a moment, then whispered:

"I'm only telling you because you're my senior brother..."

...

"Mmm!" Bai Zisheng nodded repeatedly.

Mo Hua then offered some pointers:

"There's a knack to pulling up grass."

"The grass on the ground, when you look at it with your eyes, mostly looks the same color..."

"But when you use Divine Sense, the 'complexion' of each blade of grass is different."

"Some grasses are pale blue, rich in Spiritual Energy; some are tender green, indicating they are fresh; some are dark green, signifying they are somewhat old; some are red, indicating they are somewhat evil; and yet others are purple or even black, which means they are poisonous..."

"When feeding Big White, you need to pull up the fresh grass. Even the dark green ones can't be too old, and of course, it would be best if you can pull up grasses containing Spiritual Energy..."

Following that, Mo Hua gave Bai Zisheng an indifferent glance:

"The grass you pulled up may look the same, but the aura is red and green, some even poisonous. It's a wonder Big White doesn't mind you..."

Bai Zisheng's eyes were opened to a whole new world.

Pulling grass can actually reveal so much knowledge.

"How do you know all this?" Bai Zisheng couldn't help asking.

Mo Hua looked puzzled, "How else to know? Just look with the eyes, sweep with Divine Sense, and you'll know, right?"

Bai Zisheng's expression was complicated.

Okay then, his little junior brother had tricked him again...

But then, his brows furrowed again.

Is it really so?

He seemed to have also swept with Divine Sense and had never seen the colorful aura Mo Hua described...

Could it be that his Divine Sense was not strong enough?

Bai Zisheng was grappling with the intricacies of pulling grass on one side.

Meanwhile, Mo Hua was blissfully enjoying his meal on the other side.

After being busy for half the day, he was very hungry.

As he ate, Mo Hua suddenly remembered something and asked Mr. Zhuang:

"Master, may I go look for Instructor Yan?"

Mr. Zhuang took a sip of his wine, nodding, "You may."

Having said that, he instructed, "Zisheng and Zixi, accompany him."

"Mm," Mo Hua nodded.

Bai Zisheng and Bai Zixi both nodded and said, "Yes, Master."

After everyone finished eating, Mr. Zhuang rested at the inn while Old Kui attended to the carriage.

Mo Hua, together with Bai Zisheng and Bai Zixi, took a stroll in South Yue City to see if they could find Instructor Yan.

Mo Hua started from the perspective of a Formation Master.

Instructor Yan was a Formation Master, and if he had come to South Yue City, he would likely have interactions with other Formation Masters.

Mo Hua asked the inn's servant and got directions to the residences of several famous Formation Masters in South Yue City.

Some of them were First-grade Formation Masters who had passed the assessment.

Others were capable of Drawing Formation of a First Grade Nine Pattern Formation but had not crossed the threshold and had not been assessed, so they were considered "pseudo First-grade" Formation Masters.

Mo Hua noted down the residences of these people and drew a line on the map of South Yue City, planning to visit them one by one.

The threshold to become a Formation Master is high.

Not just in terms of talent, but even the literal threshold in front of their residences is formidable.

At least three junior cultivators like Mo Hua could not cross it.

Despite looking exceptional, he was indeed too young and appeared too tender.

The doorkeepers stopped them from entering, but they were still polite, simply saying:

"The gentleman is receiving important guests and cannot be disturbed at this time."

Mo Hua then asked, "When will he be finished receiving guests?"

"That, well, is hard to say..." the doorkeeper hesitated.

After all, there were so many lining up to see their master, and it would take more than a month to get through them all.

Moreover, whether the master had the time to see these three junior cultivators was not certain.

He thought that Mo Hua and the others had come to apply as disciples.

This was a common occurrence.

The doorkeeper then tactfully said, "Three young friends, please return for now."

Having no other option, Mo Hua took out the Heaven Shu Ring to declare his genuine identity as a "First-grade Formation Master."

The moment Mo Hua produced the Heaven Shu Ring, he could clearly feel the doorkeeper trembling all over, and even his voice shook:

"You, you... this..."

He was somewhat at a loss for words, not knowing what to say.

How could there be a First-grade Formation Master who was only about ten years old?

The doorkeeper thought it was fake, but he didn't dare to bet on it.

He too was a Formation apprentice, someone learning about Formations.

If it were fake, stopping them would be fine.

But if by chance it was real, he would have truly offended a First-grade Formation Master, and he really would have to pack up his belongings and leave...

Moreover, even if it was a counterfeit, to know to use a "Heaven Shu Ring" as a fake meant the identity was not ordinary; at least they were "insiders."

The doorkeeper then respectfully said:

"Young brother, please wait a moment, I will go and report this."

It didn't take the time of one cup of tea for a Formation Master, dressed lavishly with half-white hair and beard, looking like the owner of the residence, to come out, smiling and saying:

"May I know which young friend here is a First-grade Formation Master?"

Mo Hua showed him the Heaven Shu Ring again.

The Formation Master glanced at the diminutive Mo Hua, then at the Heaven Shu Ring that was one size too large for his thumb, then again at Mo Hua, and once more at the Heaven Shu Ring...

He was clearly at a loss for a moment...

After the doorkeeper told him there was a visiting First-grade Formation Master of minor age, he naturally didn't believe it at first.

Now, even though he saw the Heaven Shu Ring with his own eyes, he remained skeptical.

It was only after he invited Mo Hua inside and personally saw Mo Hua effortlessly draw a First-grade Formation, and after exchanging a few words about Formation knowledge, that he was utterly convinced.

His attitude towards Mo Hua then became exceedingly polite, even carrying a measure of respect.

There is no seniority among scholars—the learned are accorded respect.

This little gentleman truly possessed the knowledge of a First-grade Formation Master.

Chapter 412: Old Friend (1)

Mo Hua and several others were invited into the living room, where disciples served fresh fruit and tea enveloped in spiritual energy.

The Formation Master introduced himself:

"My surname is Su, a first-rank Formation Master, and I have the honor to be an Elder of South Yue Sect. May I ask the young master's name...?"

Mo Hua replied, "My surname is Mo, also a first-rank Formation Master, but no one has invited me to become an elder yet..."

The Formation Master smiled, "Young Master Mo speaks with quite a sense of humor."

With exceptional talents, Mo Hua was neither arrogant nor haughty. He spoke with an innocent tone and a charming, affectionate smile. The elder thus let down his guard, leisurely sipping his tea before inquiring:

"May I ask what brings the young master here?"

Mo Hua then said, "Master Su..."

"Please, no need for formalities, just call me Elder Su..."

Elder Su hastily gestured with his hands.

As a fellow first-rank Formation Master, he was too modest to let anyone address him as "Master."

Mo Hua nodded and asked:

"Elder Su, do you know of a Formation Master surnamed Yan with a half-step First Rank cultivation or perhaps already at the First Rank?"

Elder Su was taken aback for a moment, stroking his beard as he murmured:

"Surname Yan..."

After pondering for a long time, he shook his head and finally said:

"I truly do not know of anyone."

"The city of South Yue is both big and small, especially when it comes to the circle of Formation Masters. Anyone with some level of skill is bound to have crossed paths with others, more or less."

"A Formation Master surnamed Yan... there are a few in South Yue City, but half-step First Rank or already at First Rank... I have not heard of any such person."

Mo Hua felt somewhat disappointed and added:

"He is from outside."

Elder Su pondered:

"If he's an external Formation Master who stayed here a while and interacted with others, then I should've heard of him."

"If I haven't heard of him, it's possible he only stayed here briefly before leaving..."

"Of course, if this Formation Master secluded himself upon arriving here and did not mingle with other Formation Masters, then it's normal that I haven't heard of him..."

Mo Hua slowly nodded his head.

Since Instructor Yan was on a quest to find a renegade from his sect, it was plausible for him to seclude himself and hide his traces after arriving here to avoid startling the quarry.

Elder Su hesitated for a moment before asking:

"May I ask what is the relation between you and Mr. Yan?"

After asking, he added with an apologetic tone, "Of course, if it's inconvenient to disclose, please pretend I did not ask."

"Mr. Yan is something of a predecessor and mentor to me. Since I happened to be passing by, I thought to pay him a visit,"

Mo Hua provided just a brief explanation.

Elder Su understood.

Visiting one's mentor was a natural human sentiment.

He then expressed regret, "It's a pity that I have never met this Formation Master and can't be of help to you, young master."

Mo Hua politely responded:

"You are too kind, Elder Su. We apologize for the intrusion."

Since he couldn't find out any news about Instructor Yan, Mo Hua stood up to take his leave, intending to inquire with other Formation Masters.

Elder Su paused to think, then had a disciple fetch a name card, which he handed to Mo Hua, and said:

"This is my name card..."

"When visiting other Formation Masters, without showing the Heaven Shu Ring, it may be difficult to gain entrance."

"However, the Heaven Shu Ring is valuable and not only draws attention but may also invite envy, so it's best not to reveal it lightly."

"Having this name card will make it much more convenient."

Mo Hua took the name card, noticing the Elder Su's elegant and dignified signature, with golden specks on the ink and also bearing the emblem of South Yue Sect.

It looked both precious and reputable.

"Thank you so much, Elder Su!" Mo Hua expressed his gratitude.

Elder Su replied with a smile, "If young master has some free time while staying in South Yue City, please feel free to visit my humble abode for tea and discussion on Formation theory."

Mo Hua thanked him again, yet hesitated, saying:

"Won't I disturb your entertaining of guests?"

Elder Su, being a Formation Master and an Elder, would surely be busy with a host of guests.

Elder Su shook his head, "Not at all. Whenever you come, young master, you will be an honored guest."

Mo Hua then smiled, "Thank you for your kind offer, Elder Su. I will definitely make time if I can."

Afterward, Elder Su personally escorted Mo Hua to the door.

Only after watching Mo Hua walk away did Elder Su stroke his beard and mutter to himself:

"Seen a ghost I have, where does this junior Formation Master hail from? So young, surely he couldn't have been learning Formation from the womb, and yet, that doesn't seem right either..."

The disciple who had been by Elder Su's side asked softly:

"Master, could he be an imposter?"

"Impossible," Elder Su shook his head:

"Formation skill doesn't lie. If it's genuine, it's genuine, if not, it's not. The moment he began Drawing Formation, I knew for certain that he must be a first-rank Formation Master!"

The disciple felt a twinge of jealousy, "Even if he's a first-rank Formation Master, he's still young. Weren't you a bit too courteous to him?"

"What do you know?"

Elder Su glared at the disciple.

The disciple didn't dare say another word.

Elder Su knitted his brows in thought for a while before slowly saying:

"This young gentleman... I cannot see through him."

"Not only him, but I also cannot see through the two young Cultivators accompanying him, distinguished in appearance and temperament..."

"They seem like mere Qi Refinement Cultivators, yet Divine Sense reveals nothing..."

"I remain at Foundation Establishment, yet cannot see through Qi Refinement..."

"This suggests that they must be wearing some kind of Spiritual Artifact to conceal their aura."

"Such Spiritual Artifacts cannot possibly be owned by Cultivators of ordinary status and background."

The disciple became solemn inwardly, "Could these three young Cultivators be of no small origin?"

Elder Su nodded, then shook his head, and suddenly looking perturbed, said to the disciple:

"Why do you care so much? Just focus on learning your Formation!"

"If you put even half that amount of attention into Formation, you wouldn't still be just an apprentice."

"Of all the disciples I've taken, you're the most blockheaded."

...

"If it weren't for your mother's face, I would have told you to get lost a long time ago."

"Look at others, already a top-grade Formation Master at barely over ten years old. Now look at you, even if you live to be a hundred, you might still not amount to much..."

...

Elder Su gave the disciple a severe scolding.

The disciple left sullenly, quickly saying:

"I know my mistake, I will go and work on Drawing Formations right away."

Then, he ran off hastily, though his expression did not show much panic.

Seeing this, Elder Su sighed helplessly:

"Back in my day, why couldn't I control myself and avoid getting involved in such a romantic mess?"

...

After leaving Elder Su's residence, Bai Zisheng asked:

"Shall we visit the other Formation Masters as well?"

"Hmm," Mo Hua nodded, "Though it's highly likely we won't find any clues, we should still make the trip, at least to become acquainted."

Being strangers in South Yue City, it was good for them to get to know more Cultivators.

Moreover, these Cultivators were all Formation Masters.

Local Formation Masters generally held prestigious positions.

Building some rapport could be beneficial in the event of conflicts.

Without any connections, the likelihood of resorting to physical confrontations in disputes was high.

With connections, even if it's just a nodding acquaintance, negotiations tended to be easier.

This was something he had learned from Master Luo.

Master Luo was highly successful in Tongxian City, navigating among the Formation Masters with ease. Taking his advice was always the right decision.

Bai Zisheng nodded.

Afterward, several of them, holding Elder Su's name card, visited all the influential Formation Masters of South Yue City one by one.

They both inquired about Instructor Yan's whereabouts and took the opportunity to socialize.

Elder Su was a Foundation Building Cultivator, a top-grade Formation Master, and an elder of South Yue Sect, apparently even from the Inner Gate.

His name card proved to be extremely useful.

Mo Hua easily visited the residences of all the Formation Masters in South Yue City.

Everyone was mostly polite and amiable.

With the name card, Mo Hua did not need to reveal his status as a top-grade Formation Master, as it wasn't necessary.

Elder Su's status was more than sufficient.

Even if some Formation Masters were initially arrogant, after a few conversations and discussions about Formations, they became amicable.

When Formation Masters interact with each other, communication is easier.

Especially when discussing Formations, it quickly becomes apparent who is knowledgeable based merely on a few comments.

Mo Hua's youth and knowledge of Formations impressed them.

Mo Hua spent a whole day asking around and managed to make himself known.

As the saying goes, a powerful dragon cannot suppress a local snake.

Initially a mere "Crossing River Dragon," Mo Hua, after mixing in the social circles, had practically become a "local snake" in the Formation community of South Yue City.

Walking the streets of South Yue City, Mo Hua carried himself even more upright.

Bai Zisheng didn't quite understand.

He had seen with his own eyes; all Formation Masters, no matter how arrogant at first, ended up treating Mo Hua cordially in the end.

It seemed that they were quite willing to give face to Mo Hua.

Was this popularity simply too good to be true?

Or was it because Mo Hua was a Formation Master?

But Mo Hua hadn't said that he was a top-grade Formation Master. He had only mentioned he knew "a little" about Formations...

Bai Zisheng couldn't grasp it.

Mo Hua was unaware of what Bai Zisheng was thinking.

He was still concerned about Instructor Yan's whereabouts.

As expected, none of the Formation Masters he inquired about knew where Instructor Yan was, some haven't even heard of the man...

Mo Hua couldn't help frowning.

Where on earth had Instructor Yan gone?

Was he still in South Yue City at all?

...

Upon returning, Mo Hua reported everything to Mr. Zhuang.

Mr. Zhuang was not surprised, as if he had anticipated this, and simply nodded slightly.

"Master, shall we continue our search?" Mo Hua asked.

He didn't want to waste Mr. Zhuang's time.

"Let's continue searching," Mr. Zhuang said, "Give it a few more days."

"All right."

...

In the following days, apart from his daily cultivation routine and working on Formation Painting, Mo Hua, along with Bai Zisheng and Bai Zixi, wandered the streets and alleys of South Yue City, sightseeing while inquiring about Instructor Yan's whereabouts.

After five or six days, they still hadn't turned up any leads.

While they hadn't found Instructor Yan, Mo Hua did bump into other acquaintances.

One day, as Mo Hua was walking through the city, he saw a group of people in a dispute, among them a pretty female Cultivator who looked somewhat familiar.

Mo Hua couldn't help but take a few extra glances.

Bai Zixi curiously watched him.

Mo Hua blinked his eyes and suddenly remembered, his eyes lighting up as he waved and called out:

"Sister Situ!"

The woman was Situ Fang.

Years ago, outside of Tongxian City at Big Black Mountain, she and Zhang Lan were apprehending Evil Cultivators when they came across Mo Hua.

Mo Hua helped them find their way to the Evil Cultivators, and even modestly assisted them in subduing the Evil Cultivators, even going as far as to break one of their legs.

Mo Hua remembered that Situ Fang had treated him well. Afterwards, she and Zhang Lan had even treated him to a meal at the Spiritual Meal Building.

An entire table full of dishes!

Situ Fang, dressed in a black Taoist Court uniform, was startled by the call, turned around and saw a young cultivator with rosy lips and white teeth waving at her, calling her "sister" with a ringing voice.

Situ Fang was puzzled for a moment before recognition dawned, and her mouth fell open:

"Mo... Mo Hua?!"

...

Chapter 413: Disappearance (1)

Situ Fang saw Mo Hua and was full of surprise.

After explaining a few words to the arguing cultivators, she managed to get away and led Mo Hua and the others to a quiet teahouse by the road. They ordered a few cups of green tea, some dried fruits, and pastries.

Curious, Mo Hua asked:

"Sister Situ, are you the Supervisor for South Yue City?"

Situ Fang being a Supervisor wasn't surprising to Mo Hua.

She wore the official robes of a Supervisor and her cultivation was not weak. Plus, coming from a clan background, it was natural for her to hold the position of Supervisor at the local Taoist Court.

What puzzled Mo Hua was why she would be the Supervisor of South Yue City.

South Yue City was quite far from Tongxian City. If she was the Supervisor of South Yue City, why would she have gone all the way to Tongxian City to capture evil cultivators?

Situ Fang sighed and said, "Clan training, we have to take turns serving everywhere."

"Oh," Mo Hua understood.

The practices of the Situ Family seemed quite good, knowing to send disciples out to various places to serve and hone their skills.

And it looked like this kind of training was rather exhausting.

Even the idle Zhang Lan ended up busy as can be with one incident after another, what with the Black Mountain Stronghold and the Big Demon and all.

"What about you?" Situ Fang also asked, "What brings you here?"

She looked around and then asked, "Did Zhang Lan come with you as well?"

Mo Hua shook his head and laughed,

"Uncle Zhang didn't come. I'm traveling with my master, and we just happened to pass by here. I wanted to visit an elder, and it just so happened that I ran into you."

"Master, traveling?"

Situ Fang was slightly startled.

She remembered Zhang Lan briefly mentioning that Mo Hua was good at Drawing Formations and had a mysterious and profound master.

She then glanced at Bai Zisheng and Bai Zixi.

Both had extraordinary appearances and an otherworldly aura; they clearly looked like disciples of a remarkable person.

Especially Bai Zixi, Situ Fang couldn't help but take a few more glances, somewhat astounded by her beauty:

"This is your junior sister, isn't it? She's truly beautiful..."

"Mhm!" Mo Hua nodded, but inwardly thought to himself:

"You haven't even seen her at her prettiest..."

Bai Zixi also smiled lightly and said, "Sister also looks very beautiful..."

Beautiful in appearance, pleasant to listen to, nice to talk to.

Situ Fang grinned from ear to ear.

A moment later, she asked again:

"What about Zhang Lan, is he still in Tongxian City?"

"He should have returned to his clan."

"He reached the Foundation Establishment."

"Mhm."

Situ Fang nodded and then suddenly asked:

"I heard that you all in Tongxian City killed a Big Demon, is that true?"

Mo Hua quickly nodded, "Yes!"

"The Large Formation was drawn by me, and in the end, I also used the Great Formation Dissolution to send that pig soaring to the heavens!"

Of course, Mo Hua did not say these words out loud; they were just thoughts in his heart.

Situ Fang exclaimed in admiration, "Truly... that is no small feat."

Such an achievement, where a local cultivator constructs a Large Formation to subdue a Big Demon, was extremely rare even in the history of the Taoist Court.

She didn't ask for more details.

This kind of matter, which was related to the life and death of all the cultivators in the city, probably had nothing to do with Mo Hua, a young cultivator of about ten years old.

Even if asked, he might not know.

Mo Hua took a sip of tea, smacked his lips, feeling its bitterness and astringency, followed by a hint of sweetness.

It was somewhat unpleasant yet slightly enjoyable, a strange sensation.

He tasted each of the dried fruits and then the pastries, his eyes lighting up.

They were delicious.

He tasted a few more, silently guessing the methods used to make the dried fruits and pastries, wondering if he could replicate them.

Dried fruits for Old Kui, pastries for his junior sister.

Mo Hua ate and drank while pondering, when suddenly something occurred to him. He asked Situ Fang:

"Sister Situ, you were arguing with someone just now. What happened?"

Situ Fang's previously relaxed mood instantly vanished, leaving her with a sense of resignation as she replied:

"Indeed."

"Can you tell me about it?"

Mo Hua blinked, his eyes sparkling.

Bai Zisheng and Bai Zixi also looked at Situ Fang, clearly curious as well.

Situ Fang considered for a moment, then sighed and said:

"There's no harm in telling you..."

"I was transferred here as the Supervisor for South Yue City's Taoist Court six months ago."

"Around here in South Yue City, the clans hold the mines while most loose cultivators earn their living by mining, what's commonly referred to as 'mining cultivators'."

"Mining cultivators need to enter the mines, dig tunnels, and mine—which is quite tough and very dangerous."

"Inside the mines, there's not only centuries-old Evil Qi but also other odd and sinister spirits, as well as monster beasts that burrow through the mountains."

"If the Evil Qi invades the body, it can cause severe injuries at best, and at worst, death."

"The mine's monster beasts, too, are man-eaters."

"Additionally, if the mineshafts are poorly excavated or the Formations are crudely drawn, it can easily lead to the collapse of the mines."

"Once a mineshaft collapses and rocks tumble down, cultivators in the Qi Refinement Realm wouldn't be able to make it out alive."

"That's why, every year in South Yue City, quite a few cultivators die within the mines..."

"So the cultivators just now, they were arguing with you because they had relatives who died in the mines?" Mo Hua asked.

Situ Fang nodded, "Yes, but it's not certain. They are just missing."

She then sighed again, "Based on past experiences, those who went missing in the mines are most likely dead."

Mo Hua asked with confusion, "But what does this have to do with you?"

Situ Fang helplessly said, "Their family members went missing, and they cried to the Taoist Court to file a report. The Taoist Court accepted the case, but they don't seem very willing to handle it."

"Seeing their poverty and distress over their missing loved ones, who were washing their faces with tears day in and day out, I felt somewhat compassionate and took the initiative to take on the matter."

"As a result, I didn't expect..."

Mo Hua suddenly said, "You've run into trouble, huh..."

Situ Fang gave a bitter smile, "If the trouble was only from the Taoist Court's side, it would still be okay. But these victims, they are also a big headache."

"At first, when I helped them, they were immensely grateful to me."

"Gradually, they started to complain, blaming the Taoist Court for being ineffective, wondering why it's taken so long to find anyone."

"Regarding compensation, they've also made extravagant demands."

"The Court Leader from that side also dislikes my meddling in affairs."

"Caught between both sides, I'm helpless and in an awkward position..."

Deep helplessness showed on Situ Fang's face.

Mo Hua nodded, "Ungratefulness for kindness is often the case."

"If you don't help them, they will beg you to help. Once you actually help them, they will think your help is not enough and they will blame you."

Situ Fang looked at Mo Hua in surprise, "Then what do you think I should do?"

Mo Hua thought for a moment and said:

"If you really want to help, you should adopt an official and impartial attitude from the beginning."

"Unbiased, so they would plead for your help and naturally have a better attitude towards you."

"Otherwise, it will be troublesome."

"If you get too close to them and show that you're considering their interests, they subconsciously think that, no matter what happens, you will side with them..."

"Consequently, they will take your kindness for granted, become even more demanding, and may even deceive you, treating you like a fool..."

Situ Fang exclaimed in shock, "How do you know all this?"

Mo Hua scratched his head, "Uncle Zhang Lan told me..."

Situ Fang was taken aback, "Why would he tell you these things?"

Recalling the past, Mo Hua crisply said:

"We had a drink together. Of course, it was mainly him drinking and me eating meat, and I also had some fruit wine... He talked a lot when he was drunk and told me everything."

"He said that in the past, even when doing good deeds, he ended up not pleasing anyone..."

Situ Fang looked surprised upon hearing this.

She was quite familiar with Zhang Lan.

Zhang Lan seemed lethargic on the surface, but in fact, he was very astute and somewhat proud by nature, did not have many friends, and was also slightly at odds with his clan.

She hadn't expected him to have such a good relationship with this child, Mo Hua, and to share everything with him...

Situ Fang thought for a moment and then nodded.

Mo Hua was right.

She had been too soft-hearted, ending up with a mess on her hands. Now, with no progress being made, she was caught in a quagmire, facing daily complaints.

With this thought in mind, Situ Fang let out a deep sigh.

"Sister Situ, how did these mining cultivators go missing exactly?"

Situ Fang shook her head, "We haven't figured it out yet. There aren't any clues in that mine, and the families of these miners are being unreasonable, stirring up trouble for the sake of it, demanding an explanation and more compensation in spirit stones, but when asked about the specifics of the case, they're evasive, talking about their hardships..."

Mo Hua's gaze became focused, "There's probably something wrong here."

Situ Fang nodded, "I also feel something is amiss, but I can't find any leads for the time being. Now, I'm constantly being troubled by these miners' families, lost for what to do..."

Mo Hua ventured, "Why not lock them up?"

Situ Fang was taken aback, "Lock them up where?"

"The Taoist Prison..."

Situ Fang fell silent.

Even Bai Zisheng and Bai Zixi were silently looking at Mo Hua with gazes akin to looking at a bad person.

"That doesn't seem right..." Situ Fang said delicately.

"Just to scare them a bit..."

Mo Hua said, "They're taking advantage of your kindness, which is why they're overstepping their bounds. If this continues, you won't be able to find the missing people or solve the case, and you'll inevitably be in a difficult position."

"It's not good for anyone this way..."

"Besides, they're definitely hiding something."

"Lock them up for a few days, let them cool down and feel afraid, then they'll know not to go too far. When you ask them anything again, they'll speak honestly."

Mo Hua paused, then, remembering what Zhang Lan had said, nodded:

"For those who are reasonable, you can be gentler, but for those who are unreasonable, you need to establish your authority appropriately; otherwise, you will be bullied."

"Being a goody-two-shoes doesn't solve problems."

After pondering for a long time, Situ Fang finally said helplessly, "I'll give it a try."

After a few more pleasantries about turning to her if there were any troubles, and settling the bill, Situ Fang left.

After Situ Fang left, Mo Hua took a sip of tea and suddenly realized Bai Zisheng was staring intently at him.

Mo Hua was taken aback, "What's the matter?"

Bai Zisheng said, "We should also go to the Taoist Court Official's case."

Mo Hua pouted, "What for?"

Bai Zisheng hesitated for a moment, not willing to admit he just wanted to join in on the excitement.

After thinking for a bit, he said, "Aren't you curious? Why the mining cultivators disappeared, whether they are alive or dead?"

"If alive, where are they trapped, and can they be rescued?"

"If dead, how did they die? Could they have been killed by other cultivators, and why would they be killed..."

Bai Zisheng muttered on and on.

Upon hearing this, Mo Hua, who hadn't been very curious before, also became somewhat intrigued...

Mo Hua then furrowed his eyebrows.

He also had a vague sense that there was something strange about this matter, as if it were tied to complex causality.

He couldn't clearly explain why he felt this way.

But ever since he learned Divine Sense Calculation, he would occasionally get these premonitions.

Perhaps Divine Sense Calculation could sense the causality of certain things.

"Could it be that my master taught me Calculation all along so that I could sense causality and seek good fortune while avoiding disaster?" Mo Hua wondered to himself.

Chapter 414: Mine (1)

The disappearance of the mining cultivators was something Mo Hua wanted to understand, but he had to wait until Situ Fang had gotten a clear answer.

In the following three days, Mo Hua still sought Instructor Yan in South Yue City every day, but still without a clue.

Instead, it was Situ Fang who came up with some news first.

It was in that same small teahouse, Situ Fang invited Mo Hua for tea and then said to him,

"I went to ask the families of the missing mining cultivators what exactly happened; they wouldn't speak and were being obstinate and unreasonable, claiming that the Taoist Court and the Lu Family were in cahoots, oppressing the good people..."

"The Lu Family?"

"The mine belongs to the Lu Family."

"Oh," Mo Hua nodded.

Situ Fang continued, "So I detained them for a few days, and once they got scared, they finally told the truth."

"What did they say?" Mo Hua asked curiously.

Situ Fang sighed and said,

"These missing mining cultivators disappeared while trying to steal from the mines..."

"Steal from the Lu Family's mine?"

"Yes," Situ Fang nodded. "They told their families before they disappeared that they were about to strike it rich and wouldn't have to live in hardship anymore."

"Then, under the cover of night, they left and never returned..."

Mo Hua understood, "They were afraid that if the Lu Family found out, the Lu Family wouldn't compensate them with spirit stones, so they didn't dare speak up, right?"

"Yes."

Situ Fang seemed somewhat helpless.

It was likely that the Lu Family would not only refuse to compensate with spirit stones but would also demand compensation from the families of the missing mining cultivators.

Because stealing from the mine is a major taboo for mining cultivators.

The ores they stole were nominally owned by the Lu Family.

"No wonder..." Mo Hua nodded.

So that's why they were being obstinate and not telling the truth.

Of course, part of the reason was that they saw Situ Fang had a soft heart, and they became pushy because of it.

"Sister Situ, what do you plan to do?" Mo Hua inquired.

Situ Fang pondered and said, "I can keep quiet about the theft, but right now the most important thing is to find these missing mining cultivators, dead or alive, we need an explanation."

Situ Fang sighed, "And if these mining cultivators really are dead, we also need to figure out a way to get some compensation from the Lu Family, otherwise, these mining cultivators' families, without income, won't be able to survive."

Mo Hua also felt some sorrow and couldn't help asking,

"Will the Lu Family compensate?"

"I have asked them, and the Lu Family said that unless the bodies of these mining cultivators are found in the mine, they won't compensate."

Mo Hua frowned, "Has the Lu Family always done things this way before?"

"Yes," Situ Fang nodded. "No body, no compensation in spirit stones."

She explained further,

"The Lu Family's approach is certainly uncompassionate, but before, there indeed were mining cultivators who faked their deaths to claim compensation, so it's difficult to fault them too much."

After thinking for a moment, Mo Hua asked, "Then do these missing mining cultivators have any leads?"

"Hmm." Situ Fang took out a map and handed it to Mo Hua.

"When these missing mining cultivators left and which hilltop they entered the mine from, I have marked on the map."

Situ Fang sighed again,

"These things, their families originally didn't want to speak of, now they're afraid, so they finally revealed it."

"After all, once these things are said and the Lu Family knows about it, they will have leverage."

"These missing mining cultivators, even if they are dead, will have died in vain, their families won't receive a penny of compensation."

"Then we'll investigate secretly, without letting the Lu Family know," Mo Hua whispered.

Situ Fang nodded, but halfway through, she suddenly realized and corrected,

"I will investigate, not we. What are you, a child, doing getting involved in this kind of thing?"

Mo Hua's eyes flickered, and he smiled, saying,

"Sister Situ, you've been so kind to me; I want to help you too."

Situ Fang felt a warmth in her heart but then sensed something amiss and looked at Mo Hua skeptically,

"Really?"

"Really!" Mo Hua nodded earnestly.

Still, Situ Fang refused,

"No, this matter is a bit strange, I can't involve you."

Mo Hua said, "It takes three stakes to fence in a hog, three helpers to make a hero great."

"Me, as well as my senior brother and sister, will all help you. Besides, there are formations in the mine; you may not be able to find some places..."

Situ Fang frowned, thinking to herself.

Indeed, formations were a problem...

There were indeed many formations in the mine, and without knowledge of formations, it's very easy to miss some key places.

She herself knew a little bit about formations, but not much, and likely she couldn't unravel their intricacies.

Asking another Formation Master didn't seem right either.

In South Yue City, the Lu Family had the greatest influence, and they were also on good terms with other Formation Masters; no Formation Master would help her if she went to the mines.

And although she didn't know how good Mo Hua's skills in formations were, Zhang Lan had praised them.

Zhang Lan, born to a noble clan, had good judgment. If he praised Mo Hua's drawing formation skills, then Mo Hua's abilities in formations must indeed be exceptional...

Situ Fang hesitated for a long time before finally making up her mind,

"Alright, but you must be careful, the mines are no trivial matter, and you must not be negligent at any cost."

"Don't worry, Sister Situ,"

Mo Hua nodded.

...

After discussing the plan, two days later.

Situ Fang took Mo Hua, along with Bai Zisheng and Bai Zixi, to the Lu Family's mines.

The mining cultivators had gone missing, and the Taoist Court was conducting an inspection, so the Lu Family had no grounds to refuse, nor did they dare to.

But the overseer in charge of the mine did not wear a welcoming expression.

Thus, Situ Fang led the three of them, accompanied by a Lu Family cultivator, into the mine.

This was Mo Hua's first time inside a mine.

On the way there, he had only looked on from a distance, hearing the constant clang and clatter, a noisy and busy scene.

Only upon seeing it up close did he understand the hardship of the mining cultivators.

In the Minor Wilderness State Boundary, the weather was scorching hot, heating the rocks until they were searing.

The miners, their skin darkened by the sun, were bare-armed, bent at the waist, their backs showing lash marks, as they mined the ore under the foreman's supervision, to the best of their abilities.

The mine produced blue iron ore.

This type of iron ore was cheap and hard, requiring a lot of effort to excavate.

The mining cultivators had to toil for an entire day to earn just one spirit stone.

Those who hadn't undergone body cultivation simply couldn't do this job.

Even for the physically strong body cultivators, many might not be able to endure it.

And this was just the outer mountains—if one went into the deeper mines, which were dark, damp, and full of filthy qi, not only was it more strenuous, but it was also more dangerous. A single misstep could cost them their lives.

Mo Hua felt uncomfortable at the sight.

Bai Zisheng and Bai Zixi frowned as they observed.

Bai Zisheng couldn't help but say to Mo Hua, "These mining cultivators, they're really suffering..."

The accompanying Lu Family cultivator snorted dismissively, "What suffering? People are born to different stations, high and low, noble and base. This is their fate, their lot in life."

"On the contrary, they should be grateful to our Lu Family. Without us, they couldn't earn even one spirit stone after a hard day's work."

After saying this, the Lu Family cultivator then gave a veiled warning, "Young brother, please mind your words within our Lu Family's mine."

Bai Zisheng looked at him coldly, "I don't like the tone of your voice. Speak to me like that again, and I'll twist your mouth sideways."

The Lu Family cultivator grew angry.

Bai Zisheng displayed the imposing aura of a peak Ninth Level Qi Refining cultivator.

The Lu Family cultivator turned pale and begrudgingly shut his mouth.

Situ Fang was also somewhat surprised.

This junior brother of Mo Hua's appeared to be only a few years older than Mo Hua, yet his spiritual power was so profound...

It seemed that Mo Hua's mentor was indeed extraordinary.

Therefore, his expertise in formations was likely to be high as well.

"I hope he can notice something and find those missing mining cultivators..." Situ Fang thought silently to himself.

The group wandered around the outer mountain for a while, asked a few mining cultivators, but found nothing, and so decided to look in the deeper mines.

The Lu Family cultivator said with a forced smile, "You can go into the mine, but don't blame me for not warning you. It's very dangerous in there, not somewhere outsiders can simply..."

Bai Zisheng sent a sharp, knife-like glare his way.

The Lu Family cultivator stopped speaking abruptly, not daring to say more.

Afterward, everyone entered the mine.

A mine is a general term for the internal tunnels, caves, and chambers within a mountain.

The mine was cold, damp, and the air stifling.

The stone walls were carved with formations which generally served to both reinforce the walls to prevent the mine from collapsing and provide functions like lighting, ventilation, and filth removal.

Mo Hua glanced at the formations and shook his head.

The formation patterns carved there were indeed very rough.

They offered only minor reinforcement and dim lighting.

As such, with external walls unstable and filthy qi accumulating inside, accidents were likely to happen easily.

It seemed the Lu Family didn't hold the lives of these mining cultivators in high regard.

"The lives of loose cultivators don't seem to count for much..." Mo Hua sighed silently in his heart.

The group progressed step by step along the mine.

As Mo Hua walked, he studied the formation patterns and reconstructed the layout of the mine in his mind.

The formations were extremely rudimentary.

Mo Hua could see through them at a glance; he didn't even need to use Divine Sense Calculation. With just a few glances, he understood everything clearly.

Understanding the formations naturally meant grasping the layout of the mine.

The paths might be misleading, but the formations were not.

Initially, the Lu Family cultivator led the way, but after a while, Mo Hua began leading instead.

The Lu Family cultivator frowned.

This young cultivator, clearly here for the first time, how could he be more familiar with this place than him?

Situ Fang also watched with a puzzled gaze, somewhat astonished.

Mo Hua led the group along the mine for half a day without any discoveries.

The Lu Family cultivator started to get impatient, "That's enough, isn't it? The mine is so vast, no matter how much you look..."

Before he could finish, Mo Hua stopped.

He fixated on the wall in front of him, then took out his ink and brush, drawing several formation patterns.

Then, with a flash of light from the patterns, they dissipated into each other.

The stone wall trembled and crumbled, revealing a pitch-black opening.

Situ Fang was slightly taken aback.

The Lu Family cultivator turned stark white.

Chapter 415: Death Condition (1)

"What is the meaning of this tunnel?" Situ Fang asked coldly.

The Lu Family cultivator's face was pale, yet his mouth was firm, "It's a mine, isn't it normal to have caves inside?"

But his tone quivered slightly.

"Let's go in and have a look," Mo Hua said indifferently, paying him no heed.

The Lu Family cultivator's eyes flickered with panic, and he quickly stepped in front of the entrance, stretching out his arms to block everyone,

"This mine shaft is a secret of the Lu Family's mining operation. Outsiders are not allowed..."

Bai Zisheng kicked him directly, sending him tumbling into the hole.

Mo Hua nodded and said, "He is a Lu Family cultivator, and he took the lead in going in. We have no choice but to follow."

Situ Fang stared at the two in stupor.

She thought to herself, these two really are brothers from the same sect...

Birds of a feather flock together.

Mo Hua boldly stepped into the mine.

The others followed him in as well.

After entering, Situ Fang silently followed beside Mo Hua.

She knew that Mo Hua was innately weak and was not a body cultivator, and it would be dangerous if someone or something got close to him.

By staying close, she could protect Mo Hua in case of any emergencies.

After all, Mo Hua was risking his own safety to help her by entering the mine; she didn't want him to get hurt.

The Lu Family cultivator who had been knocked to the ground also got up, saying angrily:

"You... cough..."

He spit out a mouthful of dirt with a "ptui" and continued, "That's too much! I will report this to the Family Head..."

"Stop talking nonsense!" Bai Zisheng kicked him again, "Lead the way!"

The Lu Family cultivator was indignant, "Impossible! I can't lead the way!"

Because he actually didn't know the way either.

Mo Hua looked around and then said, "Follow me."

He then took the lead deeper into the mine shaft.

The others exchanged glances and also followed Mo Hua inside.

The Lu Family cultivator's expression fluctuated uncertainly.

Is this little devil a traitor from their Lu Family?

How could he be so familiar with this mine shaft?

He wasn't sure what was inside the mine, and he dared not venture deeper.

But he also couldn't let the Supervisor from the Taoist Court Records Office inspect the mine at will.

Otherwise, if the clan held him accountable, he would be in deep trouble.

The Lu Family cultivator hesitated for a long time, but eventually could only grit his teeth and follow them inside, hard-headed...

...

The shaft was as damp and gloomy as the outside, filled with a filthy stench.

But there was an added scent of decay, a hint of death, and a bone-chilling coldness permeating the air.

And all around were formations.

As Mo Hua walked, he used his divine sense to perceive the formations on the stone walls, feeling inwardly surprised.

The formations within the mine were mostly first-grade ones.

Not only that, these first-grade formations were part of an entire set, complementing each other in a complex first-grade compound formation.

This compound formation was intricately designed and executed with skilled strokes using high-quality spiritual ink, completely different from the crude formations outside.

Clearly, they came from the hand of an expert, possibly even a veteran first-grade formation master.

It seemed that the Lu Family didn't lack formation masters or the means to hire them.

This was very strange...

Mo Hua slowed his pace and began to use divine sense calculation to decipher the formation patterns and determine the types of formations.

After a moment, he had a rough understanding.

The compound formation included an Earth Stone Formation, an Early Warning Formation, a Sound Isolation Formation, and several other types that supported each other.

The Earth Stone Formation was for reinforcement, the Early Warning Formation for precaution, and the Sound Isolation Formation to keep out noise...

Mo Hua frowned slightly.

What was the Lu Family's purpose for setting up such complete formations in this mine shaft?

Mo Hua extended his divine sense further.

What he perceived were the complex auras within the mine.

There was the essence of earth and stone, filth, and traces of formations.

These auras were mixed together, forming a natural barrier that interfered with divine sense perception.

Everything and nothing... there were no other findings.

Mo Hua could only continue to walk forward.

As they walked, several branched tunnel entrances appeared ahead.

At the same time, there came an acrid smell.

It was like the musty odor of rotting flesh.

All of them frowned and covered their noses with their sleeves.

The Lu Family cultivator found it unbearable and immediately hunched over, leaning against the wall, and started vomiting.

Mo Hua glanced at him with contempt and then swept his divine sense around, noting that the branches were not deep and seemed safe. He then said:

"Let's split up and search."

Situ Fang and the others nodded and moved to check each tunnel entrance individually.

The tunnels all appeared to have been freshly excavated.

The formations on them were all newly drawn.

...

Mo Hua strode through several tunnels, only to halt abruptly; his pupils constricted as his brows deeply furrowed.

He had found those Mining Cultivators.

Indeed, they were dead, leaving behind only their corpses.

But these could hardly even be called corpses...

In the small space, the cave was littered with severed limbs, indistinguishable flesh and blood, and pools of blood everywhere.

The blood had congealed and due to the dampness, had become half-sticky, half-thick, emanating a strong stench of decay that was nauseating.

The Mining Cultivators had died a bloody and brutal death.

As if something had gnawed on them...

A chill seeped into Mo Hua's heart.

After a while, Situ Fang also entered.

Upon witnessing this scene, her expression was one of shock.

Then came a bout of retching, as she covered her face with her sleeve, unable to help vomiting a few times.

Bai Zisheng also entered.

He tried to hold back but ultimately failed and vomited as well.

Bai Zixi heard the commotion and started walking over.

Mo Huna heard footsteps and, seeing Bai Zixi enter, quickly stretched out his little hand to cover her eyes.

Bai Zixi was taken aback, her confusion evident as she asked:

"What's wrong?"

"You can't look," Mo Hua said.

"Why can't I look?"

"If you do, you'll have nightmares..."

"Okay," Bai Zixi understood and nodded, staying quiet as Mo Hua covered her eyes.

The last to arrive was the Lu Family Cultivator.

He had just vomited before, and upon seeing this scene, his face was fraught with horror; he crumpled against the rock wall, almost vomiting out his intestines...

Situ Fang frowned and said, "Let's talk somewhere else."

Mo Hua nodded.

Thus, the group made their way back, with Bai Zisheng dragging the Lu Family Cultivators by his collar.

They didn't stop until they reached a slightly more open area.

It was then that they finally took a breath of relief.

Even though the air here still reeked, compared to the fetid stench by the tunnels, it almost felt "refreshingly pleasant"...

It took Bai Zisheng quite a while to recover, and seeing Mo Hua looking unaffected, he couldn't help but ask:

"Didn't you throw up?"

"I'm okay..."

Mo Hua nodded.

Not only was he a Formation Master, but he was also a Monster Hunter.

Though he was young, he had spent a long time around Big Black Mountain, witnessed Monster Beasts kill humans, and seen the bloody scenes of Monster Beasts devouring their prey, so he could barely tolerate it.

Bai Zisheng gave a wry smile, at a loss for words.

Situ Fang also regained her composure and sighed:

"Those Mining Cultivators... they're still dead..."

Even though they had anticipated it, her heart couldn't help but feel heavy.

"How did they die?" asked Bai Zisheng, puzzled. "Were they eaten by the Monster Beasts in the cave?"

Mo Hua furrowed his brow and shook his head, "It doesn't quite seem like it. Monster Beasts' teeth are typically long, and they mainly tear and bite when they eat humans, which is cleaner."

"The way they are now... it's more like they've been gnawed or hollowed out..."

Mo Hua was precise with his words.

Bai Zisheng glanced at Mo Hua with a complex look in his eyes.

Even Situ Fang looked at Mo Hua with some astonishment.

You child, the things you understand... have you gone off the beaten path a bit?

What normal Cultivator would study these things?

Situ Fang shook her head, resigned, "Taoist Court has coroners who can examine the bodies. Have them come down later; they should be able to figure out what killed these Mining Cultivators."

After saying that, she turned to Mo Hua with concern:

"You should head back first. This place is dirty, no place for children like you to linger."

"Okay," Mo Hua nodded.

Now that the missing Mining Cultivators had been found, his task was essentially complete.

However, there was one more thing to do before leaving.

He pointed to the Lu Family Cultivator and said:

"Interrogate him to see if he knows anything."

The Lu Family Cultivator was somewhat slippery.

Normally, he might not tell the truth.

But now, having witnessed the state of the Mining Cultivators' deaths and shaken to his core, he was in a state of utter disarray and his mental defenses had been breached—it was an ideal time to interrogate him.

Maybe they could ferret out something useful from him.

Mo Hua wanted to know why the Mining Cultivators had died.

He also wanted to know, what was the real purpose of this Mining Cave?

Moreover, there was an even more eerie point...

Mo Hua furrowed his brow; in his eyes, a cold light condensed.

He had sensed a whiff of the Ultimate Formation's aura on the bodies of the dead Mining Cultivators in the well...but this aura carried a certain malevolent taint.

...

Chapter 416: Cause of Death (1)

Situ Fang asked the Lu Family cultivator, "What exactly is this mining cave used for?"

The Lu Family cultivator's face turned pale, and he clenched his teeth, refusing to speak.

Situ Fang threatened,

"Someone died in here, if you don't talk, the Taoist Court will investigate thoroughly, and your Lu Family definitely won't be able to escape involvement."

The Lu Family cultivator said, "A few Mining Cultivators died, so they died. My Lu Family will compensate with Spirit Stones."

After he finished speaking, it seemed he figured it out and thus gained some confidence.

"Right, right! A few Mining Cultivators, my Lu Family will compensate with Spirit Stones..."

He sneered, "This mining well is intricately connected, and some abandoned entrances are nothing out of the ordinary."

"These Mining Cultivators didn't know what was good for them, dug their way in, and were... just eaten by Monster Beasts, what does that have to do with my Lu Family?"

"Just a few worthless lives, it serves them right to die!"

Situ Fang, her anger surging, immediately wanted to beat him up.

Mo Hua hurriedly stopped her, "Sister Situ, getting angry is useless."

Situ Fang frowned, but still restrained herself.

Mo Hua then turned his head and said to the Lu Family cultivator:

"Normally, the death of a Mining Cultivator is an accident; indeed, just compensating with some Spirit Stones would suffice, but this time it's different. This is murder, a violation of the Taoist Law..."

The Lu Family scoffed, "Then who killed them?"

Everyone fell silent for a moment.

The scene was bloody and terrible; indeed, no one knew who had killed them, or even if they had been killed by a person.

The Lu Family cultivator laughed, "Without a murderer, how can you call it murder? To me, it looks like these Mining Cultivators, arrogantly assuming too much, entered this mining cave wanting to steal from my Lu Family's mines, only to end up trapped and then eaten by Monster Beasts..."

The Lu Family cultivator became more and more assured as he spoke, his demeanor growing increasingly haughty.

Mo Hua's eyes shifted, and with a suddenly bright smile, he falsely accused:

"I understand now; you committed murder for wealth, killing these Mining Cultivators!"

The Lu Family cultivator was taken aback, "You little ghost, what nonsense are you spouting? I don't even know them, plus they're just Mining Cultivators, all paupers; what wealth could they possess that would be worth my while to kill them for?"

Mo Hua said, "The fact you don't know them makes it easier to act against them. Besides, wealth isn't always visible. If you didn't kill them, without searching their Storage Bags, how could you know they carried no wealth?"

The Lu Family cultivator, annoyed, said, "You're slandering me!"

Nonsense, do I even need to say it? Mo Hua silently thought.

Then he regretfully continued, "Since you refuse to confess, we can only take you to the Taoist Court, lock you up in the Taoist Prison, and subject you to a severe interrogation..."

The Lu Family cultivator sneered, "You wouldn't dare."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"The Court Leader and my Lu Family..."

He halted mid-sentence, his face changing color, not daring to continue.

Mo Hua's gaze flickered as he understood.

Since the Lu Family was the largest Clan in South Yue City, possessing the most mines, they surely had dealings with the Court Leader.

And judging by the looks of it, these "dealings" were out of the ordinary.

On the surface, the Taoist Court and the Lu Family each did their own thing.

If there was an incident, the Taoist Court would also investigate and hold the Lu Family accountable.

But behind the scenes, there would likely be some transactions.

Mo Hua thought for a moment, then sneered, "Even if the Court Leader has a relationship with the Lu Family, that doesn't concern you..."

"You're just a minor cultivator in the Lu Family. For the lives of five Mining Cultivators, do you think the Lu Family would protect you, or would the Court Leader step in for you?"

"Do you think you're worth it?"

A chill ran through the Lu Family cultivator's heart, and the arrogance faded from his face.

Mo Hua continued, "We'll take you back, lock you up in the Taoist Prison, and publicly announce that you killed five Mining Cultivators..."

"What do you think the Lu Family will do? Will they provoke a public outrage to protect you, or will they let you take the fall to appease the situation?"

The Lu Family cultivator's gaze trembled.

Mo Hua, watching his reaction, sighed and pretended to be someone who didn't want to get involved, to avoid trouble:

"Actually, we didn't want to get involved in this matter..."

"But those Mining Cultivators keep making trouble at the Taoist Court; the Court had no other choice."

"The higher-ups need an explanation, and Sister Situ has to provide an answer."

"Who killed those five Mining Cultivators, in reality, is irrelevant."

"Nobody cares about the actual truth."

"All that's needed is someone who can take the blame, admit the guilt, and quell the situation..."

Mo Hua patted the Lu Family cultivator's shoulder, "The decision from above is that this person is you..."

The Lu Family cultivator jerked in reaction, "You're lying to me!"

But his tone trembled, lacking conviction.

He didn't know Mo Hua's identity, but he knew of Situ Fang's.

Situ Fang was indeed a Supervisor of the Taoist Court in South Yue City.

On the surface, she appeared to be seeking the truth for the Mining Cultivators.

But the waters of the Taoist Court were murky, and its officials corrupt; showing one face while keeping another hidden.

He couldn't be sure which side Situ Fang was really on.

And of all the Lu Family disciples, why was it him they chose to lead the way?

Mo Hua gave Situ Fang a signal with his eyes.

Situ Fang then darkened her face, her smile sinister, "Take him back. It'll give the Court Leader something to report; and as for the Family Head of the Lu Family... they surely won't miss a mere Qi Refinement Middle Phase Disciple."

Bai Zisheng reached out to grab him.

Struggling, the Lu Family cultivator shouted, "You have no evidence, you can't arrest me or convict me of any crime!"

Mo Hua slapped his forehead, "Right, we need to create some evidence."

After saying that, Mo Hua pulled out more than a dozen Spirit Stones, crushed them, and stuffed them into the Lu Family cultivator's hands.

The Lu Family cultivator was stunned, "What are you doing?"

Mo Hua claimed brazenly, "These Spirit Stones are the evidence of your murderous greed!"

The Lu Family cultivator found it absurd.

Was this little ghost no longer bothering to pretend?

Could he be so blatantly framing him?

The Lu Family cultivator hastily threw all the Spirit Stones on the ground, "I didn't do it, it wasn't me..."

Mo Hua sneered, "You refuse the toast only to drink a forfeit?"

The Lu Family cultivator asked, "And what else can you do to me?"

Mo Hua's gaze shifted slightly, and a faint sinister air appeared on his face, his voice low and tinged with eeriness:

"Locking you in this cave and sealing it with a Formation, forcing you to stay with these five dead Mining Cultivators..."

"A few days later, when we come to check, everyone will find you right at the crime scene, along with the deceased. You'll have no explanation then."

The Lu Family Cultivator said, "I will say... it was you who framed me!"

Mo Hua instantly reverted to a face of innocent naiveté, "Who would believe that?"

The Lu Family Cultivator's eyelids twitched uncontrollably.

"Oh, right." Mo Hua had another thought, "You might not even live to see that day. Who knows what's in this cave? It devoured Mining Cultivators, it'll probably eat you too..."

"It's possible that you'll be devoured by it the day after you're locked in..."

"But that also works perfectly, we can say you were killed while trying to rob and murder, resulting in mutual destruction."

"Anyway, whatever happens here, nobody else will ever know..."

The Lu Family Cultivator looked at Mo Hua in disbelief.

What on earth was this young devil capable of? How could he scheme so expertly, one trick after another?

Left with no choice, the Lu Family Cultivator nodded and said:

"Fine, I agree."

Before the words had fully left his mouth, he took advantage of Mo Hua's distraction to get up and run, but he didn't get far before feeling his body tighten, restrained by something.

Looking down, he found his body bound by faint blue water-shaped lock chains.

The Lu Family Cultivator was horrified.

What kind of spell was this?

Mo Hua, on the other hand, let out a cold laugh.

Bai Zisheng quickly stepped forward and dragged the Lu Family Cultivator back.

Pretending to lose patience, Mo Hua gestured to Bai Zisheng and said:

"Seal him inside. I'll draw the Formation."

Situ Fang hesitated for a moment but said nothing.

Bai Zisheng arched an eyebrow and, gripping the collar of the Lu Family Cultivator, dragged him towards the foul and decaying cave—the site of the Mining Cultivators' tragic demise.

The Lu Family Cultivator was terrified.

Only now did he realize that this little devil meant business!

Struggling, he pleaded hastily, "Spare me! Spare me! I'll tell you everything!"

Bai Zisheng glanced at Mo Hua.

Mo Hua nodded.

Bai Zisheng then dragged the Lu Family Cultivator back and dumped him in front of Mo Hua.

Mo Hua looked at him and said, "I'll ask you a few questions. Answer well, and I may spare you. If you hide anything, you'll join those Mining Cultivators..."

The Lu Family Cultivator's face turned ashen, and he nodded.

"What's the purpose of this mine shaft?"

The Lu Family Cultivator shook his head.

Mo Hua's gaze turned frosty, ready to throw him in.

The Lu Family Cultivator hastily said, "I, I... really don't know!"

Mo Hua's gaze sharpened, "Then what do you know?"

"I... I only know..."

The Lu Family Cultivator hesitated, sighed, "I only know that the mine shafts were ordered to be built by the Family Head, and even the Formations inside were personally arranged to be painted by him."

"After these shafts were constructed, they were sealed off, and no one has ever entered them..."

"I don't know what's inside."

"The Family Head has strictly ordered that the matter of the mine shafts must not be known to any Cultivator, nor is any Cultivator allowed to enter..."

The Lu Family Head, huh...

Mo Hua frowned, then asked further:

"How did these Mining Cultivators die?"

The Lu Family Cultivator mumbled, "That I know even less... How would I know they would sneak into these mine shafts?"

"You didn't notice?"

"They came in the middle of the night when it's eerie and spooky—who would want to go into these mine pits?"

Mo Hua's gaze sharpened, "Eerie and spooky?"

The Lu Family Cultivator knew he had misspoken and remained silent.

Mo Hua said, "This cave might be damp or dark, but it doesn't seem 'eerie and spooky'..."

"This..." the Lu Family Cultivator's gaze darted around.

"Don't want to talk?"

The Lu Family Cultivator nodded, then seeing Mo Hua's unfriendly expression, became alarmed and shook his head.

"Go on, why is it 'eerie and spooky'?"

The Lu Family Cultivator hesitated, swallowing hard before slowly saying:

"It is said that at night, this mine is haunted by ghosts..."

Mo Hua was startled, "Ghosts?"

The Lu Family Cultivator nodded, "Every night, waves of Yin energy and creaking noises fill the mine, the entire shaft vibrating subtly, as if someone is chiseling away at something..."

The Lu Family Cultivator wiped the cold sweat from his forehead:

"Some say they are the spirits of those Mining Cultivators who died unjustly within these pits. When the Yin energy is strong at night, they return to the mines as Ghost Cultivators and continue to dig as they did in life..."

Mo Hua knitted his brows.

It seemed that those Mining Cultivators had ventured into the mine to steal, and met some unknown ghostly specter at night, which led to their deaths.

But even with this, there were still many unanswered questions.

Mo Hua repeated his interrogation several times.

The Lu Family Cultivator stammered his answers, consistent every time, which made him seem truthful.

As a mid-phase Qi Refinement disciple of the Lu Family, he likely didn't know more confidential matters.

Mo Hua also casually gathered some information about the Lu Family before finally nodding and saying:

"Since you've been so cooperative, I won't make things difficult for you."

A huge weight lifted in the Lu Family Cultivator's heart.

Mo Hua then expressed his concern, "But if the Lu Family finds out that you've told me all this..."

The stone that had just lifted in the Lu Family Cultivator's heart now sank back down, and he hastily said:

"Young friend, young master, dear ancestor... please don't tell anyone..."

If word got out, the Lu Family certainly wouldn't let him off easily.

Mo Hua grudgingly said, "Fine..."

Then he sternly reminded, "But you must behave. If I have questions in the future, I'll come to you..."

"By the way, what's your name?"

The Lu Family Cultivator, on the verge of tears, replied, "Lu Ming."

Chapter 417: Cave Abode (1)

Lu Ming was tormented by Mo Hua and became completely docile.

Situ Fang was a bit startled, she kept sneaking glances at Mo Hua on the way back, filled with confusion.

Mo Hua seemed so innocent and naive.

How could he be so skilled at framing, threatening, interrogating, and coercing...

Who taught him all this?

The group left the Lu Family's mine.

The ensuing matters were to be handled by the Taoist Court.

The cause of the mining cultivator's death, whether or not he was killed by a cultivator, the identity of the murderer, and the subsequent compensation, all were left to the Taoist Court to deal with.

Situ Fang sighed with relief and said to Mo Hua,

"Thank you for this time, I'll treat you to something delicious when I'm free!"

"Thank you, Sister Situ!"

Mo Hua thought for a moment, then quietly said, "Sister Situ, if the Taoist Court finds any clues about the murderer, could you tell me?"

Situ Fang slightly furrowed her brows.

Investigations by the Taoist Court were usually kept confidential.

However, Mo Hua had been a great help in this case, and without him, they wouldn't have found even the body of the mining cultivator. Telling him seemed harmless.

With this thought, Situ Fang suddenly asked with some curiosity,

"How did you find that mine tunnel?"

She had wanted to ask when they were at the mine.

Why would there be a formation on an ordinary-looking rock wall?

And how did Mo Hua know that behind the rock wall was a cave?

Mo Hua modestly said, "I just have slightly stronger divine sense, and I know a little bit about formations, and I happened to discover it."

Situ Fang's expression was complex, and for a moment, she couldn't tell whether Mo Hua was being truthful.

But she didn't probe further, simply nodding and saying,

"I understand. If there's a clue, I'll secretly tell you."

Mo Hua smiled and said, "Thank you, Sister Situ."

Afterward, everyone bid farewell.

Before leaving, Mo Hua gave Lu Ming a meaningful look, "You understand what should be said and what shouldn't, right?"

Lu Ming shivered with fear, nodding repeatedly, "I understand, I understand!"

Mo Hua nodded in satisfaction.

After leaving the Lu Family's mine, Mo Hua and the others returned to the Nanyue Inn and reported the incident at the mine to Mr. Zhuang.

Mr. Zhuang frowned and remained silent.

In a low voice, Mo Hua said, "Master, I suspect the murderer has clues to the Ultimate Formation on him."

Mr. Zhuang smiled faintly and asked, "How did you come to that conclusion?"

"The deceased mining cultivator seems to have a trace of the Ultimate Formation's aura..."

Bai Zisheng and Bai Zixi looked at each other in bewilderment; they lacked divine sense calculation and hadn't noticed anything.

"Do you know what Ultimate Formation it is?" Mr. Zhuang asked again.

Mo Hua shook his head, looking somewhat disappointed, and said, "The aura is too faint, and the traces of the formation are shallow, I can't calculate it..."

"But..." Mo Hua recalled something, his expression becoming one of startled doubt, "This trace of the Ultimate Formation's aura is somewhat malevolent..."

"Malevolent..."

Mr. Zhuang's gaze became inscrutable.

"Master, are there Ultimate Formations within evil formations as well?" Mo Hua asked.

Mr. Zhuang nodded, "In this world, where there's righteousness, there's evil, and formations are no different."

"How is a malevolent Ultimate Formation different from regular Ultimate Formations?"

Observing the curious Mo Hua, Mr. Zhuang suddenly said with a smile,

"That kind of question, if you can figure it out yourself, then I won't tell you."

"Figure it out myself?"

Mo Hua was taken aback and muttered quietly, "But I haven't figured it out..."

Mr. Zhuang said with a laugh, "If you can find this Ultimate Formation, you'll naturally understand."

Mo Hua's eyes lit up, "So, Master, there really is an Ultimate Formation hidden in South Yue City, isn't there?"

Mr. Zhuang was taken aback, then replied with an ambiguous smile,

"Who knows? I haven't left the inn, how could I know..."

Mo Hua's eyes flickered, staring at Mr. Zhuang, then gradually became certain in his heart.

There must be one!

Whenever Mr. Zhuang showed this kind of teasing expression, it meant it was true.

Mr. Zhuang shook his head slightly and patted Mo Hua's head, "We might have to stay here longer, find a cave dwelling to settle in. The inn is noisy and not very convenient."

"A cave dwelling?" Mo Hua was somewhat astonished.

He had never lived in a cave dwelling.

Cave dwellings in the Cultivation World were generally very expensive.

In Tongxian City, only prominent or well-backed cultivators could afford the spirit stones to buy a cave dwelling.

Like Master Luo, a first-grade Formation Master, and the An Family's patriarch, Old Master An.

Although Mo Hua himself was also a first-grade Formation Master, he wasn't as "corrupt" as Master Luo; when drawing formations for people, he charged very few spirit stones.

If he was dealing with loose cultivators like those from East Mountain Village, he even did it for free as long as they provided their own spiritual ink.

He just treated it as free practice for drawing formations.

So although he was not lacking in spirit stones now, he was also far from being wealthy.

"A cave mansion, that must be expensive..." Mo Hua said weakly.

Upon seeing Mo Hua's expression, Mr. Zhuang revealed a smile and kindly said,

"As a first-grade Formation Master, it would actually be strange if you didn't live in a cave mansion."

"But..."

"Don't worry about spirit stones," Mr. Zhuang said. "You can go and choose a cave mansion in the city with your senior brothers and sisters later."

Since Mr. Zhuang had spoken, Mo Hua could only nod and then asked,

"What kind of cave mansion should we pick?"

"Look at the spiritual energy, the location, the formations, the Five Elements," Mr. Zhuang answered.

Mo Hua was initially stunned, but then gradually grasped what his master was implying.

The master was testing him.

On the surface, it was about choosing a cave mansion, but in reality, it was a test of his understanding and comprehension of formations, spiritual energy, and various principles of Tao cultivation.

"Understood, Master."

In the afternoon, when he had some free time, Mo Hua followed Bai Zisheng and Bai Zixi to the streets of South Yue City, looking to rent a cave mansion.

Buying one would be too expensive, and since they were only staying temporarily, renting was sufficient.

Mo Hua had never lived in a cave mansion, but he knew well how to find one and the intricacies involved.

Having grown up in Tongxian City, he had always been popular among cultivators of the same age like Da'hu and Dazhu.

After becoming a Formation Master, he had built an extensive network among the adults as well.

Having been exposed to the ways of the lower-ranking cultivators, he was familiar with them.

Although South Yue City was not Tongxian City, the rules and customs of the loose cultivators at the bottom were much the same.

Generally speaking, renting or purchasing a cave mansion relied on the services of a housing agency.

The intermediaries at a housing agency were generally called housing agency workers.

Mo Hua arrived at a housing agency and found a shrewd worker, expressing his intention to rent a cave mansion.

The worker was confused and somewhat indifferent when he saw the three children, Mo Hua included.

He thought Mo Hua was joking with him.

Three kids, renting a cave mansion?

Mo Hua handed over a spirit stone to him.

The worker was surprised, weighed the spirit stone in his hand, and immediately plastered a smile on his face:

"Dear young friends, what kind of cave mansion would you like to see?"

Whether these three kids rented or not, he had gotten his hands on the spirit stone.

It didn't matter if they didn't buy.

It was as if he had earned a spirit stone just for accompanying the children on a walk, and that wasn't a loss either.

Unsure of what kind of cave mansion he wanted, Mo Hua said, "Just show us around."

"Alright!"

The worker then enthusiastically led the way, taking them on a tour of the cave mansions listed in the housing agency's registry.

As the worker led the way, he talked non-stop:

"This cave mansion is great, spacious and roomy..."

"This cave mansion is also good, compact and exquisite..."

"This cave mansion is great, located high up, very majestic..."

"This cave mansion is also good, located low, very low-key..."

Anyway, everything was good according to him; big meant "spacious," small meant "exquisite," high meant "majestic," and low meant "low-key." There was always something positive to say...

Mo Hua silently took note, thinking that he should learn this way of talking.

Once learned, he could also praise others with such blatant flattery.

At first, the worker retained some pretense, but then he realized that his clients were three children – deceiving them felt pointless.

Furthermore, it wasn't certain if they would rent or not, so gradually he started to relax and speak some blunt truths...

"This cave mansion is good, but it's just for show; it looks nice but is uncomfortable to live in..."

"This one, forget it, it's shoddy workmanship..."

"It's a pity about this cave mansion; the rockery and waters are fake, but the formations are complete. The only issue is that someone died here..."

"How did they die?" Mo Hua's curiosity was piqued.

"Not clear on that..." the worker shook his head and explained, "Some say it was death from deviating during cultivation practice, their veins broken; some say it was an enemy seeking revenge, hacking them to death; others say they offended the Lu Family and were killed, then thrown into a mining pit..."

"Did the Lu Family really do that kind of thing?"

"That is..." The worker hesitated before abruptly realizing his blunder, then awkwardly chuckled, "Just rumors, nothing more than rumors..."

Moving on to the next cave mansion, he said:

"This cave mansion is also nice, elegant and luxurious in layout, the garden is equipped with the Flower Wood Formation; when activated by spirit stones, the garden blooms with clusters of flowers, fragrant and pleasing to the eye, a feast of beauty. But this one is better off not rented..."

"Why?"

The worker spoke in a hushed tone, "This belongs to a Court Leader from the Taoist Court, used for keeping a mistress..."

Mo Hua was shocked, "You know about this?"

The worker curled his lip, "These kinds of rumors, outsiders may not know, but we insiders hear them all the time until our ears grow calluses."

Bai Zisheng also asked, "And then what happened?"

The worker appeared to revel in the misfortune, "The affair got exposed, didn't it? The Court Leader's wife caught the mistress in the act, tore up the mistress's face, and even applied poison to the wounds, ensuring that she would be disfigured for life."

"The Court Leader tried to intervene but failed, and he too ended up with his body all torn up..."

Mo Hua was stunned and after a while, couldn't help but exclaim,

"The life of a cultivator in South Yue City is quite colorful..."

The worker hummed lightly, "To those who are well-fed and warm, thoughts turn to lust; these cultivators of such status are not worried about food and drink, people give them spirit stones, so naturally they seek ways to find enjoyment. There's plenty of such messy affairs around..."

Chapter 418: Chop Once (1)

The housing agency worker chatted about the idle gossip of South Yue City while introducing the cave dwelling to Mo Hua.

Mo Hua, while taking in the exterior layout of the dwelling, remembered what Mr. Zhuang had said.

"Look at the spiritual energy, look at the layout, look at the formations, look at the five elements..."

Since the Taoist Court unified all, the cultivation world had developed for over twenty thousand years, and billions of cultivators had been born, yet nature's spiritual energy had gradually become diluted.

Nowadays, the natural spiritual energy present between heaven and earth was no longer enough to support the cultivation of cultivators.

But there was indeed still spiritual energy between heaven and earth.

It's just that this spiritual energy was either too sparse, too mixed, or too tainted to be absorbed and refined by the cultivators.

Mo Hua pondered silently in his heart:

"Master asked me to look at the spiritual energy, but what exactly am I supposed to look at?"

"What's so special about spiritual energy?"

Mo Hua released his divine sense and observed the lingering spiritual energy above the cave dwelling, after a while, he gradually understood and realized something in his heart.

What Mr. Zhuang asked him to look at was not the spiritual energy itself, but the flow of spiritual energy.

If the spiritual energy flows, then the qi channels are unobstructed, making the dwelling suitable for living.

Wind may not always be present, but the flow of spiritual power is constant.

It's just that this kind of flow is very subtle and requires patience to sense and careful discernment to identify.

The layout is also easy to understand.

East, south, west, north, as well as the upper and lower directions.

The location of the cave dwelling within the entire layout of the Immortal City, as well as its orientation, are all carefully considered.

There's no need to mention formations.

As a First-grade Formation Master and a First-grade Chief Formation Master who had constructed the Five Elements First-Class Demon Slayer Formation, had divine sense of twelve patterns, and had even learned the Ultimate Formation that surpassed first grade, Mo Hua found things related to formations the simplest.

Especially the formations at the Qi Refinement Realm.

This South Yue City was but a Second Grade Immortal City.

The highest level of cultivation was only at Foundation Establishment, and the formation masters were at most first grade.

The formations used in this dwelling were mainly first grade, with even the nine-patterned formations being rare—most were simple formations of six or seven patterns.

These formations were so simple that Mo Hua didn't even need to calculate; he could see through them at a glance.

To Mo Hua, six or seven patterned formations were practically no different from basic formation patterns.

Lastly, the five elements...

Mo Hua still remembered the principles of the Five Elements Generation and Restraint he dealt with when constructing formation diagrams for the Refinery Shop.

In Tao cultivation architecture, different rooms and formations all involve the principles of the Five Elements Generation and Restraint.

How to utilize metal to produce water and nurture water sources; use water to produce wood, to nourish flowers and plants; and use earth to produce metal, to strengthen buildings...

Mo Hua looked, calculated, and confidently muttered to himself.

The housing agency worker couldn't help but look at Mo Hua with surprise.

This young cultivator didn't seem like an amateur.

And he was very familiar with the formations in the dwelling...

It seemed he had some solid foundations in formations.

Could it be that he's an apprentice of some Great Formation Master, picking out a dwelling for his master?

The housing agency worker's spirits lifted, and the smile on his face became even more sincere.

A Formation Master, after all...

Even if you couldn't curry favor with one, you must never offend one.

...

The housing agency worker was very enthusiastic, leading Mo Hua and two companions to see all the cave dwellings the housing agency had.

After Mo Hua looked around and reflected on them, he initially settled on three dwellings and asked Bai Zisheng and Bai Zixi:

"What do you think?"

Bai Zixi didn't say anything.

However, Bai Zisheng was not quite satisfied.

"It's not large enough, not grand enough, there are too few rooms, and the facilities for alchemy and artifact refining are very basic."

Mo Hua glanced at him, "Why don't you pick one then?"

Bai Zisheng thought for a moment and then backed down:

"Never mind, Master asked you to pick, so you should do it."

All these matters of spiritual energy, layout, formations, and five elements just gave him a headache.

If Mo Hua picked the wrong one, the master wouldn't punish him.

But if he picked wrongly, it was another story; he might be punished to copy scriptures or draw formations hundreds of times...

Bai Zisheng looked at Mo Hua again and mused in his heart:

"Could Mo Hua be a blood-related junior of Master? Otherwise, why would Master treat him so well?"

Bai Zisheng speculated, then immediately denied it in his mind:

"Impossible. The descendants of Mr. Zhuang couldn't possibly have such poor spiritual roots as Mo Hua!"

Mo Hua furrowed his brow, "Are you bad-mouthing me again?"

"I haven't even said anything!"

"You were saying it in your mind."

Bai Zisheng's mouth fell open, "Mo Hua, have you become a spirit? Can you know what other people are thinking?"

Mo Hua snorted lightly and didn't speak.

Since his divine sense had grown stronger and he learned calculations, he had developed a vague sense of some things.

Of course, knowing what Bai Zisheng was thinking was mainly because he knew him too well.

Bai Zisheng kept his guard up around strangers, but with acquaintances, especially his junior brother with whom he spent all his time, his thoughts were written all over his face.

Bai Zisheng asked about the serious matter, "So, which cave dwelling do we choose?"

Mo Hua said, "I picked according to the standards of spiritual energy, layout, formations, and the five elements that Master mentioned. These three are all similar, so choose whichever one you like."

Bai Zisheng scratched his head.

He felt none were particularly good, but if he had to choose, they were all similar.

Mo Hua glanced at Bai Zixi, "Little senior sister, which one do you like?"

Bai Zisheng also looked toward his sister.

After considering for a moment, Bai Zixi lightly pointed her slender finger at a picture of a cave dwelling and said:

"This one."

Mo Hua glanced at it; there was nothing special about this dwelling except for a pond in the yard, a lawn beside the pond, and a big tree on the lawn.

Although the layout was different, it bore some resemblance to their mountain abode in South Mountain of Immortal City where they had studied with Mr. Zhuang, especially the big tree in the courtyard.

Mo Hua then nodded, "Then this one it is."

Mo Hua showed the picture of the dwelling to Mr. Zhuang.

Mr. Zhuang only glanced at it and nodded, "Good."

Mo Hua was delighted in his heart, it seemed that his earlier considerations were correct.

Now that Mr. Zhuang had agreed, the next step was to go to the housing agency worker to rent the cave dwelling.

The housing agency worker was quite surprised upon hearing this.

He hadn't expected that Mo Hua and the other two were actually serious about renting.

"You really want to rent?" the housing agency worker confirmed again.

Mo Hua nodded, but before he could speak, Bai Zixi's crisp voice rang out:

"No, we're not renting."

Not only was the housing agency worker stunned, Mo Hua was too.

Bai Zixi said indifferently:

"We're buying."

Mo Hua whispered, "Sister apprentice, purchasing would require a lot of Spirit Stones..."

Bai Zixi shook her head, "Not a lot."

She gently patted the storage bag with golden silk and phoenix patterns at her waist and softly said to Mo Hua:

"Before we left, Aunt Xue gave me all the Spirit Stones..."

After saying this, fearing that Mo Hua would worry, she added:

"A lot, a lot..."

Mo Hua was somewhat shocked.

His little sister apprentice was actually a little rich girl...

Immediately after, he felt a bit puzzled, "Can this small Storage Bag hold that much?"

Bai Zixi nodded, "It can hold it."

Mo Hua understood.

This Storage Bag must be an extraordinary Spiritual Artifact.

The storage space in bags used by Loose Cultivators is limited, not able to contain too much.

If one needs to transport large items, they would have to use storage boxes.

But Mo Hua knew that some storage Spiritual Artifacts have very large inner spaces, which of course are also very expensive, at least too expensive for Mo Hua to afford.

Mo Hua looked again at the gold-threaded phoenix Storage Bag, his curiosity piqued, really wanting to know how much it could hold inside.

Yet, he felt it inappropriate to rummage through his little sister apprentice's Storage Bag.

On the other hand, the worker from the housing agency was overjoyed upon hearing this.

What was originally a rental had turned into a purchase.

A large deal had become an even bigger deal.

The housing agency worker immediately smiled and said, "This cave dwelling's original price is forty thousand Spirit Stones. If you, young friends, wish to purchase, our agency can offer a discount price, thirty-eight thousand Spirit Stones!"

Just as Bai Zixi was about to nod, Mo Hua spoke up indignantly:

"Hold on!"

Thirty-eight thousand Spirit Stones?! Scamming who?

A Loose Cultivator at the Foundation Establishment generally spends only about ten thousand Spirit Stones.

That ten thousand Spirit Stones would require a Loose Cultivator to save up for over thirty years without eating or drinking.

Moreover, how could a Loose Cultivator not eat or drink?

And how can one's cultivation always go smoothly?

If faced with an unexpected event requiring Spirit Stones, it's highly likely one would spend more than earn, never mind ten thousand Spirit Stones, they might not even save up a hundred.

This cave dwelling costs thirty-five thousand Spirit Stones?

Save for a hundred years without eating or drinking?

Why would an ordinary cave dwelling be so expensive?

Mo Hua furrowed his brows, feeling somewhat angry.

The housing agency worker, feeling helpless, said, "The market price is what it is; we can't do anything about it..."

Then he said something more about the Taoist Court, clans, and land issues, implying that the cave dwelling was indeed expensive, but it wasn't their fault.

"The market price has always been like this for the past few years..."

Seeing they really had difficulties, Mo Hua then said:

"Then give us a cheaper price."

Though he didn't need to pay the Spirit Stones himself, his little sister apprentice's Spirit Stones were still Spirit Stones.

He also felt pained for her for the thirty thousand plus Spirit Stones.

"We can't reduce it any further..." the housing agency worker said with a troubled face, "Young brother, you have a good eye. This cave dwelling you've chosen may look unremarkable, but it has a nice setup and is an excellent choice..."

Mo Hua's eyes narrowed slightly, "The Formation of this cave dwelling is flawed."

The housing agency worker was taken aback, somewhat displeased:

"The Formation here can be flawed? Let's not talk about other things, just this Formation alone, it integrates the Five Elements, it's good for both offense and defense, not only can it prevent theft and repel enemies, but it can also ventilate and cultivate one's Qi.

Moreover, the classification of this Formation method is definitely first-grade, drawn by a great Formation Master himself, and it's almost brand new..."

The housing agency worker was glib, praising to the skies.

Mo Hua pointed to a spot on the ground and said: "The Formation here is broken."

The housing agency worker was startled, "Broken... broken?"

Mo Hua nodded, "The Earth Stone Formation, the second Formation Pattern's media is broken..."

Mo Hua walked a few steps forward, looked up, and then said:

"The Formation painting here is incorrect."

"The Bright Lamp Formation, the fourth Pattern, the fifth stroke is wrong..."

The housing agency worker's mouth hung open.

Mo Hua turned his head to look at the courtyard, "Originally there were four Formations here, but they're no longer working and no one has repaired them, you probably didn't even know..."

"Also, the Formation here is wrong too..."

"The Formation here isn't incorrect, but it used low-grade Spiritual Ink, it will fail in two months."

"And here, the Formations are conflicting with each other..."

"What is this drawing here..."

"Here..."

...

The housing agency worker was completely dumbfounded.

Who exactly was this young cultivator?

He had never shown the Formation Diagrams of this cave dwelling to the young cultivator...

Formations are confidential, and the diagrams are always sealed. They can't be revealed until the transaction is completed.

But how did this young cultivator, after just a few glances, list all the defects in the cave dwelling's Formations as if he was reciting from a family treasure?

Whether a cave dwelling looks good or is comfortable to live in, and whether the layout is nice—

These are subjective issues.

One person may have one opinion, which can't be taken for certain.

But issues with Formations are very real and can't fool anyone...

And to have these issues pointed out so clearly and straightforwardly...

The housing agency worker felt the soul knocked out of him, sweating profusely.

After Mo Hua listed almost all the defects, his gaze flashed, and taking advantage of the worker's shock, he made a ruthless bid:

"Twenty thousand Spirit Stones!"

He shot for a high price, determined to cut nearly half off.

The housing agency worker trembled, nearly fainting...

Chapter 419: Tangyuan (1)

...

Cut the price in half and then slowly negotiate.

This was something Mo Hua had learned in the Market Town of Tongxian City.

The housing agency workers showed a bitter face, "It's just... nobody bargains like this..."

"Is there a problem with this Formation?"

"There is..." the housing agency worker said helplessly, then suddenly perked up, "No, I don't know..."

"Being stubborn is of no use!"

Mo Hua appeared confident, "The words I just said, write them down and show them to other Formation Masters, and they will confirm they're not the slightest bit wrong."

The housing agency worker was at a loss for words, "Then..."

"Is there a problem with the Formation?" Mo Hua asked again.

"That's... yes, there is..."

"Is the problem with the Formation a major one?"

"It is... I suppose."

"So since this cave mansion has a major issue, why are you selling it at such a high price?" Mo Hua demanded righteously.

The housing agency worker said bitterly, "But it can't be that cheap?"

"I didn't say we can't negotiate. How much will you lower the price?"

Bearing the pressure of Mo Hua's gaze, the housing agency worker tentatively said, "Thirty-seven thousand?"

Mo Hua shook his head, "Twenty thousand and five hundred."

"Thirty-six thousand?"

"Twenty-one thousand..."

...

After a back-and-forth of quoted prices, in the end, Mo Hua was only willing to pay twenty-nine thousand.

The housing agency worker gritted his teeth, saying helplessly, "I need to ask the owner. Please wait a moment."

"Go on, go ahead."

Mo Hua waved him off.

Bai Zisheng watched Mo Hua in wonder, "You're really good at bargaining..."

"Naturally."

Mo Hua nodded.

To a Loose Cultivator, every single Spirit Stone was valuable. Naturally, one should never be courteous when it was time to bargain.

Having Spirit Stones was one thing,

Not spending them unwisely was another.

After a little while, the housing agency worker came back, holding a Spirit Pact, and with an apologetic smile, said:

"I reported back to the owner. The owner was also unaware of so many problems with the Formation in the cave mansion and feels deeply sorry. Therefore, he is willing to sell this cave mansion to the three young friends at a low price."

With both hands, the housing agency worker offered the Spirit Pact to Mo Hua:

"The price can be even more favorable, twenty-eight thousand eight hundred and eighty-eight, for good luck..."

Mo Hua checked the Spiritual Energy. It was indeed twenty thousand, followed by a series of "eights."

"Your owner is so easy to talk to?"

Mo Hua was somewhat skeptical.

That's nearly ten thousand Spirit Stones cut...

The housing agency worker laughed, "Firstly, there are indeed issues with the cave mansion which you, young master, have noticed, and we have become a laughing stock; secondly, our owner also wants to make your acquaintance. You buying our cave mansion is also giving us face."

Mo Hua said suspiciously, "Does your owner know me?"

"The owner has not yet had the pleasure of meeting you, sir."

Mo Hua's sparkling eyes turned as he asked again, "Is the backing of your housing agency the Lu Family or South Yue Sect?"

The housing agency worker was stunned, then replied:

"Not hiding anything from you, young master, there's both the Lu Family and South Yue Sect..."

Mo Hua was also somewhat surprised, "Your housing agency's background is this significant?"

The housing agency worker chuckled, "Well, it's not all that... The Lu Family provides financial backing, and the owner who manages things is a direct disciple of the Inner Gate of South Yue Sect."

"Although there is backing from both sides, it's not as significant as being an Elder or Family Head, so it is just a small housing agency..."

The Lu Family, Taoist Court, South Yue Sect...

It seems they are all wearing the same pants.

Mo Hua sighed.

However, since he was an outsider, he didn't ask too much for the time being and gave a fist salute, "Please thank the owner for me."

The housing agency worker gave a respectful fist salute, "I wouldn't dare."

Afterward came the exchange of Spirit Stones, signing of the Spirit Pact, and handing over some Formation Diagrams and the Formation keys.

When signing the Spirit Pact, Bai Zixi said to Mo Hua, "You sign."

Mo Hua was taken aback, "Why should I sign?"

Bai Zixi said, "You picked it out."

"But, the Spirit Stones were provided by junior sister..."

Bai Zixi said, "I can't sign."

Bai Zisheng also nodded on the side, "Aunt Xue doesn't allow us to sign Spirit Pacts with others."

Mo Hua was taken aback for a moment, then understood.

He guessed clan members of prominent families probably had some taboos - signing Spirit Pacts could lead to being cheated or targeted.

"Alright then."

Mo Hua signed the Spirit Pact and, after signing, he gave the Pact to Bai Zixi, "Junior sister, you keep it."

Bai Zixi intended to refuse, but after thinking it over, accepted it.

After buying the cave mansion, it needed to be tidied up.

Especially the Formation.

The previous Formation was too shabby for Mo Hua's taste.

And since it was going to be his place of residence, he felt more at ease setting up the Formation himself.

Mo Hua spent some time restructuring the Formation Diagram of the cave mansion.

This Formation Diagram now utilized mostly First-grade Formations and even included the Thick Earth Formation.

Together with his junior brother and junior sister, Mo Hua renovated the Formation inside the cave mansion according to the Formation Diagram.

Afterward, they had the housing agency arrange for someone to come over and clean up.

The cave mansion was tidy and clean, with doors, windows, corridors, flowers and courtyards, every nook and cranny adorned with Formations. These Formations were interconnected, forming a sophisticated and complex First-grade Compound Formation.

Only then was Mo Hua satisfied.

After getting everything in order, Mo Hua and his companions returned to the inn, and brought Mr. Zhuang to the cave mansion.

Mr. Zhuang, seeing the tranquil courtyard, the peaceful bamboo rooms, and the quiet pond,

As well as the numerous, yet naturally integrated Formations matching each courtyard, each room, and every step with grass, nodded in pleased content.

Dinner was enjoyed under the big tree in the courtyard.

Mo Hua laid out a low table, with everyone sitting on the grass.

The table was arrayed with various dishes.

Because they had been to the mines, smelled the odors in the mine shafts, and seen the dreadful state of the deceased Mining Cultivators, Mo Hua and his companions had not had much of an appetite these days.

Actually, Mo Hua was fine, since Bai Zixi had her eyes covered by Mo Hua and didn't see much.

...

The main issue was with Bai Zisheng, who couldn't be exposed to the slightest smell of meat.

So, Mo Hua made some lighter vegetarian dishes and desserts.

That day's staple food was soup dumplings filled with sesame paste.

A gentle breeze passed, causing the tree leaves to rustle.

As Mo Hua ate the soup dumplings, he asked Mr. Zhuang, "Master, is the flow of spiritual energy very important?"

Mo Hua had been puzzled about this before.

Inside the cave dwelling, what could the flow of spiritual energy signify?

He guessed it had something to do with the direction of the wind and the momentum, but these were only his speculations. He wasn't sure about the deeper reasons.

Mr. Zhuang spoke succinctly,

"The flow of spiritual energy is related to the Spirit Vein."

"Spirit Vein?"

Mo Hua was slightly taken aback.

Mr. Zhuang nodded slightly, "The so-called Spirit Vein refers to the vast streams of spiritual energy that flow through nature, forming patterns of energy."

"Vast spiritual energy..." Mo Hua said, "So now, does that mean there are no Spirit Veins anymore?"

Because the spiritual energy in the world had already become extremely thin.

"There still are," Mr. Zhuang said indifferently, "it's just that ordinary cultivators can't see them..."

Mr. Zhuang paused, took a bite of the soup dumpling, nodded, and then continued,

"The existing Spirit Veins are either in the Taoist Court or within some ancient noble clans or sects that have been passed down to this day and have not yet declined."

"Some mid-level powers, if they have far-reaching plans and want to sustain their legacy, will also try to use Formation methods to artificially create Spirit Veins..."

Mo Hua was surprised, "Artificial Spirit Veins?"

"Indeed," Mr. Zhuang said reflectively, "it takes a large amount of Spirit Stones and special Formation methods to construct a massive flow of spiritual power, thus forming an ever-flowing and everlasting Spirit Vein."

"Using the spiritual energy within the Spirit Vein to cultivate for future generations."

"It's just that this is very difficult, and the cost is too great..."

"And what the general cultivator sees as a Spirit Vein is actually another form."

Mr. Zhuang looked at Mo Hua and slowly said, "You've seen it too."

Mo Hua furrowed his eyebrows and thought for a while, his eyes lighting up,

"Spiritual mines?"

Mr. Zhuang nodded, "The spiritual energy in the Spirit Veins, due to the changes in the terrain and buried underground, merges with the mountains, stones, and vegetation. Over the years, it forms Spiritual mines."

"So Spiritual mines are actually a kind of 'immobile Spirit Vein,' a 'one-off Spirit Vein,' solidified 'Spirit Veins' ..."

Mo Hua nodded in understanding, thought for a moment, then jumped in his heart, and asked,

"So, Master, if I can discern the flow of spiritual energy between the mountains, determine the direction of ancient Spirit Veins, would it be possible to calculate... where there might be Spiritual mines?"

Mr. Zhuang smiled encouragingly,

"The principle is that indeed..."

"Divine Sense Calculation, perception of spiritual power, Formation energy trails, and the flow of nature's spiritual energy all have things in common and form a system."

"But making it happen is very complicated in practice."

"You should learn more and practice more, start from the flow of spiritual energy, from simple to complex, from shallow to deep. In the future, perhaps you could indeed deduce Spirit Veins from the flow of spiritual energy, and thus locate Spiritual mines..."

Spiritual mines!

Mo Hua nodded repeatedly, his eyes shining.

If he really found a Spiritual mine, wouldn't that mean striking it rich?

He could dig up so many Spirit Stones!

Mo Hua revealed a greedy little look.

Mr. Zhuang couldn't help but chuckle and shake his head.

It wasn't that simple.

After more than twenty thousand years of Taoist Court development, the Spiritual mines in the cultivation world that hadn't been discovered were already few and far between.

Even if one was discovered, such a big prize attracted many would-be claimants, which often meant a storm of blood and violence...

Mr. Zhuang's gaze flickered, and he sighed softly in his heart.

Turning to look at Mo Hua, Mr. Zhuang suddenly hesitated again, showing an amused expression.

His disciple seemed obedient but was also whimsical and mischievous.

He was able to help a Loose Cultivator brazenly snatch a Spiritual mine from the Qian Family.

If he really discovered a Spiritual mine in the future, perhaps he could take a cunning opportunity and reap a juicy reward...

Afterward, there was no more talking, and Mo Hua concentrated on eating.

His cheeks were stuffed full.

The soup dumplings were fragrant and sweet.

Mo Hua couldn't help but eat more, and turning his head, he saw Bai Zixi seated beside him staring blankly at the soup dumplings in her bowl.

Mo Hua asked curiously, "Don't they taste good?"

He remembered that Junior Sister was supposed to love sweet things.

Bai Zixi shook her head.

Mo Hua's gaze held some confusion.

Bai Zixi glanced at Mo Hua, then pointed at the soup dumplings in her bowl and said, "They kind of look like you."

Mo Hua was stunned, then frowned.

He looked at the soup dumplings in the bowl.

White, round, and translucent.

After thinking for a while, Mo Hua asked uncertainly, "Junior Sister, are you saying I look pale?"

Bai Zixi shook her head again.

Mo Hua was even more puzzled.

Bai Zixi scooped up a snowy-white dumpling with her spoon, gently bit into it, and the black sesame filling oozed out...

Mo Hua froze, and after a long while, he finally understood.

Junior Sister was calling him scheming.

A fair face on the outside, but with a little dark heart on the inside.

Mo Hua muttered in dissatisfaction, "Where am I scheming..."

Bai Zixi nodded and said, "You are!"

In the mines, there was threatening, framing, deceiving, and intimidating - his methods were quite skilled.

Bai Zisheng also nodded on the side,

"Exactly, you seem harmless on the outside, but you have so many cunning ideas in your heart..."

Mo Hua glared at Bai Zisheng, "Being scheming is better than being a fool!"

Bai Zisheng was indignant, "How dare you call your Senior Brother a fool!"

"I didn't say that, you admitted it yourself..."

...

Under the big tree, Mo Hua and Bai Zisheng bickered endlessly in a lively manner.

Mr. Zhuang looked on unperturbed, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Bai Zixi then took another bite of her soup dumpling, squinting slightly, her gaze sparkling and clear.

Chapter 420: Clue (1)

After moving into the cave dwelling, Mo Hua had hoped for some peace, but within a few days, a stream of visitors began to arrive, presenting their calling cards.

The first was from the owner of a Housing agency, who was said to be a direct disciple of the South Yue Sect.

Mo Hua received him with simple hospitality.

This owner, surnamed Zheng, wasn't very old, with a Qi Refining Ninth Level cultivation, dressed in brocade robes and a jade pendant, looking every bit the dandy.

Mr. Zheng was very polite upon meeting Mo Hua, and after a brief conversation between them,

Mo Hua understood the general situation.

Mr. Zheng was a direct disciple of an Elder Lin of the South Yue Sect; his parents were in the Alchemy business and were quite wealthy, which helped him enter the Inner Gate of the South Yue Sect.

But inside the Inner Gate, fights among the direct disciples were common.

Worried about disadvantages befalling their son, his parents financed a Housing agency for him, so he could be the owner and make some Spirit Stones, which he could use to maintain good relations with the Sect and other local Tao Cultivation forces.

However, without powerful backing, a Housing agency is hard to establish.

His Dao companion came from the Lu Family, and a small part of this Housing agency also served as her dowry.

Seeing Mo Hua's young age, yet remarkable understanding of Formations, Mr. Zheng had the idea to build relations, and sold the cave dwelling to Mo Hua at a relatively low price.

Part of these matters Mo Hua learned from Mr. Zheng himself.

The rest he found out by spending two Spirit Stones to gather information from Housing agency workers.

Since Mr. Zheng didn't seem to have any ill intentions, Mo Hua treated him with likewise courtesy.

Mr. Zheng had no further business, and after a few cups of tea, he took his leave, saying before he left,

"I'll have my servant send over some fine tea to the young master later."

He probably thought the tea Mo Hua offered was not to his liking, but it would be impolite to say it outright.

The tea must have tasted bad indeed, as Mo Hua had bought it for only a fraction of a Spirit Stone.

Good tea is quite expensive.

He usually just "scrounged" for tea, seldom buying it himself.

Only after purchasing the cave dwelling, for fear of visitors, did he reluctantly purchase some tea leaves to serve guests.

Whether it tasted good or bad, it was all the same to him; Mo Hua wasn't picky.

But since Mr. Zheng intended to send tea, Mo Hua didn't want to be curt and thus replied with a smile and a cupped-hand salute,

"Then I must thank Mr. Zheng."

Mr. Zheng, seeing Mo Hua accept his gesture graciously, seemed very pleased and left with a smile and a salute.

Afterward, there were some other visits from Formation Masters, a bit of tea drinking, and some talk of Formation arts.

And some neighbors stopped by to offer welcome gifts.

Two days later, even Elder Su came by.

Mo Hua served the tea Mr. Zheng had sent to Elder Su.

After taking a sip, Elder Su commented,

"This is... our South Yue Sect's tea?"

Mo Hua asked in surprise, "You could tell?"

Elder Su chuckled, "I drink it every day; I know just by the smell."

Elder Su pondered for a moment before asking again,

"Who gave this tea to the young gentleman?"

Mo Hua replied, "A Mr. Zheng."

Elder Su frowned, "Mr. Zheng?"

"The one dressed extravagantly, wearing the jade pendant, and a tad chubby, who opened the Housing agency..."

"Oh," recalled Elder Su, "Zheng Yu, right?"

"He actually sent tea to the young gentleman?"

Elder Su seemed surprised but soon noticed that within just a few days, Mo Hua had already made quite a few acquaintances among the Cultivators in South Yue City.

When he entered, there were even many gifts piled up at the doorstep.

"Met them while buying the cave dwelling," Mo Hua said.

Elder Su nodded.

Mo Hua then inquired about Instructor Yan's matter.

Elder Su shook his head, "I sent people to investigate further, but we still have no leads on this Mr. Yan."

"I see..." Mo Hua nodded, "Thank you for your effort, Elder Su."

"It's a trifling matter, unworthy of mention," Elder Su replied politely.

Then, after pondering for a short while and hesitating, he still asked,

"Young gentleman, have you been to the Lu Family's mines?"

Mo Hua was slightly astonished inwardly but maintained his composure, nodding as if nothing was amiss, "I have been there."

Elder Su seemed about to say something but stopped.

Mo Hua inquired, "Is there something amiss?"

Elder Su hesitated for a good while before finally saying,

"The water in the Lu Family's mines is somewhat deep; it would be better for the young gentleman not to get involved."

Mo Hua spoke in a lowered voice,

"Could it be that the Lu Family has some unspeakable secrets..."

Elder Su waved his hands repeatedly, "No, no, young gentleman, don't get the wrong idea."

Elder Su continued, "The mines of the Lu Family are legal and compliant, having passed the Taoist Court's inspection, and the Mining Cultivators are there voluntarily. They don't delay payments of Spirit Stones and compensate in the event of an incident; there's nothing unspeakable."

Mo Hua put on a face of someone who, although not personally affected, was quite curious, and whispered,

"I heard from a friend at the Taoist Court that five Mining Cultivators died horrifically inside the mine... their deaths were particularly gruesome..."

Elder Su exclaimed in surprise, "You have friends in the Taoist Court?"

"You could say that," Mo Hua nodded.

After all, he called Situ Fang "sister" and had worked on assignments and dined together with her, which certainly qualified as friendship.

Elder Su's expression was complex.

This First-Grade Junior Formation master, wasn't it his first time in South Yue City? Yet not only did he know Zheng Yu, but he also had friends in the Taoist Court.

However, all that was of no consequence to him and didn't really concern him.

Elder Su just sighed before saying,

"People die in that mine every year; no death inside it is ever less than tragic."

"Every year there are deaths?"

"Yes."

Mo Hua frowned, "How many die?"

"That's hard to say," Elder Su pondered, "There are always a few hundred, but if a major accident occurs, the deaths could climb into the thousands..."

"A major accident?"

"Mine collapses, Monster Beasts causing trouble, Filthy Qi leaks, and so on."

Mo Hua felt a pang of compassion, "So many people die?"

Elder Su sighed, "It can't be helped, we rely on what the land gives us; here in South Yue City, there are only mines, and Cultivators have to make a living from them..."

"It's a bit better now; if people die, the Lu Family still compensates with Spirit Stones."

"In the past, death meant dying for nothing..."

Mo Hua was surprised, "They didn't compensate with Spirit Stones in the past?"

Elder Su nodded, "For Loose Cultivators, who cares if a few die?"

Mo Hua also sighed.

Elder Su then realized that the topic had strayed a bit and said:

"In short, the situation with the mines involves the livelihoods of mining cultivators, clan interests, as well as the authority of the Taoist Court, it's very complicated..."

"As Formation Masters, we should stay above such mundane matters; there's no need to concern ourselves with these trifles."

"Especially since you're an outsider, Young Master, it's even less appropriate for you to get involved..."

Elder Su's words were indeed heartfelt.

Mo Hua nodded:

"Don't worry, Elder Su, I know my limits."

Elder Su then breathed a sigh of relief.

He did not know whether Mo Hua was truly listening or just pretending to listen, but having heard these words was reassuring enough.

After chatting a bit more, Elder Su took his leave.

Mo Hua, however, rested his chin in his hand, somewhat puzzled.

How did Elder Su know that he had been to the mine?

If he wanted to inquire, he could certainly find out.

But he and Mo Hua were neither relatives nor close acquaintances, so why would he investigate Mo Hua's whereabouts?

Could this matter be related to the Lu Family?

Mo Hua remembered that the South Yue Sect and the Lu Family were in close association...

Sure enough, the next day, Mo Hua received an invitation.

The invitation was personally sent by the head of the Lu Family.

The wording was brief and did not specify any reason, merely asking Mo Hua to visit the Lu Manor to discuss Formation together.

Discuss Formation...

It seemed the Lu Family must have learned of his status as a First-Grade Formation Master; otherwise, the Family Head of the Lu Family wouldn't have personally sent an invitation.

In a Second-Grade Prefecture Border, the status of a First-Grade Formation Master was still quite prestigious.

And within South Yue City, the cultivators who knew of Mo Hua's First-Grade Formation Master status, as far as he could tell, included only Elder Su.

It seemed Elder Su and the Lu Family had no shallow relationship.

Mo Hua furrowed his brow.

To go or not to go?

Could there be any danger?

Mo Hua thought about it and decided to pay a visit.

Without any good reason, the Lu Family wouldn't dare and had no need to harm a First-Grade Formation Master.

If they wanted to act, it would be in secret, unseen and unheard.

Not by sending an invitation and openly welcoming him into the Lu Manor before making a move.

Moreover, Mo Hua was somewhat curious.

He wanted to know what type of person the Lu Family Head was.

Mo Hua shared this matter with Mr. Zhuang.

Mr. Zhuang merely nodded, not saying much.

Mo Hua then felt at ease, Mr. Zhuang's lack of comment indicated there was no danger in this matter.

Bai Zisheng wanted to go with him, but Mr. Zhuang kept him back.

"Practice the formation I taught you a hundred times first..." Mr. Zhuang said.

Bai Zisheng made a bitter face, watching Mo Hua leave the house with ease.

Mo Hua arrived at the Lu Family's estate.

There were disciples of the Lu Family who respectfully received Mo Hua at the entrance and led the way.

Mo Hua took this opportunity to take in the Lu Family's manor.

The first impression was that the Lu Family was very wealthy!

If the Sun Family was a small-time wealthy owner, then the Lu Family was a grand landlord.

The scale of their estate and the grandeur of their architecture surpassed even the Qian Family of Tongxian City in luxury.

And it was the same with formations.

The Lu Family likely had a complete transmission of formation knowledge, and there should also be a First-Grade Formation Master in the family, plus an abundance of Spirit Stones.

Therefore, the entire estate's Architectural Formation was the best Mo Hua had seen so far, superior even to the formations he had designed for the Refinery Shop and the Alchemist's Business.

Of course, it still fell far short of a real Large Formation like the Five Elements Slaughter Demon Great Formation.

The Lu Family disciple escorted Mo Hua to the Lu Family Head's study.

This was Mo Hua's first encounter with the Lu Family Head.

To his surprise, the Lu Family Head was an extremely gentle and refined middle-aged cultivator, bringing warmth like a spring breeze, handsome in appearance, creating an easily favorable impression.

In their conversation, Mo Hua discovered the Lu Family Head had a profound understanding of formations; at the very least, he was a First-Grade Formation Master.

Throughout the conversation, the Lu Family Head showed great admiration for Mo Hua.

The two talked for two hours, only discussing formations and some trivial matters, local customs of South Yue City, and some experiences in Tao Cultivation.

There was not a single mention of the mine.

Mo Hua was shy and polite, while the Lu Family Head was enthusiastic and attentive.

An air of mutual enjoyment between host and guest.

Before departing, the Lu Family Head gave Mo Hua a large and small bundle of gifts—Formation Books, Spiritual Ink, Formation Pens, some Spiritual Meat snacks, and specialty products from South Yue City.

He then had Mo Hua escorted back to the entrance in the Lu Family's luxurious carriage.

Mo Hua, riding back in the Lu Family's opulent and softly cushioned carriage, dumped the big and small Storage Bags in the courtyard of his home.

Bai Zisheng gaped, "Mo Hua, did you go scamming?"

Mo Hua shot him a glance, "I don't scam people."

Bai Zisheng shook his head, "We're fellow disciples, there's no need to lie to me."

He then asked, "All these, were they given to you by the Lu Family?"

Mo Hua nodded.

Bai Zisheng frowned, "Why would they do that?"

Mo Hua mused, "When someone is overly courteous without cause, there must be a problem."

But as for what the problem was, Mo Hua couldn't guess yet; he could only keep this matter in his heart for now.

Mo Hua furrowed his brow.

The pressing issue was to find a way to locate Instructor Yan.

Instructor Yan had been a mentor to him in the transmission of his cultivation.

Now, the situation in South Yue City seemed quite complex.

With forces intertwined, mining cultivators dying tragically, and the sinister Ultimate Formation...

If Instructor Yan really had come here, he may have encountered some misfortune.

Mo Hua wanted to find Instructor Yan quickly to check on his safety.

But after much searching, he still had no clues, so he decided to ask Situ Fang for help.

Situ Fang was a Supervisor at the Taoist Court and he had more ways of finding people than Mo Hua himself did.

Situ Fang agreed to help.

A few days later, Situ Fang came with news of two matters.

One was that a cultivator bearing the surname Yan and resembling a gentleman did indeed arrive in South Yue City a few years ago, and rented a room near the mines on the south side of the city.

But the room had not been inhabited for a long time.

According to nearby cultivators, this Mr. Yan left his house one evening, headed towards the direction of the mine, and never returned...

The second matter was that there were new leads regarding the five miners who had died tragically...