

The Quest 421

Chapter 421: Burying (1)

"The coroner from the Taoist Court inspected the bodies in the mine shaft and concluded that these Mining Cultivators were killed by Monster Beasts, and then eaten by them..."

"People from the Lu Family said they would compensate with Spirit Stones."

"Once the family members of the Mining Cultivators received the Spirit Stones, they stopped causing trouble."

"That's how things were left for the time being within the Taoist Court..."

Situ Fang said helplessly.

Mo Hua's gaze turned slightly somber, "It's not that simple, right..."

Without mentioning anything else, those Mining Cultivators were definitely not eaten by Monster Beasts.

Having dealt with Monster Beasts frequently at Big Black Mountain, Mo Hua was certain of this.

Seeing there was no one else around, Situ Fang spoke in a lower voice:

"Right, that coroner told a lie."

Mo Hua was somewhat puzzled, "How do you know he lied?"

Situ Fang replied, "I gave him Spirit Stones, and he confessed to me himself."

Mo Hua nodded.

Indeed, Spirit Stones could make people honest.

After he had given two Spirit Stones to the housing agency workers who dealt with cave dwelling sales, they also spilled all the truth.

Situ Fang continued:

"The coroner told me that these Mining Cultivators were first killed by someone, and then eaten by something unidentifiable..."

"The time of death was somewhat old, and the Filthy Qi inside the shaft was heavy, so the putrid and turbid scents blended together, making it difficult to distinguish what exactly ate the bodies..."

Mo Hua felt a chill in his heart; he was also somewhat moved.

To deduce the cause of death for those Mining Cultivators in such a state, that coroner certainly had some real skill.

In Tao Cultivation, every profession, even those deemed unassuming or 'lowly,' had its special intricacies that should not be underestimated.

"Then why didn't this coroner speak the truth?" Mo Hua asked again, "Did someone prevent him from doing so?"

"Yes," Situ Fang nodded, "Court Leader Zhao from the Taoist Court discretely briefed him."

"Court Leader Zhao?"

Situ Fang spoke softly, "He's more senior than I am, serving as a Supervisor in the Taoist Court of South Yue City for sixty or seventy years, deeply trusted by the Court Leader."

The Court Leader, huh...

Mo Hua somewhat understood.

That meant the Court Leader of South Yue City had instructed to downplay the incident, finding a 'suitable' reason to make a big issue small, a small issue gone.

If a Cultivator kills, it's murder.

If Monster Beasts kill, it's an accident.

Since it's an accident, it's considered an inevitable risk.

The Taoist Court wouldn't need to waste effort investigating, and the Lu Family wouldn't bear much responsibility, just needing to provide some Spirit Stone compensation.

The family members of the Mining Cultivators would be compensated with Spirit Stones and would no longer continue to make a fuss.

And so the matter was settled...

At first glance, it indeed seemed 'appropriate.'

Mo Hua glanced at Situ Fang's expression, seeing her take it to heart, and quietly asked:

"Sister Situ, are you planning to keep investigating?"

Situ Fang hesitated for a moment, then nodded:

"You're right, this matter isn't so simple. We have to find out who killed these Mining Cultivators and what ate their bodies."

Situ Fang sighed, "If we don't figure it out, I'm afraid more Mining Cultivators will die such tragic deaths..."

Mo Hua then said, "Your Court Leader won't agree to your continued investigation, right?"

Situ Fang carelessly replied:

"I'm on a rotating duty. With the backing of my Clan, I just need to be polite to him outwardly, and I don't need to be overly concerned with him."

Mo Hua nodded and praised, "Sister Situ, you have a kind heart!"

Then he thumped his chest and said, "I'll help you investigate!"

Situ Fang looked at Mo Hua skeptically, "Investigate what?"

"The cause of death for the Mining Cultivators."

Situ Fang, not understanding, said, "It's my duty to investigate, but why would you get involved in this mess?"

After thinking for a moment, Mo Hua replied:

"I want to find Instructor Yan; since he went missing in the mine as well, it might be related to the cause of death for the Mining Cultivators."

"Furthermore, I want to uncover the truth and not allow these Mining Cultivators to have died in vain."

Of course, there was also a key point: the Ultimate Formation.

Mo Hua had sensed the malevolent presence of an Ultimate Formation emanating from the bodies of the dead Mining Cultivators.

He wanted to know what this Ultimate Formation was and why it carried an evil aura.

And who exactly was using this Formation to harm people...

However, he did not reveal the matter about the Ultimate Formation to Situ Fang.

After pondering for a while, Situ Fang nodded, "Alright."

Then she added a word of caution:

"But you must be careful, this matter is probably more complex than it seems. If something goes wrong, you must run immediately."

"Their power is great, but only within South Yue City."

"Once you leave South Yue City, you'll be back in Tongxian City, your own territory, and you won't have to fear anything."

Mo Hua's gaze flickered, indicating that Situ Fang had also sensed something.

Mo Hua nodded and said, "All right!"

...

Although determined to investigate, the clues were limited.

Mo Hua wanted to first examine the bodies of the Mining Cultivators.

He wanted to use his Divine Sense to feel the deathly Filthy Qi on the bodies and find out what it was and how it differed from the usual natural essences.

He also wanted to perform further calculations, to see if he could obtain more clues about the Ultimate Formation.

After the mine shaft was cleared, the bodies of the Mining Cultivators were sealed within the Taoist Court.

Mo Hua followed Situ Fang to the Taoist Court, only to be informed that the bodies had already been cremated by the families.

Mo Hua's gaze became slightly focused.

Situ Fang also frowned deeply, "Who permitted this?"

"Who else?" The coroner curled his lips and, seeing no one around, pointed upwards with his hand.

Upwards—that would be the Court Leader of South Yue City.

Mo Hua quietly made calculations in his heart.

To hastily dispose of the corpses like this...

The problem with this Court Leader seemed quite severe.

It also indicated that indeed, these corpses harbored some unspeakable secrets.

Situ Fang's eyes flickered, evidently sharing the same thought.

They hadn't considered confronting the Court Leader either, because such an action would be meaningless.

"Let's go ask the families of the Mining Cultivators," suggested Mo Hua.

Situ Fang nodded in agreement.

These Mining Cultivators lived in residential houses near the mines.

Their houses were incredibly cramped, filthy, and in complete disarray, suffused with foul air.

The Mining Cultivators living inside all had disheveled appearances and dirty faces.

At this noontime, many were eating plain congee mixed with hard, black pickles.

The congee was mixed with flour, and it contained but few grains of rice.

Children, equally grimy, ran back and forth through the narrow alleyways.

Situ Fang showed a look of pity.

Even Mo Hua, accustomed to seeing Loose Cultivators in poverty, sighed lightly.

Even among Loose Cultivators, these Mining Cultivators were almost the poorest of the lot.

Mo Hua had always thought that the Loose Cultivators of Tongxian City had it tough.

But the further one traveled and the more one saw, the more one encountered the depths of poverty.

It appeared Elder Yu was right, "The Loose Cultivators of Tongxian City suffer greatly, but beyond Tongxian City, those who suffer more than Tongxian's Cultivators are even more numerous..."

Mo Hua's gaze became inscrutable as he silently pondered something.

Situ Fang led Mo Hua to the front of a dilapidated house.

The door of the house was closed.

Situ Fang inquired with the neighbors and found out that after the Taoist Court had cremated the bodies and returned them, the household went to bury the deceased Mining Cultivator.

The burial place was a large wasteland to the south.

It was a mass grave.

When Mo Hua and Situ Fang arrived at the mass grave, they saw the desolate ground scattered with many messy tomb mounds.

Some had steles with the names of the deceased inscribed.

Some had only a wooden plaque, weathered and decayed by the wind and sun.

Most graves had no markers, leaving it unknown who was buried there or who had buried them.

In the mass grave, there was a new tomb being buried.

As Mo Hua and Situ Fang approached, they saw three or four households gathered together, dressed in white, burning paper money, and weeping softly.

There was just one coffin.

Situ Fang inquired and learned that the bodies of these five men had been mangled beyond recognition, making it impossible to distinguish their limbs.

The Taoist Court had mixed them together and cremated them as one.

The families of the Mining Cultivators could only inter the five men together in one coffin.

Situ Fang said indignantly, "How could this be done?"

A woman, haggard and of middle age, clutching a thin child, spoke helplessly:

"Even if separated, we couldn't afford coffins. This single coffin was pooled together by four of our households."

"Isn't it five households?"

"One family—the wife has already remarried with her son and no one is there to bury him."

Situ Fang was at a loss for words.

The woman sighed and said:

"We don't blame her. A widow with an orphan, if she didn't remarry, she couldn't survive."

Situ Fang furrowed his brow, "Didn't the Lu Family compensate with Spirit Stones?"

"We got a hundred, but by the time it reached us, only twenty were left. These twenty Spirit Stones won't last long."

Situ Fang's expression turned cold, "Who skimmed off the top?"

The woman hemmed and hawed, unable to speak, her face filled with sorrowful sighs.

Situ Fang asked again, but the woman only shook her head, remaining silent.

Everyone fell somewhat silent.

The desolate gravesite once again grew deathly quiet, with only the weak sounds of weeping intermittently rising and falling.

After the graves were established, everyone offered incense.

The incense smoke curled upwards, the graves lonely.

The Mining Cultivators' family members had faces filled with sorrow.

Life as a Mining Cultivator was tough, and it was uncertain how long they could survive.

Who knows when an accident in the mine shaft might occur, adding another grave to this mass burial ground?

And ultimately, these graves would remain nameless and unidentified amid the desolate hills.

Unasked-about, unvisited for offerings.

Just a collection of unknown mounds of earth and rocks.

Mo Hua glanced around, feeling an inexplicable sense of desolation and melancholy.

After a moment, Mo Hua was taken aback.

He took another look at the families of the Cultivators and slowly furrowed his brows.

He remembered that when these families of the Mining Cultivators had made a fuss, demanding an explanation from the Taoist Court and arguing with Situ Fang, there were several strong men by their side.

But now, looking at these few households, there were only women and children, or the elderly.

There were a few young Cultivators, but they were also frail and thin.

Where had those strong men gone?

Mo Hua's gaze turned slight cold.

Chapter 422: Ruffian (1)

Mo Hua quietly shared her suspicions with Situ Fang.

Situ Fang was slightly stunned, then her brows furrowed tightly. She realized something was not right and, recalling the situation at that time, she slowly said,

"Those burly men, dressed in the miners' clothes with rough hands and dark skin, I thought they were the family of these missing miners, or at least relatives or friends."

"It was them who were causing trouble all along, demanding a huge compensation from the Lu Family."

"But now that the matter has settled and the Lu Family has given the compensation, they have suddenly disappeared. They didn't even show up for something like the burial, which is very strange..."

Situ Fang remarked after some thought, "I will ask the miners' families again."

Mo Hua shook her head, "They may not dare to speak."

Seeing their demeanor just now, all meek and compliant, they must be afraid of retaliation and hence don't dare to say much.

Situ Fang then said, "Then I'll ask the local miners about their identities."

"The miners might not tell the truth either," Mo Hua said.

After all, they don't hold much affection for the Taoist Court either.

"Then..."

Mo Hua's eyes flashed as she said, "Let me handle this, Sister Situ. You draw the portraits of those few burly men..."

"Leave it to you?" Situ Fang was astonished.

"Yes," Mo Hua nodded, "I know who to find."

Situ Fang hesitated, "You are here for the first time in South Yue City, right? How do you know so many cultivators?"

Mo Hua replied modestly, "I am quite well-received..."

Situ Fang was at a loss for words for a moment.

"Alright then."

Situ Fang sighed and, following her memory, drew the appearances of the few burly men, albeit a bit awkwardly with the brush.

Mo Hua took the drawing, and following her instructions, added a few touches.

Situ Fang's eyes brightened, "This is how they look; you are really good at this."

Mo Hua smiled.

As a Formation Master who deals with formation patterns every day, sketching portraits is quite simple.

Mo Hua carefully stored the portraits and then sneakily slipped away to the Lu Family mines. Hiding in plain sight, she sat on a boulder, waiting for the opportunity to arise.

As evening approached, there was a shift change for the overseers.

A Lu Family cultivator in the middle phase of Qi refinement walked out of the mine, full of arrogance.

Mo Hua called out, "Lu Ming."

The cultivator named Lu Ming paused, looking around; no one was in sight, and his expression was one of confusion as he muttered,

"Weird, who's calling my name..."

He continued walking.

Not far ahead, he heard his name being called again.

It was a young, clear, child-like voice.

Lu Ming was taken aback and looked around once more, but still, no one was there.

The arrogance on his face slowly faded, replaced by extreme solemnity and tension.

"Damn it..."

All the cultivators guarding the mine knew that the mine was dangerous and eerie at night.

But now it was only evening, not yet dark...

Could it be...

Lu Ming began to sweat with fear.

He was so scared that he turned to run, but after staggering only a few steps, he found himself immobilized.

Blue watery spiritual power chains wrapped around him, leaving him unable to move.

The feeling was familiar, and Lu Ming quickly realized what was happening.

He turned his head and, sure enough, saw a young cultivator sitting leisurely on another big stone.

The young cultivator was even waving his little hand at him.

Lu Ming felt like crying without tears.

He was only in the middle phase of Qi refinement, while this young cultivator was already in the later phase.

Not only that, this little cultivator also knew formations, and his spells were very peculiar.

Knowing he couldn't escape, Lu Ming had no choice but to reluctantly approach Mo Hua. As he came face to face with Mo Hua, he forced a smile and said,

"Young... Young Master, how come you're here?"

Mo Hua replied, "I've come to find you."

Lu Ming's eyelid twitched, "To find me... for what?"

Mo Hua's smile held a hint of amusement as she said,

"Did you, perhaps, tell your family head about my affairs?"

Lu Ming went pale, "No, I didn't!"

"Tell the truth."

Lu Ming fell silent.

"If you tell the truth, I won't trouble you," Mo Hua said.

Then she smiled with a hint of malice, "But if you lie, the things in this mine will have a good feast tonight..."

Remembering the death of the few miners, Lu Ming shivered and immediately confessed,

"I didn't want to say anything, but when the family head asked me, I... I didn't dare not to speak..."

"What did you say exactly?"

Lu Ming replied weakly, "I just said you know formations, that you found the mining tunnel, and then you found the bodies of the miners inside. I didn't say anything else..."

"I dare not say..."

Because the other matter is related to the Lu Family.

These matters, it was he who had leaked them out.

If the Family Head knew he'd leaked the news, especially about the mine, he certainly wouldn't let him off.

Mo Hua nodded.

Being skilled in Formation, discovering the mine was something he couldn't hide. The Lu Family Head knowing about it wasn't really a big deal.

As long as he didn't know that Mo Hua was interested in the mine, that was fine.

"Alright, let's talk about the main issue."

Mo Hua took out the portraits of those few men drawn by Situ Fang and asked:

"Do you recognize these men?"

Lu Ming looked over the portraits one by one, shook his head, and said:

"I don't recognize any of them."

Mo Hua's gaze tightened.

He picked out three portraits and said to Lu Ming:

"You lied, you recognize these three portraits."

Lu Ming's mouth gaped open, "This... this..."

How did he see through him?

Could this junior cultivator actually read minds?

Mo Hua couldn't read minds.

It was just that when Lu Ming looked at those three portraits, although his expression remained unchanged, there were slight fluctuations in his Divine Sense.

Such minute fluctuations couldn't escape Mo Hua's perception.

One's expression may deceive but Divine Sense would not.

Therefore, Lu Ming certainly knew these three men.

Mo Hua's crisp voice carried a hint of chill as he warned:

"I may be young, but I have a bad temper."

"You've lied to me once, I'll remember that, but if you lie to me again..."

Mo Hua spread a bright smile, "I'll make sure you never have the chance to lie to anyone ever again!"

In Mo Hua's innocent smile, there was a hint of maliciousness.

He seemed like an Immortal child from under the seat of an Immortal, yet also like a little demon from the Underworld beckoning souls...

Lu Ming shuddered again, bitterness in his heart:

What exactly is this little ancestor's identity?

Mo Hua patted the three portraits with his small hand, "Tell me, who are these three?"

Lu Ming sighed and said dispiritedly, "They're Mining Cultivators..."

"Mining Cultivators?"

"To say they're Mining Cultivators isn't exactly right either..."

Lu Ming explained, "They are actually local ruffians from the city. Usually, they loiter for descendants of the Noble Families, bullying people by flaunting power; or they extort small merchants, exploiting locals; or they rob on the outskirts of the city to scrape up some Spirit Stones..."

"With Spirit Stones in hand, they squander in indulgences, gambling and visiting brothels."

"Only when they have no Spirit Stones left do they go to the mines to dig for a day or two..."

"So although they are Mining Cultivators, they aren't really Mining Cultivators..."

Mo Hua frowned, "Do they also help wronged Mining Cultivators claim Spirit Stones?"

Lu Ming was a bit surprised, "How did you know?"

Seeing Mo Hua ignoring him, Lu Ming had no choice but to explain,

"If a Mining Cultivator encounters misfortune, they will inform the family of the Mining Cultivator and then take it upon themselves to claim the Spirit Stones for them."

"The Spirit Stones they claim, they keep the lion's share, and only the rest gets to the hands of the Mining Cultivator's family."

"Doesn't anyone deal with them?" Mo Hua inquired.

"It's useless," Lu Ming said, "They have quite a few people, and they are ruthless in their actions. Once involved with them, they're like clingy dogs that you can't shake off..."

"The higher-up cultivators don't bother with them and the lower-class Mining Cultivators dare not speak out against them."

Mo Hua pondered for a moment and then asked:

"How do you know them?"

Lu Ming hesitated to speak.

Mo Hua said, "Tell the truth, I won't blame you."

Only then did Lu Ming sheepishly speak, "I've accepted Spirit Stones from them, giving them some conveniences here at the mine..."

Mo Hua's gaze sharpened, "What conveniences?"

Lu Ming hurriedly replied, "Nothing much, just that they come and go as they please, and if there's an issue, I would just turn a blind eye..."

Mo Hua's brows furrowed, a hint of doubt in his heart.

These ruffians themselves hardly ever mined, so why bribe for such privileges?

And what exactly were they doing that they needed the mine supervisor to "turn a blind eye"...

Mo Hua had a vague guess in his heart, and his gaze became icy.

Although the Loose Cultivators of Tongxian City were poor, the ones at the bottom supported each other.

But in South Yue City, some Loose Cultivators, despite being at the bottom and weak themselves, indulged in trampling over those even weaker.

"What are the names of these three cultivators?" Mo Hua asked coldly.

Lu Ming replied, "The tall one is named Wang Hu, the one with half his hair burned off is Tang Huzi..."

"The one leading them, with the scar on his face, is named Wang Lai, but privately everyone calls him 'Cheeky Wang'..."

Chapter 423: Tracking (1)

Mo Hua relayed the information he had gathered to Situ Fang.

Situ Fang, thinking of the destitute orphans and widows, furrowed her brows tightly in anger.

"How outrageous!"

This was exploiting the deceased's wealth, ruining complete households!

The next day, Situ Fang, accompanied by cultivators from the Taoist Court, found Wang Lai and his cronies at the gambling den, arrested them, and took them in for interrogation at the Taoist Court.

She incidentally confiscated the Spirit Stones they had extorted.

Situ Fang returned those Spirit Stones to the families of the mining cultivators, but she had no way to deal with Wang Lai and the others.

Wang Lai and his group had forcefully demanded compensation for the miners and appropriated most of the Spirit Stones for themselves, which was not considered a grave offense.

The judgment from the Taoist Court couldn't be too severe.

Situ Fang wanted to dig up their past misdeeds and convict them on multiple charges.

These hoodlums had been a blight on the township and undoubtedly had a track record of bad behavior.

However, with the miners being weak and fearing retribution, no one dared to testify against them.

Left with no choice, Situ Fang could only detain them for a month. She also resorted to corporal punishment; giving them thirty heavy strokes of the rod before releasing them.

After being released from the Taoist Prison, the first thing Wang Lai and his thugs did was to band together with a bunch of other scoundrels, go to the deceased miner's house, and threaten and extort the family. They took back the Spirit Stones and even injured several people, brazenly declaring:

"If you dare report us to the Taoist Court again, we'll ensure your entire family is wiped out!"

This was what Situ Fang told Mo Hua.

In the courtyard of her dwelling, Situ Fang was so angry that she gritted her teeth.

"I was about to throw them back into the Taoist Prison when several older Enforcement Leaders stopped me..."

"They told me it was pointless, that they had seen such things happen many times over the years."

"Unless we actually kill these thugs, they are like sticking plasters, impossible to get rid of."

"Arresting them only to release them again and again..."

"Indeed, as a Supervisor of the Taoist Court, I'm not afraid of them, but ultimately, it's the poor mining cultivators they bully who suffer..."

Situ Fang's expression was laden with helplessness.

After talking for a while, Situ Fang left with a face full of worry.

Mo Hua sat in the courtyard, frowning in thought.

Bai Zisheng and Bai Zixi finished learning about Formation from Mr. Zhuang and, as they walked out, they passed by the courtyard and saw Mo Hua sitting under a large tree, deep in contemplation.

Bai Zisheng ran up to Mo Hua and asked,

"What's wrong?"

After thinking for a moment, Mo Hua told him about Wang Lai and the others' case.

Hearing this, Bai Zisheng angrily said, "Just slaughter them!"

Bai Zixi's willow brows also knitted slightly.

Mo Hua said, "Actions need to follow the rules, we must adhere to the Taoist Law, if they haven't committed a crime deserving death, it's not right to kill people casually..."

Bai Zisheng muttered, "I think they deserve to die already..."

Mo Hua gave him a look.

Bai Zisheng said no more.

Then he paused, looking at Mo Hua suspiciously, "Are you scheming something bad?"

Not pleased, Mo Hua said, "Why would you call it scheming something bad?"

"You're definitely planning to trick people..." Bai Zisheng remarked.

Bai Zixi also looked at Mo Hua with suspicion.

"It's not exactly tricking people..." Mo Hua thought for a moment, then said, "I plan to secretly follow them and see what they usually do, to find if there's something incriminating."

If these cultivators were guilty of repeated wrongdoings, they were bound to slip up somewhere.

"Follow them?" Bai Zisheng's eyes lit up.

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

Bai Zisheng was hugely disappointed, "Why not?"

"You don't know a Concealment Technique."

"It's not needed, right..."

"Of course, it is!" Mo Hua raised his fine eyebrows, "Only by concealing yourself can you follow them. To tail them openly is to make fools of them, isn't it?"

"Alright then..."

Bai Zisheng lost his enthusiasm.

Bai Zixi coughed softly to remind Bai Zisheng and then glanced subtly at Mo Hua.

Realization dawned on Bai Zisheng, and he said to Mo Hua,

"Right, aren't you skilled in Concealment Formation?"

"My Concealment Formation isn't very effective..." Mo Hua demurred.

Bai Zixi shook her head, "Your Concealment Formation works quite well, it's the Taoist Robe you use that isn't good."

Hearing this, Bai Zisheng also nodded vigorously:

"Exactly, exactly, you're my junior brother, how could your Formation skills be bad, it must be the Taoist Robe you're using..."

"I'll prepare a superior Taoist Robe for you, you draw up a Concealment Formation for us, and then we can go together to follow those bad guys."

Bai Zisheng figured confidently, then assertively said,

"As your senior brother, how can I let you venture alone? I would feel guilty."

Mo Hua looked at him silently, "Are you feeling 'guilty' or is it your 'desire to play' that can't take it..."

Bai Zisheng, his intentions seen through by Mo Hua, sheepishly said,

"Both, both."

He had been cooped up in the last few days by Mr. Zhuang, studying those complicated and profound Formations until his head spun.

Naturally, he wanted to seize the chance to go out and have fun with Mo Hua.

"What about your master? Don't you need to keep learning Formation?" Mo Hua asked in doubt.

Bai Zisheng and Bai Zixi had been studying Formation in the past few days.

It was that kind of formation he couldn't learn.

"It's fine, Master hasn't taught new things in the past few days, I just need to review whenever there's time," said Bai Zixi.

Mo Hua was still somewhat hesitant.

Bai Zisheng looked at him eagerly.

The eyes of Bai Zixi were also shining brightly.

Mo Hua sighed, "Alright, but you must be low-key and cautious..."

"You must listen to me," Mo Hua emphasized again.

When the younger disciple said this, the elder brother and sister both nodded obediently.

After that, Mo Hua began to draw the Concealment Formation.

The Taoist robe was too cumbersome; they couldn't just wear another robe over their clothes. That would be fine when concealed, but too conspicuous when not.

Moreover, it would be inconvenient for movement.

Bai Zixi picked out several garments for Mo Hua.

Mixing and matching with the formation, Mo Hua finally chose a cloak-style garment.

This hooded type, worn over the outside, could keep one warm, block out the wind and dust, and when wearing the hood, could even hide one's face.

In the Minor Wilderness State Boundary, the weather was hot, so Mo Hua chose three lighter cloaks.

These cloaks were made with special refining techniques and were all top-notch Spiritual Artifacts,

Mo Hua drew the Concealment Formation on them.

Afterward, the three tried it out, to great effect.

At least to the naked eye, it couldn't detect anything.

Of course, Mo Hua's Divine Sense was too strong; he could still detect his elder brother and sister, but Bai Zisheng could not detect Mo Hua.

Once they were prepared, the three began their surveillance.

Their target was Wang Lai.

Wang Lai, also known as Cheeky Wang, was regarded as the leader of these ruffians.

He wasn't tall, but his cultivation was not low—Qi Refinement ninth layer peak, and amongst this group of rogue cultivators, he had the deepest cultivation level.

An Earth Series Spiritual Root, he practiced the path of Body Refinement, using straightforward cultivation techniques. His specialty was wielding a ring-head blade called the Mountain Opening Blade.

On ordinary days, he was idle and caused trouble.

Whenever he had Spirit Stones, he would indulge in eating, drinking, prostitution and gambling, not short of anything.

The street he often frequented was Jinhua Street, located to the north of South Yue City and was the most bustling area of the entire city.

Naturally, it was also the most corrupt place.

Qin Tower, Chu Pavilion, brothels, gambling houses, and all sorts of establishments were available.

There were also some places that Mo Hua had never seen or even imagined...

Mo Hua was a bit curious, but still refrained from going in to have a look.

After all, they were definitely not good places.

He might let it pass for himself, but with his elder brother and sister following, he couldn't lead them astray, otherwise his Master would surely knock on his little head.

Although Jinhua Street was bustling, it also had its social stratifications.

The places Wang Lai could afford were some secluded brothels, narrow gambling houses, and low-grade taverns.

Living a life of drunkenness and debauchery, squandering the money he swindled from dead miners, Wang Lai began to "make" Spirit Stones again.

He had to "make" Spirit Stones, as he also owed money to the gambling houses.

A horse does not get fat without night grazing, a person does not get rich without windfalls.

Just as Mo Hua expected, Wang Lai's methods for "making" Spirit Stones were all underhanded.

There was stealing, cheating, tricking, and robbing.

There was being a lackey for a Noble Clans disciple of South Yue City, clearing the way for him to earn rewards; there was extorting protection money from small merchants;

There was setting up cons in the gambling houses and tricking Spirit Stones from visiting cultivators; there were highway robberies and stolen goods;

There was even finding a female cultivator from a brothel to perform petty tricks called "tricky" to swindle Spirit Stones...

Mo Hua truly had his eyes opened.

The way Mining Cultivators earned Spirit Stones was only one: through hard, sincere effort, yet both bitter and tiring.

And yet Wang Lai, without doing any proper work, spent each day in dissipation...

The harder one worked, the more toil they endured, the more miserable their life became.

This world truly bullied the honest cultivators.

Mo Hua felt some emotion and at the same time, some doubts arose in his mind.

He remembered Lu Ming saying that when these ruffians like Wang Lai truly ran out of Spirit Stones, they would join the mines as Mining Cultivators for a few days, dig some ore, and earn a few Spirit Stones.

But during these days, Wang Lai indeed experienced times when his pockets were dry, without a single Spirit Stone to his name.

However, he hadn't entered the mines once, nor dug any ore.

"Something's not right..." Mo Hua furrowed his brows.

This Wang Lai seemed to have nothing to do with the mines.

This seemed highly unlikely.

Mo Hua waited patiently, and after a few days, he found that Wang Lai was finally going to enter the mine.

Because he found an elderly Mining Cultivator to whisper:

"There are top-grade ores hidden by the Lu Family in the mine, let's steal some, and we won't have to worry about food and drink for the rest of our lives..."

Stealing from the mine...

Mo Hua's pupils contracted.

The five missing miners seemed to have died in the mine because of an attempt to steal ore...

And stealing ore was a great taboo for Mining Cultivators.

Why had those five unfortunate miners suddenly thought of stealing ore?

Mo Hua looked at Wang Lai, his eyes brimming with a cold light.

Chapter 424: Calculation (1)

"Old Yu, what do you say?"

Wang Lai spoke to the elderly, dark-skinned, and gaunt old cultivator.

Old Yu was startled, waving his hands repeatedly:

"No, no, I dare not steal from the Lu Family's mine..."

Wang Lai let out a scoff, "What's there to be afraid of? The bold thrive, and the timid starve. The Lu Family rides on our backs, making us suffer and slave away for them. They, on the other hand, enjoy their riches and luxuries while we can't even afford to eat. What does it matter if we steal a little ore from them?"

Wang Lai appeared to be considering Old Yu's interests.

Old Yu's gaze turned wary, and he shook his head again.

Wang Lai's eyes showed displeasure as he continued patiently, "Don't worry, the Lu Family won't find out."

"How do you know?" Old Yu cautiously asked.

"We'll go at midnight, unseen and unheard," Wang Lai whispered. "And besides, I've bribed the Lu Family's cultivators to turn a blind eye..."

"But that's a secret mine, the Lu Family's treasure trove, who knows how many good things are there."

"We won't take much, just one or two pieces. Once sold, they could be exchanged for a large amount of Spirit Stones..."

Wang Lai enticed him bit by bit.

Old Yu was visibly tempted, but after glancing at Wang Lai, he still shook his head.

He did not trust Wang Lai's character.

As for who Wang Lai was, Old Yu was all too aware.

Wang Lai tried to persuade him again, "Aren't you lacking Spirit Stones?"

Old Yu nodded, "In this mine, who isn't short on Spirit Stones?"

"But you're different," Wang Lai said, "Your grandson has an excellent Spiritual Root, but what a waste it is without Spirit Stones to cultivate..."

"Just think, if he succeeds in his cultivation, he could leave the mines behind for a promising future in Tao Cultivation."

"But you're so poor that without Spirit Stones for cultivation, no matter how talented he is, he'll end up just like you, unable to leave the mines for life, forever buried in these rotten stones, living a bitter existence until one day, dying in the pits..."

Wang Lai sighed, "If his Spiritual Root were poor, that'd be another story. We'd all share the same miserable fate, rotting in the mountains, left with nothing to say."

"But your grandson is different, isn't it a waste of his talent if he doesn't cultivate and gamble on his future?"

"Spiritual Roots are innate. Your grandson being born with such a Spiritual Root is a rare blessing that comes once in a hundred years, not every family has the chance to have a child with such a good Spiritual Root..."

Wang Lai's expression was sincere, and his tone was filled with regret.

Old Yu listened, somewhat dazed.

Seeing his chance, Wang Lai's eyes flickered as he whispered temptingly:

"Don't you want to earn a batch of Spirit Stones, to give your grandson, to give your Yu Family a chance to rise above?"

These words struck a chord in Old Yu's heart.

He looked guilty, his heart ached, and his skinny old hands clenched tightly. His hunched body trembled slightly.

He lived a hard life, but he didn't want his grandson to suffer the same fate.

They, as mining cultivators, truly rotted away in the mountains, never lifting their heads for a lifetime.

But as for stealing the ore, Old Yu had reservations and dared not agree too hastily.

Seeing this, Wang Lai wore a mocking smile:

"The older you get, the less courage you have. Half in the grave and still so timid."

"Forget it." Wang Lai sighed, "I only gave you this opportunity because your grandson is talented. If he becomes successful in cultivation one day, I could share in the glory too."

"But with you being such a disappointment as a grandfather, it can't be helped."

"Wang Er and Tang Wu will be enough."

Wang Er and Tang Wu were other mining cultivators from nearby, with multiple siblings in their families. They didn't have proper names and were called by their birth order.

Old Yu's heart skipped a beat, "They're going too?"

Wang Lai said, "Of course, it's all been agreed upon. Otherwise, relying just on an old man like you, how much could we possibly steal?"

After finishing his piece, Wang Lai got up and said, "If you're not coming, then forget it. But don't speak of this to anyone, or there will be consequences."

Wang Lai made a show of leaving.

Old Yu panicked inside and quickly grabbed his sleeve, "I... I'll go!"

Wang Lai looked none too pleased.

Old Yu softened his tone, "Master Wang, you're giving me this opportunity. I'm willing to accept fewer Spirit Stones. If my grandson makes something of his cultivation someday, he will surely remember your great kindness."

Only then did Wang Lai break into a smile:

"That's the answer I was waiting for!"

He patted Old Yu on the shoulder, "Don't blame me for being opportunistic. In a world without true kinship, one certainly doesn't get up early without prospect of profit. I'm also looking for a glimmer of hope..."

Old Yu laughed and echoed him, "Of course."

Wang Lai nodded, whispered a few more instructions, then left Old Yu's house. Turning the corner and seeing that no one was around, he spat scornfully:

"Old fool, still daydreaming, believing anything you tell him..."

"Success in cultivation? Go dream on."

"Born in the mines, you're destined for a lowly life, no matter how good your Spiritual Root is, it's still a lowly life you lead!"

...

Wang Lai snorted coldly and walked away.

On a nearby rooftop, three little cultivators dressed in cloaks, their figures hidden, lay in secret, their little heads huddled together.

"This guy is a bastard," Bai Zisheng declared.

Bai Zixi nodded in agreement.

Mo Hua also nodded.

"Should we take care of him first?" Bai Zisheng was eager to try.

Bai Zixi looked at Mo Hua.

Mo Hua shook his head, "Not yet, let's see what they're up to."

Bai Zisheng thought for a moment, then nodded, "Alright, you're the junior brother, we'll follow your lead."

The three of them moved stealthily, following Wang Lai.

Walking proudly on the main road, Wang Lai, oblivious to the events behind him, was unaware that every move he made was being watched by the three little cultivators.

Wang Lai left Old Yu's house and met with a few other mining cultivators.

That is, the ones he mentioned, Wang Er and Tang Wu.

"Old Yu has agreed, will you go or not?"

Wang Er frowned, "He actually agreed?"

"Fortune comes with danger, how could he not understand that?" Wang Lai snorted coldly, looking at Wang Er and the others with slight contempt.

"An old man like him has more guts than you two, young and yet so timid?"

Tang Wu was somewhat unconvinced and wanted to agree on the spot.

But Wang Er pulled him and signaled him not to rush.

Wang Lai's eyes darted around and he asked, "You haven't got yourself wives, have you?"

The two men looked a bit bashful.

Wang Lai lowered his voice, "The old lady Li who sells pastries in the city, her family has two or three young daughters, young and with tender, dewy faces..."

"Come with me to steal from the mine, earn some Spirit Stones, and I'll be the matchmaker for you."

Wang Er and the others were somewhat moved, their faces turning slightly red, "But..."

"But what?" Wang Lai scorned, "How can you start a family and marry without earning some Spirit Stones while you're young? Do you want to bring someone into suffering?"

Tang Wu immediately said, "I'll go with you!"

Wang Er was still hesitating, "You could steal by yourselves, why involve us?"

Wang Lai sighed, "Old Yu is getting on in years and isn't strong enough, and my few men, although they have mined before, are inconsistent as they come. They're not familiar with the workings of a mine, hence I turned to you..."

After finishing, Wang Lai turned serious and warned in a low voice:

"You must not let this matter out, otherwise the Lu Family won't let us off..."

Wang Er and Tang Wu both turned solemn and nodded:

"Brother Wang, rest assured."

Wang Lai nodded, "Then it's settled..."

"Tomorrow at 1 p.m., at the eastern end of the mine near the half-cut willow tree, I'll wait for you there."

After giving his instructions, Wang Lai left.

After Wang Lai left, he didn't go out for his usual drinking and gambling but went straight home to sleep, seemingly to prepare and conserve his energy.

Mo Hua and his two companions then returned to their cave dwelling.

Back in the dwelling, entering the courtyard, the three removed their cloaks, revealing their figures.

Bai Zisheng, still excited, said, "Eavesdropping is so much fun!"

Mo Hua glanced at him, "This isn't for fun."

"Okay..." Bai Zisheng paused, then asked,

"What exactly do you think that Wang Lai is planning to do?"

"Murder?" Bai Zixi said.

Mo Hua nodded, "I guess he wants to deceive the mining cultivators into the mine, then kill them and go to the Lu Family for compensation..."

"They deceive people, then kill them, and then profit from the dead..."

Mo Hua's voice was chillingly cold.

Bai Zisheng frowned, "That's evil!"

He clenched his fists, "Should we just take them out now? Scum like them don't deserve to live."

But Mo Hua appeared to be lost in thought.

"What is it?" Bai Zixi asked.

"Something doesn't feel right."

"What's not right?"

After pondering for a moment, Mo Hua slowly said:

"Logically speaking, if they kill mining cultivators and fake their disappearance, then claim compensation from the Lu Family, they earn compensation in Spirit Stones..."

"But the Lu Family also has a rule, without a corpse, there's no compensation in Spirit Stones."

"So to say, just killing the mining cultivators wouldn't be enough to claim any compensation."

"Even if they could get some, it would be quite troublesome."

"It's unlikely that Wang Lai would kill for such uncertain gains in Spirit Stones..."

"There must be something more to this affair..."

Bai Zisheng, propping his chin, stared at Mo Hua.

Mo Hua blinked, "What is it?"

"How come there are so many twists and turns in your little head?" Bai Zisheng said.

Bai Zixi also nodded slightly.

Mo Hua raised his little finger, declaring righteously:

"Master said, to plan ahead is the key to success, not to plan is to fail. Think deeply about matters, and prepare in advance..."

"Alright, alright..." Bai Zisheng said somewhat helplessly, "I can't argue with you."

"What do we do next?" Bai Zixi asked.

Mo Hua shook his head, "I don't know yet, let's play it by ear tomorrow."

...

The next day, at dusk.

The sunset sank behind the mountains, and twilight thickened.

Dressed in their cloaks and hiding their figures, Mo Hua and his two companions arrived early near the mine. They found a little mound to lie on, peeking out, waiting for Wang Lai and the others to arrive.

As night deepened, Wang Lai and his people were the first to arrive.

There were four of them, all local ruffians from South Yue City. After meeting, they nodded at each other, their mouths curving into ambiguous smiles, but they hardly spoke.

Approaching 1 p.m., Old Yu, Wang Er, and Tang Wu finally arrived together.

In the desolate mine, beneath the sinister and twisted half-cut willow tree.

The two groups of cultivators met.

In the darkness, a cold light flickered in Wang Lai's eyes:

"Tonight, I'll lead you to fortune!"

Chapter 425: Murder Plan (1)

The night was pitch-black, the moonlight desolate.

Outside South Yue City, a group of Cultivators stealthily made their way toward the mine.

And behind them, three little Cultivators, also hidden, stealthily followed.

They proceeded in silence, and before long, Wang Lai and his companions arrived at the outskirts of the mine.

The mine did not operate at night, and its periphery was secured by several large iron gates.

Wang Lai pressed against the iron gate, walked twenty steps to the right, crouched down, and searched with his hands in the veil of night, soon opening a low, concealed door.

Old Yu and Wang Er exchanged glances, perplexed.

They had mined for years and had no idea that such a secret entrance existed outside the mine.

"Let's go."

Wang Lai whispered, then hunched over and led the way into the mine through the concealed door. Old Yu hesitated.

A few rogues behind him gave Old Yu a push.

Fortune favors the bold.

Old Yu gritted his teeth and, like Wang Lai, stooped low to crawl into the mine.

Once Wang Lai and his group had all entered the mine, the last rogue closed the concealed door.

Mo Hua and his two companions arrived at the door, finding not only was it closed, but also wrapped with a chain which was secured with an iron lock.

Bai Zisheng asked, "Shall I split it open?"

Mo Hua shook his head, "Too noisy."

"Then how do we get in?"

Mo Hua pointed to the lock, "There's a Formation on this lock."

"Can you unlock it?"

Mo Hua's eyebrows rose slightly:

"For such a small lock, if I can't unlock it, I don't deserve to be a first-grade Formation Master..."

Bai Zisheng muttered, "Not every first-grade Formation Master knows how to break Formations..."

Bai Zixi raised her fair little finger and "shushed" them to silence, then said to Mo Hua:

"Hurry and unlock it."

"Mhm."

Mo Hua nodded, took out his writing brush and ink, made a quick Calculation in his mind, and then understood the Formation on the lock.

An Iron Lock Formation of the first-grade, seven Patterns.

Mo Hua casually sketched a few Formation Patterns; a glint of light flashed over the iron lock then faded away, and with a "click," it opened.

His expertise was such that it was as if he was using his own key to open his own lock with ease.

Bai Zisheng was somewhat astonished.

Mo Hua felt a slight sense of pride, but as he carefully tried to push open the concealed door, it didn't budge after several pushes...

The door was heavy and difficult for someone not practicing Body Cultivation to open.

Mo Hua glanced at Bai Zisheng.

Bai Zisheng understood, lightly pushed with his hand, and the concealed door opened; he then gave Mo Hua a smug smile.

Mo Hua shook his head and was about to enter when Bai Zisheng stopped him.

"I'll go in first," Bai Zisheng said.

Mo Hua wasn't a Body Cultivator, and if he went first and encountered danger, it could be troublesome.

Mo Hua paused, understanding Bai Zisheng's intent, and after a moment's hesitation, nodded.

Though he had already scanned the area beyond the door with his Divine Sense and found no danger, he still appreciated his Junior Brother's kindness.

Bai Zisheng entered through the door first, and after a moment whispered:

"No danger, everyone come in."

So Mo Hua and Bai Zixi followed suit and entered the mine through the concealed door.

Beyond the door lay the mine.

This was Mo Hua's second time in the mine.

The first time was during the day when many Mining Cultivators were at work.

The mine was hot and noisy.

But now it was night, and the mine was completely deserted.

The oppressive darkness enveloped the entire mine, rendering it eerie and deathly still.

Before them, only the jagged rocks and pitch-black mine shafts were visible.

No sign of Wang Lai and his party could be seen.

Bai Zisheng asked, "What should we do?"

Mo Hua released his Divine Sense and then pointed down a path, "Let's go this way."

Thus, the three of them, with the Concealment Formation activated to hide their tracks, quietly headed toward the mine shaft.

Inside the pitch-black mine shaft, Wang Lai led the way.

Old Yu, Wang Er, and Tang Wu were in the middle.

Three rogues followed behind them.

The mine shaft at night was damp and sinister; within the silent cavern, only the disordered footsteps of the few echoed, with occasional drips of water falling, near and far, unnerving those present.

Tang Wu asked, "Big Brother Wang, where is the ore?"

Wang Lai replied, "Just follow me."

Wang Lai walked ahead, his tone neutral and echoing in the shaft, carrying an indescribable inscrutability.

Wang Er, trailing behind, felt something was off and cautiously asked:

"Big Brother Wang, do you often come here to mine secretly?"

"This is my first time."

"But you seem so familiar with this route..."

Wang Lai paused briefly, then slowly replied:

"I scoped out the place in advance, bribed the Lu Family Cultivators, and left the concealed door, so it's been smooth sailing..."

Wang Er nodded, half-convinced.

Old Yu walked in silence, not speaking much but feeling uneasy.

He had started to sense that something was wrong.

Wang Lai was too familiar with the mine, as if he had been there many times before.

Yet he claimed it was his first time stealing ore.

That was clearly not possible.

Even if he had scoped out the place, he couldn't be this familiar with it.

Old Yu kept his expression neutral, but inside he was beginning to regret his decision, and his steps slowed.

Wang Lai noticed and turned around to give Old Yu a glance, "We're almost there, pick up the pace."

But that one look made Old Yu's heart skip a beat.

Wang Lai's glare was like that of a person looking at a dead man.

What were they planning?

Cold sweat dripped down Old Yu's back.

But he still had to follow Wang Lai and the rest.

They walked deeper into the mine, the deeper they went, the more silent and desolate it became.

After a few steps, Wang Er suddenly stumbled and fell, muttering under his breath:

"Why is the ground so slippery?"

Wang Lai said displeasedly, "Be careful."

With an awkward smile, Wang Er said, "Yes, Big Brother Wang."

His glance flickered slightly as he slowly stood up, deliberately lagging a few steps behind everyone else. When Wang Lai and the others weren't paying attention, Wang Er turned and ran, trying to escape to the entrance of the mine.

Hearing the hurried footsteps, Wang Lai turned around fiercely, his expression ferocious:

"Catch him!"

A big man quickly stepped forward, catching up to Wang Er in just a few steps. He grabbed Wang Er's collar, pulling him down to the ground.

Wang Lai said coldly, "Wang Er, what do you think you're doing?"

Wang Er's face turned somewhat pale: "Nothing... nothing at all..."

"Then why did you run?"

"I wasn't running."

Wang Lai's expression grew colder.

Grinding his teeth, Wang Er said, "You didn't bring us here to steal from the mine at all!"

Wang Lai looked somewhat stunned before responding coldly,

"How do you know that?"

Wang Er pointed towards the deeper parts of the mine and said, "There is no ore here, nothing at all!"

Before he finished speaking, Old Yu's face drastically changed. He stepped back a few times, intending to flee.

But it was already too late. Wang Lai had already drawn his knife and slashed at Old Yu.

Old Yu, aged and frail, was no match for Wang Lai, especially not with the surprise attack.

He was struck by Wang Lai's knife in the shoulder, and after a harsh kick, he collapsed on the ground, leaning against the cold stone wall, gasping for air.

Tang Wu was still somewhat dazed. He didn't understand why Wang Er suddenly tried to run, nor why everyone suddenly started fighting...

"Big Brother Wang, what's going on here?"

Before he could finish, a thug nearby suddenly punched him in the stomach.

Tang Wu was pained, clutching his stomach, and slowly knelt down.

Before he could react to what had happened, another thug struck him on the back of the head with a club.

The blow, infused with spiritual power and full of strength, left the club bloodied. Tang Wu then collapsed to the ground.

Anxiously, Wang Er shouted,

"Tang Wu!"

Although they didn't share the same surname, they had grown up together, mined together, and were close friends.

Wang Er had only thought of escaping alone in a moment of fear, instinctively wanting to run. But he hadn't anticipated that Wang Lai and the others would truly harm Tang Wu.

Without any grievances, why deal such a deadly blow?

Wang Er's eyes were split with rage as he yelled at Wang Lai:

"Cheeky Wang, you motherf..."

A thug punched him in the face, cutting off his words, and similarly, someone hit him on the head with a club.

Blood seeped from the top of Wang Er's head as it gradually drooped down.

Collapsed on the ground, Old Yu spoke bitterly,

"Wang Lai, what exactly do you want?"

Wang Lai shrugged, "You poor devils, it's just suffering being alive. Better to die and suffer less. It also lets me make some money from spirit stones."

Old Yu's complexion turned ashen.

He should have known.

Wang Lai was a wolf in sheep's clothing, sharing meat with a wolf is like seeking skin from a tiger, simply impossible.

He should not have been greedy and believed Wang Lai's words.

Frightened, Old Yu pleaded, "Let us go, anything you want, I'll give it to you."

Wang Lai let out a scornful laugh, "What could you possibly have? All your worldly possessions might not even be worth a single spirit stone, what's there to talk about?"

"Tang Wu and the others are still young, don't..."

"The strong and young fetch a better price."

A thug said, "Big Brother, it's getting late, we can't stay here for long."

Wang Lai nodded, "You're right."

He turned his head, gave Old Yu a sardonic look, and said,

"I told you, fortune comes with risk. Without danger, how can there be fortune? It's just that the risk is yours, the fortune is mine."

Old Yu's voice trembled, "What good does killing us do you?"

Wang Lai smiled, "That's not for you to worry about."

The thugs took out iron chains from their storage bags and locked up both Wang Er and Tang Wu.

Wang Lai instructed, "Slice open the heart vessels, kill them without damaging the limbs, don't spoil the skin."

Then he looked at Old Yu again, "I'll handle this old man."

As a cultivator with high skill and ruthless methods, Wang Lai could easily kill Old Yu without exerting much effort.

At death's door, Old Yu was filled with fear and regret.

He shouldn't have been greedy, dealing with someone like Wang Lai.

Immediately, deep guilt filled his heart.

Life as a mining cultivator was miserable. His son had died young, and he depended solely on his grandson.

Once he died, leaving behind his grandson, alone and helpless, how would he survive...

Would his beloved grandson still have clothes to wear, food to eat, or would he be bullied, perhaps starve to death on the streets at night...

Old Yu felt a bitter hatred in his heart.

Pained by his inability to care for his grandson and regretting his own greed.

Shedding tears, he pleaded bitterly,

"Wang Lai, I beg you, spare my life, please... my little grandson..."

Wang Lai was unmoved. His right hand gripped the knife, raised high, a numb and ruthless smirk on his lips.

Old Yu felt like he was falling into an ice cellar, he could only watch wide-eyed as the knife came down towards his chest.

His elderly tears turned ice cold, his gaze filled with despair.

Just then, a deep red flame flashed by in an instant, illuminating the pitch-black mine.

The firelight was blinding, and the surging fire elemental spiritual power hit them head-on.

Old Yu involuntarily closed his eyes, and after a moment, when he opened them, he found his chest intact, miraculously still alive.

Staring blankly, Old Yu looked up to see Wang Lai's entire arm consumed by ferocious flames.

The deep red flames licked at Wang Lai's arm, charring his right arm black. The knife from his right hand had already fallen to the ground.

Wang Lai, suffering the torment of the fierce fire, knelt on the ground, struggling to make a sound.

As Old Yu's numb senses gradually returned,

He wondered... Was that the Fireball Technique?

Chapter 426: Rescue (1)

"Who's there?!"

The other ruffians, their eyes filled with terror, shouted loudly.

Before they could react, they realized a cultivator had already closed in on them.

This person was not tall, but his speed was incredibly fast, and his fists, wrapped in golden light, knocked one of the thugs to the ground, making him vomit blood.

Another thug panicked, pulled out a knife, and slashed at the figure.

But halfway through the swing, his forearm was caught.

With a twist, the person broke the thug's forearm.

The thug, in pain, cried out, but before he could scream much, he was kicked away, his chest roiling as if the river were overturned, spewing fresh blood.

The last thug, with deeper cultivation, barely managed a few moves, but the more he fought, the more frightened he became.

The identity of this cultivator was unknown; he was clearly practicing Qi Refinement, but his aura was incredibly dense, his movements fast and swift, his boxing method proficient, and it was evident that his rank was not low.

With every exchange of blows, he felt his fists go numb from the vibration, as if the bones inside were about to shatter.

Under the opponent's fierce offensive, he could only passively take hits, completely unable to fight back.

And he couldn't hold on for long; having managed a few moves was already his limit.

As expected, after a few exchanges, his knuckles were shattered, the pain unbearable, his form faltered, exposing his weakness.

The opponent flashed to his side, the punch going from below to above, golden light overflowing, and with one punch, his arm was broken.

The big thug groaned in pain, turned to leave, but was approached by the ghost-like cultivator and kicked, breaking his leg.

He collapsed to the ground with a thud and passed out from the pain.

In the blink of an eye, only Wang Lai remained among the thugs.

Wang Lai, who had just put out the flames on his arm, had his right arm charred and hanging limply, obviously severely injured and no longer able to wield a knife.

Wang Lai, looking around with a fearful expression, quickly said:

"Which cultivator from where?"

In the silent mine, there was no response.

Wang Lai turned and ran, but only a few steps later, a golden sword light flared up and flew past, piercing his right leg.

Wang Lai staggered a few steps, then fell to the ground, clutching his right leg and howling in pain.

His right leg, penetrated by the sword light, had a wound from which snow-white, flame-like spiritual power was toasting it bit by bit, causing him unbearable pain.

But in just a few moments, Wang Lai and the other fierce thugs were all laid low.

Old Yu found it unbelievable.

His eyes shocked, he fell to his knees with a thud, fearfully saying:

"I don't know which expert it is, please..."

Before he could finish, he saw a fair-skinned little hand supporting his arm, helping him up.

Three small figures appeared before him.

It was dark in the mine, and Old Yu could barely make out their faces, which left him even more astonished.

The ones who easily subdued Wang Lai and the others turned out to be three young cultivators with clear brows and extraordinary appearances.

"You, who are you..."

Mo Hua raised a piece of bronze waist badge in his hand.

"We are from the Taoist Court."

This bronze badge was specially applied for him by Zhang Lan and Court Leader Zhou when they were in Tongxian City.

After all, traveling abroad, having multiple identities provides multiple paths.

In the current situation, the identity of the Taoist Court came in handy.

Old Yu still couldn't quite believe it.

Could the Taoist Court really have such young cultivators?

But the badge didn't look fake, and they had no need to deceive an old man like himself.

Old Yu bowed his head in gratitude, "Thank you, three young masters."

Mo Hua didn't let him bow, but handed him a Hemostatic Pill, saying:

"Take this first, and rest for a while."

Then he ran over to Wang Er and Tang Wu, feeding a pill to each one.

He had just used his Divine Sense to check; the two men had only fainted, their scalps broken, their Sea of Consciousness suffered some shock, but their lives were not in danger.

Mo Hua then leisurely approached Wang Lai.

Wang Lai's right arm was injured by Mo Hua's Fireball Technique, and his right leg by Bai Zixi's sword light, leaning against a corner, sweating profusely from the pain.

He looked at Mo Hua, his eyes full of disbelief.

He had never imagined that he would be brought down by a few children.

Who exactly were these kids?

How did they find him, and why were they in the mine?

What exactly did they intend to do?

"You...are with the Taoist Court?" Wang Lai asked through his pain.

Mo Hua nodded.

"Then do you know... Court Leader Zhao?" Wang Lai ventured.

Mo Hua's eyebrows twitched, "Are you familiar with Court Leader Zhao?"

Wang Lai managed a weak smile, "Not very familiar, but we have some acquaintances."

"Oh," Mo Hua said with a meaningful expression.

Wang Lai couldn't see through Mo Hua's background, nor could he guess Mo Hua's thoughts. His Divine Sense could not probe, as if Mo Hua's entire being was shrouded in mist.

Feeling uncertain, Wang Lai still asked:

"Young masters, may I know what brings you to this mine?"

Mo Hua's smile was enigmatic, "What do you think?"

Wang Lai awkwardly said, "Please enlighten me, master."

Mo Hua looked at him and said, "You were murdering!"

Wang Lai's face changed, and he immediately exclaimed:

"Wrongfully accused, young masters, I'm wrongfully accused!"

Holding up his uninjured left hand and pointing at Old Yu, he said:

"It was they who were trying to steal from the Lu Family's mine. I discovered them, subdued them, and was going to deliver them to the Taoist Court for judgment..."

"These mining cultivators may seem honest, but they are cunning at heart, greedy for petty gain, capable of anything."

"Don't be deceived by them..."

Mo Hua was slightly taken aback.

Wang Lai was truly resourceful.

In just a moment, he had concocted a story that turned black into white and smeared others with false charges.

Chapter 427: Saving People (2)

No wonder he can get along so well in South Yue City, and also no wonder that everyone calls him "Cheeky Wang."

Old Yu listened and was furious, his finger trembling as he pointed at Wang Lai:

"You, you're shameless!"

Without any cause for grievance, it was clearly he who wanted to silence someone by killing them, yet was now trying to turn the tables.

Wang Lai sneered without saying a word.

Mo Hua smiled but then said, "Cheeky Wang."

Wang Lai, upon hearing this, his expression suddenly changed, "You know me?"

If one didn't know his background, they wouldn't know this nickname.

Wang Lai thought it over carefully, a chill gradually growing in his heart as he narrowed his eyes and said:

"So that means you know everything, you came for me from the start, and you've seen everything that's happened here?"

"Sort of." Mo Hua said indifferently.

Wang Lai asked: "Just how much do you know?"

Mo Hua counted on her fingers:

"This month, you've been to the Red Happy Building seven times, you've robbed people twice on the road, you've beaten up people six times, swindled five meals, and the day before yesterday you gambled and lost a total of ten and three-tenths Spirit Stones..."

Wang Lai was shocked and pale, "How is that possible? How could you possibly know!"

Mo Hua curled her lip.

I've been watching you every day, of course, I know everything.

It's just that you, a fool, have such low Divine Sense that you didn't notice.

These words, of course, Mo Hua would not say out loud, but rather showed a profound and inscrutable smile, which made Wang Lai even more baffled.

Wang Lai's heart trembled in fear, "What exactly do you want to do?"

Mo Hua's voice was clear as she said:

"I'll ask you a few questions, and you better answer honestly."

Wang Lai's gaze hardened, "If I tell you, can you spare me?"

"If you talk, I won't kill you, but instead take you to the Taoist Court where the Taoist Court can decide your fate. If you don't talk, I'll slaughter you right now!" Mo Hua threatened.

Wang Lai sneered, "Once I'm at the Taoist Court, won't I still die?"

Mo Hua said, "There's a difference between dying sooner and dying later, besides, don't you know Court Leader Zhao? Beg him for mercy, and perhaps he'll let you go."

Wang Lai's gaze flickered as he sneered:

"Since you know me so well, then you should already know what you want to know. Why bother asking me?"

"If you're asking me now, then there must be some things you don't know."

"If you don't know, and I do, then I still have value, so you won't kill me!" Wang Lai firmly said.

Bai Zisheng said unhappily, "He's still talking tough."

Mo Hua gave him one last chance, "Are you really not going to talk?"

Wang Lai snorted disdainfully, "Even if you beat me to death, I won't tell."

Mo Hua said, "Good! I admire your backbone!"

Then Mo Hua drew out the Thousand Jun Stick, glanced at Bai Zisheng, and said:

"Beat him up."

Bai Zisheng was excited. He had wanted to give this bastard a thrashing for a long time, but he had held back because Mo Hua wanted to ask Wang Lai some questions.

Now, upon hearing this, Bai Zisheng was both happy and a little worried:

"Is this okay?"

"What could go wrong?"

"What if he's beaten to death?"

"If he's beaten to death, so be it. He's not a good guy anyway."

"No, I mean if he's beaten to death, won't you not be able to ask him anything?"

"It's fine, let's leave it to fate. After all, there are still three more over there..."

"That makes sense..."

...

After Mo Hua and Bai Zisheng had finished speaking, with a friendly smile, they stepped towards Wang Lai.

Wang Lai felt a chill in his heart and couldn't help but prop himself up with his hands against the cold stone wall, scooting back until there was no room left to retreat, then he trembled:

"You... don't..."

Mo Hua raised the Thousand Jun Stick high, "Let's see if your mouth is as tough as my iron stick!"

Then, she swung the stick down fiercely.

Bai Zisheng was not courteous at all and proceeded to punch and kick.

When Bai Zixi recalled what Wang Lai had done, she felt a bit angry and condensed her golden Sword Qi into the size of golden needles, pricking them into Wang Lai's body one by one.

Wang Lai gritted his teeth, holding on for dear life, "You bunch of little bastards, I'll remember this..."

"Still daring to talk tough?"

With a raise of her eyebrow, Mo Hua struck even harder.

After beating him for a while, Mo Hua seemed to remember something, she took out a pill and fed it to Wang Lai.

Bai Zisheng asked doubtfully, "What pill is that?"

Mo Hua replied, "Small Rejuvenation Pill, it's for hanging on to life, scared of beating him to death."

Bai Zisheng couldn't help but say, "You're thinking quite... thoroughly."

Mo Hua nodded, "As I should."

After the beating continued for a while, it seemed that Wang Lai was running out of breath, Bai Zisheng frowned and said,

"This Small Rejuvenation Pill of yours isn't working..."

Mo Hua scratched her head, somewhat perplexed.

This was given by Old Mr. Feng to her; it should be a good thing. Could it be she had been too rough?

Bai Zisheng then took out a bottle of pills, "Try this one, a secret recipe from the Bai Family, Ten-Complete Great Restoring Pill. First, rejuvenate his blood, then keep on thrashing..."

Mo Hua sniffed it by her nose and her eyes brightened, "This one's good."

She took one out and administered it to the half-dead Wang Lai.

Wang Lai's complexion quickly improved a lot, and his Blood Qi gradually grew more vigorous.

Bai Zisheng rolled up his sleeves and declared, "Continue!"

Mo Hua, not a Body Cultivator, was already a bit tired, but after thinking it over, she gritted her teeth and said,

"Alright!"

Thus, they continued delivering a hefty beating to Wang Lai.

Even Old Yu, watching from the side, couldn't help but twitch at the sight.

And Wang Lai, at last, could not hold out any longer.

The punches were mighty, the iron staff was hard, and the golden needles were painful.

The key was, these few brats truly did not care about his life or death.

If it went on like this, he was really going to be beaten to death.

Wang Lai lost all his toughness and begged intermittently for mercy,

"I... was wrong, please... spare my life..."

Bai Zisheng felt somewhat unsatisfied, and Mo Hua was also quite regretful, blurting out,

"You only behave after taking a beating; instead of 'Cheeky Wang,' we should call you 'Despicable Wang'"

Wang Lai spat out a mouthful of old blood.

...

After a beating, Wang Lai was no longer cheeky.

He honestly answered whatever Mo Hua asked.

Wang Lai was indeed a habitual offender.

First, he'd concoct an excuse to lure the Mining Cultivators to the mine, then he'd kill them stealthily, later contacting the miners' families to claim compensation from the Lu Family.

After committing a murder, he even profited from the deceased person's money.

Wang Lai had done many such things, but because the mines were inherently dangerous and Mining Cultivators often went missing, the Taoist Court Officials were negligent and too lazy to investigate, which is why he had been getting away with crimes.

But there was a puzzling aspect to this matter.

Because the Lu Family stipulated that without a body, there would be no compensation in Spirit Stones.

So, oftentimes, they wouldn't be able to claim any compensation.

Even though Wang Lai was greedy, it was unlikely he would risk killing someone for the chance of getting Spirit Stones that weren't guaranteed to be his.

Moreover, Mo Hua remembered Wang Lai saying earlier,

"Slice open the heart vein, kill them, don't damage the limbs or break the skin..."

What was the point of being so particular about the way of killing Mining Cultivators and disguising it as a disappearance?

So there was definitely another issue at hand, and Wang Lai was surely hiding something.

Wang Lai was unwilling to speak.

Mo Hua's gaze grew cold as she pressed him repeatedly.

Wang Lai realized that the questioning young Cultivator was sharp as a tack, as cunning as a ghost.

He couldn't tell a lie without being detected and could not deceive her at all. That's when he finally opened his mouth to reveal the truth,

"Some people pay Spirit Stones for the corpses of Mining Cultivators..."

"We rely on killing and selling the dead... to make Spirit Stones..."

Chapter 428: Selling the Corpse (1)

Mo Hua and his companions exchanged glances, their eyes filled with shock.

Murder for corpse-trading?

"Who did you sell to?" Mo Hua asked.

Wang Lai hedged, "A grey-clothed, masked Cultivator... I don't know who it was..."

"You didn't see his face?"

"I only want the Spirit Stones; I don't care about his appearance..."

"What else?" Mo Hua's eyes narrowed slightly.

Wang Lai looked somewhat bewildered, "What else is there?"

Mo Hua said, "How did you meet him, how did you connect, how did you make the transaction, how did you murder, how did you sell the corpses—tell me everything, without missing a detail."

Wang Lai tugged at the corner of his mouth.

Mo Hua kicked him, and said fiercely,

"Don't try to deceive me. Your little tricks won't get past me. If I find out you've lied to me, I'll make sure you regret it!"

But his delicate, picturesque face didn't seem threatening when he tried to be fierce.

Yet, Wang Lai didn't dare not speak.

This young demon might look adorable, but his actions were anything but.

Especially those eyes—innocent yet profound, as though they could see right through one's secrets...

Besides, there was no need for him to hide anything anymore at this point.

If he was to speak, then there was nothing he couldn't say:

"I met that grey-clothed Cultivator in a brothel on Jinhua Street..."

"He was average in height, lean, with his face covered, his features unclear, his Divine Sense impenetrable."

"He always had a faint, odd smell about him—I didn't realize at first, but after making a few deals, I understood. That scent, it was the smell of the dead, a cold, decaying odor."

"The first 'deal' happened because I ran out of Spirit Stones."

"I gambled away everything the previous night, and my creditors were pressing me hard, threatening to chop off my hands if I didn't pay up."

"Desperate, he asked me, 'Do you want to make a deal?'"

"I scoffed. These days, with legitimate business, how can one earn Spirit Stones?"

"He then said it wasn't legitimate."

"That piqued my interest, so I asked him about the deal. He asked if I had killed before, and I said yes. He then told me it was similar to killing, except this time, I was to give the bodies to him afterward."

"It felt ominous, but without any Spirit Stones, I was worse off than a stray dog—hungry and unable to fend for myself."

"Poverty can be scarier than death."

"Besides, it was others who were dying, not me. So I agreed to it."

"The first time I did this job for him, I killed a passerby Cultivator. After killing him, I cut a few extra times before handing over the body. He frowned and said that except for the vital meridian, there couldn't be too many wounds, or I'd have my payment deducted."

"I was impatient—it was just a killing, yet there were too many damn rules. But I needed the Spirit Stones, so I had no choice but to follow his rules."

"He went on to explain the details to me..."

"A young and fit Cultivator's corpse, one hundred and fifty Spirit Stones;"

"An aged Cultivator's corpse, eighty Spirit Stones;"

"Gender doesn't matter."

"Apart from the vital meridian, the body mustn't have any wounds."

"If there are wounds, depending on the severity, ten to fifty Spirit Stones would be deducted..."

"..."

"After a few sales, I realized this business wouldn't last long."

"Kill one or two, and the Taoist Court might not bother. But if you kill too many, even fools will track you down."

"That's when the grey-clothed Cultivator suggested I target Mining Cultivators."

"I hesitated at first; after all, my father was a Mining Cultivator, and I'm half a Mining Cultivator myself. Even though I did no good, we would still see each other from time to time, and we weren't without rapport."

"But he offered too much, I couldn't refuse..."

"For Cultivators, Spirit Stones are the only truth, while rapport is illusory."

"Killing a Mining Cultivator, I could make roughly a hundred Spirit Stones per hit."

"With so many Mining Cultivators in South Yue City, I couldn't even begin to imagine how many Spirit Stones I could earn if this continued to the end..."

"And more Mining Cultivators would be born, an endless cycle of potential targets..."

"Even if I didn't kill them, they would die of old age, exhaustion, mineral poison, oppression, or accidents in the mines..."

"Since they're bound to die anyway, why not let me make some Spirit Stones off it?"

"Besides, killing a Mining Cultivator could be very discreet."

"Their lives were so miserable, any pretext of earning Spirit Stones would lure them."

"The mines at night were quiet and deserted, perfect for murder."

"Disguise it as a disappearance afterward, and no one could find out—the perfect crime."

"Still, we were somewhat worried about being discovered."

"So we approached the families of the deceased Mining Cultivators, offering to help them claim compensation."

"First, to divert suspicion and reduce doubt—as we claimed compensation on behalf of Mining Cultivators, no one would suspect us of being the killers."

"Second, claiming the compensation allowed us to take a cut of the Spirit Stones."

"One dead Mining Cultivator could earn two shares of Spirit Stones..."

Old Yu listened with eyes blazing red, wishing he could devour Wang Lai alive.

Mo Hua's expression was icy to the extreme, "The five Mining Cultivators who disappeared before—they were also your work?"

Wang Lai hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

Mo Hua's gaze intensified, "Then how did they end up dead in the mine?"

Wang Lai's expression showed a trace of fear, "I... I don't know."

"I just killed them. But after I killed them, it seemed like there was some activity in the mine..."

"I thought of the rumors about the mineshaft and got scared, so I hid their bodies in a corner, covered them with rubble, and then planned to sneak the corpses out of the mineshaft when I had the chance."

Wang Lai swallowed hard, "But... but when I went back the next day, I found that the bodies of these five people... were gone..."

Mo Hua's eyes shone coldly, "You don't know about the Lu Family mine?"

These five corpses, they seemed to have been dragged into the mineshaft by something and then... eaten...

Wang Lai was perplexed, "What mineshaft?"

Mo Hua released his Divine Sense, peeking at the fluctuations in Wang Lai's Divine Sense, and found that he was not lying.

Wang Lai... really didn't know...

"How many years have you been in this trade?" Mo Hua asked again.

"Thirty or forty years..."

Mo Hua's face was expressionless, "So you've been killing Mining Cultivators for thirty or forty years, and you've been selling the remains of Mining Cultivators for that long?"

Wang Lai gulped, "Yes..."

Bai Zisheng couldn't help but say, "How about we just kill him..."

Wang Lai was horrified, "You promised to let me go."

Mo Hua's gaze slowly turned cold, his expression inscrutable, his thoughts unknown.

Chills ran down Wang Lai's spine.

At that moment, Mo Hua's expression suddenly showed shock as he looked towards the mineshaft behind him.

From within the mineshaft, the pervasive aura of death abruptly intensified.

It was as if something was gradually awakening.

Moisture condensed into droplets that fell with a rhythmic pitter-patter, the sound of water drops echoing eerily throughout the mineshaft.

From the surrounding stone walls, minute and peculiar noises emerged.

Mo Hua's expression changed drastically, and he hurriedly said:

"Run!"

Bai Zixi and Bai Zisheng also sensed the danger and nodded to each other.

Mo Hua glanced at Wang Er and Tang Wu, who were lying on the ground, and said to Old Yu, "Wake them up."

Old Yu looked panicked.

He, too, felt the abnormalities in the mineshaft.

It was the dead of night, the most dangerous time within the mineshaft.

Something unknown had come to life...

Old Yu's legs went weak as he staggeringly stood up, walked over to Wang Er and Tang Wu, and slapped both of them, "Get up quick!"

The two were only knocked unconscious, and having consumed Mo Hua's Pills, their injuries were healing. With Old Yu's slap and his cry, they gradually opened their eyes.

The scene before them seemed alien.

The thugs lay on the ground spitting blood, Wang Lai was miserably curled up in a corner.

In front of Wang Lai, stood three young Cultivators with an extraordinary bearing.

The two were stunned at first, "Old Yu... what is this...?"

Old Yu said, "Don't ask, just run for your life!"

Wang Er and Tang Wu then realized the urgency and scrambled to their feet.

"Let's go!" Mo Hua said decisively.

Just as they were about to run, Wang Lai pleaded:

"Save me! I don't want to die here!"

Mo Hua's gaze flickered, then he said to Bai Zisheng, "Take him with us."

Bai Zisheng was somewhat reluctant.

Mo Hua said, "He still has his uses."

"Alright then."

Bai Zisheng nodded, secured Wang Lai with a chain, and dragged him as they ran outside.

As for the remaining thugs, Mo Hua didn't care.

If they could live through the anomaly in the mineshaft, that would be their good fortune. If they died, they deserved it, repaying the lives of the Mining Cultivators they had taken.

And so, Bai Zisheng dragged Wang Lai, who was like a mangy dog, without slowing down, running out of the mineshaft.

Mo Hua employed his movement technique and followed Bai Zisheng closely.

Bai Zixi's steps were light as she followed beside Mo Hua.

Behind them, Old Yu, Wang Er, and Tang Wu ran for their lives with desperation, possibly spurred on by the crisis, they were running quite fast.

The atmosphere inside the mineshaft grew increasingly sinister, the aura of death gradually filling every corner.

But fortunately, Mo Hua had detected it early, and their withdrawal was timely enough.

So by the time a muffled roar emerged from the mineshaft, sounding eerily non-human, Mo Hua and the others had already escaped from within.

Still, Mo Hua was not reassured, and led everyone through the secret passage away from the Lu Family mineshaft until they reached the edge of the mine. Only then did they stop.

Wang Lai was dragged so violently that he was covered in wounds and passed out.

Wang Er and Tang Wu had only just calmed their frightened souls and were gasping for air.

The expressions on Bai Zisheng's and Bai Zixi's faces were also filled with astonishment and uncertainty.

Mo Hua turned to look at the mine, his pupils shaking.

At that moment, the mine burst forth with a terrifying presence, composed of numerous sinister auras.

From deep within the mineshaft, there came grating and heart-wrenching noises, like some spectral beings scraping at something with their hands.

It also sounded as if deceased Mining Cultivators were still laboring in the mine.

And amidst the decay and the aura of death, that malevolent presence from the Ultimate Formation that Mo Hua had sensed became even more intense.

Mo Hua's brows furrowed even more tightly.

Who exactly set up this Ultimate Formation, and what was it? What exactly lay hidden in this gloomy mine...

Chapter 429: Disappearance (1)

The mine was showing abnormalities, we couldn't stay long.

So Mo Hua and the others left the mine and reached South Yue City, where they found a place to rest for a while.

Wang Lai was covered in wounds, looking miserable, but he was still breathing.

Mo Hua woke him up and took the chance to ask him some more questions.

As dawn was breaking and no further information could be extracted, Mo Hua handed Wang Lai over to Situ Fang.

At the same time, he recounted all the actions of Wang Lai and these ruffians.

Old Yu and the other two stood by as witnesses.

Situ Fang was both shocked and enraged upon hearing this.

She had never imagined that Wang Lai and these scoundrels could do such heinous things.

Killing for Spirit Stones and then trying to swindle compensation.

Situ Fang's brows furrowed with anger as she said:

"Leave the rest to me. I'll take Wang Lai to the Taoist Prison first, extract the names of his accomplices, and then round them all up!"

"The Taoist Court... there won't be any problems, right?" Mo Hua asked.

The Taoist Court in South Yue City was different from the one in Tongxian City; its workings were murky, and the Court Leader was not necessarily a good person either.

Situ Fang frowned, pondered for a moment, and then sighed:

"I'll just be careful. If I follow the procedures strictly, even the Court Leader shouldn't be able to object."

Mo Hua nodded, "Okay, then be careful, Sister Situ."

"Don't worry."

Situ Fang nodded and then looked at Mo Hua and his companions with a sense of gratitude:

"We really owe you big this time."

Mo Hua waved his hand dismissively, "It was nothing, no trouble at all."

Situ Fang gave his shoulder a pat, "I'll treat you to a meal someday."

Then she left with Wang Lai in custody.

Old Yu and the other two expressed their heartfelt thanks to Mo Hua.

"Thank you, all three young masters, thank you!"

"Many thanks to our benefactor!"

"There's no need for thanks. Go home and take care of your injuries," Mo Hua said.

After another round of deep bows, they finally left, feeling the fortune of surviving such an ordeal, their hearts unburdened.

They had narrowly escaped death in the mine.

And they had also narrowly avoided being eternally separated from their families...

After the trio departed, Bai Zisheng asked Mo Hua:

"What do we do now?"

Mo Hua thought for a moment, "I need to go back to the mine."

Bai Zisheng was startled, "Have you lost your mind? Are you going back to court death?"

Mo Hua pointed towards the sky.

The sun was hanging high in the sky.

It was then that Bai Zisheng realized it was daylight.

Even if the mine was "haunted," that would be an issue during the middle of the night.

"What are you going to do in the mine now?" Bai Zisheng inquired.

Mo Hua's gaze grew deep, "I want to see... what has become of the corpses of those scoundrels..."

Bai Zisheng's expression grew solemn, "Then we should go together."

Mo Hua shook his head, "No need, I can go alone. You don't know the Concealment Technique, and although our cloaks have the Concealment Formation, the formation isn't perfect. It's fine to use at night, but in daylight, there will still be faint traces, making it easy to be discovered."

Bai Zisheng was somewhat indifferent, "So what if we're discovered? It's no big deal..."

No one in this mine could stop him.

But Mo Hua said, "This mine belongs to the Lu Family. There could be Foundation Building cultivators stationed here during the day. If we're discovered by them, even if we escape, we'll alarm others and expose our whereabouts..."

"Once the Lu Family becomes vigilant, anything else we need to investigate will become inconvenient."

"But if you go alone and encounter a Foundation Building cultivator, won't you be in danger?" Bai Zisheng countered.

Mo Hua shook his head, "The Lu Family's Foundation Building cultivators won't detect me."

He knew the Concealment Technique and had the Concealment Formation, and with his Divine Sense of the Foundation Building twelve patterns, the Lu Family's Foundation Building cultivators couldn't find him.

"Oh, right." Bai Zisheng nodded but still looked worried.

Bai Zixi then said, "You go in alone, and we'll cover you from the outside."

Mo Hua wanted to protest, but Bai Zixi just looked at him calmly, her voice gentle but firm:

"I am your senior sister."

Mo Hua had no choice but to agree.

So after a bit more rest, they set off again and returned to the Lu Family mine.

By then, the sky was fully bright, with the morning glow filling the heavens.

The mine had already started its operations.

Mining cultivators came to the mine one after another, enduring the heat, gripping their mining picks, and harvesting ore with each successive strike.

The mine was once again a bustling and noisy place, devoid of the sinister quiet of night.

Mo Hua, with his figure concealed, boldly walked into the mine.

Indeed, there was a Lu Family Elder, a Foundation Building cultivator, sitting to one side in the shade drinking tea, watching the mining cultivators toil.

Next to him was an attractive servant girl fanning him.

Mo Hua passed by him leisurely.

The elder was completely unaware, his eyes darting lasciviously over the curves of the servant girl.

Mo Hua shook his head at this disgraceful sight as he passed by.

He moved through the crowd, entered the mine, and walked deep inside, arriving at the spot where Wang Lai's murder attempt had taken place the night before.

The area was deserted, not a mining cultivator in sight.

There was no sign of anyone's presence.

The disturbances in the mine from the night before, along with the ruffians Mo Hua had left there, had all vanished without a trace.

No mining cultivators were around because this was a deep, secluded and quiet part of the mine, with no ore to be mined, so cultivators seldom came this way.

But what about those scoundrels?

Dead? No remains?

They committed so many evils, their death is of no consequence, let alone the absence of their remains.

But Mo Hua wanted to know, how exactly did they die...

Mo Hua released his Divine Sense, in the void-like white vision, sensing everything around him.

The stone walls were cold, showing a faint blackish-grey color.

There was Blood Qi around, thin and weak, left from last night, and it had almost dissipated all but completely.

Amidst the various traces of Blood Qi, some mingled with pitch-black Qi of death, meandering on the ground, extending along the stone walls into the distance.

Mo Hua silently opened his eyes, his Divine Sense locked onto this trace of Blood Qi, following it along the stone wall, step by step.

After walking the time it takes to brew a cup of tea, the trail of Blood Qi ended.

In front was a stone wall.

A sweep of his Divine Sense and Mo Hua knew that there was a Formation on the stone wall.

And behind the stone wall, surely, were the mine tunnels dug by the Lu Family.

Mo Hua's gaze became focused.

"From the traces... these scoundrels were dragged by something, all the way into the mine tunnels..."

What happened inside the mine tunnels, Mo Hua did not know.

But with high probability, these scoundrels and those five missing Mining Cultivators were eaten by something...

Mo Hua hesitated for a moment, wanting to unlock the Formation and take another look inside the mine tunnels.

But as soon as his brush touched, he stopped.

His Divine Sense twitched slightly, he calculated for a moment, then slowly put away the brush.

"They have actually... reinforced the Formation..."

The stone wall wasn't just sturdier, but there were also layers upon layers of Early Warning Formations drawn inside it.

Mo Hua could unlock these Formations, but he wasn't sure if doing so would cause any disturbances, which might alert the Lu Family's Cultivators.

Or perhaps, the Lu Family deliberately created Formations with the intention of setting a trap?

Mo Hua weighed his options and decided it was better not to take any risks.

If he were caught by the Lu Family inside the mine, it would be quite problematic.

Mo Hua sighed and turned to leave, yet his mind was shrouded with doubt.

What exactly were the Lu Family using these mine tunnels for?

And what secrets truly lay within those mine tunnels...

Frowning, Mo Hua couldn't help but eavesdrop on the conversation of nearby Mining Cultivators as he left.

But he didn't hear anything useful.

Moreover, the Mining Cultivators nearby had not noticed those scoundrels either.

Those scoundrels had just vanished, just like those five Mining Cultivators, disappeared into the depths of the mine...

...

After leaving the mine, Mo Hua met up with Bai Zisheng and Bai Zixi.

"Found anything?" Bai Zixi asked.

Mo Hua spoke of the scoundrels' affair.

Bai Zisheng snorted, "They got what they deserved!"

Then he also wondered, "Is the Lu Family up to some shady business?"

Mo Hua shook his head, "It's still unclear."

"If not the Lu Family, then someone else?"

"Didn't that Wang Lai mention a grey-clothed Cultivator?"

Mo Hua nodded, "At this point, we can only start from that grey-clothed Cultivator."

The three of them then made their way back.

On the way, Mo Hua's expression still seemed somewhat disheartened.

Bai Zixi asked, "What's wrong?"

Mo Hua sighed, "I'm worried about Instructor Yan..."

"Sister Situ said that after Instructor Yan entered the mine, he disappeared without a trace, and since then no one has seen him again..."

"I'm afraid he might have been harmed by Wang Lai and the others..."

Bai Zisheng couldn't help but nod, "It's possible..."

Upon hearing this, Mo Hua's worry intensified, his brows furrowing even more deeply.

Bai Zixi gave her brother a light glare and said softly to Mo Hua:

"The righteous man will be protected by heaven, Mr. Yan may not have necessarily met with harm."

Bai Zisheng, realizing his blunder, scratched his head and chuckled sheepishly:

"I was just speaking off the cuff, don't take it to heart. Mr. Yan might have found other clues and left South Yue City to investigate on his own."

Mo Hua knew his siblings were trying to comfort him, and although he thought what they said didn't make much sense, he still felt a little better.

"Let's hope Instructor Yan is indeed blessed by heaven..."

Mo Hua silently sighed.

Seeing that Mo Hua was still not cheerful, Bai Zisheng changed the subject:

"That grey-clothed Cultivator, shall we investigate him?"

Mo Hua nodded, "We must."

Without trade, there would be no slaying.

It was the grey-clothed Cultivator who wanted to buy the bodies, thus he led Wang Lai and the others to kill the Mining Cultivators.

The root of the problem lay with that grey-clothed Cultivator.

Even if Wang Lai were taken out of the picture, there would be others—Zhao Lai, Qian Lai, Li Lai...

As long as the grey-clothed Cultivator remained, other Cultivators would, for the sake of Spirit Stones, murder Mining Cultivators and sell their bodies.

To eradicate evil, one must go to the root.

Bai Zisheng nodded vigorously in agreement.

Then he thought of another issue: "Wang Lai said, he met with the grey-clothed Cultivator at a Brothel, so..."

Bai Zisheng asked seriously:

"Do we need to go to the Brothel?"

This question also stumped Mo Hua.

Chapter 430: Displaying Dust (1)

Bai Zixi directly said, "You're not allowed to go."

Mo Hua muttered softly, "I didn't say I was going to..."

Bai Zisheng frowned, "But if we don't go, how will we investigate that grey-clothed cultivator?"

"That's true..."

Mo Hua looked at Bai Zixi, and Bai Zisheng also looked at her.

The autumn-water-like shine in Bai Zixi's eyes flickered, "It's fine to go, but I must go with you."

Bai Zisheng quickly shook his head.

Mo Hua also said, "Junior Sister, it's not appropriate for you to go."

Bai Zixi said, "If you can go, I can go too. We'll just be invisible when we enter."

"This..."

Mo Hua hesitated, about to say something, but caught by Bai Zixi's crystal-clear gaze, she could only sigh.

"Alright..."

So, it came to pass that night, at 22 p.m.

As night fell and lanterns were hung, the bustling noise of carriages and horses filled Jinhua Street at its most lively.

Wrapped in cloaks, the three of them climbed to the opposite side of Hundred Flower Tower.

Hundred Flower Tower was a brothel, also the place confessed by Wang Lai, where, after hiding the body of the killed person, a rendezvous with the grey-clothed cultivator took place.

The Hundred Flower Tower was extravagantly decorated.

Flower clusters bloomed brightly at its entrance, yet no one solicited customers outside.

But those who came to this place knew exactly why they were there.

Bai Zisheng quietly asked Mo Hua, "How are we going to get in?"

Mo Hua released her Divine Sense, probed for a while, and frowned, "A brothel has actually set up an Expose Dust Formation..."

"Expose Shadow Formation?" Bai Zisheng was slightly taken aback.

"Expose Dust Formation," Mo Hua corrected.

Bai Zisheng puzzled, "Is there a difference?"

"The principle behind the formation is different."

Bai Zisheng was somewhat bewildered.

Mo Hua then explained, "The Expose Shadow Formation reveals the true form of objects, rendering any Concealment Formation and Concealment Techniques within its range ineffective."

"The Expose Shadow Formation is more effective, but it's an upper-level nine-pattern formation from the first series. It requires high Divine Sense, is difficult to learn, uses peculiar ink, and is also very costly to set up."

"The Expose Dust Formation is an Earth Series formation, a seven-pattern from the first series, easy to set up, and relatively low-cost."

"Unlike the Expose Shadow Formation, the Expose Dust Formation does not render concealment ineffective. Instead, it creates fine dust particles within the formation which adhere to any cultivator passing through it, thereby revealing their tracks."

"The Expose Shadow Formation negates concealment at a fundamental level;"

"Whereas the Expose Dust Formation indirectly reveals the form of a cultivator through an external substance."

Bai Zisheng appeared taken aback, "You've researched this so thoroughly?"

"Mhm." Mo Hua nodded proudly, "The way of formations is vast and profound; naturally, one must study it in detail."

Bai Zisheng opened his mouth, then asked, "But isn't it bad for the brothel welcoming guests to let guests be covered in dust by the Expose Dust Formation?"

"Hmm..." Mo Hua observed the formation carefully again and said,

"This dust is a kind of cheap fragrance. Ordinary cultivators who do not understand formations would only think they have been dusted with rouge and powder, unaware that it's the effect of a formation."

"Moreover, the Expose Dust Formation's potency is limited. This dust only lasts the length of a cup of tea before it gradually fades away..."

"The duration of a cup of tea..." Bai Zisheng furrowed his brows, "So it's meant to prevent someone from invisibly entering the brothel to peek?"

"It seems so..." Mo Hua then seemed puzzled, "Who would bother peeking in a brothel for no reason..."

Bai Zisheng glanced at Mo Hua, Bai Zixi, and then down at himself, saying weakly,

"Aren't the three of us trying to sneak in to peek, though..."

Mo Hua was stunned for a moment, furrowing her brows in thought, then said earnestly,

"We're looking for clues; it's legitimate business, not just peeking."

Bai Zisheng nodded, "That makes sense!"

Bai Zixi watched the two of them, her gaze tinged with helplessness.

"Since there's an Expose Dust Formation, how are we going to get in?"

Bai Zisheng asked again.

Mo Hua was also a bit stumped, "I could solve the formation, but to do it without attracting attention, that's a bit more difficult..."

"So what now, should we go back first?"

After some thought, Mo Hua nodded,

"Let's go back first. There's a Foundation Establishment cultivator inside the brothel. If we linger here too long, we might be detected."

That was not something Mo Hua feared.

Usually, a Foundation Establishment cultivator could not see through his Concealment.

But it was a different story for his Junior Brother and Junior Sister.

The three of them then left stealthily.

On the way back, Bai Zisheng grumbled, "A brothel with a Foundation Establishment cultivator stationed there..."

If it weren't for the presence of a Foundation Establishment cultivator, their actions would have been much easier.

Ordinary Qi Refinement cultivators, he didn't even regard them.

Mo Hua said, "This indicates that the brothel has many troubles and also earns a lot of Spirit Stones."

Bai Zisheng thought about it and nodded.

Mo Hua remembered the Mining Cultivators toiling away in the mines, earning a single Spirit Stone a day, and let out a light sigh.

The more disreputable the business, the more Spirit Stones it earned...

...

The grey-clothed cultivator frequented Hundred Flower Tower.

Mo Hua wanted to look inside the Hundred Flower Tower, but with limited time, he couldn't come up with any good ideas on the spot.

The brothel had too much foot traffic for them to slip in unnoticed.

The biggest problem was the Expose Dust Formation still.

The Expose Dust Formation was manageable, but not easy to handle without anyone noticing.

And besides the formation at the entrance, there were probably some minor Expose Dust Formations in the brothel's doors, windows, corridors, and above the beams in front of the rooms to prevent peeping.

Mo Hua was somewhat disgruntled.

It must be the work of some cultivators using Concealment Techniques for nefarious deeds.

It had reached the point where an attempt to use Concealment Techniques for a legitimate cause, to capture a villain, was heavily guarded.

Guarding against the dishonest ends up implicating the honest...

Several days passed with no further progress.

Mo Hua thought about indirectly probing for information, to see if he could gather some clues from other cultivators.

The best candidate was Elder Su.

He was a first-series Formation Master and a Foundation Establishment Elder of the South Yue Sect, so he was sure to have a wide network and be well-informed.

But Mo Hua wasn't sure if Elder Su had any involvement with the matter, so his questions were quite implicit, and the conversation was cautious.

"Elder Su, is there anything interesting to do on Jinhua Street?"

Elder Su wasn't surprised.

Although Mo Hua was a first-series Formation Master, he was still young, and it was normal for a youngster to feel a little playful when in a new place.

So Elder Su began to describe in detail for Mo Hua,

Jinhua Street was the most bustling place in all of South Yue City.

He mentioned the festivals, the scenic spots, and the best places to eat...

Which dish from which Food Building is prepared well, which tavern has the best liquor, which teahouse offers the richest tea...

When the conversation strays, Elder Su can't help but digress.

Like which gambling house has the easiest winning table, and which brothel has the most...?

Elder Su's words cut off there.

"The most what?" Mo Hua asked.

Elder Su, sweating profusely, awkwardly said, "Not suitable for children, not suitable for children..."

Mo Hua, with a suspicious tone, said, "Elder Su, you seem quite familiar with these things..."

Elder Su was greatly alarmed, "No, it's not what you think, I never... Don't smear my reputation!"

"Oh..." Mo Hua clearly didn't believe it.

Elder Su laughed awkwardly again.

Mo Hua wanted to learn more but saw a servant approach and whisper something to Elder Su.

Elder Su looked troubled.

Knowing when to take a hint, Mo Hua said, "Elder Su, you're busy. I'll take my leave now."

Elder Su also hastily stood up to return the gesture, "A guest has arrived, truly sorry. Another day I'll prepare a fine banquet and apologize to the young gentleman."

Mo Hua waved his hand, "You're too kind, Elder."

In his heart, he was somewhat curious about what kind of banquet Elder Su could prepare, and if there would be any delicacies.

Elder Su escorted Mo Hua out. Just as they reached the courtyard, an exquisitely dressed cultivator appeared, of median age, handsome in appearance, gentle, and refined.

Mo Hua was a bit surprised, "Lu Family Head?"

The person was indeed the Lu Family Head who Mo Hua had previously met.

And the guest that Elder Su was going to entertain must have been this Lu Family Head.

Mo Hua had learned from Elder Su that the name of Lu Family Head was Lu Chengyun.

When Lu Chengyun saw Mo Hua, he wasn't surprised, and he had a smile on his face as he said warmly,

"Little Mister Mo."

They exchanged greetings and salutations.

After exchanging a few polite words, Mo Hua was about to leave when Lu Chengyun stops him.

"The young gentleman can join us for some tea."

Mo Hua somewhat puzzledly asked, "Aren't you here to discuss matters with Elder Su?"

Lu Chengyun said, "It's not a matter of urgency, just exchanging some insights on Formation. Since the young gentleman is also a Formation Master with notable expertise, why not join in the conversation?"

After thinking it over, Mo Hua agreed.

Clearly, there were issues with Lu's mines.

But he wasn't familiar with the Lu Family.

Interacting with the Lu Family Head might reveal some clues.

However, as the Family Head, Lu Chengyun naturally had his own deep stratagems. Throughout the conversation with Mo Hua, he didn't mention anything about the mines or mining cultivators, and simply talked about Formation.

Moreover, Lu Chengyun's Formation expertise also surprised Mo Hua.

It's not always possible for the head of a family involved in many affairs to find the time and thought to delve into Formation, but Lu Chengyun's knowledge in the field seemed to be somewhat deeper than even Elder Su's.

No wonder he and Elder Su were so close.

After discussing more about Formation, Lu Chengyun's attitude towards Mo Hua became even more amiable, and his eyes couldn't hide his admiration.

Lu Chengyun paused, then suddenly asked:

"Young Mister Mo, have you ever been married?"

Mo Hua, who was drinking tea, choked on his sip, "Not yet... not yet..."

Lu Chengyun's eyes brightened even more, "I wonder..."

Mo Hua coughed and said with difficulty:

"I'm still young, not considering it yet."

Lu Chengyun showed no displeasure, but rather a knowing look, and discreetly handed Mo Hua a booklet.

"This is part of the Lu family genealogy."

Lu Chengyun didn't finish his sentence, just giving Mo Hua a meaningful look.

Mo Hua opened the genealogy gently and found that it recorded the direct descendants of the Lu family, all of whom were eligible-aged females.

Turning to the back, there were portraits of beautiful female cultivators.

Mo Hua felt somewhat helpless.

Lu Chengyun smiled nonchalantly, while Elder Su silently drank his tea, pretending to see nothing.

After finishing the tea and discussing Formation, Lu Chengyun stood up to leave.

Before leaving, Lu Chengyun patted Mo Hua and softly said:

"No rush, take your time to look."

Mo Hua didn't know what to say.

As Lu Chengyun turned to leave, it seemed as if he suddenly remembered something and turned back to Mo Hua:

"I have a question for the young gentleman, if I may ask?"

Mo Hua was taken aback and nodded, "Please ask."

"It may be a bit presumptuous."

"It's fine."

Lu Chengyun nodded and asked:

"Young Mister Mo, you manage to keep your aura concealed, impervious to Divine Sense exploration. Is it perhaps... a Spiritual Artifact that conceals your aura?"

Mo Hua's eyes flickered slightly, and then he earnestly said:

"Yes, you have keen eyesight, Family Head!"

Lu Chengyun let out a sigh of relief, then bowed and said, "I take my leave, and another day when there's time, I'd like to discuss Formation again with the young gentleman."

Mo Hua also bowed, "Lu Family Head, take care."

After Lu Chengyun left, Elder Su also slowly exhaled, and said to Mo Hua:

"He is the Family Head, so it's within his duties, understandable, but..."

Elder Su hesitated.

"But what?" Mo Hua asked curiously.

Elder Su thought for a moment, then sighed:

"The Lu Family is rife with disputes. If you can avoid getting involved, it's better to stay out."

Mo Hua nodded.

Elder Su looked at Mo Hua, his gaze focusing slightly, his expression complex, and he slowly asked:

"Young Mister Mo, you've come to me with a purpose, haven't you?"

Mo Hua was taken aback, "How did you know?"

Elder Su expressionlessly said:

"In these few days coming to my place, beating around the bush, you likely wanted to ask something..."

"But the matter is somewhat secretive, not something easily spoken about, so you didn't ask directly. Instead, you sought some pretext, talking roundabout, trying to get some information out of me."

Mo Hua fell silent.

Elder Su's gaze turned chilly.

He knew that this Junior Formation Master must have had some agenda.

Elder Su picked up the teacup, skimmed off the froth, and his gaze floated unpredictably like the tea water:

"Young Mister Mo, after all, what do you intend to do?"

At this point, there was no need for Mo Hua to hide his intention.

He said solemnly:

"Elder Su, I want to go to a brothel!"

Elder Su sprayed out a mouthful of tea.